Reinventing the Cycle:

Adapting Relationship Fundraising for Donors Who Use DAFs

DAF RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

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Executive Summary

Donor advised funds (DAFs) are charitable giving accounts that donors set up at 501(c)(3) public charity sponsoring organizations. Donors make contributions to the accounts and then recommend grants out of the accounts to other charities.

As intermediaries between individual donors and charitable organizations, DAFs change individual philanthropy[1] and have implications for the relationship fundraising paradigm that dominates major gift fundraising strategies and processes. Professional fundraisers are already successfully garnering support from DAF donors to serve organizational missions and meet societal needs.[2] To help further enhance these efforts, fundraisers are seeking research-based information for identifying, cultivating, soliciting, and stewarding DAF donors.

This report, based on interviews with professional fundraisers from across the US, explores DAFs' effects on fundraising and implications for fundraisers' day-to-day work. In the study, fundraisers affirmed relationship fundraising as their chosen approach for DAF donors, describing how the paradigm informed their efforts to engage and seek support from donors who use DAFs. While DAFs create some challenges, they also offer notable opportunities. Many of the identified challenges were process-oriented and could be addressed by deliberate procedural adjustments and intentional training of fundraising teams. The opportunities enabled fundraisers to use the presence of a DAF to further their relationship-building efforts.

The fundraisers' insights are depicted through the "DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle," which illustrates the DAF fundraising process, introduces DAF-specific implications for grant processing and relationship development, and integrates the challenges and opportunities. This cycle provides fundraisers and organizations with a new framework to holistically review their DAF systems and strategies.

The report includes a set of DAF-specific roles that fundraisers demonstrated as they moved through the DAF fundraising cycle. These roles emphasize their multifaceted approach to maintaining relationships with donors. Fundraisers can reflect on these insights as they move through various stages of relationship management with DAF donors.

Recommendations for developing and refining DAF fundraising are included in callout boxes in Section 3. An annotated mock-up of DAF grant correspondence is presented in the Appendix as an additional resource.

The Rising Prominence of Donor Advised Funds

DAFs are charitable giving accounts opened by donor advisors (e.g., individuals, families, corporations) and hosted by 501(c)(3) public charity sponsoring organizations. Donor advisors receive an immediate tax deduction for their contributions to their DAF. The contributions are held and invested by the sponsor until the donor recommends that the sponsor grants funds from the DAF to support charities.[3]

DAFs are changing the philanthropic landscape for donors, nonprofits, and fundraisers.[4] In 2023, there were over 1,000 DAF sponsors, nearly 1.8 million DAF accounts, and DAFs received 11% of all charitable contributions.[5,6] The assets under management within DAFs totaled $251.52 billion, contributions equaled $59.43 billion, and grants from DAFs amounted to $54.77 billion.[7] A 2020 survey found that 70% of participating nonprofits had received a DAF grant.[8] DAF granting was resilient during the macroeconomic and societal shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] Another survey of mostly large nonprofits ($25 million+) found that nonprofits had received 83% more DAF grants from 2019 to 2023.[10]

DAFs are increasingly accessible to a wide range of donors due to the proliferation of DAF sponsors, DAFs' use in workplace giving platforms, and the opportunity to open a DAF with only a small initial contribution.[11] The most recent calculations show that about half of accounts have less than $50,000 in assets, and about a quarter of DAF accounts contain between $100,000 to $500,000.[12]

DAFs appeal to donors for a host of reasons, including the up-front tax deduction, extra time to make philanthropic decisions, structure for donating appreciated securities and other non-cash assets, increased privacy in giving, and the investment of the assets within the DAF.[13,14] Many donors also appreciate having access to a platform that simplifies contributing to multiple charities and tracking those contributions. DAF sponsors provide additional benefits, including philanthropic information and, in most cases, philanthropic advising for donors.[15]

DAFs have also sparked concern, critique, and controversy. DAF accounts do not have a federally-mandated payout rate (like private foundations do), which has raised questions about whether DAFs are impeding the flow of philanthropic funds to programmatic charities.[16,17] Some believe that allowing donors to give completely anonymously compromises philanthropy's democratic principles regarding transparency.[18,19] Nonprofit administrators and fundraisers have expressed concern that DAFs could significantly disrupt donor-organization relationships by adding a third-party intermediary.[20] Organizations have reported some administrative challenges associated with receiving DAF grants, but those that have received the grants also have a more positive perspective on DAFs than those that have not.[21]

DAFs' donor benefits and organizational-level concerns are explored in this report, with implications for administrative practices and donor-fundraiser relationships.

The Relationship Fundraising Paradigm

For the last several decades, "relationship fundraising" has been the leading paradigm guiding fundraising.[22] Relationship fundraising shifted the focus from a transactional approach, where only the gift mattered, to a relationship-based strategy that values donors as strategic partners.[23,24]

To build relationships, fundraisers develop personalized strategies for engaging potential and existing donors (particularly those with the capacity for making significant gifts) with their organizations. Fundraisers learn about the donors and their philanthropic priorities and find alignment with their organizational mission and programs.[25]

Ideally, the relational approach will lead to lasting associations between donors and organizations, which in turn will generate repeated and increasingly significant philanthropic donations. Soliciting donations is one activity within a strategic, ongoing relational process.[26,27,28] Stages of this process include identifying donors, qualifying them based on interest and capacity, developing a strategy and cultivating a relationship, soliciting and negotiating donations, acknowledging and recognizing gifts, stewarding the gifts, and seeking additional (renewed) gifts.[29,30] (See Figure 1 for a depiction of this process).

Cycles depicting the fundraising process are standardized and cannot reflect fundraisers' strategies for every donor within every organizational context,[31] including the adaptations that fundraisers may make when working with DAF donors. Research has identified, however, that fundraisers may take on roles such as networkers, knowledge-brokers, and negotiators for their donors when working through the process of securing large gifts.[32] Researchers have also found that fundraisers consider both organizational and donor interests, in part by understanding gift vehicles, organizational systems and structures, and details and technicalities surrounding gifts.[33,34] If a fundraiser does not know who a donor is or if a gift is recorded with faulty information, the relationship cycle may be broken; accurate documentation of donor information and proper processing of donations is critical for fundraisers' work.[35]

Figure 1. Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle

Note: Reproduced with permission from The Fund Raising School, Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 2001.

Study Information

This report is based on interviews with 46 professional fundraisers across the US. Participants were recruited through email and social media outreach in partnership with The Fund Raising School in the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, a leading professional education provider in the field with a large network spanning organizational types and fundraising experience.

