



Nonprofit-Funder Dialogue Series

Getting Resources to Nonprofits
Led by People of Color

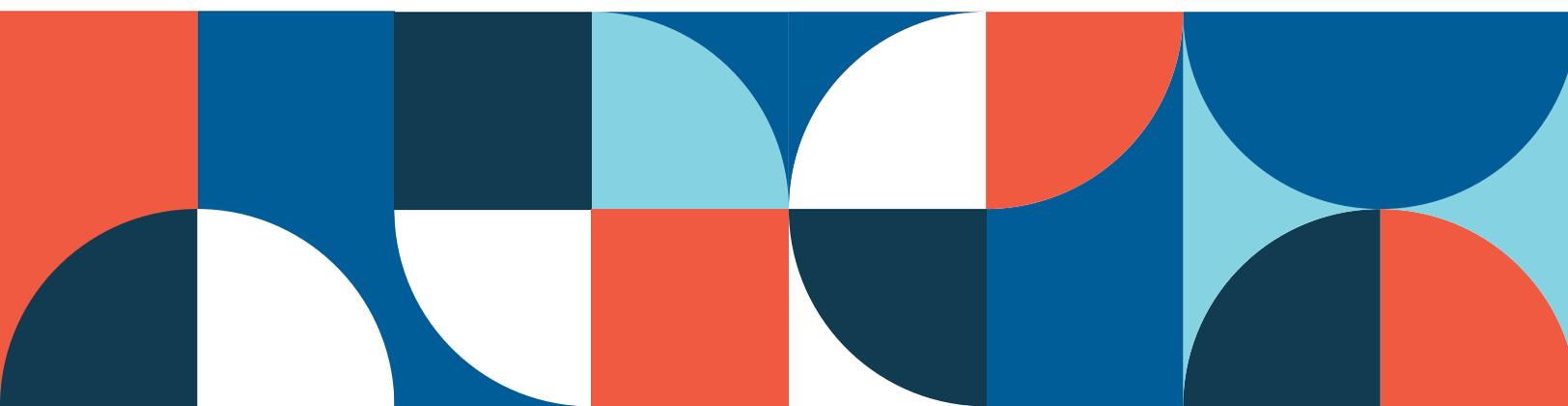


Dorothy A. Johnson Center
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Dorothy A. Johnson Center FOR PHILANTHROPY

201 Front Ave SW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504 // 616.331.7585 // johnsoncenter.org

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University was established in 1992 with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Our mission is to be a global leader in helping individuals and organizations understand, strengthen, and advance philanthropy, resulting in a smart, adaptive sector that helps create strong, inclusive communities.

We put research to work with and for professionals across the country and the world. Through professional education offerings; research, evaluation, and consulting services; and bold thinking to advance the field, we support a philanthropic ecosystem defined by effective philanthropy, strong nonprofits, and informed community change.



6568 Woodward Ave, Detroit, MI 48202 // 313.499.9865 // coactdetroit.org

Founded in 2019, with initial support from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, Co.act Detroit works to accelerate collaborative action in southeast Michigan's nonprofit community. As a catalyst and connector, Co.act serves as a hub that accelerates transformational impact with nonprofit and community organizations through cross-sector resources and equitable access to world-class programming and learning opportunities. By activating the intersection of people, organizations and ideas, Co.act brings together stakeholders to work collaboratively towards long-term systemic change to build a more equitable future.

