

GOVERNANCE CASE STORY:

Elmina B. Sewall Foundation

Disrupting patterns, shifting culture and aligning
practice with values

➤ Quick Info

Organization: Elmina B. Sewall
Foundation

Type of grantmaker: Private/
independent foundation

Board size: 6

Funder's assets (as of Feb 2026):
\$165 million

**2025–2029 annual grantmaking
budget:** \$14.3 million

Grant size (range): \$25,000–\$50,000
for single-organization grants;
collaborative grants are larger

INTERVIEWEES:

Gabriela Alcalde
Executive Director

Jono Anzalone
Board Chair

About the Series

What does it take to build governance that fuels transformative philanthropic practice and lasting social change? At its best, governance sets a strategic rudder that clarifies and maintains focus on an organization's mission and priorities, despite the buffeting winds of fear and resistance that challenge our work. Good governance isn't magic: It involves mindsets, structures and practices that foster frank conversation; reveal power inequities; and harness the contributions of people with diverse lived experiences, identities and talents.

Because boards are an essential lever for change in philanthropy, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and Northern California Grantmakers are partnering on this series of case stories to surface and promote concrete practices that help funders better align their governance with their mission and values. There's no one right way for grantmakers to do governance, so we hope these case stories provide diverse examples of ways funders have evolved in this area and offer translatable lessons.

For more information and resources, including the rest of the case stories, see GEO's [work on governance](#) and NCG's [governance page](#).

About the Sewall Foundation

Elmina B. Sewall established the foundation in 1982 as part of her lifetime commitment to helping those in need in her hometown of Kennebunk, Maine, and the state as a whole. Since Sewall's death in 2005, the foundation's board of directors has sought to continue her philanthropic legacy. The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation makes grants in Maine in the following program areas: animal welfare, food systems, keystone (grassroots efforts in environmental justice), Lewiston-Auburn (place-based), nature-based education, rural partnerships, and Wabanaki (Indigenous communities), complemented by a rapid-response program and, as of 2025, a strategic discretionary fund program. The Sewall Foundation also makes local impact investments to advance its mission and offers a partner-informed Beyond the Grant program of capacity supports.

Governance Background and Context

M. Gabriela Alcalde, MPH, DrPH became the second executive director of the Sewall Foundation in 2019, following the founding executive director. The board intentionally hired Alcalde, an immigrant woman of color, to bring a racial equity lens to the foundation's work. In the six years since her hire, the foundation has changed significantly across all four dimensions of trust-based philanthropy (culture, structures, leadership, and practices). Sewall's deep commitment to trust-based philanthropy practices includes offering multiyear general operating support grants, minimizing the burden on grantees, partnering meaningfully with the community, offering support and convenings beyond the grant, and increasing its giving to address community needs.

Yet despite the foundation's deeply relational approach, the culture of the board was radically different from the reputation of the foundation in the community. Of particular note, shifts on the staff side of the foundation had created greater dissonance between the way the staff team was operating and the way the board was operating.

The organization now uses the Sewall approach instead of a time-limited strategic plan, reflecting a belief that the most strategic decision the organization can make is to remain consistent and adaptive in bringing its values to life.

The board that governed the Sewall Foundation when Alcalde joined the organization was traditional along several dimensions. It approved every grant, saw itself as having “power over” staff and held strong perspectives on the importance of hierarchy. There was a dominant (although not consensus) view that the board was the “boss” of the executive director. In part, this is reflective of the developmental stage of the board and the organization, and the fact that due to the foundation’s having started out with a very small staff, the board was originally more of a working board than a strategic board.

Despite intentional efforts by the board to diversify its membership, and concerted learning efforts around equity, the dynamics between the board and staff were deeply hierarchical and far from the thought partnership that both parties had articulated as the desired approach. Specifically, the relationship between the board and staff was increasingly marked by tension and strife, including periodic blow-ups during board meetings. “I used to bring

lavender essential oils and relaxing teas to the office for weeks before each board meeting,” said Alcalde. “It was that stressful for the staff.” It is worth noting that Alcalde started her tenure approximately six months prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, so stressors were both internal and external.

Board members, though diverse in terms of race, gender and sexual orientation, were not well connected to the communities the foundation served. When it came time to recruit new board members, according to Jono Anzalone, current board chair, members would “think about who they knew, and often that was the beginning (and the end) of how board recruitment would take place,” perpetuating a similarly minded board. The board culture seemed stuck in an old way of operating that did not work for the foundation it was governing. Alcalde proposed an open call for board recruitment early in her tenure, but it took two years for the proposal to be put into practice.

Levers of Change

► An open call.

The change began with an open call for board members. The foundation issued a public call that described the role and the desired candidate attributes along with clear statements about the Sewall Foundation's values and culture. Interested candidates submitted applications, which Sewall's executive director and two other staff members reviewed first, using criteria developed by the executive director and governance committee; then staff shared the reviews and full list of applicants with the board's governance committee to select finalists. The board invited the finalists to interviews, which allowed both parties to get to know each other and ensure a good fit. The recruitment process focused on values as well as culture practices, such as conflict management.

