

Moving from Intention to Impact: Funding Racial Equity to Win

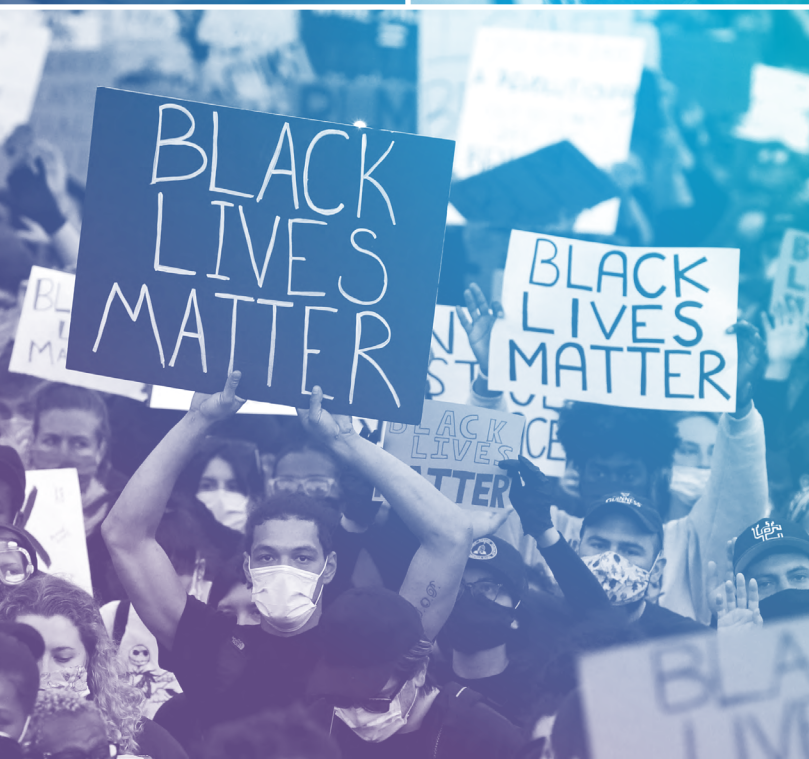
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Contents

1.0	<u>Winning on Equity</u>	page 5
2.0	<u>Preamble</u>	page 7
3.0	<u>Change Is Possible</u>	page 8
4.0	<u>The State of Philanthropic Funding for Racial Equity Today</u>	page 10
5.0	<u>What We Need: A Robust, Sustainable Movement Fueled by Doers and Donors</u>	page 13
6.0	<u>Strategies for What to Fund and How to Fund</u>	page 18
7.0	<u>Practical Steps Funders Can Take</u>	page 22
8.0	<u>How Much Is Needed?</u>	page 28
9.0	<u>Where Do We Go from Here?</u>	page 31
10.0	<u>Notes</u>	page 33
11.0	<u>Author Biographies</u>	page 35

Winning On Equity

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
—Langston Hughes

We have not yet seen the beauty and potential of a truly multiracial democracy in America. Instead, our democracy has always required perfecting. Proof of that reality is the approximately 100 million people in America who struggle to make ends meet, including nearly half of the people of color in the nation. But today's reality does not have to dictate our future. We can ensure all people in America—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism—participate in a just society, live in a healthy community of opportunity, and prosper in an equitable economy. Although 2020 was one of the most challenging years in our nation's recent history, those on the frontlines of change delivered us an extraordinary gift—an opening for structural transformation, and that gives me hope.

The title of this report invites philanthropy to fund racial equity to win. But what does it mean to win on equity? For PolicyLink, winning is straightforward to describe, if difficult to achieve. It means our nation has finally transformed its laws, customs, and institutions to serve everyone, particularly those who are currently left behind. It is why we focus on advancing liberating policies for the 100 million people living in or near poverty.

Therefore, the purpose of this report is a practical one. It is an attempt to elevate the capital needs required to win on equity and attract significant investment to equity movement leaders, especially those on the front lines. In order for the equity movement to deliver transformative change it needs strong networks and institutions, not just charismatic leaders. That takes deliberate and sustained investment.

Understanding how funds are aggregated and deployed is a critical piece of infrastructure for a movement that is hoping to win. Imagine if we could finally get funding to align with equity leaders to work in transformative solidarity—the potential is an ecosystem effectively designed to build an equitable nation for all. This report attempts to help move us in that direction. And it will be the start of our regular look into the state of funding for racial equity.

We chose to partner with Bridgespan for this report in the spirit of collaboration, coalition building, partnership, and the potency of inclusion, which has always been at the heart of equity work. Each of our organizations brings different experiences and skillsets to this work, and because our shared goal is a just and equitable society, complementary roles can help to mobilize new resources and build new relationships with this larger purpose.

Collaboration is necessary because the road map to win on equity is rooted in three big ideas that connect leaders from all three sectors of our society:

- Movement leaders must be aligned and focused on structural reforms that address the root causes of inequity
- Policymakers must become antiracist
- Corporate leaders must become authentic champions of racial equity

Ultimately, “winning on equity” will ensure *all* children, *all* families, and *all* communities can reach their full potential. Or, as we like to say in [our equity manifesto](#): **unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.**

I am confident that the promise of equity can be realized. To paraphrase Langston Hughes, I believe that America can be the “dream the dreamers dreamed.” It is on all of us to make it happen.

In solidarity,



Michael McAfee

President and CEO, PolicyLink

Preamble

Over the past several years the conversation around racial equity has shifted considerably in the United States. Once edgy concepts like the need to dismantle white supremacy culture in our institutions are finding mainstream traction, while activist language has shifted to liberation and abolition in the name of justice. However, there are still significant differences in where people enter the conversation. Recognizing that the nuance of this ongoing dialogue is constantly evolving, we have written this report for an audience that shares a set of starting beliefs:

- Structural racism exists and continues to produce wide-scale inequity
- Philanthropy has a role to play in achieving racial equity
- Continuing on our current course will not get us to a different result (you will have to read on to understand how to plot a new course)

We share this in advance because this report does not spend time convincing you of these truths. Instead, from that shared starting point, we invite you to join us in order to form a more equitable nation.

Change Is Possible

“The uncomfortable truth is that philanthropy itself is often one of the biggest obstacles to transformative work. It is possible to fund the right things in the wrong way.”

—Farhad Ebrahimi

Founder and President, Chorus Foundation



Although inequity has always been in full view in the United States, there is no denying that 2020—with its high profile police killings of Black people combined with nationwide racial disparities amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic—also put in full view the growing power of the movement for racial equity. In response to the converging social and public health pandemics, people organized, voted, donated, and resisted, all united by the desire to transform reality into a more equitable future. This showed up in philanthropic giving through an unprecedented surge of commitments to funding for racial equity. But it will take more work to move from intention to impact.

“Systems change all the time but while transition is inevitable, justice is not,” says Farhad Ebrahimi, founder and president of the [Chorus Foundation](#), an equity-driven funder active in funding social movements. “The uncomfortable truth is that philanthropy itself is often one of the biggest obstacles to transformative work. It is possible to fund the right things in the wrong way.”¹

In this report, we share what we’ve learned about funders’ intention to contribute toward racial equity, and what it will take to achieve enduring impact, according to those closest to the work. We also offer specific ways that funders can close the gap between intention and impact. Our research included interviews with more than 34 racial equity movement leaders, funders, and others across the equity ecosystem, analyses of Candid data for 2020 and 2018 (the most complete year data is available) to identify funding trends, and a review of literature to understand what is needed to achieve equitable structural change.

PolicyLink and The Bridgespan Group join in this work together because our ultimate goal is population-level results: improving the standard of living, without racial disparities, for the approximately 100 million people² in America—or 1 in 3 people, including nearly half of the people of color in the nation³—who are living in poverty. Eradicating racial inequity is the path to such population change because a nation where the most marginalized among us can prosper—people of color living in poverty—is a nation where everyone does.⁴ In fact, Citigroup has put a price tag on racism finding that the US economy has lost \$16 trillion as a result of discrimination against African Americans over the past 20 years.⁵

\$16 trillion

Loss to the US economy as a result of discrimination against African Americans over the past 20 years, as estimated by Citigroup

While the roots of racism indeed run deep, preceding the founding of the country with the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the current structures that produce the nation’s racial inequities are the result of many choices, old and new. After all, people wrote the rules and regulations engaged by our civic institutions that have resulted in such inequitable outcomes. It was also people who then crafted cultural narratives that normalize, or even justify, the resulting inequities. Therefore, *we the people* hold the power to revisit those choices and make different ones to re-imagine and transform those structures and systems. And in that lies reason for optimism.

