

# Glaucoma Research Foundation: Navigating the Strategic Horizon (2023-2027)

## Executive Summary

The Glaucoma Research Foundation (GRF) has articulated a robust five-year strategic plan for 2023-2027, centered on four pivotal imperatives: Accelerating Research, Expanding Awareness and Patient-Centered Activities, Maximizing Philanthropic Support, and Building and Strengthening Leadership.<sup>1</sup> This comprehensive framework is designed to significantly advance GRF's enduring mission to cure glaucoma and restore vision through innovative research. A key financial objective within this plan is to achieve an annual contributed income of \$10 million by fiscal year 2027.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two fiscal years (FY2023-2024), GRF has demonstrated commendable financial health and operational momentum. Fiscal year 2024 marked a record year, with total revenue reaching \$7.9 million and total assets at a record \$14.6 million.<sup>3</sup> The organization consistently maintains high charity ratings, having earned Charity Navigator's highest 4-star rating for eight consecutive years and meeting all 20 of the Better Business Bureau's Standards for Charity Accountability.<sup>3</sup> Significant strides have been observed in research, particularly through the continued funding and progress of the Catalyst for a Cure (CFC) initiatives and Shaffer Grants, alongside expanded patient education efforts delivered via various events and digital platforms.<sup>5</sup> Despite these achievements, the plan acknowledges challenges such as the need for increased staffing to support ambitious growth and the management of rising operational expenses, partly due to inflation.<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of the broader non-profit landscape reveals several strategic considerations pertinent to GRF's trajectory. The importance of revenue diversification is paramount for mitigating financial risk and fostering organizational innovation, preventing over-reliance on single funding streams.<sup>8</sup> Effective leadership development and robust board governance are critical components for talent retention and ensuring long-term organizational stability.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, emerging funding models, such as venture philanthropy, present promising avenues for high-engagement, long-term support for transformative research initiatives.<sup>14</sup> Based on these insights, strategic recommendations for GRF include leveraging digital fundraising trends more extensively, formalizing leadership pipelines, and exploring strategic partnerships to enhance its ambitious goals and ensure sustained impact.

# 1. Introduction: The Glaucoma Research Foundation's Strategic Vision

The Glaucoma Research Foundation (GRF), established in San Francisco in 1978, stands as a prominent national non-profit organization dedicated to combating glaucoma, the second leading cause of irreversible blindness globally.<sup>16</sup> The organization's fundamental mission is to cure glaucoma and restore vision through innovative research, addressing a critical unmet medical need given that currently there is no cure for this blinding disease.<sup>17</sup>

GRF's operational philosophy is underpinned by a set of core values that guide its efforts:

- **Discovery:** A relentless pursuit of a cure and the development of solutions to prevent glaucoma, slow its progression, and ultimately restore lost vision.<sup>18</sup>
- **Collaboration:** Fostering a collective environment that brings together patients, families, caregivers, doctors, and researchers to facilitate mutual learning and support.<sup>18</sup>
- **Innovation:** Providing crucial seed funding for creative research projects that might otherwise struggle to secure initial support, thereby attracting new talent and pioneering ideas to the field of vision science.<sup>18</sup>
- **Empowerment:** A commitment to sharing knowledge, insights, resources, and inspiration to empower all individuals affected by glaucoma.<sup>18</sup>

The organization's strategic direction for 2023-2027 is encapsulated in four key imperatives, meticulously reviewed and evaluated by its Board of Directors and staff to provide a clear framework for action and ensure continued success<sup>1</sup>:

1. **Accelerate Research:** This imperative focuses on investing in innovative and promising research aimed at developing improved therapies, achieving vision restoration, and ultimately finding a cure for glaucoma.<sup>1</sup>
2. **Expand Awareness & Patient-Centered Activities:** This involves a concerted effort to educate and communicate vital information about glaucoma to a broad audience, including patients, their loved ones, healthcare providers, and the general public.<sup>1</sup>
3. **Maximize Philanthropic Support:** A crucial financial objective to increase philanthropic contributions and engagement to adequately fund GRF's ambitious research goals and expand its educational programs.<sup>1</sup>
4. **Build and Strengthen Leadership:** This imperative emphasizes the recruitment, development, retention, engagement, and support of a diverse and talented group of board directors, staff members, and dedicated volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Detailed Analysis of the 2023-2027 Strategic Plan

## 2.1 Accelerate Research

The "Accelerate Research" imperative is central to GRF's mission, focusing on groundbreaking scientific advancements. The strategic plan outlines specific ambitious goals, including advancing the Steven and Michele Kirsch Catalyst for a Cure (CFC) Vision Restoration Initiative towards clinical trials for neuroprotective therapy by 2025 and for vision restoration mechanisms by 2027.<sup>2</sup> A significant new endeavor involves launching a new consortium dedicated to solving neurodegeneration, which will combine expertise from various neurodegenerative diseases.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, GRF aims to increase funding for its prestigious Shaffer Research Grants, with a target of supporting 15 pilot studies annually by calendar year 2027.<sup>2</sup>

The pursuit of these goals is not without challenges. Innovative research, particularly in complex areas like neurodegeneration and vision restoration, demands substantial and sustained financial investment. These are often high-risk, high-reward endeavors that require long-term funding commitments, which traditional grant cycles may not always accommodate.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of neurodegenerative research necessitates effective collaboration across diverse scientific fields.