The open call brought in six new and values-aligned board members, essentially "flooding" the board with new perspectives. Sewall Foundation brought on several board members affiliated with grantee organizations, adding essential voices that had been missing when this practice was only occasional. To ensure that people of all socioeconomic and employment circumstances could participate, Sewall had begun to offer stipends for board participation in 2020.

► Asking WHY.

The newly reconfigured board reviewed a racial equity assessment that an external consultant had conducted during the first year of Alcalde's tenure. The assessment had been quite controversial when shared with the original board, as it identified areas where board behavior was out of alignment with the organization's committed values. According to Anzalone, the new board members were able to use their fresh perspectives to disrupt old patterns of thinking and behavior: "Six of us understood that things could be different — and we really questioned the five original board members, asking 'why' at every turn."

► Revisiting the board role.

The board assessment also illuminated ways in which the board's activity was encroaching on staff leadership's "lane." Despite opposition from some members, the board revisited its role and shifted its focus to a more strategic level. The board moved away from its previous practice of approving specific grants and instead approved a multiyear grantmaking budget. Staff gained authority to make grant decisions within that budget, and the organization created greater clarity on board and executive director roles through the development of descriptions of board roles and responsibilities, a code of conduct statement, and iterative board agreements that guided meeting practices and behavior.

► Redefining "fiduciary responsibility."

Perhaps most importantly, the Sewall Foundation board engaged in deep study and reflection of fiduciary responsibility, which had, in the past, been a roadblock to making values-aligned decisions.

Levers of Change & Impact

The organization developed a new definition of fiduciary responsibility:

The Sewall Foundation understands fiduciary responsibility to be the strategic, values-based stewardship of resources to advance our mission of supporting a culture of equity and interconnected well-being for people, animals, and the environment in Maine, and to ensure adequate resources are available to meet our social impact obligations to and aspirations for Maine and Wabanaki communities.

With this new definition that centers community and mission, the foundation was able to increase its giving to address community needs, especially during volatile times.

► Building a culture of care and respect.

The board and staff had struggled in a relationship of mutual distrust and antagonism that created stress and suppressed healthy dialogue. To move to a new type of relationship and align the entire organization with its stated values, the board and staff engaged in extensive work to create a new culture, supported by structures, practices and tools that reiterated and reinforced organizational values.

The multiyear codevelopment of the Sewall “[approach](#)” offered multiple opportunities over a few years for the staff and board to learn together, explore areas of misalignment, and land on a durable approach based on values and long-term impacts. Importantly, the Sewall approach prioritizes HOW the work is done, more than WHAT the work is. The organization now uses the Sewall approach instead of a time-limited strategic plan, reflecting a belief that the most strategic decision the organization can make is to remain consistent and adaptive in bringing its values to life. The board recently developed and is now using a decision-making tool that checks alignment with the foundation’s approach.

Impact

Six years later, the Sewall Foundation’s governance looks very different from what it looked like when Alcalde was hired. Dramatic shifts in the board’s composition, culture and practice were essential to the foundation’s evolution. The six-member board now is more reflective of the community and is aligned with the organizational values of equity and stewardship. Instead of an antagonistic relationship, the board and staff see each other as partners in what is described on the website as an “intentional community committed to a values-based culture that recognizes that the people in our organization are the most valuable resource in moving our mission forward.” Simply put, the board has moved to “power with” rather than “power over.”

SHIFT IN BOARD MINDSET



Lessons & Advice for Peers

1 Fiduciary responsibility must center our responsibility to the mission and community.

There is space between existing in perpetuity and spending down. Boards need to have their own definition of fiduciary responsibility and revisit it in relation to community needs in this volatile time.

2 The relationship between the president / executive director and board chair is essential.

It requires an active commitment to building trust and strong communication. Both individuals must understand their roles in relation to the board, staff and organization.

3 Organizations are alive — and we need to be willing to change if we are to be responsive to our communities and their needs.

Creating values-based structures that are flexible and adaptive allows organizations to evolve while retaining their core purpose.

4 Conflict is not violence! Conflict is change coming up and getting worked through.

Boards, especially board chairs, need to get more comfortable with healthy conflict so that they can navigate change. Offering and practicing ways to engage with and navigate conflict in a caring and productive way is an essential learning practice for organizations, especially for boards.

5 Remember that at the heart of all change, we are dealing with human beings with feelings, experiences and lives outside the organization.

Alcalde reflected that some changes could have been smoother if everyone had paid more attention to the human aspects of managing change, especially the natural sense of loss or grief that change — even positive change — can bring to human beings.

6 Before you can repair harm, you must first acknowledge it.

Boards can't always see how they perpetuate harmful patterns, and working with an external consultant and performing an assessment may be necessary to make those patterns of harm visible. At Sewall, understanding the difference between intent and impact was an essential early lesson for both board and staff — and this lesson continues to inform organizational and board dialogue.

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