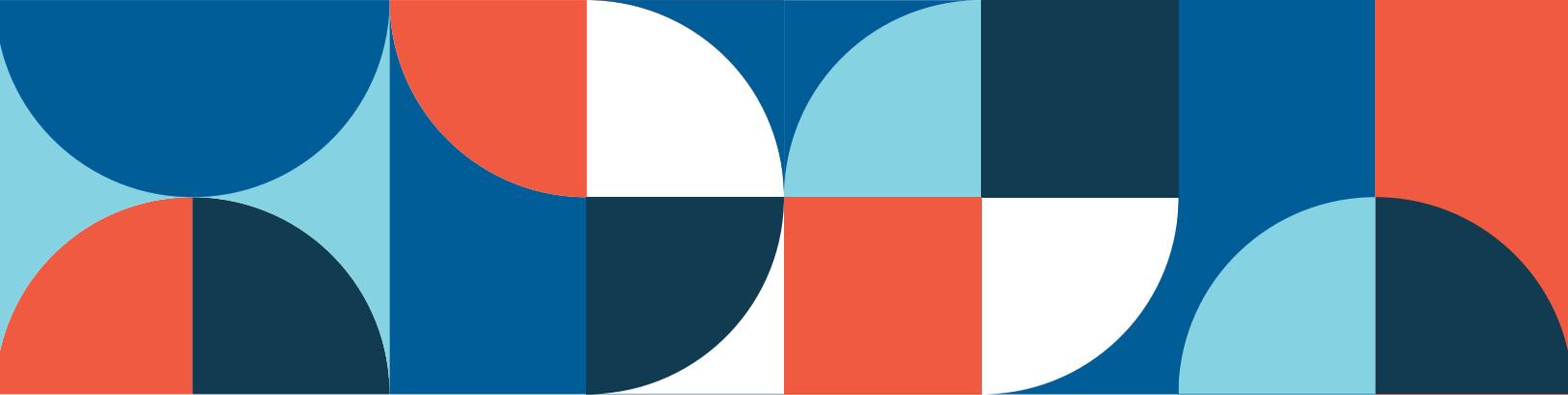


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Introduction

How might community impact look different when partners come to the table as equals to co-create solutions for social challenges? What transformative opportunities are possible when partners demonstrate transparency and vulnerability to break down barriers?

We believe that real social change requires nonprofit organizations and foundations to develop deeper, more trusting relationships. While the inherent power dynamics are always a challenge, we believe that the way forward is to focus on shared goals and challenges in a space where candid — even if uncomfortable — conversation is supported. Participants referred to this as a “brave space.” To this end, the Nonprofit-Funder Dialogue Series was designed to build trust and to challenge traditional roles and power dynamics between funders and regional nonprofit leaders. The Dialogue Series was a collaboration between the Dorothy A. Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University and Co.act Detroit, with facilitation provided by The Eureka Group.

The Dialogues were conceptualized as an ongoing process. The goal of sustained dialogue¹ is to create relationships that can provide the basis for addressing issues jointly. However, sometimes having a specific topic to address is the best way to bring people together initially. The partners identified the challenge of getting more resources to organizations that are led by and serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as one that was ripe for deeper conversation. There is ample data on the disparities in funding between organizations with white leadership compared to those led by people of color.² Differences in the amount of funding and the strings attached to that funding persist. Networks identified the following funders and BIPOC nonprofit leaders as willing to engage in dialogue about this challenge:

Detroit

- Katie Brisson, Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan
- Kyle Caldwell, Council of Michigan Foundations
- Melanca Clark, Hudson-Webber Foundation
- Melinda Clemons, Enterprise Community Partners, Inc.
- Chanell Scott Contreras, ProsperUs
- Shamyle Dobbs, Michigan Community Resources
- David Egner, Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation
- Meredith Freeman, Fisher Foundation
- Wendy Jackson, Kresge Foundation
- Lisa Leverette, Community Connections Grant Program
- Yodit Mesfin-Johnson, Nonprofit Enterprise at Work (NEW)
- Donna Murray-Brown, Michigan Nonprofit Association
- Michael Rafferty, New Detroit
- Madhavi Reddy, Community Development Advocates of Detroit
- Tameka Ramsey, Michigan Voices
- Omari Rush, CultureSource

¹ See <https://sustaineddialogue.org> for more on the practice.