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist. GRF can leverage virtual events and online programming to expand its research reach nationally and globally, facilitating broader scientific discourse and collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Strategic partnerships with industry, media, and other healthcare organizations can also accelerate research translation.<sup>2</sup> A particularly promising avenue is investigating venture philanthropy, a funding model that can provide the necessary capital for innovative technologies and novel therapies.<sup>2</sup>

The explicit shift in GRF's research focus from solely intraocular pressure (IOP) reduction to neuroprotection and vision restoration represents a pivotal evolution in its scientific strategy. This strategic direction is a direct response to the growing understanding that while IOP reduction remains a cornerstone of current glaucoma treatment, it is often insufficient for many patients who continue to experience vision loss despite optimal pressure control.<sup>5</sup> GRF's own pioneering work through the Catalyst for a Cure program, which helped redefine glaucoma as a neurodegenerative disease, provides the foundational scientific rationale for this ambitious pivot towards curative interventions rather than just symptom management.<sup>18</sup> This strategic reorientation reflects a mature recognition of the limitations of past approaches and a commitment to investing in more fundamental, long-term solutions that address the underlying disease pathology.

The plan to launch a new consortium combining expertise across various neurodegenerative diseases also positions GRF at the forefront of broader neuroscience research, extending its influence beyond ophthalmology. Researchers funded by GRF have already acknowledged that discoveries in glaucoma research can have broader implications for other neurodegenerative conditions, such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).<sup>5</sup> This strategic move allows GRF to leverage shared biological mechanisms across diseases, potentially unlocking new funding streams from entities traditionally focused

on these broader neurodegenerative disorders. By expanding its research scope, GRF can access a larger pool of scientific talent, foster interdisciplinary breakthroughs, and attract a wider array of philanthropic and governmental funding, thereby increasing its overall impact and financial resilience.

## **2.2 Expand Awareness & Patient-Centered Activities**

The "Expand Awareness & Patient-Centered Activities" imperative aims to empower glaucoma patients, their loved ones, healthcare providers, and the general public with comprehensive, compassionate, accessible, unbiased, and accurate information about glaucoma.<sup>2</sup> Key goals include significantly growing and broadening GRF's constituency base both nationally and internationally, and increasing public awareness of glaucoma risk factors, particularly for high-risk communities such as African American, Latino, and Asian American populations. This also involves developing culturally appropriate educational materials.<sup>2</sup>

Challenges in this area include effectively reaching diverse communities, which necessitates tailored approaches and robust partnerships. Furthermore, maintaining the accuracy and accessibility of medical information in a rapidly evolving scientific and clinical landscape requires continuous effort.

Despite these challenges, GRF has several opportunities to advance this imperative. The organization can continue to leverage virtual events and online programming to expand its reach nationally and globally.<sup>2</sup> Developing and updating print and online materials based on identified unmet needs from both patients and doctors will enhance the relevance and utility of educational content.<sup>2</sup> Strategic partnerships with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), other healthcare organizations, and non-profits are crucial for effective awareness and outreach activities, particularly in underserved communities.<sup>2</sup>

The explicit emphasis on developing culturally appropriate materials and targeting high-risk communities, including African American, Latino, and Asian American populations, highlights GRF's commitment to health equity and addressing disparities in glaucoma care. Glaucoma is notably the leading cause of blindness in Black Americans, and early detection is critical for preserving vision.<sup>17</sup> This is not merely a general outreach objective but a targeted public health initiative. By focusing on these specific demographics, GRF is directly addressing a significant health disparity, which has the potential to lead to earlier diagnoses and improved outcomes for vulnerable populations, thereby aligning its mission with broader societal health equity goals.

## **2.3 Maximize Philanthropic Support**

The "Maximize Philanthropic Support" imperative is fundamental to enabling GRF's ambitious programmatic goals. A primary focus is to grow revenue to support increased program areas, with a specific target of reaching an annual contributed income of \$10 million by fiscal year

2027.<sup>2</sup> This requires significant increases in leadership gifts, multi-year pledges, Catalyst Circle membership, and general supporting gifts.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the plan emphasizes promoting planned giving and increasing revenue from signature events like Glaucoma 360 and the Glaucoma Patient Summit.<sup>2</sup>

Achieving these fundraising goals presents challenges. Growing revenue to this scale necessitates additional development staff and a realignment of current staff responsibilities to focus on donor engagement and prospect identification.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, expenses are projected to increase for personnel, communications efforts, and the research budget, particularly due to the second Catalyst for a Cure (CFC) initiative and planned growth of Shaffer Grants. Production costs for events and print materials are also projected to rise by 10% over the next 12 to 18 months due to recent inflation.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these challenges, GRF possesses significant opportunities. Its strong financial health and consistent high charity ratings—including Charity Navigator's highest 4-star rating for eight consecutive years and adherence to all 20 of the Better Business Bureau's Standards for Charity Accountability—provide a robust foundation for attracting donors.<sup>3</sup> The fact that over 87% of GRF's revenue comes from individual donors indicates a strong and loyal donor base, which can be leveraged for growth.<sup>4</sup> Promoting planned giving offers a long-term revenue stream.<sup>2</sup>

The ambitious \$10 million revenue target by FY2027, coupled with the acknowledgment of "increasing expenses" due to "recent inflation," highlights a critical financial challenge. This situation necessitates a robust and diversified fundraising strategy to mitigate the risks associated with over-reliance on any single funding stream. Academic research on non-profits underscores that depending heavily on one primary revenue source can jeopardize an organization's sustainability, as economic downturns or shifts in funder priorities can abruptly impact a single revenue stream.<sup>8</sup> While GRF's strong reliance on individual donors (87% of revenue) is a testament to its donor loyalty, it also indicates a concentration risk if donor behavior shifts due to broader economic factors such as inflation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, achieving the revenue target sustainably requires a sophisticated, multi-channel fundraising approach that extends beyond merely increasing existing individual giving streams.