Moving from intention to impact asks for a mindset change to believe that racial equity is a goal that is possible and not something too big to achieve. That doesn’t mean it will be easy. There surely will be failures along with successes, and the work will take a long time, generations even. But history has shown that when it comes to achieving massive societal changes, philanthropy often has played a critical role. Philanthropic dollars, well directed and deployed, helped in toppling apartheid in South Africa, virtually eradicating polio across the globe, and establishing marriage equality in the United States, to name a few wins.⁶ That track record matters because it illustrates that it is possible—intention can turn into enduring impact.

4.0

The State of Philanthropic Funding for Racial Equity Today

“I am now worried that because we saw a flood of resources in 2020 that philanthropy thinks the job is done. This is not a moment for philanthropy to pull out.”

—LaTosha Brown

Co-founder, Black Voters Matter



Philanthropic *intention* to fund racial equity surged in 2020. However, how much actual giving has happened is hard to definitively pinpoint. That is because the vast majority of the money publicly pledged⁷ for racial equity work in 2020 has not been reported beyond foundation website statements, news articles, and corporate press releases. In fact, 94 percent of past racial equity funders have not reported their 2020 data yet, as of early June, 2021.⁸ Therefore, we don't actually know whether the checks are in the mail—or not—or who might be getting them.

The uncertainty is enormous. Based on currently reported grant data collected by [Candid](#), \$1.5 billion in funding for racial equity in 2020 can be tracked to recipients.⁹ That is a far cry from the \$11.9 billion in philanthropic capital that has been publicly pledged for racial equity in 2020.

\$11.9 billion

Philanthropic capital that has been publicly pledged for racial equity in 2020

\$1.5 billion

Funding for racial equity in 2020 that can be tracked to recipients

But here's what we do know: there are a lot of new donors giving to racial equity and corporate funding for racial equity increased. New donors range from countless individuals making \$5 or \$10 gifts, to Mackenzie Scott, for whom Candid has so far identified \$511 million in grants to racial equity efforts in 2020. At the start of 2021 the momentum of pledges from funders to equity efforts continued including, among others, the California Black Freedom Fund, the first state-based fund of its kind, which has already attracted about two dozen institutional and corporate donors. The \$100 million initiative will provide resources over the next five years to Black led power-building organizations to eradicate systemic and institutional racism in the state.

Likewise, denouncing “systemic racism” became a ubiquitous part of corporate rhetoric in the wake of George Floyd's murder, with the phrase often appearing prominently in public statements announcing funding. According to a report by McKinsey released in December 2020, Big Business had committed a whopping \$66 billion to racial equity initiatives. Five months later that figure jumped to \$200 billion.¹⁰ While this commitment is significant

it's important to recognize that this corporate spending captures philanthropy as well as other non-philanthropic corporate investments in service of racial equity including internal diversity efforts, antiracist speakers, product changes, banking relationships, and supplier diversity.

Also, the gap between what has been promised and what has been given is startling. A study released at the one-year anniversary of Floyd's death documented that much of the corporate commitment was not much more than talk. According to Creative Investment Research, a Black-owned impact investing firm, American corporations pledged to spend \$50 billion on racial equity since Floyd's murder, but only about \$250 million has actually been spent or committed to a specific initiative.¹¹

The difference between Creative Investment Research's \$50 billion figure and McKinsey's higher estimate points to one of the core challenges of saying anything more definitive about the amount of funding for racial equity: there is no shared definition of what “funding for racial equity” truly means. Philanthropists, including corporate givers, choose their own terms, sometimes including things that movement leaders say won't change the root causes of inequities. Consider that only 31 percent of the country's 100 largest companies that announced pledges to racial equity are looking at how equitably they paid their own employees,¹² even though a shift to fair and just wages would go a long way to ensuring racial equity.¹³

We used Candid's data because it captures most available giving by institutional philanthropy and high-net-worth individuals.¹⁴ However, the lack of a shared definition makes tracking trends over time currently difficult. For instance, was the apparent surge in 2020 truly due to an increase in giving to racial equity or an increase in labelling already existing giving patterns as racial equity grants?

For years, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) and others have been calling for, and working toward, a shared definition of what we mean by funding for racial equity. It is a critical ingredient to understanding whether funding trends are making good progress and to identifying funding gaps to be filled. PRE has advanced a definition based on what racial justice movement leaders use and has been collaborating with Candid to put this in place. (PRE is currently working with Candid to analyze 2020 data using this shared definition.) This is a start. Philanthropists will benefit from this shared definition of funding for racial equity when reporting their giving. So, too, would the equity movement benefit from the capacity to analyze this data at regular intervals.

This effort for more reliable data would be greatly aided if funders reported their data in real time or close to it. We saw the potential of real-time data with the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans to nonprofits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transparency on where the loans were going allowed for a pulse check of the financial health of the sector and exposed gaps in access to aid.¹⁵

In addition to the issues over lack of transparency and a shared definition, discussions with leaders across the equity ecosystem raised three concerns about the surge of 2020 racial equity funding:

- **The money may not have gone to the full range of work that is needed to support transformative change.** Without a more intentional focus on directing funding toward work that disrupts the root causes of inequity, there's a risk that any amount of money would be insufficient to eliminate the nation's racial disparities and improve outcomes for all of the 100 million people living in poverty in the United States. The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network USA recently used the Sustainable Development Goals to interrogate the extent of racial inequality in the United States. On average across states, white communities receive resources and services at a rate approximately three times higher than the racial community least served. And Black and Indigenous communities are most often left behind in the United States.¹⁶ The depth of this inequity will not go away without long-term work on transforming the systems that underpin how our nation functions and that govern our public and private lives. Research has shown that systems-changing work typically gets very little funding: looking at the nation's largest 1,000 grantmakers over the course of a decade ending in 2013, just 1 out of every 10 of those new dollars went toward such work.¹⁷

- **The money is insufficient to address the historic undercapitalization.** Research has shown that the majority of organizations doing racial equity work are undercapitalized. These organizations tend to be led by people of color and/or focused on systems change, two categories that funders have traditionally given less support.¹⁸ We found that, in 2018, the majority of racial equity grants were relatively modest with the median grant size at \$50,000. More than 64 percent of the nonprofits received \$100,000 or less in funding. Similarly, a [study by Bridgespan and Echoing Green](#) found that the unrestricted net assets of Black-led organizations was 76 percent smaller than their white-led counterparts.¹⁹

- **The money will disappear.** Concerns run high that 2020 was an anomaly with interest in racial equity energized by a perfect storm of nationwide outrage over state-sanctioned murders and a global pandemic, a combination that hopefully will not be replicated. The risk is that racial equity work is multigenerational, so what happens this year? And next year? Real rebuilding requires sustained investment. To ensure giving is sustained will require a transformation of culture. Funders need to accompany giving with the internal work necessary to move their organizations along on their racial equity journeys. This includes adopting more equitable grantmaking practices, as well as both diversifying staff and board trustees to include more people of color, so that the commitment is embedded throughout an organization.

76% smaller

Size of unrestricted net assets of Black-led organizations compared to their white-led counterparts, as found in a study by Bridgespan and Echoing Green

Members of the inaugural cohort of Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE) Resident Leaders for Equity leadership development program discuss a team assignment. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)



What We Need: A Robust, Sustainable Movement Fueled by Doers and Donors

“Organizing in Black communities is really just a form of survival. When you have fewer resources, you organize and collaborate to make those resources go as far as possible.”

—Christine White

Executive Director, Georgia Alliance for Progress

So what does transformative work to achieve equity look like? Here we turn to some work going on in Georgia. We are purposely highlighting an example that anchors on long-term organizing, an area of equity work that funders often overlook, but that is critical for an equitable future.

Much media attention focused on the “flipping” of Georgia from red to blue in both the presidential election and the runoff for two Senate seats in January 2021. The problem with this narrative is that it overlooks the decades of grassroots power building that was happening in the state regardless of any election cycle. Victory is not the ushering in or out of office a specific candidate but transformative change to disrupt inequities.

