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Charitable giving has a new look, one that is broadening the giving pool and helping keep the dollars rolling into nonprofits even during tough economic times, according to a new report.

The reason for this change are so-called donor-advised funds, which are the fasting growing charitable giving vehicle in the country. Some 175,000 of these giving accounts now hold $37 billion in assets, up 34% in since 2009. That growth has defied general sluggishness in charitable giving since the financial crisis. The number of gifts from these funds has grown every single year and tripled in all over the past decade,reports Fidelity Charitable, the largest donor-advised program in the nation.

Donor-advised funds have been around for many years but most often have been used by the wealthy. In recent years Fidelity, Schwab, Vanguard and other fund companies have turned them into a mainstream product. The minimum to open an account is as little as $5,000.

Here's how the funds works: You make an irrevocable tax-deductible contribution to a donor-advised fund, where you choose an investment option like an S&P500 index fund. The money grows tax-free. And whenever you like, you direct grants from the fund to an eligible charity.

These accounts are especially effective for gifting stock or other appreciated assets because they may allow donors to avoid capital gains tax on shares or other assets that have risen in value—with the tax savings going to the charity.

At Fidelity, the number of grants per account has risen steadily—to an average of seven grants per year. The average grant is $3,800. Donors in the Fidelity program supported 77,000 nonprofits with grants totaling $1.6 billion in 2012.

Just one in five using a donor-advised fund exhaust their account balance each year through a "giving while living" strategy, Fidelity found. But the vast majority of account holders gives something almost every year and increasingly uses the accounts to schedule a regular contribution to a favorite charity. Regular giving greatly helps a charity's planning. In 2012, scheduled grants from donor-advised funds accounted for 21% of all grants, up from 17% in 2008.

Another trend is unrestricted grants from donor-advised funds. These are grants where the donor selects the nonprofit but allows it freedom to use the grant where it is needed most. "These grants are especially welcomed by the receiving institution, as they provide greater flexibility to apply funds in line with the most mission-critical priorities," according to the report.

Read more: http://business.time.com/2013/06/14/new-age-philanthropy-donor-advised-funds-defy-sluggish-giving-trends/#ixzz2ijTX3Ki1

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