The explicit need for "additional staff and realignment of current staff responsibilities" directly links GRF's fundraising goals to its organizational capacity. The strategic plan prioritizes adding development staff to focus on donor engagement and prospect identification, as well as increasing communications and engagement with GRF Ambassadors. It also anticipates the need for more event and program staff as research and educational programs expand.<sup>2</sup> This indicates that the financial objectives are not solely about attracting more funds but about building the internal human infrastructure necessary to support that growth and the expanded programs. Without this investment in human capital, understaffing could impede the achievement of both financial and programmatic objectives.

## **2.4 Build and Strengthen Leadership**

The "Build and Strengthen Leadership" imperative is foundational to GRF's long-term sustainability and effectiveness. The strategic plan aims to ensure a diverse, active, committed, and supportive Board of Directors with a broad range of expertise.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, it seeks to cultivate a dedicated, collaborative, skilled, and engaged team of staff members, with a strong focus on staff engagement through professional development, clear growth pathways, recognition, and regular feedback mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> A critical component of this imperative is the creation of robust succession plans for both anticipated and unexpected departures of key leaders on staff and the board, ensuring organizational continuity.<sup>2</sup>

Challenges in this area include the ongoing effort to recruit and retain diverse talent for both board and staff positions, particularly in a competitive environment.<sup>2</sup> Successfully implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles in recruitment and engagement processes is also a continuous endeavor.<sup>2</sup> Ensuring continuity through robust succession planning, especially for critical leadership roles, requires proactive and consistent effort. GRF benefits from existing strong leadership, including Thomas Brunner (President & CEO), Nancy Graydon (Executive Director of Development and COO), and Andrew Iwach (Board Chair), who play significant roles in guiding the organization.<sup>22</sup> The GRF Ambassadors, a national group of eye doctors, serve as a valuable leadership group for patient advocacy and education, further strengthening GRF's outreach.<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis on "succession planning for both expected and unexpected departures of key leaders" is a critical recognition of organizational vulnerability and aligns directly with established non-profit best practices for continuity and risk mitigation.<sup>2</sup> Non-profit literature consistently highlights that every organization will eventually face leadership transitions, whether planned or unforeseen, and that a well-prepared plan is essential for ensuring the continuity of mission and operations, while minimizing risk.<sup>29</sup> By explicitly including this in its strategic plan, GRF demonstrates a proactive approach to long-term stability. This suggests that GRF is actively working to institutionalize knowledge and leadership, reducing over-reliance on specific individuals and ensuring the sustained viability of its mission, even in the face of leadership changes.

The goal of recruiting, developing, retaining, and engaging a "diverse, talented board of directors, staff, and dedicated volunteers and advocates" and implementing "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion principles" indicates a strategic commitment to fostering a more inclusive and representative organization.<sup>2</sup> This is not merely a compliance issue but a strategic advantage. Academic research confirms that a formal approach to leadership development presents a significant opportunity for non-profits to advance DEI goals.<sup>10</sup> Diverse boards and staff bring varied perspectives, which is particularly valuable for GRF's mission to serve a diverse patient population and address health disparities in glaucoma care. This suggests that GRF views DEI not only as a moral imperative but as a strategic tool to enhance its overall effectiveness and reach within the communities it serves.

### **3. Performance Review: Achievements and Progress**

# (FY2023-2024)

## 3.1 Financial Performance Assessment

GRF has demonstrated a strong financial trajectory over the past two fiscal years, reflecting a solid foundation for its ambitious strategic plan.

Revenue and Assets:

Fiscal year 2024 was a record year for GRF, with total revenue reaching \$7.9 million and total assets at a record \$14.6 million.<sup>3</sup> This represents a positive growth trend compared to fiscal year 2023, where total revenue was \$7.27 million and total assets stood at \$14.4 million.<sup>17</sup> This consistent growth in both revenue and assets indicates a healthy financial position.

Funding Sources and Charity Ratings:

GRF's funding model is heavily reliant on individual donors, who contribute over 87% of its revenue, with no government funding received.<sup>4</sup> This highlights a strong, dedicated donor base. The organization's commitment to financial accountability and transparency is underscored by its consistent recognition: for eight consecutive years, GRF has earned Charity Navigator's highest 4-star rating, and it meets all 20 of the Better Business Bureau's Standards for Charity Accountability.<sup>3</sup> These high ratings enhance donor trust and confidence.

Expense Allocation (FY2023 vs. FY2024):

The allocation of expenses reflects GRF's commitment to its core mission. The majority of program spending is directed towards research and education.

**Table: GRF Financial Summary (FY2023 vs. FY2024)**

Category	FY2023 (USD)	FY2024 (USD)	Change (USD)
<b>Total Revenue</b>	\$7,271,673	\$7,891,961	+\$620,288
Contributions and Grants	\$5,620,842	\$6,473,014	+\$852,172
Program Service Revenue	\$391,050	\$460,180	+\$69,130
Investment Income	\$723,300	\$578,681	-\$144,619
<b>Total Expenses</b>	\$6,497,767	\$7,252,980	+\$755,213
Research Expenses	\$3,732,341	\$4,066,864	+\$334,523
Education Expenses	\$1,951,208	\$1,883,527	-\$67,681
Management and General	\$199,723	\$228,289	+\$28,566

Fundraising Expenses	\$614,495	\$1,074,300	+\$459,805
<b>Total Assets (End of Year)</b>	\$14,426,054	\$14,638,577	+\$212,523
<b>Net Assets (End of Year)</b>	\$12,894,941	\$13,533,922	+\$638,981
Source: <sup>30</sup>			

While GRF achieved record revenue of \$7.9 million in FY2024, it is important to note that this figure is still \$2.1 million short of its ambitious FY2027 goal of \$10 million.<sup>2</sup> The significant increase in fundraising expenses from approximately \$614,000 in FY2023 to over \$1 million in FY2024 suggests a substantial investment in achieving this target.<sup>30</sup> This trend indicates the increasing cost of revenue generation, particularly in an economic climate marked by inflation, which can reduce the purchasing power of raised funds.<sup>21</sup> This situation necessitates a careful and continuous analysis of fundraising channels and their efficiency to ensure a sustainable return on investment.