“Organizing in Black communities is really just a form of survival,” says Christine White, executive director of Georgia Alliance for Progress, a coalition of progressive donors. “When you have fewer resources, you organize and collaborate to make those resources go as far as possible.”

White stresses this is different from the candidate-specific organizing that most funders are more familiar with. “For folks who live in a relative sense of privilege where organizing is not necessary for survival, they often understand what campaigns do but don’t understand what organizing truly is. Political campaigns organize for a very short period of time, and then when the election is over, they don’t leave any infrastructure afterward,” says White. White jokes that she often gets asked if what she is describing is “like the PTA,” to which she responds: “It’s like the PTA, *all* the time, for everything. So not just to get school lunches to be better, but to make sure trash is picked up in the neighborhood, or to ensure that people aren’t killed in the street—everything that matters requires organizing in Black communities.”

In Georgia, there have been generations of grassroots organizers who have been combating structural racism across issues—education, housing, healthcare, environment, economic, etc.—on the local, county, and state levels. Also, voter turnout organizing and equity work are very closely tied in Georgia, in part, because of the state’s long history of voter suppression efforts. Historians offer that Georgia’s practice of a runoff system in itself was only adopted in 1964 to suppress Black votes and ensure that white candidates stayed in power. A runoff minimizes the chance that white candidates would split the vote, giving a winning plurality to a Black candidate.²⁰ Therefore the racial equity ecosystem includes local organizations already devoted to civic engagement and also social welfare organizations that do civic engagement work, to change conditions for the communities they serve. It also includes the advocacy of individuals or coalitions who are activated by specific issues and who see civic engagement as one of the variety of tools to effect social change.

“The 2020 election painted a lot of these groups as just strictly electoral, but Georgia already had such a clear framework over the past 10 years or more that this is organizing all the time and elections become a tool—not the other way around,” explains Elena Conley, chief strategy officer for the [Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation](#), a longtime funder of grassroots groups in Georgia and the South. “These groups work from deep organizing frameworks but also deep leadership development frameworks and deep relationship building frameworks.”

Black Voters Matter Co-founders Cliff Albright and LaTosha Brown discuss with the rapper Snoop Dogg the importance of voting at an Elect Justice event in Los Angeles, California. (*Dean Charles Anthony II*)



Just some of the groups doing such work include: [Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda](#), founded in 1988 by Reverend Joseph Lowery as an umbrella organization of human rights, civil rights, labor, women's youth, and peace and justice groups who advocate for voting rights protection, elimination of barriers to the ballot box, criminal justice reform, quality education, affordable housing, economic development, and equal participation in the political process for Georgians of color and underrepresented communities.²¹ The Georgia Strategic Alliance for New Directions and Unified Policies ([Georgia STAND-UP](#)) has provided research, strategy, technical support, and resources development for grassroots community organizing and nonpartisan voter education for more than 15 years.²² Decade-old [ProGeorgia](#) brings together nonprofit groups across the state to work in a more strategic way with new tools and technology in order to change the policies of the state for equitable social change.²³ [Partnership for Southern Equity](#)'s efforts advance policies and institutional actions that promote racial equity and shared prosperity throughout metro Atlanta and across the South.²⁴ And [Black Voters Matter](#), a national organization with roots in the South, works to increase power in Black communities by supporting the local infrastructure of grassroots organizations working for social justice and sees voting as a tool in that power building.²⁵

"Strengthening our democracy is not the issue that I want to work on," admits LaTosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter (its mantra is "Black voters matter not only on Election Day but on the other 364 days as well"). She continued, "But every single system in this country has been weakened by structural racism. That impacts not just Black people or people of color but everyone. You can't fix housing, or education, or healthcare, or anything else without a vibrant, working, representative, inclusive democracy. That is why I do this work." (To learn more about Brown's work, see "[An Organizer in Her Own Words](#)" on page 17.)

"You can't fix housing, or education, or healthcare, or anything else without a vibrant, working, representative, inclusive democracy."

—LaTosha Brown

Co-founder, Black Voters Matter

Equally important are the doers that make up the civic infrastructure that often works behind the scenes. In the South, despite the often hostile environment, there is already a robust ecosystem of organizations doing this intermediary work, including a set of donors who are organizing in ways to achieve equity. For instance, [Grantmakers for Southern Progress](#) (GSP) is a network of funders who are committed to advancing equity-focused structural change in the South and conducts research and shares best practices. Likewise, the [Southeastern Council of Foundations](#) is a 52-year-old member organization that fosters peer-to-peer learning through convenings and identifies trends in philanthropy across the region. Or think of the [Southern Education Foundation](#), an organization that connects fellow nonprofits and donors in the education ecosystem to advance equitable policies and practices. One insider reminded us that the South's infrastructure organizations, like these and others, do not need to be "saved" with outside resources but instead need to be given their long overdue respect and thus more supported. Research from GSP finds that the South receives less than 3 percent of philanthropic dollars nationwide.²⁶

The equity movement in Georgia—much like the rest of the country—is also not just Black and white. Yes, Black-led grassroots groups played a significant role in voter turnout but so did Latinx, Asian-American, and Indigenous grassroots efforts, too, as well as youth-led movements.²⁷ Downplaying the multiracial coalition aspect of the grassroots work that happened in Georgia to overcome racist voter suppression efforts, weakens what it truly takes to win on equity.

Philanthropy has played a role in helping to fuel progress in Georgia, but equally instructive are the ways in which funding could have been even more helpful. In Georgia, philanthropy invested \$57 million to policy, advocacy, and systems reform focused on populations of color over the course of the decade ending in 2018. That's just \$5.7 million per year. Compare that to the spike in funding to Georgia for the 2020 election where \$34.5 million was raised between October and November²⁸ or the \$3.6 million that Stacey Abrams raised in two days before the runoff.²⁹ It illustrates the pattern we find for equity funding where even when funding is able to mobilize to take advantage of a ripe moment in time, funding for the long-term efforts that "till-the-soil" for equity are relatively modest in comparison.

\$5.7 million per year

Amount invested by philanthropy in Georgia to policy, advocacy, and systems reform focused on populations of color over the course of the decade ending in 2018

\$3.6 million in two days

Amount Stacey Abrams raised before the 2020 runoff election

“I get that elections are transactional and it costs money to win an election but the funding went so far beyond that—I think it was actually a failure in a sense,” says Tsedey Betru, Just Opportunity director of the Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), which works to promote racial equity and opportunity in metro Atlanta and across the South. “If we had invested that money in the capacity of all of these organizations on the ground to build in a sustainable way for the long term, we would have gotten so much more than an election.”

In reality, there is a lot of long-term critical work that was not being funded at all and instead relied on unpaid or underpaid labor. Economist Nina Banks of Bucknell University argues that historically, community activism by Black women, and other women of color, has been incorrectly considered political activity and thus overlooked as labor.³⁰ Feminist economists have spent decades arguing that the contributions of the unpaid household work done disproportionately by women has been economically invisible. Banks recently published research³¹ that builds on this thinking, arguing that for women of color additional unpaid work often takes place outside the household in the form of community activism. She explains that for women of color their community is often the focal point of much of their unpaid labor to “address community needs not met by the public and private sectors.”³² In other words, the unpaid (organizing and activism) work of these women of color in their communities—to improve the environment, or housing, or access to food, etc.—is necessary because of racial inequity. This lack of understanding of the role of community activism of women of color is part of the broader dynamics of how aspects of racial equity work have been commonly overlooked and how the overall funding that is required to achieve racial equity is underestimated.

