

Meet Mission Telecom Giving, a New Funder Building Grassroots Power

Mike Scutari | October 31, 2025



MEMBERS OF ADVANCE NATIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, A MISSION TELECOM GIVING GRANTEE.
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At the risk of overgeneralizing, it isn't a huge stretch to say that some grantmaking leaders are skittish about funding [501c4s](#) that engage in political advocacy.



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“I think that we have this sense that c3 work is virtuous,” said Ashindi Maxton, director of [Mission Telecom Giving](#), the giving arm of Mission Telecom, a nonprofit broadband provider and telecommunications organization. “There’s this cultural norm of, if you are feeding someone, you are doing something virtuous, but if you get involved in the politics underlying that, your motives are in question.”

Moreover, individual donors may be deterred from 501c4 giving since contributions are not deductible for federal income tax purposes. “We have a philanthropy system that incentivizes c3 giving, so if you want to stay safe and clean, do c3,” said Maxton, who is [the cofounder of the Donors Color of Network](#). “c4 is what you do if you want to change the systems.”

Mission Telecom Giving is all-in on the latter approach. Including under a previous name, it has moved \$11 million out the door since 2022, with 75% flowing to c4s, versus 25% to c3s. Every penny was earmarked as [unrestricted support](#). A few months ago, MTG officially launched as a separate program from Mission Telecom and announced it would disburse [an additional \\$20 million](#) over five years, with \$4 million dedicated for 2025. In its efforts to “shift power through unrestricted, movement-led funding for grassroots movements, advocacy and policy change,” MTG will focus on three pillars: strengthening multiracial democracy, building long-term [movement infrastructure](#) and advancing telecom justice.

Maxton, who has extensive experience building power with front-line organizations, is the first to admit that MTG doesn’t have the deepest pockets in the philanthrosphere. But bigger isn’t always better, and at a time when an antagonistic Trump administration is setting grantmakers’ work back years — thanks, some would argue, to [risk-averse funders](#)’ reluctance to support election-related work — Maxton believes MTG’s tranche of new funding to mostly c4s will have a disproportionately constructive impact.

“Twenty million is the floor,” she said. “And we hope to move more.”



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How Mission Telecom Giving came together

Maxton gained a deep appreciation for grassroots organizing before joining MTG. For example, from 2007 to 2010, she served as the director of research and special projects for the [Democracy Alliance](#), an influential network of progressive donors that coordinates support for progressive policy, media and civic engagement.

In this role, Maxton oversaw initiatives focused on voting rights. “I learned that the work that gets done, for the most part, is the work that gets funded, and staying near resources is a really powerful way to be an ally to civil rights,” she said.

What would become Mission Telecom Giving launched as an independent entity and began making grants in 2022 under the name Instructional Telecommunications Foundation. Maxton served on the board before taking a sabbatical. Upon her return in October of that year, she joined Instructional Telecommunications Foundation as a consultant to develop its grantmaking strategy.

This work found Maxton conducting what was, in essence, a philanthropic needs assessment. “We interviewed our internal stakeholders, experts in the field and movement leaders, and we asked them all, ‘What do you need that’s not out there?’” she said. “And then we did the Venn diagram of what was our in-house expertise and what the field was telling us they needed.”

The exercise yielded MTG’s three grantmaking pillars of movement-building, telecom justice and multiracial democracy — “with a very strong c4 focus, because that money is so hard to come by,” Maxton said. In 2023, the board hired its first executive director and took on the trade name Mission Telecom, which encompassed its broadband and grants work. As of the official launch of Mission Telecom Giving this year, MTG is managing the grantmaking while Mission Telecom continues its affordable broadband work.

Examples of how MTG provides “opportunistic funding”

After that initial slate of grants went out, Maxton and her team realized that most recipient organizations were located on the coasts, so they course-corrected their strategy.