² See, for example, <https://www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/Images/articles/racial-equity-and-philanthropy/racial-equity-and-philanthropy.pdf>

- Kevin Ryan, Ford Foundation
- Maria Salinas, Congress of Communities
- Sarida Scott, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Temeca Simpson, Ballmer Group
- Doug Stewart, Fisher Foundation
- Punita Dani Thurman, Skillman Foundation
- Nathaniel Wallace, Knight Foundation
- Genna Young, General Motors Foundation

Grand Rapids

- Keli Christopher, STEM Greenhouse
- Matt Cook, Lake Michigan Credit Union
- Evelyn Esparza, Hispanic Center of West Michigan
- Ron Jimmerson, Seeds of Promise
- Holly A. Johnson, Frey Foundation
- Salvador Lopez, KConnect
- Marcel 'Fable' Price, Diatribe
- Steff Rosalez, Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities
- Monique Salinas, Ascend LLC
- Stacy Stout, Latina Network of West Michigan
- Latricia Trice, Amway Corporate Social Responsibility
- Michelle Van Dyke, Heart of West Michigan United Way
- Jonse Young, Grand Rapids Community Foundation

The three-part Dialogue series was intended to both develop relationships and to make recommendations on how to address this specific issue by:

- Providing a space for nonprofits and funders to speak candidly
- Breaking down silos and challenging traditional power structures
- Focusing on authentic relationship building and listening
- Inspiring action toward greater equity in funding and other resources
- Creating the container for ongoing partnership

Structure

While the Dialogue was first envisioned as an in-person series, with opportunities for informal social time, the pandemic necessitated moving to a virtual series of half-day meetings for a cohort of participants. Three sessions were held with Grand Rapids-based participants and three with Detroit-based participants.