Interviewees averaged 17 years of fundraising experience, 54% of participants were female, 15% were people of color, and 7% were of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latine origin. There was notable representation from the education (33% higher education, 11% other education), health (20%), and human service (20%) sectors, with participants coming from a range of other sectors and some having experience across multiple sectors. Some fundraisers in the study worked at small organizations with limited fundraising capacity, while others came from large institutions with extensive development operations. All participants had worked directly with DAF donors and a small proportion (13%) also had experience at DAF-sponsoring organizations.

The interviews explored participants' experiences with DAF donors, their organizations' DAF-related processes, and their perspectives on DAFs and philanthropy. The interviews took place between June and October 2023; lasted an average of 51 minutes; and were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. The research team analyzed the transcriptions to identify patterns in the data and related them to known fundraising philosophies, practices, and systems.

This report represents the experiences and views of the study participants as analyzed and synthesized by the research team. It should not be assumed to represent all US fundraisers' experiences with or perspectives on DAFs. Fundraisers should apply the recommendations in consideration of their own contexts. For more information about study methods and processes, see the academic paper, How Donor Advised Funds Change Fundraising.

DAF Donors and Relationship Fundraising

In the interviews, fundraisers described how they engaged with DAF donors, from initial meetings with potential supporters to ongoing interactions with existing donors, both before and after receiving DAF grants. Overwhelmingly, they believed that strong relationships were the foundation of effectively raising money from DAF donors. Fundraising—including DAF fundraising—is a "relationship-based business with people," said one participant.

Even though DAF funds are managed by DAF sponsors, fundraisers noted that donor advisors should be treated like individual donors "as if they were writing the check themselves." Interactions with DAF donors should not be transactional one-off occurrences but instead customized as part of a broader strategy, just like those for any individual supporter with significant giving potential. By focusing on building relationships that aligned donors' philanthropic interests with the organization's mission, fundraisers found that DAF grants naturally followed.

Some fundraisers viewed DAFs in a matter-of-fact, neutral way as simply a new development in the field. DAFs were "just a vehicle" like a checking account or stock transfer that was just "part of the conversation" with a donor.

Other fundraisers recognized DAFs' strong benefits to donors and saw them as an important avenue for facilitating contributions to their organization and other philanthropic causes. Some of these fundraisers used knowledge of a donor's DAF as a tool for advancing the relationship. They viewed DAFs as a sign that the donor was philanthropically savvy, ready for more complex conversations, and that a relationship was especially worth building because of their philanthropic commitment.

Fundraisers also noted (and had experienced) how DAFs could upend relational and organizational systems (e.g. through anonymity and grants' special processing needs) and/or expressed concerns about DAFs' consequences for philanthropy. In the end, however, fundraisers believed it was their responsibility to adapt to the context and to do "the hard work of relationship building and getting to know the person."

SECTION 3:

Challenges and Opportunities of DAF Fundraising

The fundraisers' comments revealed ten ways that DAFs change relationship fundraising—summarized in six challenges and four opportunities. The challenges require targeted efforts by the fundraising organization, but can mostly be overcome. The opportunities, when seized by fundraisers, can lead to better relationships and more philanthropic support.

CHALLENGE 1:

Verifying the Organization

DAFs introduce the need to verify an organization's eligibility to receive grants. While organizations listed as IRS-registered public charities generally qualify for DAF grants, some sponsors have additional criteria. When compliance questions arise, sponsors contact organizations for more information or documentation—a process that was particularly challenging for new nonprofits and other qualified entities in the study.

A fundraiser for a municipal entity often had to verify her organization's eligibility. Frustrated with the process, she stated, "We're jumping through hoops and hurdles… you're calling an 800 number, and [talking to] a different person every time." In this case, some sponsors required verification every few years, which was time-consuming.

To address verification requirements, some nonprofits pre-certified with large DAF sponsors, enabling direct fund transfers without repeated verification. One fundraiser explained: "If you pre-certify yourself, all [the sponsor does] is send you the wire … So, you're not sitting there on the phone, having…to verify every time [DAF grants] come along."

Streamline Verification

- **Ensure that key information (Employer Identification Number (EIN), 501(c)(3) status, address) is easily accessible on your website**
- **Make sure your organizational profile is updated on third-party vetting platforms like GuideStar.**
- **If your tax status complicates the verification process, inform donors of potential delays and encourage them to share organizational contact information with the DAF sponsor.**
- **Proactively contact DAF sponsors to ask if pre-certification is an option.**

CHALLENGE 2:

Investigating DAF Donations

When recommending a grant, DAF donors decide what information the sponsor shares with the recipient charity. Donors can choose to share: 1) all of their information; 2) the DAF account name and/or their name, but no contact details ("partially anonymous grant"); or 3) no personally identifiable information ("completely anonymous grant"). Research has found that only 4% of grants are completely anonymous[36] and that 79% of partially anonymous grants include identifiable information.[37]

Not knowing a DAF donor's identity was a significant concern for the fundraisers in the study, though they noted that DAF grant anonymity wasn't particularly common. In these situations, many did "detective work" to try to discover a donor's identity. For partially anonymous grants, one fundraiser explained that "nine times out of ten, the name of their DAF actually has their first and last name or … [at least] their last name, so we can pretty well figure out who the DAF belongs to." For completely anonymous grants, a fundraiser at a large, well-established organization, noted, "There [are] times where we can look back at historical [data] and we know that [donor name] always gives on December 1st…We can sort of figure out …that [it's] probably [donor name]'s gift." Some fundraisers also contacted DAF sponsors, hoping to locate missing documentation about the grant.

Other fundraisers chose not to investigate grants with incomplete information, either because they believed such efforts would not be fruitful or out of respect for donors' presumed preference for anonymity. At times, however, fundraisers discovered that a donor's anonymity had been unintentional—the donor had either made a mistake on the grant form or confused anonymity with confidentiality. Some fundraisers found that this mistake could be avoided by communicating clearly with donors during solicitation (see Challenge 6).

More detail on how fundraisers navigate this challenge is provided in the Investigator section of the report.

Be a Detective

- **Don't automatically assume that a grant was meant to be anonymous.**
- **Look at the original DAF grant correspondence to see if you can find any additional donor information (see the Appendix).**
- **Examine historical donor data to see if there might be a pattern of previous donations with similar sizes, timing, or purposes.**
- **After pursuing other methods, consider contacting the DAF sponsor for more information. While sponsors cannot provide confidential information without the donor's permission, some sponsors may be willing to share details that were missed in grant processing (see Challenge 3).**

CHALLENGE 3:

Entering DAF Grants

Complete data entry is integral for tracking DAF grants, associating them with individual donors, and developing DAF donor lists.