Despite the strength of its equity ecosystem, Georgia also illustrates that challenges do not go away and that progress often creates backlash. Following the record-breaking voter turnout of the 2020 election, more than 389 bills were introduced, some within 24 hours of the election, in 48 states, that would make it more difficult for people to register to vote, vote by mail, or vote in person. And the number of bills continues to grow.³³ The Heritage Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, has teamed up with grassroots organizations to mobilize conservative supporters in state capitals for much of this legislation. Heritage, through its advocacy arm Heritage Action for America, plans to spend \$24 million across eight states that it sees as “crucial” for this type of legislation, according to *The New York Times*.³⁴

In late March, Georgia became the first state to pass its voter restrictions into law, which voter rights activists charge targets Black voters but will adversely affect all voters of color, young voters, and disabled voters, too. Georgia’s sweeping law does a range of things including dramatically shrinking the number of voting drop boxes across the state, putting them indoors and thereby preventing 24-hour access, and criminalizing the giving of food or water to voters waiting in long lines.³⁵ (In another blow to equity, many of the same states that were quick to introduce restrictive voter legislation have also introduced bills that limit the rights and protections of the LGBTQ community, including the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming people.³⁶)

“The backlash isn’t surprising. When you’re talking about dismantling white supremacy and structural racism, there is always a backlash,” says Elena Conley of Babcock. “But Georgia knows exactly what it needs to do in order to build power with and for its communities. ... 2020 is only unique if we don’t sustain the funding to allow that infrastructure to continue to build relationships, to continue to build alliances with communities, and to be able to continue to respond to community needs outside the electoral political framework. Groups in Georgia have been incredibly effective in mutual aid, COVID response, the uprisings, *and* the electoral organizing. That holds together because you’re actually centering people. As a foundation all of that gives us hope because it is all in the context of how systemic change happens.”

An organizer in her own words

By LaTosha Brown

Co-founder, Black Voters Matter



The whole runoff system was actually created to prevent Black voters from participating. But we had more Black voters that voted in the runoff than in the general election. That is extraordinary. The difference was grassroots organizations were not scrambling at the last minute to try and put two pennies together so we could actually do that work. When grassroots groups are resourced, we are able to respond and act to a particular opportunity.

That has been a hard message to get philanthropy to hear. For a number of years I've been deeply frustrated with the lack of investment from philanthropy in organizing. There is this disconnect. We would talk to foundations and they would say their interest was in policy not organizing as if one can operate without the other. I am quick to point out that Brown vs. Board of Education was in 1954, but most schools did not desegregate until the early 1970s. So policy without people just does not work.

What I saw in Georgia was philanthropy stretching itself in ways that I had not seen in the three and half decades that I've been doing this work. I had never seen the level of investment for organizing and civic engagement work being supported by philanthropy at the scale that we saw in 2020. We still had a fraction of the resources that some people spent on television ads and all kinds of other fancy consultant-driven solutions. But they had nowhere near the kind of results that we had. The bottom line is our type of investment has a high yield. It is the least risky strategy.

Still, despite all of that, we are already seeing philanthropy go back to its old ways. Traditionally, philanthropy does not give grace and space for grassroots organizations to learn, to make mistakes, to actually fail up. I find that this is especially true for Black-led organizations. Philanthropy has been very punitive when it doesn't get the results that it desires within the grant period as if we are not effective at doing the work, without recognizing that what we are doing is transformative change that takes time. We saw a loss in Georgia in 2018 not in a partisan sense but because we saw blatant voter suppression of hundreds of thousands of Black voters and that's what is a loss for us. But we would have never had the largest Black turnout in the history of the state in 2020 if we did not learn from our failures in 2018.

I am now worried that because we saw a flood of resources in 2020 that philanthropy thinks the job is done. Resources cannot be episodic. This is not a moment for philanthropy to pull out. This is a moment for philanthropy to move from a transactional model to a transformative one. Instead of flooding resources in a big crisis to stop bleeding that moment, a transformative model is recognizing that many of these issues are structural issues, and structural change is done over time and takes multiple years of funding because you are redesigning the structures, shifting the culture, and dealing with systemic issues.

When philanthropy steps up in partnership and sees themselves vested with communities, we actually get outcomes that are better for all of us.

Photo by Dean Charles Anthony II.

A blurred background image showing several people in a meeting or collaborative work environment. The image is out of focus, with people appearing as soft shapes in various colors. The overall tone is professional and collaborative.

6.0

Strategies for What to Fund and How to Fund

“Good grantmaking for racial equity has to also involve great policy and advocacy if you want it to be as effective and sustainable as we hope it can be.”

—Darrin Goss

Senior CEO, Coastal Community Foundation

Achieving true population-level change requires addressing the root causes of problems. That does not mean ignoring the tremendous needs of today. But to stop from drowning in today's problems, the flooding must be stopped at the source. Think about being aboard a sinking boat: a bucket is needed to constantly bail out the rising water on deck but plugging the holes in the hull is also necessary for the boat to ever get to shore. You need both.

For philanthropy this has implications in terms of what types of work to fund and how to give to support a robust, sustainable movement over time. Those fighting against racial injustice tell us that a movement that is capable of achieving racial equity will require a combination of different types of work in order to get at the root causes by transforming culture, rewriting rules and regulations, and redesigning institutions to achieve equitable results. These activities each focus less on addressing today's needs but collectively work toward stopping the needs from developing, on multiple fronts.

ABFE (a membership organization focused on effective and responsive philanthropy in Black communities) has developed helpful guidance on how to support Black-led infrastructure for social change. This framework (see below) can be used to identify what to fund in the broader movement for racial equity that is centered on the 100 million people who are economically insecure in the United States. In order to move from intention to impact and deliver on population-level change, funding is needed for types of work in all these areas. Likewise, this is the work that is needed, regardless of issue of interest, and that applies to any community (Indigenous, Latinx, etc).

While many funders support organizations doing work in one of these areas, it may not be clear how these pieces “add up” to systemic change. Others might wonder—where are there gaps, and what is holding back the progress we seek? In our conversations with racial equity movement leaders, three themes stood out about where more philanthropic funding is needed, in addition to these areas.

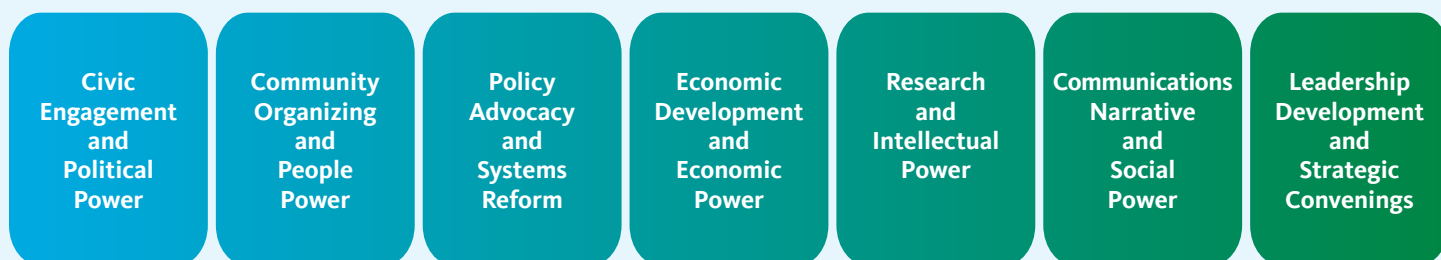
1.

There is a crucial role for connective infrastructure that spans across different types of work.

This work weaves together a strong network of actors across issues and geographies. It establishes and facilitates platforms for the ecosystem to align on values and agendas, on areas where a shared capacity or knowledge is helpful, and on how to take action. Infrastructure actors also keep a pulse on whether the movement consistently is making progress over time and assess when pivoting might be needed to take advantage of momentum or respond to adversaries. These actors exhibit specific assets or strengths that make them particularly well-suited to harmonizing the complex work of systems change,³⁷ however, are often overlooked by funders because the adaptive nature of their work is not well-suited for typical due diligence approaches that rely on a step-by-step theory of change.³⁸

In contrast to historic movements where leadership was more centralized behind charismatic individuals, current equity movements are defining new ways of leading that are often distributed and networked. This avoids the traps that can come from the personal shortcomings of individual leaders or even sidelining (e.g., imprisonment, assassination), but it needs investment in coordination and collaboration.

ABFE Guidance for What to Fund



Source: Susan Taylor Batten and Nat Chioke Williams, PhD, *The Case for Funding Black-Led Social Change*, ABFE and the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, February 9, 2017.

2.

Although nearly all equity organizations are undercapitalized, there are specific types of work that funders seem reluctant to support.

