

# A Longtime Neuroscience Funder Pivots to Giving the Public a Voice in Research

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If you're not a working research neuroscientist, you may not have heard of the [Dana Foundation](#). But you've very likely heard of its founder, the late Charles A. Dana, via the more widely known Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. It was back in 1950 that Dana, wealthy from manufacturing and other business endeavors, established and funded the Dana Foundation. The grantmaker initially focused on higher education and health, including as a longtime funder of the Sidney Farber Cancer Center, renamed in 1983 to acknowledge the foundation's contributions. But for the last 40 years or so, the Dana Foundation has been primarily known as a key funder of neuroscience and brain research.

Today, recognizing that the arcane world of neuroscience is developing quickly and growing increasingly relevant to society beyond the laboratory, the foundation is shifting its emphasis to ensure that neuroscience and related technologies not only steer toward public benefit, but include the public's voice in the research process.

This evolution has led to foundation's recent launch of the Dana Center Initiative for Neuroscience & Society, an \$11 million effort that aims to bring together neuroscientists and academic institutions with the public and the communities those institutions serve. It will also help support the education of experts who will specialize in bringing researchers and the public together.

"The impetus for moving into this focus area of neuroscience and society was the recognition that neuroscience research and neuroscience technology development are advancing quickly and in exciting ways," said Caroline Montojo, president and CEO of the Dana Foundation. "In some cases, those developments are outpacing the speed of public dialogue and understanding of the potential uses and misuses of that science and technology."

### **“How do we want to use this science and technology?”**

During the last decade, Montojo said, the Dana Foundation's leaders found themselves growing increasingly concerned that the accelerating pace of discovery in neuroscience would bring with it potential risks. As the foundation shifted its strategy to encourage prosocial research and technology, it brought on Montojo as president and CEO in 2021. A neuroscientist, Montojo had previously been director of life sciences and brain initiatives at the [Kavli Foundation](#).

Rapidly advancing areas like brain-computer interfaces, which can monitor and influence brain activity, and [the use of psychedelics in mental health treatment](#), may move out of the laboratory and into society sooner than you think, Montojo told me. If neuroscience-driven technologies like brain-computer interfaces seem like science fiction at first glance, decades away from widespread application, Montojo said it's worth keeping in mind just how quickly innovations such as smartphones can become near universal in almost everyone's life.

“The questions are: How do we want to use this science and technology? How far is too far? And where can it most benefit our lives?” she said. “I think there's an increasing recognition that philanthropy and other levers of funding, even funding from public agencies, now have the opportunity to shape that future, together with the public.”

To address those questions, the Dana Foundation hopes its new program will open novel channels for dialogue between academia and the public. A central goal is to develop methods to include people from minority communities who have historically been excluded from the sciences.

When the foundation started developing the current neuroscience initiative, the team was rather surprised to learn how rarely public input is sought or incorporated in research and development. “It's not done regularly or systematically right now,” Montojo said.

But while nonscientists might lack the background to weigh in on highly technical subject matter, there are areas where public input makes lots of sense, she said, such as around society’s broader goals and values. “When we think about how technology is shaped, or how different neuroscience models are used and researched, public input can actually stimulate new questions for research, starting with the experimental questions that are posed,” she said. Public perspectives can help in the interpretation of findings, as well, to bridge the gap between research in the lab and how those findings might impact people's lives. “That can increase the likelihood that whatever is being developed in the lab can be used by patients and communities,” Montojo said.

### **Building bridges to communities in Los Angeles and Chicago**

One of the first of the new initiative’s grants will go to a joint program run by UCLA and Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, a historically Black institution. The two universities and the foundation will convene scholars from neuroscience, social sciences, education, policy and the humanities to work with local clinician-scholars, community partners and organizations in South Los

Angeles. The program will aim "to reimagine the relationship between neuroscience and the public," serving as an incubator for researcher-community collaborations and for training multidisciplinary experts in neuroscience and society.

Another grant will partner the Dana Foundation with Loyola University Chicago to explore ways to create a new category of neuroscience professionals who can lead and drive the still-nascent practice of community participation in research. The goal is to establish an interdisciplinary approach to neuroscience education in the Chicago area, and to create a pipeline to neuroscience careers by encouraging STEM interest among middle and high school students. It will also provide community micro-grants and challenges in arts, business and journalism to expand links between neuroscience and the community.

Dana Foundation expects to announce more grants in the coming months and years under the Neuroscience & Society initiative.

### **Evolving with the times**

Dana's new neuroscience and society strategy is an interesting shift for the foundation, which currently holds assets of approximately \$235 million. But it's consistent with its roots. For example, when founder Charles Dana considered how to direct support to areas where his giving could have the greatest benefit, he opted to fund small colleges that educated underserved groups and communities. These included Berea College in Kentucky, the first co-ed and racially integrated college in the southern U.S.

Later, Dana developed a close relationship with noted pediatric cancer researcher Sidney Farber. Though Dana himself died in 1975, in recognition of his backing of Farber's cancer research, his name was added in 1983 to what is now known as the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. It was also during the 1980s that the Dana Foundation's leadership identified neuroscience as an important but underfunded new frontier in research, and the foundation grew in subsequent years to become an important part of the funding landscape in that field.

As Inside Philanthropy has reported, discussions in philanthropy about [better ensuring that science works for society](#) are increasingly happening in other fields — [we're looking at you, AI](#). And [a number of science funders](#) have long operated programs to communicate and raise scientific literacy beyond the laboratories to the world outside campus, where the rest of us live. As advances continue to accumulate in cutting-edge fields like neuroscience, philanthropy's civic role as a bridge between the ivory tower and larger society will be more important than ever.