The fundraisers noted that gift entry processes at their organizations usually focused on information found on paper checks, and details on the check stub or additional correspondence were sometimes disregarded. Because DAF grants often have critical information within the correspondence, fundraisers reported that gift entry personnel sometimes overlooked this donor information. Speaking to this, one fundraiser said, "We need to re-teach people how to open mail."

In order to associate the grant with both the DAF sponsor and the accompanying donor in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system or other software used to manage donor information, fundraisers generally followed a sector-wide strategy of providing "hard credit" to the DAF account at the sponsor and "soft credit" to the individual donor advisor(s).[38,39] Some organizations utilized their CRMs to include an additional attribute (or field) on the donor record that the person had a DAF, marking DAF donors with an interest flag, or creating a group for DAF donors. These methods enabled better tracking and recognition of DAF donors, though industry research has shown that not all CRMs are equipped to offer such configurations,[40] or in the case of this study, had been optimized for these purposes by the organizations.

Pay Attention to Data Entry

- **Ensure that all those who process contributions know how to handle DAF grants. See the Appendix for an example of DAF grant correspondence and insights for DAF grant entry.**
- **Provide hard credit to the DAF account at the sponsor organization and soft credit to the DAF donor(s).**
- **Explore the options for keeping track of DAF donors in your CRM.**
- **Link the DAF donor(s) to the DAF account in your CRM.**

CHALLENGE 4:

Thanking the Donor

Fundraisers emphasized the importance of expressing a meaningful thank you to DAF donors even though they already received their tax receipt from the DAF sponsor.

One fundraiser feared that "some nonprofits ... take that literal language from the DAF financial institution that says [they] do not have to receipt the grant... and are not

doing anything." Unfortunately, this was sometimes the case: not all organizations in the study had a policy of thanking all DAF donors.

Most fundraisers' organizations had a specialized acknowledgment process for DAF donors. This sometimes required manual adjustments to CRM reports, which could lead to delays. To speed up communication or to fill in for organizational practices that did not include thanking DAF donors, several fundraisers emailed or wrote to inform donors when the grant arrived and to say thank you.

Few organizations systematically sent DAF sponsors a grant acknowledgment, deeming this to be unnecessary and unproductive. Some fundraisers, however, did thank community foundations, seeing it as an opportunity to cultivate relationships with these sponsors. Other fundraisers contacted DAF sponsors to ask if they would pass a message or an acknowledgment to an unidentified donor. The fundraisers said that some sponsors complied with these requests within the limitations of their agreements with the donor(s).

Adjust Acknowledgments for DAF Donors

- **Once a DAF grant is properly recorded, send the DAF donor a thank you letter in a timely, and, when feasible, personal way.**
- **Adapt acknowledgment processes to remove statements about tax deductibility; only the donor's original contribution to the DAF is tax deductible.**

CHALLENGE 5:

Understanding DAF Regulations

Fundraisers must comply with IRS restrictions on DAF grants and multi-year commitments, which prohibit donors from receiving tangible personal benefits beyond the incidental benefits that are part of stewardship efforts. DAFs also cannot be used to split a donation by paying for the portion tied to a tangible benefit (such as the cost of a gala dinner) directly, while using the DAF for the remaining charitable portion. While research shows that most sponsors have safeguards to prevent violations,[41] inappropriately designated grants occasionally get distributed, highlighting the need for fundraisers to know these regulations.

Some interviewees avoided issues by educating donors about DAF rules before grants were recommended. When organizations received errant DAF grants, fundraisers had to correct the problem, which sometimes led to difficult conversations with the donor. One fundraiser's organization used its written policy in such instances: "[we] give it to the donor … [and tell them] 'You already got the charitable deduction. … [The] IRS is trying to say you can't buy something now with it.'"

Confusion regarding DAFs and pledges (contributions recorded by organizations to be received across multiple years) was common in the interviews. Many fundraisers thought that DAFs could not be used to fulfill pledges, despite an IRS update in 2017 that has been interpreted as allowing for multi-year commitments under certain conditions.[42]

A number of participants' organizations had adapted to the legislation and were documenting these grants while avoiding the word "pledge." One fundraiser explained that if a DAF donor told her that they wanted "to make a multi-year gift, … then [she changed] the language from 'pledge' to 'intention'... and [made] a gift agreement instead of a pledge form." Another reported that their organization used a non-binding gift intention template instead of a pledge agreement for all donors, to accommodate DAF grants in particular.

Learn the Rules for Accepting DAF Grants

- **To avoid difficult conversations, educate donors about regulations related to giving through DAFs, post clear policies about acceptable DAF grant designations, and have a protocol for correcting DAF grants that improperly include a personal benefit.**
- **Discuss multi-year grants as an option with DAF donors as "commitments" and "intentions" rather than "pledges" and update related paperwork accordingly.**
- **Learn more about DAFs through professional education opportunities. For more information about DAF rules and regulations, see the National Philanthropic Trust's website, "Can I Use My DAF for That?"[43]**

CHALLENGE 6:

Exchanging Information

Many interviewees indicated the importance of exchanging DAF-related information with their donors—and the problems that arose if this did not happen.

Donors did not always reveal their intention to use a DAF. This sometimes made it difficult for gift processors to match DAF donors and grants and verify intended designations. To counter this problem, study participants asked donors how they planned to make their contributions and collected information, like the fund name, to minimize backend complications (see Challenge 2). Some fundraisers also put "a little footnote in [their nonprofit's communications] that said, 'Please notify us of your grant so we can be on the lookout for it.'"

Because the information needed to recommend DAF grants is often not easily accessible or is outdated on nonprofit websites,[44] fundraisers also emphasized making DAF giving as easy and clear as possible for donors by personally "exchanging" organizational information (e.g., EIN and organization address) with donors. Without all the correct information, donors sometimes had difficulty completing grant recommendations on their sponsor's platform. To ensure grants were properly designated for a particular organizational purpose, some fundraisers offered to "walk [donors] through the process" in their DAF sponsor system. A few fundraisers had opened their own DAFs, in part to better help their donors navigate these logistics.

