

The Word Doing All the Work

One word in a funder's guidelines can be the difference between a real yes and an automatic no

What the public page said

A private foundation's guidelines page stated its geographic focus in a single sentence: the foundation “has generally restricted its funding to organizations located in, operating in or supporting residents from” one specific Florida county.

Read quickly, that sentence reads like a hard boundary. An organization based one county over would reasonably conclude: *not us, move on.*

The word that changes everything

Look again at the sentence. It doesn't say “restricted.” It says “**generally restricted.**”

That single word is doing enormous work. “Restricted” is a wall. “Generally restricted” is a strong default with real, acknowledged exceptions — the foundation is telling you, in its own careful legal language, that it sometimes gives outside this boundary.

Most readers skim past a word like “generally.” It doesn't change the sentence's meaning at a glance. It changes it completely once you know to look for it.

What the 990-PF actually showed

A three-year review of the foundation's real grant history confirmed the exception was not theoretical. One organization — based in a neighboring county, outside the foundation's named primary focus — had received recurring grants across at least four different fiscal years, not a single one-off gift. A second organization, also outside the primary county, received a real grant the following year.

This wasn't an isolated exception buried in a decade of filings. It was a real, sustained, multi-year pattern — sitting in plain sight in the same filing that most applicants never open.

Why this matters

An organization that took the guidelines page literally — and many would, reasonably — would never apply. It would read “generally restricted to County X” as “not eligible,” cross the foundation off its list, and never find out that the foundation had spent four consecutive years quietly funding organizations exactly like it, one county away.

That's a real, fundable opportunity lost — not because the organization did anything wrong, but because it trusted the plain-language reading of a sentence that was written, deliberately or not, to leave room the words alone don't fully reveal.

How to catch this yourself

Watch for qualifying language in any funder's stated restrictions: *generally, typically, primarily, in most cases, as a matter of policy*. Each of these is a signal that the rule has known exceptions — and that the real boundary can only be found by checking actual behavior, not the sentence alone.

Then do exactly what the language invites: pull two or three years of the foundation's real 990-PF grant history and look for recipients outside the named primary area. If they exist, and if they repeat across multiple years rather than appearing once, that's a real, evidence-based case for applying — not a hopeful guess.

The other direction

This is the mirror image of Issue 01, where a foundation's guidelines *oversold* its openness and the 990-PF revealed a closed, invite-only reality. Here, the guidelines *undersold* it, and the 990-PF revealed real room the plain language didn't fully disclose.

The public page can mislead in either direction. The only way to know which one you're looking at is to check the filing behind it.

The takeaway

A single qualifying word — “generally,” “typically,” “usually” — is never filler. It's a foundation telling you, carefully, that its own rule has exceptions. Whether those exceptions include you is a question only the real grant history can answer.

This is exactly the gap Unsealed Intelligence exists to close — real funder screening against primary source documents, not marketing pages, before a single hour goes into a proposal that never had a chance, and before a real opportunity gets crossed off a list it should never have left.

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