The substantial allocation of expenses to "Research" (\$4.07 million in FY2024, \$3.73 million in FY2023) and "Education" (\$1.88 million in FY2024, \$1.95 million in FY2023) demonstrates GRF's strong commitment to its core mission imperatives.<sup>30</sup> GRF's mission explicitly states its dedication "to cure glaucoma and restore vision through innovative research" and to serve as a "primary source of information and education".<sup>17</sup> The financial statements confirm that research and education constitute the vast majority of program expenses, indicating a strong alignment between resource allocation and the organization's stated mission. The slight decrease in education spending year-over-year, despite the strategic goal to "Expand Awareness," could be a point for internal review to ensure consistent programmatic investment in this crucial area.<sup>1</sup>

## 3.2 Programmatic Achievements

GRF has made significant strides in both its research and awareness initiatives, demonstrating tangible progress towards its strategic goals.

### Research Initiatives:

GRF continues to fund two bold Catalyst for a Cure (CFC) initiatives: the Vision Restoration Initiative (CFC3) and the Neurodegeneration Initiative (CFC4).<sup>4</sup> CFC3 is making notable progress towards clinical trials for nerve cell protection and enhancement, with the Board of Directors approving its continuation for a third phase beginning in 2025.<sup>4</sup> CFC4, launched in 2022, is actively exploring the root causes of neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's and tauopathy, by collecting data on immune and brain cell changes.<sup>4</sup> This multi-year, collaborative research model is designed to accelerate discovery towards a cure.<sup>7</sup> In 2024, GRF funded ten new Shaffer Grants, each providing \$55,000 to support early-career scientists and novel, high-risk/high-reward research projects.<sup>4</sup> These grants have historically

been instrumental in attracting new talent and fostering innovative ideas that might not otherwise receive funding, often leading to larger grants from other sources.<sup>7</sup> Since its inception, GRF has awarded over 300 Shaffer Grants.<sup>31</sup> The organization also launched the Zander Family Research Fund to pursue further insights into the genetics of glaucoma.<sup>4</sup> Demonstrating its commitment to research, GRF announced its largest annual research budget in its 46-year history, totaling \$2.5 million in grants.<sup>35</sup>

#### Awareness & Education Programs:

GRF's outreach and education efforts thrived in 2024, providing valuable information and hope to patients, families, and caregivers.<sup>4</sup> The organization hosts a variety of events to educate, inspire, and empower the glaucoma community, including the Glaucoma Patient Summit, Annual Gala, Glaucoma 360 New Horizons Forum, Glaucoma Symposia, Innovations in Glaucoma Webinars, and The Weston Family Lecture.<sup>35</sup>

GRF has also engaged in significant collaborations to expand its reach. Notably, it partnered with Bausch + Lomb for the second annual "Faces of Glaucoma" campaign and fundraising challenge, aimed at raising awareness by spotlighting educational resources and sharing personal stories.<sup>35</sup> Another key partnership with the Braille Institute of America resulted in the release of a free informational audiobook for glaucoma patients, enhancing accessibility.<sup>35</sup> GRF actively participates in World Glaucoma Week each year in March, joining eye health organizations globally to raise awareness.<sup>35</sup> Educational materials are also consistently provided through print, online resources, and the "Gleams" newsletter.<sup>6</sup>

The progression of the Catalyst for a Cure initiatives, particularly CFC3 moving towards clinical trials and CFC4's focus on cross-neurodegenerative disease research, demonstrates tangible execution of GRF's "Accelerate Research" imperative.<sup>4</sup> The strategic plan explicitly aims for CFC Vision Restoration Initiative clinical trials by 2025 and 2027.<sup>2</sup> The 2024 Annual Report confirms "significant progress" and the Board's approval for CFC3's continuation into a third phase beginning in 2025.<sup>4</sup> This direct alignment and execution of strategic research goals indicate that GRF's catalytic funding model is generating promising results, attracting new talent, and fostering essential interdisciplinary collaboration.<sup>7</sup> The continuous funding of Shaffer Grants, described as "seed funding for creative research projects that might otherwise not advance," further solidifies GRF's role as an incubator for high-risk, high-reward science, which is crucial for achieving breakthrough discoveries.<sup>18</sup>

The diverse range of educational events, from the Glaucoma Patient Summit to webinars and the informational audiobook created in collaboration with the Braille Institute, demonstrates GRF's commitment to patient-centered activities and accessibility.<sup>35</sup> The strategic plan emphasizes empowering patients with "accessible" information.<sup>2</sup> The partnership with the Braille Institute for an audiobook directly addresses accessibility for visually impaired individuals, a key demographic for glaucoma. The variety of events, including summits and webinars, caters to different learning preferences and expands geographic reach. This comprehensive approach to patient education, moving beyond traditional print materials to embrace digital and accessible formats, significantly enhances the impact of the "Expand Awareness" imperative.

### 3.3 Organizational Development

GRF's organizational development efforts are critical for sustaining its mission and achieving its strategic objectives.