Exchange Information with DAF Donors

- **If not already known, ask donors if they will use a DAF for their donation. If so, record the DAF account name and sponsoring organization name within their profile in your CRM.**
- **Make accurate organizational information easily accessible on your website and other materials, and reinforce in conversations when possible.**
- **Consider familiarizing yourself with DAFs by opening your own DAF account (DAFs can now be opened with a limited initial contribution at some sponsors) or by utilizing demo accounts available through several commercial DAF providers.**
- **Be willing to assist DAF donors with the granting process if requested.**

OPPORTUNITY 1:

Signaling Intent and Capacity

Many fundraisers viewed DAFs as a signal of donors' philanthropic intent and/or financial capacity. Fundraisers recognized that DAF donors had "already committed to give" and saw them as more "serious about philanthropy." Consequently, fundraisers spent less time gauging these potential donors' interest in philanthropy, and more time "matching them with the right project," as they recognized that "these are the people you most want to be talking to."

Fundraisers also saw DAFs as a sign of wealth. Many assumed that high-income donors would benefit from having a DAF for tax purposes , among other reasons. However, a few fundraisers noted that these assumptions were changing: "[DAFs] have evolved from a real wealth indicator. … [and are now] much more accessible to a larger audience." In general, however, fundraisers felt able to qualify potential DAF donors' financial capacity and philanthropic (if not organizational) interest more quickly than other donors.

Be Aware of the Potential of DAF Donors

- **Use the clues that DAFs provide regarding philanthropic intent and capacity as pieces of the puzzle in qualifying donors' interest and ability to give.**
- **Develop approaches and strategies that designate DAF donors as a distinct donor segment.**
- **Utilize lists of DAF donors in your CRM to select them for further cultivation and solicitation.**

OPPORTUNITY 2:

Engaging in Deeper Conversations

According to participants, DAFs could facilitate deep, strategic, and holistic conversations with donors. Interviewees often perceived DAF donors as savvy, strategic, and ready for higher-level conversations about giving during cultivation. One fundraiser said, "Having a DAF is one data point that would signify that there's a little more sophistication there. " Another said that when he learned a donor is using a DAF, then he knew "they're further along in ... their understanding of financial stuff and where philanthropy fits in" and "the conversation starts here [indicating a high level with his hands], it doesn't start down here [moves his hand down]." Some fundraisers attributed DAF donors' savviness to their use of financial advisors or their own professional experience in investments, banking, or related fields.

DAF donors were also seen as more direct and impact-focused than other donors. For instance, a fundraiser found DAF donors to be "more ready to speak more directly about things, like their budget or … dollar numbers." According to several fundraisers, "DAF donors want to know, 'what's the measurable impact?'" because "they want to be sure that their [donations are] being put to good use."

Ask Donors About Their DAFs

- **Ask donors why they created their DAF.**
- **Don't hesitate to address more strategic and complex topics with DAF donors.**
- **Emphasize your organization's impact and the value of DAF grants.**

OPPORTUNITY 3:

Gathering Strategic Information

Observing patterns in DAF usage, specifically donors' timing and capacity, provided fundraisers with valuable insights for managing DAF donor relationships.

Understanding grant timing behaviors and preferences helped fundraisers characterize donors' overall giving strategies and develop their solicitations. Fundraisers noticed that some of their DAF donors were "granting out a tremendous amount of their DAF every single year," while others "really have very little grant generation." A few interviewees made observations indicating that "some donors move funds in and out of their DAFs quickly." Donors occasionally "bundled their giving in one year [to] get the tax deduction they needed" and "then distributed it amongst multiple charities over a period of time." Other interviewees observed donors using a longer-term approach, with one describing donors' use of the DAF as "basically setting up their own private endowment."

Some fundraisers also sought insights about their donors' inputs to and outputs from their DAFs, building on the capacity assumptions described in Opportunity 1. Because there is no public record of how much is in DAF accounts, one fundraiser asked his donors: "Do you put money in [your DAF] yearly? Do you track it? Was it a large sum?" Another admitted that "how much is in the DAF?" was a question he "often think[s] about but never ask[s]."

Make an Informed Solicitation

Based on interviews with 48 DAF donors, Heist et al.[45] developed three archetypes of DAF donor giving strategies: Tubs, Tanks, and Towers. Seek out information about donors' DAF contributions and granting preferences to learn about which strategy they use.

- **Tub donors move money in and out of their DAFs quickly. Strategy: Ask for an annual donation.**

- **Tank donors contribute larger amounts into their DAF and grant it out over a few years. Strategy: Consider asking for an annual donation or major gift.**

- **Tower donors contribute a large amount into their DAF and strategically grant it over a longer period of time. Strategy: Ask for an annual or planned gift.**

OPPORTUNITY 4:

Experiencing Confidence in Solicitation

Because DAF funds are already earmarked for charitable purposes, fundraisers reported greater confidence and less anxiety when soliciting DAF donors. Knowing the donor is "committed to giving makes it mentally easier to ask, and helps the conversation flow a little easier."

One fundraiser explained, "Sometimes, it is easier for me to have major gift conversations earlier in the year [with DAF donors] because it's less a conversation of… 'Let me see what my bonus looks like,' and [more of] 'It's already there. I'm just asking you to consider directing part of it to us.'" During COVID-19, various organizations approached their DAF donors; one fundraiser said, "There's a lot of need right now. You have this money in your account. How can we help you put that on the street?"

Fundraisers recognized that DAF donors were not only committed to giving in principle but also that the money had already been set aside. One fundraiser reported that she was comfortable "in being bolder… [and] asking for larger grants because [she knew] that the money's available."

Donors can name one or more charities as DAF beneficiaries at their passing. Thus, some fundraisers saw this as a natural entry point to discuss planned giving with donors who had DAFs. Multiple fundraisers observed that DAF donors were better prepared for "robust discussions about planned giving topics." However, gaps in knowledge about DAF succession planning prevented some fundraisers from utilizing this opportunity.