While philanthropy has shown up to fund efforts at key moments—efforts aimed around a specific campaign cycle or policy change—funding to do the long-term work that endures beyond those moments is much harder to come by. As a result, funders typically overlook the critical work of long-term community organizing and narrative change. A robust, sustainable movement that achieves population-level change on racial equity will require capacity to “till the soil” to create conditions for transformative change (like much of the long-term work that went on in Georgia) and efforts that capitalize on ripe moments in time. For lasting change you need a combination of both.³⁹

Part of the hurdle is this kind of long-term equity work often doesn't neatly fit with how philanthropy traditionally makes grants—siloed priority areas, 3-5 year strategies, and narrow definitions of how to measure success. Instead, this work incorporates relationships, ideas, and stories that don't have tangible outputs or predictable timelines. Efforts working to bring equity to philanthropic practices, such as those from the [Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity](#) (PRE), [CHANGE Philanthropy](#), a coalition of 10 identity and equity networks that includes PRE and ABFE, and the [Trust-Based Philanthropy Project](#), have been making this case about the mismatch of equity work and philanthropy grantmaking norms for a long time.

Some funders do not understand the critical role that activities that “till the soil” hold to achieving equity. For instance, the long-term work of narrative change is critical because the truths that are collectively embraced about inequity shape perspectives on the problem as well as solutions. Narrative change leaders and organizations develop a shared understanding of goals, values, and a desired future state, and pursue shifts to the existing narratives and cultural norms. This may include elevating new concepts and language to help disseminate lasting equitable visions.

The PSE's Just Health team, Live Healthy Chattooga, and many other partners came together to distribute food in rural Georgia in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)

The overall lack of understanding of what equity work requires also leads funders to have blind spots of what is needed. We encourage funders to be mindful that social change leaders also need resources to nourish and replenish their own energy for leadership. Leaders of color who are doing this kind of work have to navigate the added weight of trying to liberate a community from the harm of injustices that they themselves are also harmed by. A recent study conducted by the Building Movement Project into this issue characterizes the toll this past year has taken on nonprofit leaders of color, particularly women of color leaders, as “immense” concluding, “The overwhelming consensus is that the current climate is taking an immeasurable psychological, physical, and emotional toll, especially on women of color leaders.”⁴⁰

Criminal justice activist and organizer Brittany Packnett Cunningham talked openly about the strain of the past year for Black organizers during a moment of vulnerability on her podcast: “My job is to educate and activate folks and I am extremely dedicated to doing that as responsibly as I can but that doesn't mean it doesn't take a personal toll. I have sucked back tears and had to push down my pain and rage and grief to get a job done.”⁴¹ In our discussions we heard from several leaders of color who were grateful for funders in 2020 who provided grants specifically for professional development and wellness care, in addition to the grants they made for general operating support for their organizations.



3.

A need for funders to recognize that there is persistent activity that is in opposition to equity that will only be overcome through sustained, durable support for equity efforts.

Movement leaders reinforced that there is always some kind of opposition to nearly every aspect of equity work, which philanthropists who seek to advance equity should both anticipate and prepare for. That includes anticipating that there will be backlash, setbacks, and progress that may come in fits and starts. Specifically countering opposition requires investing longer with flexible funding and measuring impact differently.

“It’s really up to funders to sit back and hold the tension around one step forward and three steps back. Part of that step back is if the work is not well resourced,” says Elena Conley, chief strategy officer for the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, a longtime funder of grassroots groups in Georgia and the South.

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) “[Power Moves](#)” guide encourages funders to see that the path to equity and justice is dependent on the building, sharing, and wielding of power. “Power Moves” defines building power as “supporting systemic change by funding civic engagement, advocacy, and community organization among marginalized communities.”⁴²

Philanthropists often shy away from funding power-building efforts as too partisan. But funders committed to racial equity would be better served to view efforts through an equity lens rather than a political one: will such action help or hinder efforts to achieve racial equity? At any given moment, *both* parties are proposing reforms to policy, tax, government regulations, judicial appointments, etc. at the local, state, and federal levels that may ultimately stall equity or create inequity. Think of gerrymandering, for example, which tends to be a popular strategy of whichever party has a majority in the statehouse. A racial equity lens might provide a different view of a redistricting proposal than a partisan lens.

“Good grantmaking for racial equity has to also involve great policy and advocacy if you want it to be as effective and sustainable as we hope it can be,” says Darrin Goss, Sr., CEO of the [Coastal Community Foundation in South Carolina](#). Cheryl Dorsey, president of Echoing Green,⁴³ encourages funders to take a broader view for the sake of equity, “Funders are terrified of the word advocacy but, in essence, advocacy is raising your hand and talking about what you care about.”

Ultimately, to effectively counter this opposition, the equity movement would require well-capitalized organizations that engage in a variety of activities (both short-term drives and long efforts), sustained networks and coalitions, and a spirit of “transformative solidarity,” meaning the ecosystem operates with a shared vision, values, and commitment.

Achieving results for the 100 million Americans in poverty requires investment and action across a range of dimensions



Supporting and building power among identity groups over-represented in the 100 million



Investing across critical areas of work* required to achieve systemic change



Working within and across multiple levels of geography



Making progress within and across issue areas most fundamental for people's well-being

Source: PolicyLink and The Bridgespan Group. *See “ABFE Guidance for What to Fund” on page 19.



7.0

Practical Steps Funders Can Take

“There is joy in this work. There is a relational aspect in how we build trust, co-design strategies, and fail, learn, and move forward together—there is joy in that.”

—Kelly Nowlin

Board Member, Surdna Foundation

After considering *what to fund* and *how to fund*, it's important to start taking action. Funders can focus on individual steps that would collectively add up to major shifts in the way movements for equity receive support. For each step, we highlight what to do to get started in funding for racial equity and also how to bring racial equity funding to the next level. Recommendations here are informed by the foundational work of PRE, including [“Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens.”](#)

Fund more of what is needed and in ways that build capacity and relationships.

Fund the core areas of work using ABFE’s framework, including local as well as national actors, across issue areas. Provide multiyear general operating support to organizations and support leaders of color.

Just getting started

Provide funding to re-grantors and learn alongside them. Re-grantors and intermediaries, like [Amplify Fund](#), can be a lifesaver for funders who seek to invest in racial equity but are not sure how, and/or who are seeking to build strong relationships with proximate leaders. Re-grantors often have the relationships and capabilities to deploy significant philanthropic capital in a way that models much of what is needed to make lasting progress—a long-term lens and trusting relationships with leaders of color and grassroots organizations. Proximate leaders and peer funders can both support funders and keep them accountable as they pursue this work. There is no shortage of opportunities: in a 2021 Bridgespan survey, funds focused on racial equity reported that they could absorb up to \$3 billion annually without any increase in operating capacity.⁴⁴ Joining funder collaboratives centered in equity, like the [Funders for Housing and Opportunity](#) or the [Convergence Partnership](#), can also provide opportunities for learning while giving more than is possible alone.⁴⁵

Next level

Give more to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color led organizations that you are already supporting. We found the average size of grants for racial equity was small and many of the organizations doing the long-term work to dismantle structural racism are led by people of color. “I think it is a conceit of white privilege to think that people of color are only able to take small amounts of money,” says Jason Franklin, senior philanthropic advisor of the Movement Voter Project, which moves resources to grassroots community-based organizations with a focus on youth and communities of color. “Philanthropy loves to use the excuse that these organizations have never operated at a big scale. Well, they’ve never operated at a big scale, because you’ve never given them the money to operate at a big scale.”

Strengthen coalitions for equity. Look beyond organizations to support the coalitions, networks, and intermediaries that keep movements robust. These networks come in various forms, including the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#), a joint project of Race Forward and the Othering and Belonging Institute to bring local and regional government actors together to advance equity with policy and institutional strategies; the Movement for Black Lives, a network of more than 150 Black organizations across the country working for racial justice; and tribal governments as a vehicle to making meaningful investment in Indigenous communities.

Expand into areas of work that are underfunded. (e.g., organizing, narrative change, infrastructure) “We need *huge* amounts of money invested in grassroots organizing, ecosystem weaving, coalition building, and power building to be able to maintain what we have already accomplished, push back against what is coming, and do more going forward,” says Nathaniel Smith, founder and chief equity officer of Partnership for Southern Equity. “The other key piece that is needed is strategic communications (narrative change). The funders that fund inequity efforts and inequitable policies don’t have a problem spending money on communications, focus groups to figure out the right messages to connect to the community on the ground, and elevating leaders.”

Bring your full organizational assets to bear to support this work.