Leadership Engagement and Strategic Partnerships:

GRF maintains a dedicated Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers, who are integral to its operations.<sup>2</sup> Key individuals such as Thomas Brunner, President & CEO; Nancy Graydon, Executive Director of Development and COO; and Andrew Iwach, Board Chair, play pivotal roles in guiding the organization's strategic direction and day-to-day activities.<sup>22</sup> The GRF Ambassadors, a national group of eye doctors, serve as a vital leadership group, advocating for patients and assisting in the development of educational materials.<sup>27</sup> GRF has also established a Strategic Advisory Council comprising key industry leaders, further strengthening its connections within the corporate community.<sup>35</sup> Beyond these internal structures, GRF engages in significant external collaborations, including partnerships with Bausch + Lomb and the Braille Institute of America, and active participation in global initiatives like World Glaucoma Week.<sup>35</sup>

**Table: GRF Strategic Imperatives: Goals & Progress Snapshot (2023-2024)**

Strategic Imperative	Key Goals (2023-2027)	Progress/Achievements (FY2023-2024)
<b>Accelerate Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advance CFC Vision Restoration to clinical trials by 2025/2027.</li> <li>- Launch new neurodegeneration consortium.</li> <li>- Fund 15 Shaffer Grants annually by 2027.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CFC3 progressing towards clinical trials; Board approved continuation for 2025.</li> <li>- CFC4 (neurodegeneration) launched in 2022, collecting data.</li> <li>- Funded 10 new Shaffer Grants in 2024 (each \$55K); largest annual research budget (\$2.5M).</li> </ul>
<b>Expand Awareness &amp; Patient-Centered Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empower patients/public with comprehensive info.</li> <li>- Grow constituency nationally/internationally.</li> <li>- Increase awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hosted Glaucoma Patient Summit, Glaucoma 360, webinars.</li> <li>- Partnered with Bausch + Lomb ("Faces of Glaucoma")</li> </ul>

	of risk factors, esp. for high-risk communities.	and Braille Institute (audiobook). - Participated in World Glaucoma Week. - Provides print/online educational materials (Gleams newsletter).
<b>Maximize Philanthropic Support</b>	- Reach \$10M annual contributed income by FY2027. - Increase leadership gifts, multi-year pledges, Catalyst Circle. - Promote planned giving; increase event revenue.	- FY2024 Revenue: \$7.9M (record high), FY2023 Revenue: \$7.27M. - 87%+ revenue from individual donors. - Maintained 4-star Charity Navigator rating (8 years) & BBB standards. - Increased fundraising expenses (FY24: \$1.07M vs. FY23: \$0.61M).
<b>Build and Strengthen Leadership</b>	- Ensure diverse, active Board. - Cultivate engaged staff (professional development, growth, feedback). - Create succession plans for staff/board.	- Dedicated Board, staff, and volunteers in place. - Key leadership (Brunner, Graydon, Iwach) active. - GRF Ambassadors (eye doctors) actively advocate for patients. - Established Strategic Advisory Council of industry leaders.
Source: <sup>16</sup>		

## 4. External Landscape: Non-Profit Trends and Strategic Considerations

Understanding the broader non-profit landscape is crucial for GRF to optimize its strategic plan and ensure long-term sustainability and impact. Several key trends and strategic

considerations from the sector offer valuable context and potential pathways.

## **4.1 Financial Sustainability & Growth**

### Revenue Diversification Strategies:

Over-reliance on one or two primary funding streams poses a significant risk to a non-profit organization's sustainability.<sup>8</sup> Economic downturns, shifts in funder priorities, or policy changes can abruptly impact a single revenue source, jeopardizing an organization's ability to deliver its mission.<sup>8</sup> Diversifying revenue sources, conversely, creates a financial safety net, enhances organizational flexibility, encourages innovation, broadens stakeholder engagement, and builds brand resilience.<sup>8</sup> While some academic studies suggest that revenue concentration can lead to administrative cost savings, the consensus indicates that the benefits of diversification generally outweigh these drawbacks by mitigating financial vulnerability and fostering growth.<sup>9</sup>

GRF's current financial structure, with over 87% of its revenue stemming from individual donors, presents a potential concentration risk, despite the organization's current financial health and strong donor loyalty.<sup>3</sup> While this high percentage of individual giving indicates a robust and engaged donor base, external analysis of non-profit revenue diversification strongly cautions against over-reliance on a single or limited number of primary funding streams.<sup>8</sup> This situation implies that for GRF to sustainably achieve its ambitious \$10 million revenue goal by FY2027 and beyond, it should actively explore and cultivate other revenue sources, such as corporate sponsorships, foundation grants, or even earned income models where appropriate. Building a more diversified financial portfolio would enhance GRF's resilience against potential shifts in individual donor behavior due to economic factors or changing philanthropic trends.

### Impact of Economic Factors (e.g., inflation) on Non-Profit Operations:

Inflation significantly impacts non-profit operations, programs, and fundraising by increasing the cost of providing services and simultaneously increasing the demand for those services.<sup>21</sup> When inflation rates are high, as they have been, every dollar raised by a non-profit has less purchasing power, meaning that more funds are required to achieve the same level of impact as before.<sup>21</sup>

GRF explicitly acknowledges "increasing expenses" due to "recent inflation," particularly noting a projected 10% increase in production costs for events and print materials over the next 12 to 18 months.<sup>2</sup> This aligns directly with broader non-profit sector trends, where inflation drives up operational costs and reduces the real value of donations.<sup>21</sup> This situation means that GRF's financial planning must account not only for nominal revenue growth but also for the erosion of purchasing power. To maintain the planned expansion of research and education programs, GRF will need to pursue either more aggressive fundraising strategies or innovative cost-saving measures to ensure that the real impact of its financial resources is sustained.