Ask with Confidence

- **Prioritize developing relationships with DAF donors, recognizing their unique ability to potentially give more and outside the annual cycle.**
- **Be encouraged to ask for the donation knowing DAF dollars are already designated for charity.**
- **Don't hesitate to bring up planned giving topics with DAF donors.**

SECTION 4:

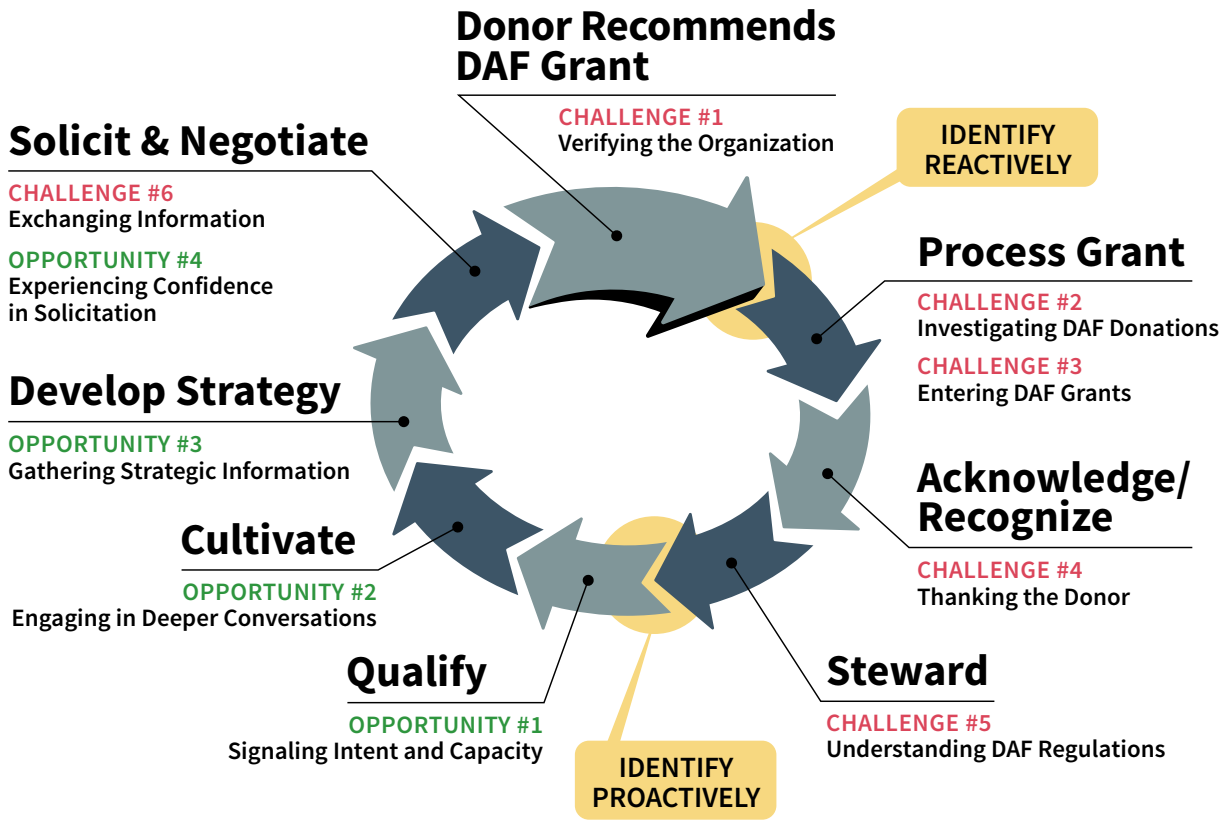
The DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle

Interviews with the fundraisers made it clear that DAFs affect every stage of the fundraising cycle. Illustrating these changes requires a new approach to visualizing the cycle. The "DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle" (see Figure 2) adapts the Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle[46] and shows how fundraisers modify their processes and strategies as they work with donors who use DAFs. This revised model introduces DAF-specific implications and integrates the challenges and opportunities discussed in the previous section.

The DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle starts and ends with "Donor Recommends DAF Grant." For some fundraisers, receiving a DAF grant may be their first interaction with a DAF donor. For all fundraisers, this stage represents the goal of securing a DAF grant. The DAF cycle includes verifying the organization as a challenge that some organizations may experience before receiving a DAF grant. After receiving a grant, the model introduces "Process Grant" as a new stage because it is critical that information from the grant is processed correctly.

The traditional Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle begins with "Identify," which is the process of discovering potential major donors. This stage usually includes analyzing current donor data to discover patterns of giving as well as conducting broader research to discover new donors. In contrast, identifying whether a donor uses a DAF can occur at multiple points. A fundraiser may not know that a current donor uses a DAF and as there are no public records of DAF donors, common prospect research methods are rendered obsolete.

Figure 2. DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle



Note: Figure modified from the "Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle," used with permission from The Fund Raising School, Indiana University Center on Philanthropy (2001).

In many cases, DAF donors may not become known until after a grant is received. In these instances, the fundraiser relies on gift processing or other investigative techniques to identify new DAF donors. This process is depicted in the DAF cycle as "Identify Reactively," which requires extra attention to gift processing and data entry, as well as potential modifications to organizations' donor databases or CRM systems.

Once a DAF grant arrives and the donor is identified, the DAF cycle proceeds to the stages of "Acknowledge/ Recognize" and "Steward," which are similar to traditional relationship fundraising practices in that they include thanking donors in the near term and providing reporting and ongoing information in the longer term. These stages can seem less straightforward in relation to DAF donors, however. This can be due to confusion about communicating with donors versus sponsors, providing acknowledgment given that the tax receipt has already been sent, and correcting DAF grants where personal benefits are expected or the designation is unclear. It is at this point in the new cycle that fundraisers also begin working on seeking subsequent DAF grants from these donors.

The DAF cycle next moves to "Qualify" when fundraisers "Identify Proactively" DAF donors. This can be done by asking new potential donors if they have a DAF during early conversations or asking existing donors in the course of ongoing conversations. Fundraisers will benefit from having this information because DAFs can signify both philanthropic intent and capacity.

Knowing that a donor uses a DAF provides fundraisers with several additional advantages over the next three stages. "Cultivate," "Develop Strategy," and "Solicit & Negotiate" are the stages when fundraisers grow their knowledge about donors and foster connections with them, form a plan for the request for support, and then execute the request. As in the Eight-Step Major Gift Management Cycle, relationship formation is a core goal of cultivation within the DAF cycle, which can be advanced by conversations that progress more quickly toward donors' philanthropic hopes and goals. While developing a solicitation strategy for a donor, fundraisers can use the information they gleaned from deeper conversations to create a more informed solicitation. The solicitation stage with DAF donors may be approached with more confidence for fundraisers who know the DAF is already funded with money committed to charitable purposes. Along with this added confidence, the technicalities of the DAF grant recommendation and facilitating the movement of the money through the intermediary require the smooth exchange of information. Following a successful solicitation, the donor recommends the grant, and the funds are received.

SECTION 5:

Fundraisers' Roles with DAF Donors

This section provides insights into how fundraisers created tailored approaches for interacting with donors using DAFs, often by combining several approaches or roles. These efforts took place within the relationship fundraising paradigm, which prioritizes listening, responsiveness, and personalized attention. Self-awareness is a key skill for fundraisers in building relationships with donors. These roles provide an opportunity for self-reflection on how fundraisers are already interacting with the DAF donors, how and when the roles (or activities described within them) have been successful in their experience, and what to continue, hone, and refine going forward.