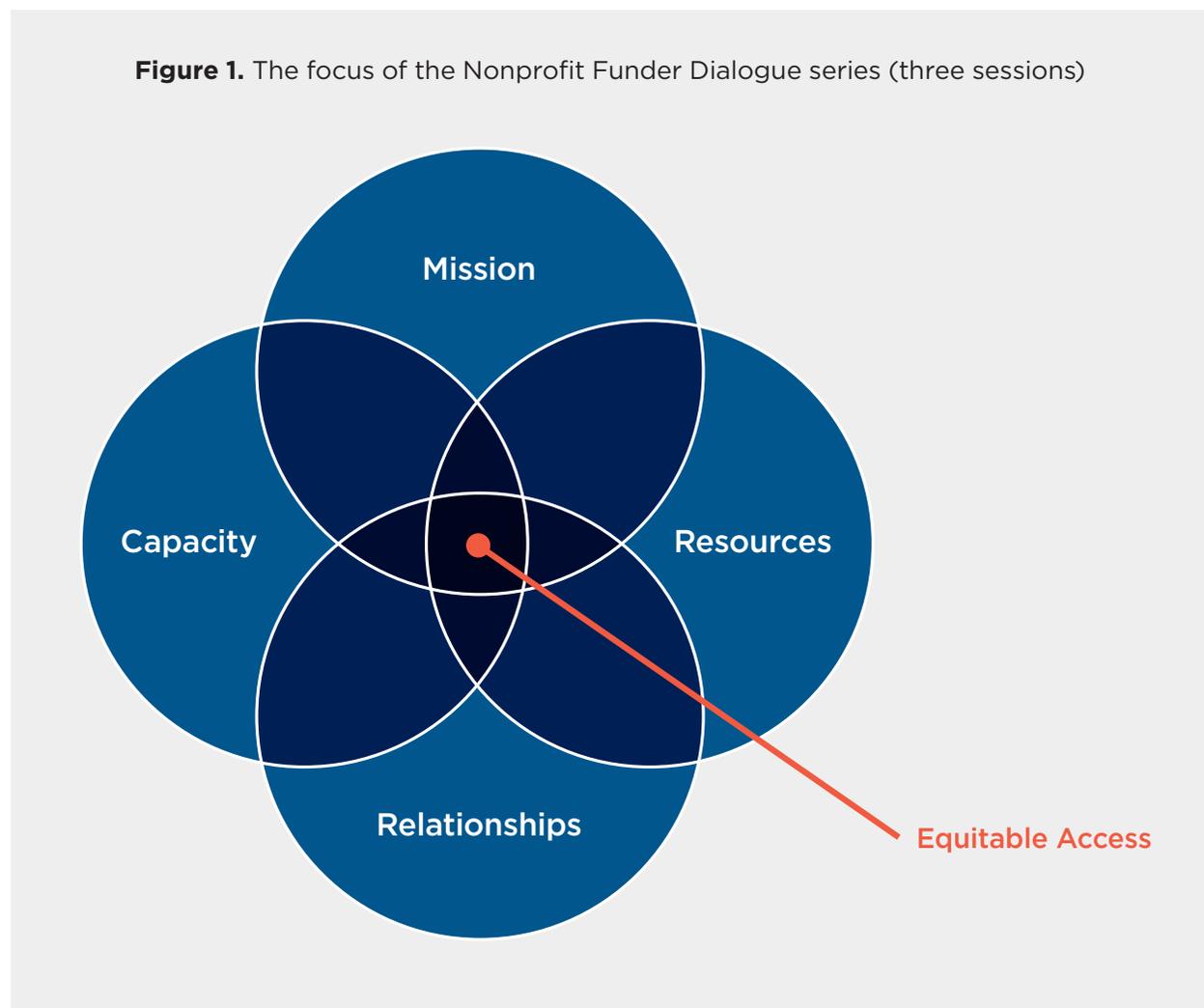


The Dialogues

The series kicked off in May 2021, with the second sessions in fall of 2021 and the final sessions in May 2022. The initial session was designed by Johnson Center, Co.act, and Eureka Group staff. Participants then volunteered to help plan the remaining sessions.