### Digital Fundraising Trends and Best Practices:

Online giving accounts for a significant portion of total revenue for non-profits, with mobile donations showing substantial growth, comprising 45% of online donations in 2024.<sup>37</sup> Email remains the preferred method for donors to receive updates and appeals from organizations, with consistent communication leading to a notable increase in revenue.<sup>37</sup> The presence of charity rating badges on donation pages significantly increases the likelihood of giving, and employer matching programs are highly effective in encouraging donations.<sup>37</sup> Monthly giving programs also contribute substantially to overall online revenue.<sup>37</sup>

While GRF already leverages online programming and digital content, having seen online donations rise significantly, particularly on mobile, after a recent website redesign, there remains significant untapped potential for optimizing its "Maximize Philanthropic Support" imperative.<sup>2</sup> Although GRF has improved its mobile donation flow, the broader non-profit data indicates that average mobile gifts are generally lower than desktop gifts (\$76 versus \$145).<sup>37</sup> This suggests an opportunity to further optimize the mobile donor journey to increase average gift size or conversion rates. Furthermore, the high impact of employer matching programs presents a clear, actionable pathway for GRF to expand its revenue without solely relying on direct individual appeals, by actively promoting these programs to its donor base.

## **4.2 Organizational Capacity & Effectiveness**

Talent Acquisition, Retention, and Leadership Development:

A significant challenge for non-profits is voluntary employee turnover, with a lack of opportunities for upward mobility and career growth cited as a major reason.<sup>10</sup> Implementing a formal approach to leadership development can effectively address this issue while also advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals within the organization.<sup>10</sup> The 70-20-10 model, which emphasizes 70% on-the-job learning, 20% coaching and mentoring, and 10% formal training, is a widely recommended framework for professional development.<sup>10</sup> Investing in employee growth, career advancement, and leadership skills has been shown to significantly improve talent retention in non-profit organizations.<sup>11</sup>

GRF's strategic goal to focus on "staff engagement through professional development, growth pathways, recognition, and regular feedback" directly aligns with these established best practices for talent retention in the non-profit sector.<sup>2</sup> This alignment indicates a recognition that human capital is a key asset for achieving its ambitious goals. The strategic plan's explicit mention of "staffing needs" and "maintaining and expanding Board and Staff Engagement" as both challenges and opportunities underscores this understanding.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that GRF is not merely looking to hire more staff but is committed to cultivating a high-performing, engaged workforce through structured development, which is essential for sustaining long-term research and outreach efforts.

Best Practices in Board Governance and Succession Planning:

Effective non-profit governance relies on a clear governance structure, well-defined roles for board members, and transparent policies and procedures.<sup>12</sup> Board diversity, encompassing a range of skills, backgrounds, and experiences, is crucial for effective decision-making and

commitment to the organization's mission.<sup>13</sup> Succession planning is a vital component for ensuring continuity and mitigating risks, particularly for critical positions such as the CEO and other key leadership roles.<sup>28</sup> Regular review and updating of succession plans are recommended to keep them relevant and effective.<sup>29</sup>

GRF's strategic focus on "succession planning for both expected and unexpected departures of key leaders on the staff and board" reflects a mature understanding of governance best practices.<sup>2</sup> External analysis emphasizes that succession planning, often overlooked, is critical for ensuring "continuity of mission and operations" and "minimized risk" for non-profits.<sup>29</sup> By explicitly including this in its strategic plan, GRF demonstrates a proactive and forward-thinking governance approach. This commitment suggests that GRF is actively working to institutionalize knowledge and leadership, thereby reducing reliance on specific individuals and ensuring the long-term viability of its mission, even in the face of unforeseen leadership transitions.

**Impact Measurement and Program Scalability:**

Impact measurement is crucial for non-profits to understand their progress towards intended outcomes, facilitate learning, and drive continuous improvement and growth.<sup>39</sup> Best practices emphasize defining outcomes and metrics that are directly aligned with the organization's Theory of Change (II/TOC).<sup>39</sup> It is important to balance qualitative and quantitative data to capture both the scale ("how many") and the depth ("how") of programmatic changes in perspectives or behaviors.<sup>39</sup> Engaging a wide range of voices, particularly those directly impacted by the organization's work, in data collection and interpretation is also a key best practice.<sup>39</sup>

While GRF tracks notable publications of its funded researchers and provides information about its achievements, the explicit integration of formal impact measurement frameworks, such as a comprehensive Theory of Change, could significantly enhance its accountability and strengthen the case for future philanthropic support.<sup>2</sup> Non-profit best practices advocate for defining specific outcomes and metrics aligned with a Theory of Change and balancing quantitative with qualitative data.<sup>39</sup> This implies that while research publications are a valuable output, GRF could further strengthen its impact narrative by explicitly linking research outcomes to tangible patient benefits, such as "improved therapies" and "vision restoration".<sup>2</sup> Systematically measuring the impact of its awareness and education programs would also provide a clearer picture of their effectiveness. This enhanced data-driven approach would not only improve internal decision-making but also create a more compelling case for maximizing philanthropic support by demonstrating clear, measurable impact.

