

Herb Kohl's foundation realigns goals, increases funding to \$15M this year



A memorial service for Herb Kohl was held in January 2024 at Fiserv Forum.

KENNY YOO/MBJ



By [Rich Kirchen](#) – Senior Reporter, Milwaukee Business Journal
Jan 15, 2025

Listen to this article 9 min

AT A GLANCE

- Milwaukee legend Herb Kohl died a little over a year ago, but his foundation lives on, increasing its giving this year.

- The foundation realigned its goals, which included ending a 30-plus-year college scholarship program.
 - The foundation board's leaders anticipate elevated giving levels for years to come, with a greater sense of urgency for K-12 education and community engagement.
-

One year after a memorial service for Herb Kohl, his charitable foundation's leaders are doubling down on his commitment to education and contributing more to the community — \$15 million this fiscal year.

The foundation board anticipates extending the duration of Kohl's philanthropy for a to-be-determined number of years and possibly at higher annual dollar amounts than \$15 million, said board member Chuck Pruitt. Pruitt is a longtime friend of Kohl and co-managing director of A.B. Data in Glendale.

The previous high outlay from Herbert H. Kohl Charities was nearly \$14 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2020, according to the foundation's income-tax returns. The foundation distributed \$10.44 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024, according to its latest tax return, and was between \$9.7 million and \$12 million in other recent years.

In fine-tuning the mission of Herbert H. Kohl Charities, the board that Kohl handpicked has discontinued one long-running, high-profile program that awarded \$10,000 scholarships to graduating high school students who demonstrated academic excellence and initiative and displayed a broad range of activity and leadership in their communities.

Remembering Herb Kohl

Milwaukee native Kohl, who was single, was a short man who cast a long shadow on Milwaukee and Wisconsin for decades. He started his career working for his family's Kohl's Food Stores and later Kohl's Department Stores, bought the NBA's

Milwaukee Bucks in 1985 and served as a Democratic U.S. Senator representing Wisconsin from 1989 to 2013.

Kohl, who was 88, [died Dec. 27, 2023](#), after a short illness. A [public memorial service](#) was held Jan. 12, 2024, at Fiserv Forum, the Bucks' home arena to which he [contributed \\$100 million toward construction costs](#).

Herb Kohl's charitable foundation board has four members: Pruitt; Herb Kohl Philanthropies CEO JoAnne Anton; Milwaukee attorney Dan Conley and Milwaukee attorney George Dionisopoulos. In an exclusive interview with the Milwaukee Business Journal, Anton and Pruitt discussed the foundation's activities the past year.

'Responsibility of legacy'

While Kohl was still alive, board members held lengthy conversations over a period of years about the things he most cared about and wanted to support, Pruitt said.

"It's the responsibility of legacy that the entire board of directors takes very seriously," Pruitt said. "This was a consequential life — Herb Kohl led a consequential life on so many dimensions."

Prior to Kohl selling the Bucks in 2014 [for \\$550 million](#), his charitable giving was somewhat informal and based on his instincts of who and what he wanted to support, Pruitt said. After selling the Bucks, Kohl seeded about \$80 million to the foundation and continued contributing smaller amounts, including \$3 million in fiscal 2024, on a pay-as-you-go basis, Anton said.

In the past decade, Kohl's charitable contributions totaled a bit more than \$100 million, Anton said. Add the \$100 million he contributed to the new arena, and the total is \$200 million, she said.

“We are here for the foreseeable future,” Anton said during an interview at the foundation’s downtown Milwaukee office. “Part of that is the time horizon to ensure the assets continue to grow and replenish the foundation and part of that is we’ve got work to do. There’s a lot to be done in this community, and we want to help.”

Kohl’s assets will continue funding the foundation, with proceeds from the sale of those assets eventually ending up in the foundation. Over time, a four-person team including Anton will transition from running his family business office to focusing solely on the foundation's operations.