In other words, be a part of the movement for racial equity. If you talk to enough leaders of color committed to equity work another truth bubbles up: the responsibility of fixing oppression should not keep falling only to the oppressed. “Philanthropy’s accountability has to go beyond that we fund good organizations to do good work but instead to philanthropy actually seeing themselves as a part of the ecosystem. We are funding this work because there is a vested interest for *all of us* to eliminate structural racism and create a nation that is more inclusive and equitable,” says organizer LaTosha Brown of Black Voters Matter.

Just getting started

Begin by doing the internal work to examine governance, strategy, culture, and processes through an equity lens. In recognition of how critical it is to pursue the internal work, the [National Center for Family Philanthropy identified](#) not only the pragmatic shifts that are necessary (e.g., simplifying reporting requirements, moving resources quickly), but also the motivations that drive funders to pursue this work. Given the urgency of the inequity that we face and the reality that racial equity journeys are continuously ongoing, it is impractical for funders to delay funding so they can learn first. Instead, they should invest *while* learning.

Share timely, detailed data about your racial equity grantmaking via Candid. In 2020, many funders committed to devoting more resources to racial equity and increasing support of organizations led by people of color. Funders have also been called on to increase multiyear general operating support and unrestricted funding. For the sector to hold itself accountable to making progress on these indicators, it needs to know how much is invested in these areas. That will require funders to proactively share data about their grantmaking in a common format. Candid’s [standard for sharing grants data](#)⁴⁶ provides the sector with a means for doing so. This is work that can start immediately.

Track and share your staff and board demographics. Ask grantees you work with to do the same. Transparency around who works in and leads organizations can help the sector understand who is being included—and who is left out. Diversifying staff and board trustees to include more people of color can help ensure the commitment to racial equity is embedded throughout an organization.

Next level

Bring other assets to bear. Funders have more assets that can be leveraged to achieve racial equity beyond just financial, namely their relationships, influence, and voice. NCRP calls this “wielding power” and notes funders can do things like inform, raise awareness, and advocate to amplify voices of the most marginalized and bring visibility to critical issues. They can also collaborate with fellow funders, business leaders, and government to advance equity.⁴⁷ As one philanthropy insider reminded us, there is no finite amount to these other assets; they can be used over and over again.

Redirect endowments to reduce harm and invest in communities.

The investment strategies of foundations can have significant impact on communities both directly and indirectly. As the Movement for Black Lives asserts, funders can “invest/divest” in ways that advance or hinder racial equity. Justice Funders has created [Resonance: A Framework for Philanthropic Transformation](#), which outlines in four stages how funders can reduce their extractive practices and increase regenerative ones instead.⁴⁸ Regenerative recommendations for endowments include investing in local and regional efforts that replenish wealth and build community assets.⁴⁹

For some funders these steps will be a shift in practice; for others, they might sound familiar. No matter what end of the spectrum you fall there is work to be done. We are inspired by Chorus's Farhad Ebrahimi's call for fellow funders to not only embrace the long-term work on the ground but also embrace the "long-term transformational work" needed in philanthropy, too.

"In philanthropy it's very popular to talk about moving the field, yet rarely do we talk openly and honestly about moving our own organizations," says Ebrahimi. "I think we need to get serious about funder and donors organizing, which is more than fundraising or persuading folks. For me, organizing is developing leadership to shift power for structural change. If we're talking about funder organizing, we're talking about shifting structures and cultures within the philanthropic sector and within specific philanthropic institutions. After all, if we seek to support transformational work, then we ourselves must be open to transformation."⁵⁰

One way to approach that transformation is to move beyond thinking about funding issues in siloes to see the bigger picture, says Susan Thomas, president of [Melville Charitable Trust](#), whose core focus is on ending homelessness.⁵¹ Acknowledging that funders dedicate support in different ways to improving the lives of communities of color, Thomas boldly argues: "I wish philanthropy would recognize that racial equity is the work. At the Trust, we advance racial equity by working to end homelessness and housing instability, which disproportionately impacts communities of color. Whether a given foundation focuses on the environment, education, or housing, the actual work is racial equity. We are talking about the same people. If philanthropy would embrace that truth, our approach would be so much more impactful."

The job of investing in racial equity does not fall to one kind of funder. In fact, just the opposite. With multiple on-ramps to do this work there are opportunities for *every* funder to make meaningful investments to support equity. The on-ramps to this work could be different for issue-based funders, place-based funders, community foundations, family foundations, and corporate foundations. (See "On-Ramps for Every Funder" on the next page.)

Community advocates and energy equity organizers gathered for PSE's first Just Energy Summit in 2016 at Atlanta Metropolitan State College in Atlanta, GA. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)



Just Energy Community Organizer Marsha Gosier (right) participates in the One Voice Townhall community forum sponsored by the NAACP and Radio One in March of 2020. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)



On-Ramps for Every Funder

The job of investing in racial equity does not fall to one kind of funder. In fact, just the opposite. With multiple on-ramps to do this work there are opportunities for *every* funder to make meaningful investments to support equity:

- **Issue-based funders** can approach their missions with a more collaborative lens that recognizes that people's needs are often the results of intertwining issues and systems. The Melville Charitable Trust, for example, is one of the founding members of [Funders for Housing and Opportunity](#) (FHO), a collaborative of 15 funders with different specialties that go beyond housing, including education and health. The funders are working together to ensure all renters, regardless of income, can afford safe, stable housing in communities that support better health, economic mobility, and educational achievement. Racial equity is at the core of the collaborative's understanding of the issue and its approach. FHO recognizes that "deeply rooted systems of racial bias, discrimination, and segregation greatly limit the housing options and life opportunities of millions of Native People and People of Color. FHO is dedicated to dismantling racial inequities, repairing harms, and restructuring systems to ensure equitable housing and life outcomes for all people."⁵²
- **Place-based funders** can take stock of a region's entire ecosystem to ensure that all the critical pieces are receiving support and thus working together to build something greater than the sum of its parts. [The James Irvine Foundation](#), for example, focused its strategy in California on addressing the state's widening economic divide, announcing a 2016 effort to "raise the fortunes of California's low-income workers." It funds across a broad ecosystem of the state's labor movement, including larger advocates (e.g., National Domestic Worker's Alliance) and more local organizers (e.g., Los Angeles Black Worker Center, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, and the Chinese Progressive Association). The goal is to support a "dynamic ecosystem of organizations mobilizing low-wage workers across the state," giving them an active voice and leadership in the path forward. The start of 2021 marked the state's minimum wage increase to \$13 or \$14, depending on the employer size, and by 2023 the wage is set to hit a \$15 minimum for all California workers.⁵³
- **Community foundations**, like Coastal Community Foundation of South Carolina, are place-based funders that have played a critical role as community conveners to bring together community members, advocates, and leaders to address the major structural challenges in their regions. Foundation CEO Darrin Goss, Sr. recognizes how investing in relationships and trust can unlock critical solutions. "Before committing our entire organization to specific racial equity goals, we brought advocates, donors, and civic leaders together to build a shared language and understanding of racial equity. This meant that the descendants of the policymakers who enacted racist laws were in dialogue with the folks who were oppressed by them," says Goss. "We were prepared to lose donors in order to get on the same page about what will lead to impact in our community, but it wasn't as big of an issue as we expected. Our strength and value is to facilitate the authentic relationships and conversations needed to get results for our community."

- **Family foundations** have opportunities to align their grant-making to better support their values and mission by fueling the ecosystem of actors that address the root causes of structural racism. [The Surdna Foundation](#)—which John E. Andrus founded in 1917 (using his family name spelled backward)—incorporated social justice into its mission in 2008 and focused its grantmaking on racial justice in 2018. Today, its board of directors includes nine of Andrus’s 500 living descendants. In keeping with its belief that those closest to the problems hold powerful solutions, the foundation has established several large, multiyear re-granting initiatives to channel resources to community organizations and collaboratives working with community members to determine how best to allocate dollars. Surdna’s embrace of grantmaking for racial equity sparked a dispute among Andrus family members. A small contingent argued that Surdna’s support of social justice movements was a political “hijacking” of John E. Andrus’s intent.⁵⁴ Their arguments were unfounded and they were ultimately unsuccessful. That said, as foundations see their leadership transition to successive generations of descendants (Surdna is currently governed by fifth-generation descendants of Andrus), similar disputes could become more common as the control of family foundations falls to future generations (commonly known as “next gen” funders). Surdna’s experience demonstrates that this work should coincide with a funder’s racial equity journey, but it does not need to wait on it.
- **Corporate foundations** can follow many of the suggestions already outlined for funders, since many organize their work around issues and communities. Based on pledges and recorded commitments, we know that many corporations felt called to contribute at an unprecedented level in 2020. There is an important role for corporate philanthropists to lead by going beyond making splashy announcements—and to follow through on commitments in a way that supports the types of work that communities say is needed. This is a place where corporations should not be seeking to compete but rather to collaborate. Many corporate foundations have lean teams and can do the most good by getting unrestricted dollars to re-grantors, community foundations, and those already leading in this work, while contributing the asset of their brand and their dollars to advance the needed work.