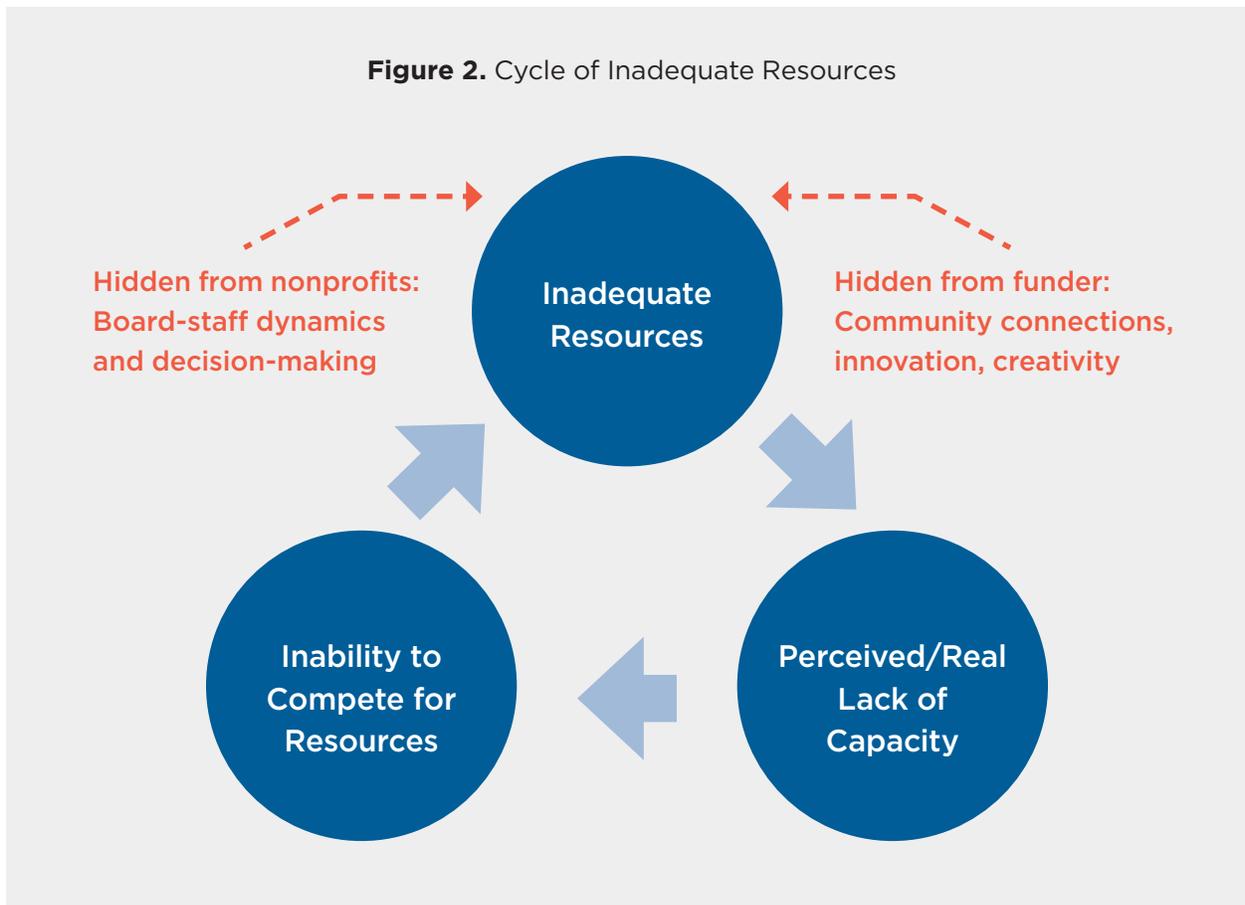
Dialogue 1

The series began with a presentation on the need for the dialogues and framing the focus. Nonprofits are able to access philanthropic resources when their mission, their organizational capacity, the availability of philanthropic resources, and relationships with those who manage the resources all converge (Figure 1).



Too often the relationship component is missing, especially between nonprofit leaders of color and foundation representatives. Without strong, trust-based relationships, a vicious cycle of underinvestment in these nonprofit organizations can take hold (Figure 2). A premise of the dialogues was that by understanding and making visible the hidden influences on this cycle, relationships can be built and this cycle is interrupted.

Figure 2. Cycle of Inadequate Resources



The first session focused on building trust by helping funders and nonprofits understand the challenges and assets that both brought to the table. The specific questions addressed were:

1. What 3–5 key features of BIPOC-led nonprofits remain hidden from funders that would be helpful for them to know? What foundation / funder dynamics would it be helpful for nonprofit leaders to understand?
2. What major barriers and power dynamics perpetuate the cycle of inequitable access?
3. What can funders do (or stop doing) that can break the cycle and ensure a more equitable distribution of resources?
4. What can BIPOC-led nonprofits do (or stop doing) that can break the cycle and better position their organizations for resource acquisition?

The session was structured with each group — funders and nonprofits — meeting separately to discuss the first two questions above, debriefing as whole, then coming together in small mixed groups to address the last two questions. The final section then focused on sharing the recommendations.

The product of this first session was a set of recommendations for both foundation and nonprofit leaders. These recommendations were refined in subsequent sessions (see Recommendations section on page 12).

Dialogue 3

For the third dialogue, funders and nonprofits were convened separately during a pre-session.

The intent was to prioritize the recommendations and identify how to move forward to implement them. However, in both communities the groups instead spent time reflecting on the dialogue process, the recommendations, and what next steps might be.

Key reflections on the recommendations:

For foundation program staff, resourcing organizations led by people of color may mean changing relationships with long-time partners. While it is important not to feed the scarcity mindset and look for ways to collaborate and leverage resources, it is likely that some white-led organizations would be de-funded to free up resources. This means long-time, personal relationships might be impacted.