Kohl’s portfolio includes various business holdings such as the office building that houses the foundation at 825 N. Jefferson St., other business holdings and properties, artwork and [Kohl’s ranch in Wyoming](#).

Eight months after Kohl’s death, his [190-acre Red Hills Ranch near Jackson Hole, Wyoming](#), was listed for sale at \$65 million. The ranch remains on the market, Anton said.

There are no immediate plans for the foundation to make a large donation for a building that would include Kohl’s name similar to the Kohl Center arena at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Pruitt said. Pruitt said the foundation board doesn’t rule that out, but the main thrust for now is making an impact on improving the lives of people in Wisconsin, especially those who are financially less well-off.

“We now have an opportunity to remind people who will never have him as their United States Senator and will never see him as the owner of the Bucks and will never see him in a Kohl’s grocery store to somehow see him and be grateful and appreciative of what he did to leave everybody better off,” Pruitt said.



JoAnne Anton, Herb Kohl Philanthropies
KENNY YOO/MBJ

Giving guidelines

The board has worked the past year to institute new guidelines for giving, establishing three pillars on which the foundation will focus and realign, Anton said. The three pillars are: education and welfare of young people, strengthening civic engagement and encouraging community collaboration.

While education always has been on the list, Anton and Pruitt said the foundation is approaching the issues with a greater sense of urgency.

“We have to be vigilant about urgency and not think of this as a 20-year, 30-year (transformation),” Anton said. “It’s been a 20-year, 30-year conversation. We have to think of it as a right-now emergency situation.”

Focus on education

At stake is the future of the Milwaukee area’s workforce and the ability to advance central city Milwaukee students to post-high school education, she said.

Pruitt and Anton said the foundation is looking to go beyond the divisions in the community for supporting public school systems — most notably Milwaukee Public Schools — charter schools and choice schools.

The decision to end the scholarship program was difficult but will enable the foundation to focus on supporting teachers, principals and programs designed to positively impact students in other ways.

“There are a lot of student scholarship programs out there and they’re wonderful,” Anton said. “For 30-plus years, Sen. Kohl operated one — he gave tens of millions of dollars in scholarships to students. But moving forward, he really was very concerned about what’s happening in education — fewer teachers, lower enrollment in schools of education, teachers not staying.”

So the foundation will maintain its grants for teachers and principals, with total donations of up to nearly \$1.5 million per year, she said.

The foundation recognizes 100 teachers of excellence with \$6,000 fellowship awards, and each of their schools with a matching grant of \$6,000. The foundation also recognizes up to 17 principals and school leaders and their schools with the same awards.

Besides teachers and principals, another example of organizations and programs the foundation supports is the M-cubed collaboration among MPS, Milwaukee Area Technical College and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Since launching in 2015, the program has resulted in 700 MPS seniors earning MATC and UW-Milwaukee college credits and 900 MPS 11th graders participating in a streamlined admissions process to UWM and MATC. The program also engaged the three education organizations’ faculty and staff to better connect what students learn from middle school through high school with higher education.

The bottom line is more MPS seniors today are gaining greater access to college, according to MATC, MPS and UWM leaders.

Early childhood education initiatives the foundation supports include Forward Scholars, which helps young MPS students catch up on their reading proficiency, Anton said. The program is now available at nine sites and has shown a significant impact in classrooms, Anton said.

The foundation also supports initiatives to boost pay for early childhood teachers and connect those teachers with affordable housing, Anton said.

Community and civic engagement

On the community and civic engagement front, the foundation in 2019 announced a \$10 million gift to the La Follette School of Public Affairs at Kohl's alma mater UW-Madison. The gift was to expand the school's public outreach mission, advance the training of future public leaders and support influential research by faculty and students.

During the fall 2024 election, the foundation supported voter information and get-out-the-vote efforts, Anton said. Contributions went to the League of Women Voters in Wisconsin, Wisconsin Conservation Voices, the Fair Elections Center campus vote project and Metcalfe Park Community Bridges program on Milwaukee's near west side.