Ultimately, transforming systems to achieve equity will take generations. Racial equity work is nonlinear and will have failures along with successes. However, conversations with funders have highlighted that these challenges don’t have to be a deterrent.

For instance, the long timeframe of this work does not mean that it is without measurable impact. In the past when philanthropy has taken on audacious social change, funders identified concrete, measurable goals—or winnable milestones—along the way.⁵⁵ Similarly, The James Irvine Foundation is doing this with its efforts to ensure greater fairness and opportunity for workers in California. The foundation redefined its metrics to focus on a different set of milestones like measuring levels of worker engagement and leadership development, strategic enforcement of wage theft, etc. “Our board’s insights and support were critical to our shift in strategy,” said Don Howard, president and CEO of Irvine. “They believed in the need to build worker power, in addition to building skills, to narrow income inequality across California’s economy. They learned that from grantees, research, and their own experience, and it helped that we were clear about our outcome goals and assessment framework for measuring worker power-building through our Fair Work initiative.”

Just because the work doesn’t connect the dots with straight lines doesn’t mean it is not strategic. When the Coastal Community Foundation pivoted its strategy to encourage donors to engage with systems and advocacy work as part of its effort to advance racial equity and increase the effectiveness of donors’ grant-making, CEO Darrin Goss acknowledged that the community foundation initially lost some donors, but it has since grown net assets by \$94 million over the last four years doing this kind of work.

And, yes, there are some things important to funders, wins even, that can never be plotted on a spreadsheet, and that is okay, too. “There is joy in this work,” reminds Surdna board member Kelly Nowlin, a fifth-generation member of the Andrus family. “There is a relational aspect in how we build trust, co-design strategies, and fail, learn, and move forward together—there is joy in that.”

How Much Is Needed?

“I think funders should reassess what they think their dollar amounts can do. We should be asking the question: ‘how much do you really think it costs to get justice?’... Folks are asking us to take on an empire with \$50,000.”

—M. Adams

Co-executive Director, Freedom, Inc.

If many more funders take these steps to move from intention to impact, there would be significant shifts in the movement for racial equity, including:

- **Increased funding for racial equity:** This would include an increase in overall dollars, number of funders, and number of major funders. Within that funding we would also see an increase in multiyear support, general operating support, funding for core infrastructure organizations, funding for underfunded areas of work (particularly narrative change, long-term organizing, and advocacy efforts directly aimed at influencing public policy in service of racial equity), funding for leaders of color, and funding for grassroots organizations and coalitions.
- **Collaboration and learning between funders and movement leaders:** A mindset of “learning while doing” such that donors provide funding today while undergoing the transformative work within each institution.
- **Increased funder accountability and transparency in their support for equity work:** Such accountability might result in funders making meaningful change in the composition of their portfolios.

The first point begs the question, “just how much would the funding increase?” While changing the nation to become more equitable is possible, quantifying just how much that will truly cost is difficult today. We say this because we tried. We spent months considering and testing different approaches to quantifying the need across areas of work, levels of geography, and by community. We analyzed data, talked to experts, studied every bit of research we could find, and analyzed the data again. Unfortunately, any number we came up with felt like at best an informed back of the envelope estimate.

For those eager to see the price tag, PolicyLink routinely calls for government budget allocations to be proportional to the size of the communities being served.⁵⁶ Following that formula, Jason Franklin, senior philanthropic advisor of the Movement Voter Project, which moves resources to grassroots community based organizations with a focus on youth and communities of color, has a simple approach: “One thing I often throw out just as a thought experiment is: what if our giving to racial equity was proportional to the share of the population of people of color? Last year we had \$450 billion in giving in the United States and 40 percent of the population is people of color.⁵⁷ What if we just give 40 percent of our giving? That would be \$180 billion.”

Too high? Alternatively, consider that we are on the verge, or already at the point, of 50 percent of the nation’s children under 18 are people of color.⁵⁸ So, if we go with 50 percent of giving then that would be \$225 billion. Since nearly 6 in 10 children of color are living in or near poverty,⁵⁹ that level of giving may not be too high at all.

Those are admittedly imprecise figures, although their scale is thought provoking. Recall that pledged funding in 2020 was only \$11.9 billion. Part of the difficulty in coming up with a figure is that the racial equity movement has never been funded at the levels or in the ways that would support the thoughtful work to develop that dollar-and-cents road map. This is critical work that lies ahead.

In the meantime, consider the coalition of funders that has steadily advanced conservative policy positions and legislation, including reducing taxation and government regulations. A key lesson from these funders’ successes is the commitment to patient funding and scale of investment. For example, the John M. Olin Foundation invested approximately \$380 million over the course of its 50-year lifespan in the conservative legal movement. It supported leadership development and capacity building for grassroots networks to combat progressive legal assumptions and it empowered public interest law organizations, including the Federalist Society, which has gained outsized influence on the Supreme Court nominations process.⁶⁰ Racial equity movement leaders will fervently tell you that such efforts have made it harder to achieve equity. They crave the same kind of patient sizeable funding.

PolicyLink’s first-hand experience with Promise Neighborhoods, a federal education program modeled after the work of the Harlem Children’s Zone, hints at the breadth of what is required to achieve a significant shift in just one policy area. Over the course of a decade, it cost Geoffrey Canada and his team at Harlem Children’s Zone an estimated \$110 million to build, evaluate, and improve a place-based educational pipeline for children to succeed. The cradle-to-career approach gained additional momentum when then-presidential candidate Barack Obama made a promise to replicate Harlem Children’s Zone’s model across the country. Philanthropy invested over \$5 million to support actors, including PolicyLink, Child Trends, the Urban Institute, and others, to make the case, draft new policies, and secure support in Congress over the life of the program.

Once the policies were in place, philanthropic funding enabled PolicyLink to dedicate \$2 million to \$3 million per year for the first four years to set up the technical assistance infrastructure to bring the policy to life with a strong equity lens. By 2020, the Promise Neighborhoods effort provided \$80 million per year to operate programs and strengthen infrastructure in communities resulting in improved outcomes.⁶¹

This example illustrates just how much effort is necessary to take one innovation from concept to implementation. However, without structural changes these kinds of program shifts are constantly subject to negotiation and potential elimination in the budget process. Much more would be required to achieve the kinds of structural changes that produce equitable transformative changes like a right to housing, universal voter registration, or national nonpartisan redistricting.

One thing to keep in mind is any effort that is not deliberately trying to advance equity builds on existing institutions that are reinforcing today's status quo of inequity or, worse, that are exacerbating it. Such inertia is always going to be cheaper than what re-imagination might initially cost.

"Because of COVID-19, everyone now understands a pandemic; we understand it shut down our economy, ravaged our families, and changed our lives. But we've been living in a 400-plus year pandemic of racism," says Christina Cummings, vice president of Operations of the Partnership for Southern Equity in Atlanta. "Structural racism is a system that is designed. It is like if you are driving from Atlanta on I-75 and stay south, it is going to take you to Florida no matter what you do because that is what that road was designed to do."

"Structural racism is a system that is designed. It is like if you are driving from Atlanta on I-75 and stay south, it is going to take you to Florida no matter what you do because that is what that road was designed to do."