- “There has been funding given to dominantly white-led infrastructure built big. There are relationships there, there are things that need to be talked about if we are really serious and translating the way we are recommending funders allocate their money.”
- “We are asking you to say, that funding relationship is not equitable. Can you revisit that? To the PM, can you revisit that relationship? But we are saying, long ago white people were running the nonprofit sector. And now Black and Brown people are taking their power. And that means taking it from someone else. Now we’re asking you to disinvest in them and invest in us. Also though, the scarcity model is real, and are we perpetuating that in this conversation? So, if you’re giving to Black-led then you can’t give to white-led? Are we competing when we could be cooperating?”
- “Somebody has to lose; money is the root of all evil. It doesn’t have to be that way if we do this right.”

Generally, the recommendations are fine and good things can be done. But we should always interrogate why we are having this conversation, how we are here in the first place, and continue to look deeply into the underlying systemic barriers for organizations led by people of color.

- “There has been a lot of harm to nonprofits ... Being careful how we articulate this discomfort and understanding the core values and harm and equity that historically and generationally have happened.”
- “How do we articulate this discomfort and perpetuation of the harm that has been done to our city and our residents to trustees?”
- “Not losing sight of the why, that insidious harm that still occurs and has caused us to be in the predicament in orienting us to solutions”

There are existing efforts and models that funders should be looking to.

- “There were a lot of concrete examples that have happened in other places that were beneficial to hear about.”
- “Throughout [the] city of Detroit a lot of small organizations have built power, through some of your funding.”
- “New York and the Bay area are light years ahead.”
- “Chicago is pulling a meeting together with 60 funders. Why is it that they can do that in Chicago?”



The transitions in leadership that are happening and upcoming are going to be important. Just putting people of color in CEO positions does not necessarily mean the kind of change we want.

- “We also have white people that have done great service in the city of Detroit, so let’s be careful about that narrative. Because there are people of color who don’t give a s*** about poor people in Detroit. We really have to think about this transition, have to be sensitive but have to be strong. Who has been a champion for us that has been white?”
- “[We don’t want] tokenistic representation, [and need to interrogate] when and how people of color are afforded the opportunity to lead, and why they ended up in that position [looking at organizational history] in the first place?”

Boards of foundations hold so much power. Progress from working with the board towards systemic change is limited by the reality of inherent change in leadership.

- “It’s concerning how much things change dependent on who’s in the seat. And these seats will inevitably change and what [does that mean] for this work?”
- “My president is going to be leaving the board in the next couple of years. These perspectives are not institutionalized, what happens when the leaders leading this work leave? And new boards of trustees say, ‘Well, that was good but we’re going in a different direction.’”

At the same time (as above), don’t let lack of progress working with boards stop material progress on other actions to increased resourcing BIPOC-led nonprofits and changes we want to see.

- “You can’t tell me that the board members from Chicago Community Trust, etc. are 100% down to move strategy, but they came to the table to learn about community organizing and power building and promote coalitions to get folks behind all that.”
- “Program staff can blame boards, or foundation staff can blame their board, and that becomes a reason not to take what actions can be taken — I want to name that. There are huge structural changes, and all the tactical things will make a minor difference. But that minor difference can be huge to you... what are the steps along the way? Were there specific practices, e.g., general operating support?”

What’s Working Well

In both communities, dialogue participants were able to point out examples that have led to greater equity in allocating philanthropic resources.

Capacity Building

There are several new resources available for building the capacity of nonprofits that have been very accessible to a broad range of nonprofits. These include:

- Detroit 21.⁴ This cohort of CEOs received unrestricted funding that fostered feelings of worth and recognized the value of their time.
- Co.act and MCR co-hosting an annual capacity building forum and are publishing a collaboration playbook and created tools for their “Activate Fund” that are now broadly available.
- Dovetail launching soon, a new web-based platform, directory of nonprofit capacity building services.

⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100067554926844>



Paradigm Shifts

Participants noted that there have been some initiatives that represent a paradigm shift in nonprofit — funder relationships.