## **4.3 Innovative Funding Models**

**Venture Philanthropy: Characteristics, Models, and Applicability:**

Venture philanthropy represents an evolving approach to charitable giving that applies principles from venture capital to the non-profit sector. It provides not only financial support but also significant non-financial assistance, such as mentoring, coaching, and strategic

guidance, with the aim of fostering long-term, sustainable change within communities.<sup>14</sup> This model distinguishes itself from traditional grantmaking through several key characteristics: a focus on long-term partnerships, a commitment to strengthening the entire organization (including leadership, operations, and scalability), high engagement between funders and recipients, and a primary emphasis on judging success by measurable outcomes rather than just activities.<sup>15</sup> Common models of venture philanthropy include the Capacity-Building Model, Milestone-Based Investment, the Catalytic Capital Approach, and Blended Finance models.<sup>15</sup>

GRF's strategic plan explicitly mentions "investigating the feasibility of Venture Philanthropy" as an opportunity.<sup>2</sup> Given GRF's core focus on "innovative and promising research" towards a cure and vision restoration, venture philanthropy models, particularly the "Catalytic Capital Approach," are highly applicable.<sup>2</sup> Venture philanthropy is characterized by "strategic investment," "hands-on engagement," and a focus on "systemic change," often taking a "long-term approach to growth capital".<sup>14</sup> This aligns perfectly with GRF's multi-year, collaborative Catalyst for a Cure research initiatives, which seek "breakthrough ideas toward the development of new therapies" and require "multi-year funding and a long-term commitment" to achieve their ambitious goals.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that GRF could actively pursue venture philanthropy partnerships to de-risk and accelerate its most ambitious research goals, moving beyond traditional grant cycles and attracting funders who are specifically interested in high-impact, scalable solutions that promise transformational change.

## **5. Strategic Outlook: Conjecture, Background, and Proposed Routes for GRF**

The Glaucoma Research Foundation's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan sets a clear and ambitious course. Building upon its strong foundation and recent achievements, the following proposed routes offer pathways to further enhance its strategic imperatives, foster innovation, and ensure long-term sustainability.

### **5.1 Enhancing Strategic Imperatives**

#### **Accelerate Research**

The strategic emphasis on neuroprotection and vision restoration aligns with the evolving understanding of glaucoma as a neurodegenerative disease, a paradigm shift partly driven by GRF's own funded research.<sup>5</sup> The primary challenge lies in translating complex basic science discoveries into viable clinical trials within the stated aggressive timelines of 2025 and 2027

for neuroprotective therapy and vision restoration mechanisms, respectively.<sup>2</sup> This translational gap is a common hurdle in medical research.

#### **Proposed Routes:**

- **Route 1 (Streamlined Translation):** Establish a dedicated "Translational Research Advisory Panel." This panel should comprise leading experts in clinical trials, pharmaceutical research and development (R&D) leaders, and regulatory specialists. Its role would be to provide ongoing, practical guidance to the Catalyst for a Cure (CFC) teams, helping to bridge the gap between fundamental scientific discovery and clinical application. This would ensure that research projects are designed from their inception with clinical trial readiness and regulatory pathways in mind, accelerating the journey from lab to patient.
- **Route 2 (Cross-Disease Funding Synergy):** Actively seek funding from foundations and government agencies that traditionally focus on broader neurodegenerative diseases, such as the Alzheimer's Association, Parkinson's Foundation, or the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) within the NIH. GRF can highlight its unique position at the intersection of ophthalmology and neuroscience, leveraging the "Solving Neurodegeneration" consortium as a compelling case for broader investment.<sup>2</sup> This approach taps into a larger pool of philanthropic and governmental resources, recognizing the shared biological mechanisms and potential for cross-disease breakthroughs.

#### **Expand Awareness & Patient-Centered Activities**

GRF has a robust portfolio of educational programs and established collaborations, demonstrating a commitment to patient empowerment.<sup>35</sup> The challenge lies in scaling these efforts, particularly to effectively reach high-risk communities, and in systematically measuring the

*impact* of awareness campaigns on early diagnosis rates and subsequent patient outcomes. While GRF's efforts are commendable, the statistic that "fifty percent of the glaucoma cases worldwide are still undetected" underscores the vastness of this challenge.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Proposed Routes:**

- **Route 1 (Hyper-Localized Outreach):** Develop and pilot culturally specific awareness campaigns in direct partnership with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) and trusted community leaders within high-risk African American, Latino, and Asian American communities.<sup>2</sup> This initiative should extend beyond merely providing culturally appropriate materials to include deploying community health workers and potentially mobile eye screening units. Such direct engagement can facilitate early detection and address the significant percentage of undetected glaucoma cases, turning awareness into actionable health behaviors.
- **Route 2 (Digital Engagement Metrics):** Implement advanced analytics for all digital educational content and virtual events.<sup>2</sup> Beyond tracking basic viewership, GRF should

monitor engagement duration, resource downloads, and subsequent user actions, such as clicks to "find an eye doctor" or newsletter sign-ups.<sup>6</sup> This data-driven approach would allow GRF to refine its content and outreach strategies, ensuring that awareness efforts effectively translate into proactive patient behavior and improved health-seeking patterns.

## **Maximize Philanthropic Support**

The target of \$10 million in annual contributed income by fiscal year 2027 is ambitious, particularly in an environment of rising operational expenses due to inflation.<sup>2</sup> While GRF's strong base of individual donors is a significant asset, an over-reliance on this single funding stream can be a vulnerability, as external economic shifts or changes in donor behavior could impact revenue.<sup>4</sup>

### **Proposed Routes:**

- **Route 1 (Diversified Digital Campaigns):** Beyond general online fundraising, launch targeted digital campaigns for specific research initiatives, such as "Fund a Shaffer Grant" or "Support Vision Restoration Clinical Trials." Leverage the growing trend of peer-to-peer fundraising for signature events like Glaucoma 360 and the Glaucoma Patient Summit, providing participants with comprehensive digital toolkits.<sup>4</sup> Actively promote employer matching programs on all donation pages and communications, as these are highly effective in increasing giving.<sup>37</sup>
- **Route 2 (Corporate Partnerships & Venture Philanthropy Cultivation):** Systematically identify and cultivate corporate partners beyond existing collaborations, focusing on companies with strategic interests in vision health, medical technology, or neurodegenerative research.<sup>35</sup> Develop a clear value proposition for corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that aligns with GRF's mission. For venture philanthropy, prepare detailed "investment cases" for specific, high-potential research projects, outlining clear milestones, projected timelines, and the potential social return on investment.<sup>14</sup> This approach shifts the conversation from traditional charity to strategic impact investment.