—Christina Cummings

Vice President, Operations, Partnership for Southern Equity

Perhaps, then, the exact dollar amount is not what is as important as the framing of what is needed. Given the historic undercapitalization of organizations doing racial equity work, especially those led by people of color, M. Adams, co-executive director of [Freedom, Inc.](#), which works with low- to no-income people of color, with a focus on the Black and Southeast Asian communities in Wisconsin, offers this advice: "I think funders should reassess what they think their dollar amounts can do. We should be asking the question: 'how much do you really think it costs to get justice?' That's a different orientation around dollars. Folks are asking us to take on an empire with \$50,000. How do you think we are going to do that? Those of us on the ground are always thinking about how to use capital efficiently. But the challenge for philanthropy is to reassess what they think are realistic commitments or good investments into these organizations to take on the work."⁶²

Lastly, imagine if the annual investment to racial equity did scale significantly. What could the equity movement get done if we start to think big about funding? One Black movement leader admitted, "Ultimately, I want to get to a day where Black-led organizations do not need philanthropy—how can we leverage current philanthropy to wean ourselves off of it?" As to how much is needed, noting that it takes about a generation to shift outcomes, the leader told us, "I would love to see every metropolitan area or region have a \$1 billion pledge in the bank that resources a generation of community-controlled systems level changes."

Members of the PSE's Just Opportunity issue area testify before the Georgia General Assembly during public hearings on the Georgia Economic Bill of Rights in late 2017. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)



Where Do We Go from Here?

“I think it’s less complicated than we as funders make it seem. It’s about building strong organizations and capacity, it’s about providing flexible, multiyear funding and resources, and at the core of it, it’s about trusting groups on the ground who know what they really need—that’s how we can begin to create equitable change.”

—Elena Conley

Chief Strategy Officer, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

Toward the end of 2020's summer of protest against racial injustice came a boldly simple statement—or call to action, really—uttered to a reporter: “Fund us like you want us to win.”⁶³ It came from Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, co-executive director of the [Highlander Center for Research and Education](#), the legendary institution that taught organizing to labor leaders in the 1930s, civil-rights leaders in the 1950s and 1960s, and Latinx immigrant and youth activists in the 2000s. It was a profound reminder of what has been missing from how philanthropy has funded racial equity, from a leader speaking up for other grassroots leaders striving for racial equity or, as she says, “the people who are making transformative changes possible.”

It wasn't the first time she had said those words, or the last. In fact, Henderson's words have become something of a rallying cry, repeated often by activists and equity-focused social change leaders. We, too, found inspiration, setting out on this research attempting to answer the question: how does philanthropy fund equity so it wins?

“I think it's less complicated than we as funders make it seem,” says Elena Conley of Babcock. “It's about building strong organizations and capacity, it's about providing flexible, multiyear funding and resources, and at the core of it, it's about trusting groups on the ground who know what they really need—that's how we can begin to create equitable change.”



Philanthropy sits at an interesting crossroads, committed to making the world a better place while clearly a beneficiary of the world as it is and the systems that some are calling to be toppled to achieve an equitable future. The surge in equity funding this past year illustrated philanthropy's intention. And the momentum of that intention continues. In the summer of 2021 the Groundswell Fund announced that over the course of a month more than 400 foundations and individual donors had already signed on to its [open letter](#) to philanthropy calling for “a significant transfer of resources into the control of institutions where people of color, who are primarily accountable to their communities, have the ultimate decision-making power over where dollars go.” But this work is generational and philanthropy has to be willing to stay onboard. In the wake of statements that organizations made during the summer of 2020 to pledge their commitment to racial equity and toppling injustice, ABFE did something a little different. It released a [call to action](#) for philanthropy to commit to “be in it for the long haul” when it comes to racial equity, naming 10 imperatives put together by Black foundation CEOs on how to make a commitment stick.⁶⁴ It is the type of philanthropy organizing the equity movement needs more of.

Unfortunately, we heard from many movement leaders who are convinced that this funder interest is guaranteed to disappear, and soon. Fueled by this scarcity mindset, organizations across the equity ecosystem are currently scrambling to do as much as they can before the funds run out. But with philanthropy's widespread recognition that our need for equity and justice is indeed, urgent, there is an opportunity to never return to a normal of funding practices that hold back transformative change. Instead, what if the equity movement operated under the mindset that it was finally being funded to win?

After all, if philanthropy wants to ever move from intention to impact, the “risk” does not come from funding equity so it wins, the risk comes from not.

The PSE staff has a candid moment during their 2019 retreat to ground their work in relationship, reaffirm their commitment to racial equity and shared prosperity, and hear from community and philanthropic leaders about the importance of PSE and its work. (*Partnership for Southern Equity*)

Notes

- 1 Skoll World Forum, "[Field Catalysts: How Systems Change Happens](#)," April 13, 2021.
- 2 The official formula for calculating poverty was established more than 50 years ago based on a standard household budget in the 1960s, and since then has only been adjusted for inflation. That means the federal poverty line today for a single person hovers around \$12,000 and about \$25,000 for a family of four, benchmarks that hold little relevance to what it costs to live anywhere in the United States. We prefer a more realistic definition of poverty or economic insecurity: households with income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line or a little more than \$24,000 and \$50,000, respectively, for single persons and families of four. PolicyLink and PERE, [100 Million and Counting: A Portrait of Economic Insecurity in the United States](#), December 2018.
- 3 Ibid, 17.
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- 5 Dana Peterson and Catherine Mann, [Closing the Racial Inequality Gaps: The Economic Cost of Black Inequality in the U.S.](#), CitiGPS, September 2020.
- 6 Susan Wolf Dittkoff et al., "[15 Success Stories of Audacious Philanthropy for Large-Scale Social Impact](#)," The Bridgespan Group, September 2018.
- 7 Announcements of the intent to make a monetary or in-kind contribution of specified value, usually in response to a disaster or other type of crisis. For more detail see [Candid's taxonomy](#).
- 8 We arrived at this figure by looking at funders who provided funding to racial equity in 2018, the most complete year available, and found that 94 percent had not yet reported their 2020 data yet.
- 9 The criteria Candid uses for capturing funding for racial equity considers grants with relevant keywords (e.g., "systemic racism") appearing in grants descriptions or recipient organization names, or grants with various permutations of coding (e.g., a grant with a population code for "African American" and a subject code for "ethnic and minority rights.") [Learn more about how Candid collects and codes grants data](#).
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- 17 Paul Engler, Sophie Lasoff, and Carlos Saavedra, [Funding Social Movements: How Mass Protest Makes an Impact](#), May 2018.
- 18 Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, and Peter Kim, "[Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#)," May 4, 2020; Lija Farnham et al., "[How Philanthropy Can Support Systems-Change Leaders](#)," January 14, 2021.
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- 25 Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute, "[About](#)."
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- 27 Maggie Astor, "[Native Americans Helped Flip Arizona. Can They Mobilize in Georgia?](#)" *The New York Times*, December 4, 2020; Sabrina Tavernise, "[A New Political Force Emerges in Georgia: Asian-American Voters](#)," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2020.
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Photo on cover (lower left) and page 8 by Maddie Meyer/Getty Images.

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Michael McAfee became president and CEO of PolicyLink in 2018, seven years after becoming the inaugural director of the Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink. Before joining PolicyLink, Michael served as senior community planning and development representative in the Chicago Regional Office of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and as the director of Community Leadership for The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation and Affiliated Trusts. He earned his doctorate of education in human and organizational learning from George Washington University and completed Harvard University's Executive Program in Public Management.

Josh Kirschenbaum, chief operating officer at PolicyLink, enjoys building projects, initiatives, and organizations. As one of the original PolicyLink team members, Josh has worked across the programmatic, communications, and operations teams, which allows him to bring comprehensive organizational knowledge to bear on supporting diverse alliances of internal and external teams to deliver on the promise of equity. His understanding of PolicyLink programs, funding, and partners enables him to design and launch new initiatives, drive organizational strategy, and chart the future of PolicyLink.



Laura Lanzerotti is an advisory partner at The Bridgespan Group and the head of Innovation and Impact. She leads Bridgespan's work in innovation strategy and collaborative processes, with a strong focus on designing for equity and inclusion.

Willa Seldon is a partner at The Bridgespan Group and a member of the Bridgespan Leadership Team. She also leads Bridgespan's workforce and economic opportunity practice area, advising philanthropy and nonprofit clients on increasing their impact and strengthening their operating and economic models while incorporating equity and justice.

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Cora Daniels is an editorial director at The Bridgespan Group. She is an author and former journalist with a long history of writing about issues of race, racism, and racial equity, and is part of Bridgespan's research team to advance racial equity in US philanthropy.

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