- Creating sabbatical programs that center rest and liberation and the root causes of the harm that has led to the need for rest. The Miller Fellowship⁵ program is one example.

Organizational Data

- Internal reports of grantee demographics by number and dollar amount

Engaged in Other Conversations About Resourcing BIPOC-led Nonprofits

- Ongoing conversations with funders of color
- Efforts amongst the “coalition of the willing”

Changes in Organizational Leadership and Governance

- New leadership from other places brings fresh perspective and renewed focus on racial equity, as well as being transparent about our [foundation] data

Changes or Ongoing Support in Grantmaking

- Youth organizing
- A decade of support for Brightmoor block-led captains to support leadership development, funding individuals without requiring any affiliation to a formal organization
- Moving away from funding large anchor organizations to small and midsize arts organizations led by POC
- Funder collaboratives and microgrants to community-based and grassroots organizations
- Shifting towards capacity building grants and multi-year grants
- Detroit Food Commons and Malik Yakini
- Michigan Justice Fund
- Transforming Power Fund
- Neighborhub⁶ grant program
- The Pontiac collaborative
- MCR North End Resilience Project,⁷ supported by the Knight Foundation.

Sharing from this Nonprofit Funder Dialogue series

- At least one participating foundation CEO shared recommendations on changes to practice with board members

⁵ See <https://mcgregorfund.org/our-work/miller-fellowship/>

⁶ See <https://www.detroitchamber.com/neighborhub/>

⁷ See <https://mi-community.org/nerp>



Recommendations

Recommendations were developed separately in each community, but there was a great deal of commonality. Below are the shared recommendations, followed by those specific to Detroit and Grand Rapids.

Shared Recommendations

Funders should assess who they are NOT funding.

To change systems, activists, agitators, and innovators are needed, but they don't have access to philanthropic support. Some of the questions to answer: Are nonprofits who have dedicated fundraising staff getting an unfair advantage in how their work is reviewed? Which nonprofits are being left behind? What are the barriers to them applying? How can you support grassroots organizations that do not have 501(c)(3) status — are there intermediaries who might play a role?

Funders should practice proactive philanthropy.

Seek out nonprofits who are working on issues you want to address. It is easy to fall into supporting the same organizations. Who else is working on your issues? Find the BIPOC leaders of smaller organizations.

Better align foundation goals with community needs.

Funders should ask “What do you really need to do the work?” vs. “I’m giving you 50k and what outcomes will you show me?” Similarly, nonprofits must stop asking for just programmatic funds. Start asking for what you think it will really take. Ask for money for operational support. Ask for program support PLUS the marketing and storytelling. Funders must begin to create environments where this realistic approach is possible.

Funders need to hear, and nonprofits need to share, the whole story about the organization.

Funders often only see the proposed project and not the organization. Understanding the whole picture — how the nonprofit is staffed, what the nonprofit's role is in community networks, and their history in the community (not just their reputation with other funders) is critical to supporting organizations doing important work on behalf of social justice. Organizations working on justice will be challenging power — and they don't get funded because of that.

Work to educate foundation staff, trustees, and donors about systemic challenges and power dynamics, and share successful strategies.

Staff and boards need to wrestle with the power dynamics of wealth accumulation and how they manifest themselves in grant making policies, procedures, and outcomes. Naming white supremacy and the nonprofit industrial complex as root causes is critical to moving beyond servicing issues to solving them. Dialogue participants talked a lot about punishment, privilege, and power. Have the conversations about the difference between investing in social justice and charity. Share best practices in educating trustees about equity and social justice. White foundation and nonprofit staff need to see themselves as having a role in and benefitting from liberation. Foundations and nonprofits should work together to increase the transparency of power in philanthropic structures and decision-making.

Streamline application and reporting and provide more general operating support and multi-year funding.