## **Build and Strengthen Leadership**

The commitment to a diverse board and staff, coupled with robust succession planning, is crucial for GRF's long-term organizational health, innovation capacity, and resilience.<sup>2</sup> The challenge lies in the practical implementation of these principles and fostering a culture of continuous development across all levels of the organization.

### **Proposed Routes:**

- **Route 1 (Formalized Leadership Pipeline):** Implement a formal leadership development program for high-potential staff members, incorporating the 70-20-10

model (70% on-the-job learning, 20% coaching/mentoring, 10% formal training).<sup>10</sup> This program should include structured mentorship by senior staff and board members, strategic stretch assignments, and targeted external training opportunities. This directly addresses the "lack of opportunity for upward mobility/career growth" often cited as a reason for turnover in non-profits.<sup>10</sup>

- **Route 2 (Proactive Board Succession & DEI Integration):** Develop a multi-year board recruitment strategy that specifically targets expertise gaps (e.g., in venture philanthropy, artificial intelligence in healthcare, or diverse community outreach) and incorporates explicit DEI targets.<sup>2</sup> Establish a formal board orientation and ongoing education program that includes modules on strategic plan oversight, financial literacy, and impact measurement, ensuring all board members are equipped to provide effective governance.

## 5.2 Fostering Innovation and Adaptability

GRF has consistently demonstrated an embrace of innovation through its leading research programs, such as the Catalyst for a Cure initiatives and Shaffer Grants, as well as its digital outreach efforts.<sup>2</sup> The dynamic nature of scientific discovery and the evolving philanthropic landscape demand continuous adaptation to maintain relevance and maximize impact.

### Proposed Routes:

- **Route 1 (AI Integration in Research & Operations):** Explore the strategic integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to accelerate research analysis, such as identifying complex patterns in genetic data or optimizing drug discovery processes.<sup>4</sup> Concurrently, investigate AI applications for optimizing internal operations, including donor segmentation, personalized communication strategies, and predictive analytics for fundraising. This aligns with the broader trend of AI adoption in healthcare and for enhancing non-profit efficiency.<sup>41</sup>
- **Route 2 (Agile Strategic Planning):** While a comprehensive five-year strategic plan provides essential long-term direction, GRF could adopt an "issues-based" or "organic" strategic planning model for specific, fast-moving initiatives.<sup>42</sup> This more agile approach allows for rapid adaptation to new scientific breakthroughs, unexpected funding opportunities, or sudden shifts in the external environment, ensuring that GRF remains nimble and responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities.

## 5.3 Mitigating Risks and Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability

Financial stability, effective talent retention, and robust governance are foundational pillars for GRF's long-term mission to cure glaucoma. Ongoing risks, such as the impact of inflation on operational costs and the potential for donor fatigue, necessitate proactive mitigation strategies.

### Proposed Routes:

- **Route 1 (Financial Resilience Fund):** Establish a dedicated "Strategic Resilience Fund" to provide a financial buffer against economic downturns or unforeseen expenses, such as the impact of inflation on research costs.<sup>2</sup> This fund could be built through specific planned giving campaigns, which offer long-term revenue streams, or by allocating a portion of unrestricted major gifts. Such a fund would enhance GRF's ability to maintain operations and research momentum even during periods of financial uncertainty.
- **Route 2 (Knowledge Management System):** Implement a comprehensive knowledge management system to systematically document key operational procedures, intricate donor relationships, detailed research protocols, and other critical institutional memory. This initiative directly supports succession planning efforts, ensuring that vital information is retained and readily accessible across the organization.<sup>29</sup> A robust knowledge management system reduces reliance on individual staff members, enhances operational continuity, and preserves the invaluable intellectual capital accumulated over GRF's history.

## Conclusion: A Path Forward for Curing Glaucoma

The Glaucoma Research Foundation stands as a highly regarded and financially healthy non-profit organization, underpinned by a clear, ambitious strategic vision for 2023-2027. Its pioneering work in redefining glaucoma as a neurodegenerative disease and its unwavering commitment to patient-centered education position it as a leading force in the global fight against blindness. The significant progress demonstrated in fiscal years 2023-2024, particularly in securing research funding and expanding programmatic outreach, underscores GRF's proven capacity for generating substantial impact.

To achieve its bold vision of a future free from glaucoma and ensure sustained impact, GRF must continue to build upon its strengths and strategically navigate the evolving landscape. This requires a concerted focus on four imperative areas:

1. **Sustain and Accelerate Innovative Research:** By strategically investing in high-potential, multi-disciplinary initiatives and actively exploring and securing diverse funding models, particularly venture philanthropy, to support long-term, transformative research.
2. **Deepen Patient Engagement and Broader Awareness:** Through targeted, culturally sensitive outreach programs and by fully leveraging digital platforms to deliver accessible and impactful educational resources.
3. **Diversify and Maximize Philanthropic Support:** By implementing sophisticated digital fundraising strategies, optimizing existing donor relationships, and cultivating new corporate and institutional partnerships to broaden its financial base and mitigate concentration risks.
4. **Invest in Human Capital and Robust Governance:** By formalizing leadership development pathways, prioritizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) across all

organizational levels, and strengthening succession planning for both staff and board to ensure continuity and resilience.

By embracing these proposed routes, the Glaucoma Research Foundation can not only achieve its 2023-2027 strategic goals but also solidify its position as a transformative force in vision science and patient advocacy, ultimately bringing the cure for glaucoma into sight.

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