“We traveled to North Carolina and Mississippi to meet groups,” Maxton said. One grantee partner in the latter state, [We Must Vote](#), is dedicated to increasing voter engagement and education in rural communities. “We’re excited because they’re part of a new c4 ecosystem that we’re seeing develop in Mississippi.”

MTG’s portfolio now consists of 50 organizations, many of which are based in the South and Southwest.

Zooming out nationally, another grantee, [Advance Native Political Leadership](#), works to increase the representation of Native Americans in elected and appointed officers. “We’re deeply proud of having watched that group come from conception to the scale that they’re at now,” Maxton said. “This is the kind of philanthropy that I personally really like doing — investing in a small scale of folks who are hard to fund initially, and then watching them get to scale.”

Of MTG’s total grantmaking, 25% is earmarked as “opportunistic funding,” which is akin to rapid-response and start-up support for nascent organizations.

Most of MTG’s grantees haven’t been directly affected by developments out of Washington, D.C., because, particularly as organizations focused on racial and social justice work, they didn’t receive federal grants in the first place. But one thing we’ve learned is that those cuts don’t exist in a vacuum. We’ve seen instances where food banks that didn’t receive a dime in federal funding saw [demand skyrocket](#) because neighboring organizations had their grants terminated.

A similar dynamic is playing out in the digital equity space.

“Everything related to digital equity has lost its funding,” Maxton said. “If you think about this as a social justice issue, how can you possibly engage in this world without digital skills?”

In response, MTG provided opportunistic funding for the San Francisco-based [Connect Humanity](#) after its leaders presented Maxton and her team with a proposal to establish alternative funding models for digital equity work. “It’s an example of how you begin to meet this need when the government’s not meeting it,” Maxton said.

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Making the case for 501c4 funding

The two main components of MTG’s giving strategy — unrestricted support and significant funding for c4s — have taken on greater resonance amid Trump 2.0.

Unrestricted funding can help organizations that lost federal grants and those that have seen demand for services [increase exponentially](#) because of the cuts. As for 501c4 support, I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that commentators were encouraging progressive funders to devote more attention to [building power](#) and winning elections long before November 2024.

IP Editor David Callahan has often noted that in 2016, Trump won the electoral college by just [80,000 votes in three states](#) — an indictment on progressive philanthropy’s inability to galvanize its base constituencies. Callahan’s [2024 election postmortem](#) suggested that the “vast majority” of left-of-center foundations were “entrenched in a dated operating model, including the idea that philanthropy should avoid ‘politics.’” His [follow-up piece](#) reminded readers that many organizing groups build power by combining year-round 501c3 work

with 501c4 electoral work to ensure that their constituencies are represented in the electoral sphere.

“While such multi-entity operations can unnerve risk-averse funders,” he wrote, “this combined approach is the best way to ensure that civic engagement leads to tangible change.”

Maxton echoed these sentiments during our call and lamented the costs of funder inaction in the run-up to Trump 2.0. “We’ve ignored the political playing field to our massive detriment,” Maxton said. “If you care about maternal health or [food insecurity](#), how did it work out for you to give up the political playing field and choose not to let people do advocacy, or run candidates for office, or get involved directly in ballot initiatives to change things for the greatest number of people?”

Maxton also stressed that MTG takes an issue-agnostic approach when disbursing unrestricted support for c4 organizations.

One such group, [Down Home North Carolina](#), is focused on building power with poor and working-class people in the state’s small towns and rural communities. “We don’t invest in particular political races or candidates,” Maxton said. “We invest in groups. We say, ‘We want to give you the most flexible money because we trust you to build power where you are.’ Down Home North Carolina has run people for local office in rural areas, and for us, that’s a way of building power in a place that has traditionally been very under-invested.”

During our conversation, Maxton was firm in her belief that grantmakers navigating Trump 2.0 need to interrogate their reluctance to support organizations that build grassroots power, even if it means dipping their toes in political waters.

“I hope there’s a reckoning in philanthropy to say, why are we here?” Maxton said. “And if we’re actually here to change things for the most people, then I think you have to change the kind of money that you’re giving.”