Fundraisers created personalized experiences for their DAF donors. When asked directly about their overall approach with donors who used DAFs, most respondents said it was the same as with other donors, but others noted tactical differences.

Regardless of whether a participating fundraiser recognized it or not, the analysis revealed behavioral nuances in the details of their specific interactions with DAF donors. Adaptations were consistently being made based on the DAF donors' real or perceived needs, circumstances, interests, and priorities.

How, when, and if fundraisers tailored their strategies to DAF donors was affected by their own experience in the field, their understanding of DAFs, their organizational context, and each donor's unique situation. The fundraisers' approaches in working with DAF donors—their "roles with DAF donors"—are listed in Table 1 and described in the subsequent pages. The roles were not mutually exclusive and sometimes operated simultaneously or in tandem. While the fundraisers certainly worked in similar ways with other donors, in this case, their behaviors were DAF-influenced and DAF-informed.

Table 1. DAF Fundraising Roles

Role	Description
 **Investigator**	*A fundraiser who proactively pieces together information to determine a DAF donor's identity.*
 **Strategist**	*A fundraiser who customizes their relationship strategy, recognizing that DAFs create opportunities to raise more money for their organization.*
 **Educator**	*A fundraiser who educates donors about DAFs to address knowledge gaps, shift donors' mindsets, and avoid mistakes related to regulations.*
 **Facilitator**	*A fundraiser who takes on administrative and logistical tasks to ensure that DAF donors' giving experiences are smooth.*
 **Collaborator**	*A fundraiser who provides strategic DAF-related advice that helps donors use the vehicle to achieve their philanthropic goals.*

Investigator

A fundraiser who proactively pieces together information to determine a DAF donor's identity.

Relationship-building relied on knowing the identity of the donor who recommended the DAF grant. As mentioned in Challenge 2, fundraisers reported that donors were identifiable in most cases. Ideally, DAF donors informed fundraisers in advance about upcoming DAF grants. However, this did not always happen and some grants did not contain enough information to identify the donor. Unidentifiable grants were frustrating as they disrupted the "true work of donor relations" and prohibited fundraisers from expressing gratitude and cultivating relationships.

While fundraisers respected donors' preference for anonymity, they worried that some donors had not actually intended to make their grant anonymous, and had clicked the wrong box or did not realize that the organization couldn't discern their identity from their fund name (see Challenge 2). Several fundraisers recalled instances of donors asking if the organization had received their grant or why they had not received an acknowledgment after recommending an anonymous grant. One fundraiser imagined a donor thinking, "wow, how ungrateful," while another worried that donors might assume their grant was unappreciated. As a result, fundraisers felt responsible for trying to figure out donor identities.

To identify anonymous grants, fundraisers relied on a variety of methods, including the processes outlined in Challenge 2 (utilizing pieces of information included with the grant, historical donor information, and/or reaching out to DAF sponsors to ask if any information was left out of the paperwork). Anonymous DAF grants were often discussed with gift processing to check for mistakes or oversights or to coordinate additional examinations. Sometimes fundraisers said making a discovery was easy, but other times, it was a "wild goose chase" for them or gift processing team members that generated little insight.

When a clear match was found, some fundraisers felt confident enough to complete their investigation by talking with the potential DAF donor about the grant. In other cases, and especially with completely anonymous grants, fundraisers hesitated to act on their research out of concern that outreach might violate donors' actual preferences for anonymity.

Ultimately, fundraisers' investigations had three common outcomes: (1) the donor's identity was clarified, allowing relationship development to progress; (2) the donor's identity appeared to be clarified but the fundraiser was unsure how to appropriately proceed, pausing or halting the relationship development; or (3) the donor remained unidentified, precluding a relationship.

Strategist

A fundraiser who customizes their relationship strategy, recognizing that DAFs create opportunities to raise more money for their organization.

As is outlined in Opportunity 1, DAFs were often seen as an indication of philanthropic intent and financial capacity. Consequently, many fundraisers invested extra time in building relationships with DAF donors throughout the fundraising cycle.

Some fundraisers prioritized relationships with DAF donors by segmenting them in the database for deeper and more strategic conversations (see Opportunities 2 and 3), more specialized campaigns, stewardship programs, and/or additional correspondence calendars. Fundraisers at organizations that encouraged this extra attention affirmed the value of these initiatives and believed they yielded significant results.

Generally, fundraisers saw DAF donors as more receptive to and ready for solicitations. As is noted in Opportunity 4, some fundraisers felt especially comfortable approaching DAF donors during COVID-19 and others seized the opportunity to talk with their DAF donors at various times during the year. Other fundraisers recognized that DAF succession options were an easy way to discuss legacy or planned giving with donors.

Strategist fundraisers often went beyond organizational protocols to engage DAF donors because they believed in their strong giving potential. One fundraiser said she kept a "running list" in her head of DAF donors, recognizing they might need special attention. Others kept an eye out for DAF grants of all sizes and proactively wrote or called DAF donors to personally thank them for their grants, have an extra contact opportunity, and maintain the relationship through possible delays in formal acknowledgments.

Despite the special efforts many fundraisers made toward DAF donors, strategist fundraisers recognized that more could be done. They saw DAFs as a key opportunity to increase funding for their organizations.

Educator

A fundraiser who educates donors about DAFs to address knowledge gaps, shift donors' mindsets, and avoid mistakes related to regulations.

To help donors navigate DAF intricacies, prevent organizational issues, and advance fundraising goals, fundraisers emphasized the importance of first educating themselves, and then educating donors about DAFs. Fundraisers learned about DAFs through first-hand experience with DAF donors, professional development opportunities, industry publications/podcasts, working at DAF sponsoring organizations, and/or having a DAF themselves.

Fundraisers tailored their interactions to accommodate donors' varying levels of familiarity with DAFs. Some donors took the initiative to open a DAF, were knowledgeable about using it, and required minimal guidance. Others "really had no clue" and had inherited their DAF or opened it at the recommendation of their financial advisor, often for tax purposes. From the fundraisers' perspective, these donors often seemed unsure of how to use the account effectively and were more likely to let money in the account "just sit there."

When addressing knowledge gaps, several fundraisers saw DAFs as an opening for shifting donors' mindsets from "checkbook philanthropy" to asset-based giving. They educated donors about the possibility of using their DAFs to fund multi-year grants or to "leave a legacy" by designating the organization in their DAF succession plan.

Fundraisers also educated donors to help them avoid regulatory "potholes," including concerns around pledges and tangible personal benefits. Some donors were unsure about DAF regulations or mistakenly referred to their DAFs as foundations. Although fundraisers did not typically correct donors' nomenclature, several noted being careful to model specific language when discussing DAF grants, sponsors, pledges, and tax benefits to ensure compliance and clarity.

Facilitator

A fundraiser who takes on administrative and logistical tasks to ensure that DAF donors' giving experiences are smooth.

Fundraisers played a critical part in facilitating DAF grants by assisting donors, coordinating with sponsors, and working through internal organizational processes. They did these things both before and after receiving grants, helping donors navigate their DAFs and ensuring their organization responded effectively. These efforts not only strengthened donor relationships but also minimized "administrative headaches" and organizational errors.

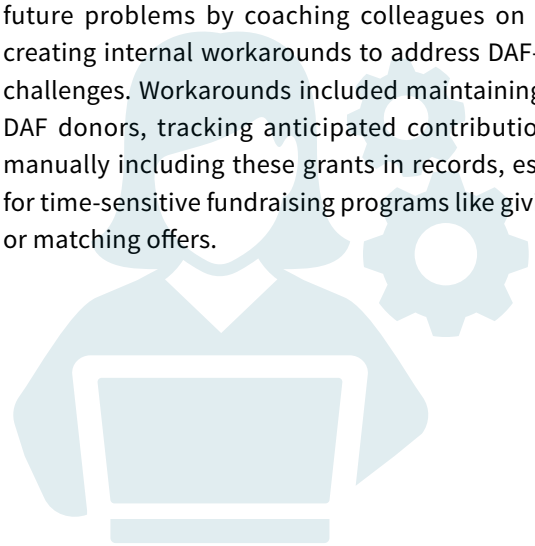
Fundraisers followed a general philosophy of making it "as easy as possible for the supporter to make a grant." What this required varied based on individual donors' experience with DAFs, fundraisers' understanding of donors' giving preferences, and organizational systems and structures.

Many fundraisers helped anticipate challenges donors might face designating a DAF grant and proactively offered guidance to smooth the giving process. One fundraiser explained, "I just give them our address, our title, our EIN, and then encourage them to connect with their advisor." Another told donors to "check the box" in the DAF platform to share their name with the organization or, if they preferred anonymity, discussed their recognition and communication preferences. Other fundraisers walked donors through designating grants for specific programs or unrestricted use, to ensure alignment between donor intentions and sponsor directives.

In some cases, fundraisers spoke with DAF donors' financial advisors to ensure accurate contribution details. Fundraisers also sometimes contacted DAF sponsors, particularly with first-time grants, to verify the organization's eligibility (see Challenge 1).

There is sometimes a delay between a donor recommending a DAF grant and the nonprofit receiving the funds. Because of this, some fundraisers encouraged donors to notify them after submitting a grant request. Once fundraisers knew a grant was on its way, they "stayed after" it by watching for its arrival and overseeing (or double-checking) processing to ensure vital information was captured. They then made it a point to ensure proper recognition. One fundraiser "[took] it upon [herself]" to contact DAF donors on the day their grant arrived, compensating for time that may have passed without acknowledgment while the grant was in transit. While this level of attention was possible in small organizations, larger organizations often required systematic policy changes to manage the scale and complexity of tracking and acknowledging DAF donors.

Occasionally, DAF grants arrived without donor identification, were not processed correctly, or were not acknowledged due to organizational policy or oversight. Fundraisers took responsibility for addressing these issues, speaking with disaffected, confused, or upset donors to provide explanations, offer reassurance, and express gratitude. Fundraisers also worked to prevent future problems by coaching colleagues on DAFs or creating internal workarounds to address DAF-specific challenges. Workarounds included maintaining lists of DAF donors, tracking anticipated contributions, and manually including these grants in records, especially for time-sensitive fundraising programs like giving days or matching offers.



Collaborator

A fundraiser who provides strategic DAF-related advice that helps donors use the vehicle to achieve their philanthropic goals.

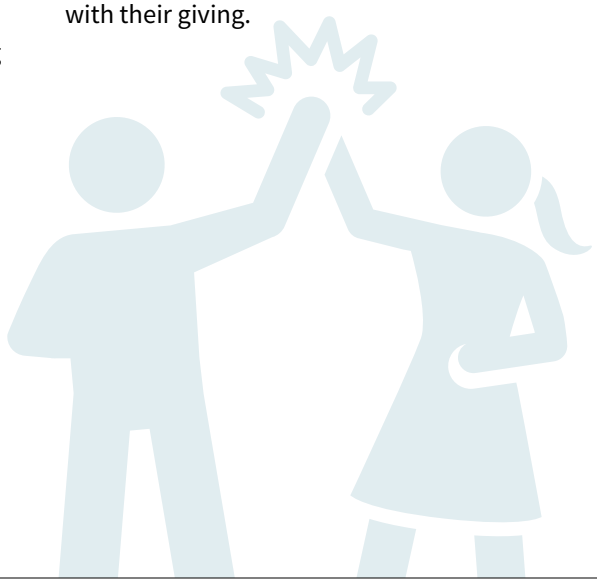
Recognizing the benefits of DAFs for donors, some fundraisers helped donors get the most out of DAFs and integrate DAFs into their overall philanthropic practices. They anticipated that this relationship-focused strategy would benefit their organizations in both the short- and long-term. Fundraisers who demonstrated this role tended to be confident in their DAF knowledge, more senior in their careers, and already in established relationships with DAF donors. The fundraisers saw these interactions as building trust with donors by showing genuine interest in the donors' philanthropic goals.

Some participants discussed their own DAFs to show credibility and strengthen relationships with donors. One fundraiser described that while "a lot of the folks I sit across the table from are sitting on a lot more disposable income than I am… it has been helpful for me to explain [our family's DAF strategy]," since a lot of these donors haven't "spent a whole lot of time thinking about [their own DAF strategy]."

Several fundraisers were involved in donors' decision-making about opening a DAF. Some fundraisers proactively recommended DAFs when the vehicle's benefits aligned with donors' priorities, such as consolidating giving, seeking flexibility in donation timing, or preferring confidentiality. One fundraiser said, "I'm okay asking questions about money," recognizing that thoughtful questions could lead to new ideas for donors. Sometimes, donors asked fundraisers for advice about whether they should open a DAF or a family foundation or about how to best support the organization with their DAF.

In addition to recommending DAFs, fundraisers also explored donors' overall philanthropic goals and then worked to help them use their DAFs more intentionally. For instance, one fundraiser remarked, "People…want to do good, but they don't know how. My job is to show them how they can make it happen. And having a DAF allows that." Several interviewees noted that DAF donors sought a demonstrable impact and had an investment mindset. Accordingly, some fundraisers honed in on these interests and sought to contribute to donors' "strategic giving" processes.

Opinions varied on the extent to which fundraisers should advise donors about DAFs. Some believed that such advice was best left to DAF sponsors and other advisors, while others saw it as both an opportunity and responsibility to help donors become more thoughtful and deliberate with their giving.



Concluding Thoughts

This report provides insights from fundraisers who work with DAF donors. The findings provide research-based strategies for nonprofit organizations to enhance their fundraising processes and systems for DAF fundraising.

Relationship fundraising remained the dominant paradigm as the fundraisers navigated their interactions with DAF donors. As one fundraiser said, "I think those who truly spend a lot of time in fundraising eventually come to the conclusion that our job isn't so much just getting money in. It's facilitating people's experience through giving."

The study findings are summarized in the "DAF Donor Relationship Management Cycle," which accounts for changes to the traditional major gift management cycle and includes the challenges and opportunities articulated in the interviews. This study provides a unique perspective on how fundraising processes and "cycles" are implemented in real-world settings. Every stage of the new cycle includes modifications and improvements to build better relationships with donors who use DAFs. As fundraisers use the cycle to help address the challenges created by DAFs, they can become better informed about their donors' giving and help donors avoid potential DAF-related confusion. By seizing DAF opportunities, fundraisers can build deep and authentic relationships with donors and craft customized solicitations to secure grants. Actively considering ways of interacting with donors who have DAFs, as highlighted in the roles section, provides a framework for reviewing interactions and facilitates an intentional approach to moving through the new DAF cycle.

Although the policy and regulatory environment is constantly evolving, DAFs seem likely to continue to grow in their popularity. Fundraisers need to monitor DAF-related developments, while also maintaining a focus on DAF fundraising and adapting to changing circumstances as needed.

Fundraisers are uniquely positioned to impact organizational practices around DAFs. They can facilitate giving through DAFs to their organizations and help donors use their DAFs in meaningful ways. As one fundraiser said, "Let's help [donors] be more thoughtful. Let's help them learn more about these [DAF] issues, be more strategic in their investments, [and] the organizations they pick." Ultimately, more informed fundraisers can guide more DAF donors to their organizations and to the nonprofit sector.

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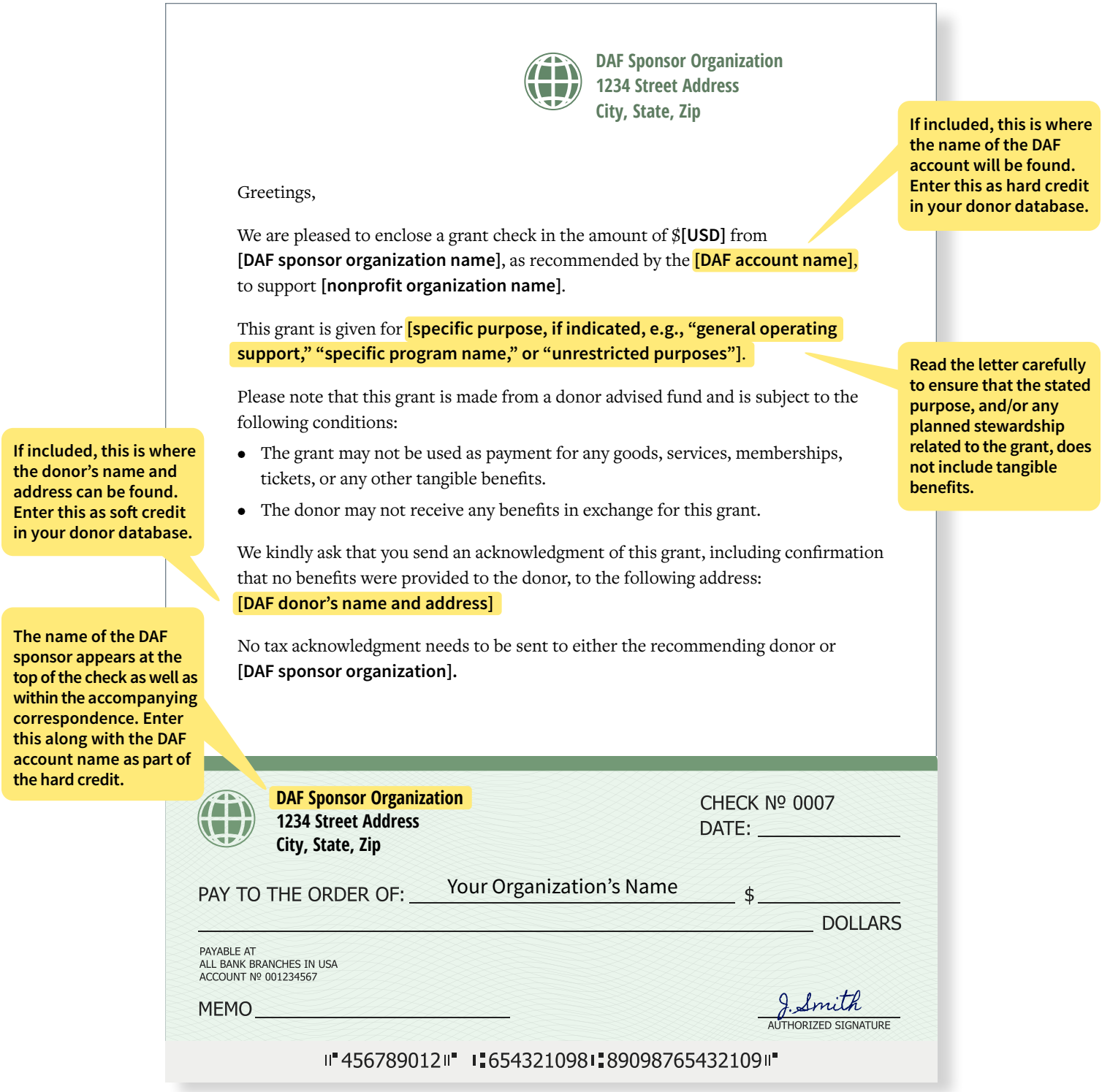

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