Some of the core grantmaking practices take tremendous amounts of time for minimal return in grant dollars. This includes grant proposals, reporting, and evaluation systems. Continuing to chase dollars take time and resources from the core work and organizations need their infrastructure supported to do that work. Be more relational, and less transactional in working with nonprofits.



Build opportunities for grantees to cooperate rather than compete.

Grantees need to stand together. This also means funders stop talking to one BIPOC leader or nonprofit as if they are a spokesperson for all. Funders blame organizations for not cooperating. However, the scarcity mentality in how philanthropy makes investments is a key contributor preventing organizations from cooperating.

Support rest.

Leaders need rest. What are the other ways nonprofits can be supported (outside of cash donations)? Nonprofit leaders, especially black women leaders, are experiencing tremendous burn out. Nonprofits need enough resources that their leaders can rest and be assured the organization is safe.

Community-Specific Recommendations

There were some recommendations specific to each community. *Grand Rapids* participants' additional recommendations were:

- **Compensate nonprofit leaders for the time they spend educating funders about the community.** Their knowledge and time are valuable, and they should be paid as other consultants are.
- **Share failures in order to promote shared learning.** Both nonprofits and funders need to acknowledge and share what didn't work as intended to promote learning.
- **Assess the balance of funding research vs community action.** In many cases, the issues in the community are well known. Funding "independent research" to confirm this may sometimes not be needed and takes resources away from action.
- **Continue to monitor the impact of COVID, perhaps by convening nonprofits to share what's happening.** We know that the impacts will continue to be felt for years.

Detroit participants' additional recommendations included:

- **Build on past efforts.** Some good examples shared as good models are KIP:D launched by the Kresge Foundation,⁸ Michigan Justice Fund,⁹ and Changing the Conversations, recommendations from 12 months of work conducted by the Allied Media Projects and Detroit People's Platform (DPP).¹⁰
- **Bring foundations together to work through collective models and collective action.** This might include things such as foundations playing a bigger role in building access to individual donors, creating funds to support grassroots organizations, with collaboratives being an opportunity for social change organizations to join them and present recommendations. Another example could be to have a group of funders distribute a survey to the community.
- **Ensure shared values and shared understanding of specific equity goals.** Don't assume everyone agrees that racial justice is a goal. Have the conversation among foundations, the community and grantee partners about equity goals and how to hold each other accountable.

⁸ See <https://kresge.org/initiative/kipd/>

⁹ See <https://kresge.org/initiativehttps://cfsem.org/initiative/michigan-justice-fund/>

¹⁰ See https://alliedmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Funders_Guidelines_2017.pdf



- ***Be honest and challenge corporate limitations.*** Evaluate what is considered “dangerous” for corporations/corporate funders and what they are willing to fund. Corporations steer clear from “dangerous” investments. They are risk-averse because of fear of how white customers will look at them. At this moment in time, there is an opportunity to challenge those beliefs and encourage them to invest more in equity and justice work.
- ***Continue to evaluate payout rates.*** Current payout rates contribute to incremental responses.

Reflections on Dialogue Series

Participants

- ***“From my participation this has offered probably the safest of all the spaces for nonprofits to be candid about their experience.*** Not everyone is going to say the thing, for a variety of reasons! It’s extremely risky that there’s an inherent problem or I feel personally harmed. There was a situation most recently where my organization and some partners [were] invited to be part of a philanthropic initiative, and, ultimately, we said no we did not want to be in partnership because of values misalignment. I was tip-toeing about being real real. I have this conversation with my board chair, how real can I be without putting funding at risk or [being] difficult.”
- ***“This is a great environment to encourage and reward vulnerability between nonprofits and funders.*** ... This is one of the few forums ever where vulnerability is encouraged and rewarded at the same time. It’s been encouraged more on the nonprofit side and rewarded a bit more on the funder side. ***Nonprofits are always in position when we get to these summary conversations for funders to be aware of what they’re doing and in the moment we’re experiencing the transactional nature of our conversation.*** See it, recognize it, hold that. Can bring value if we hold it well.”
- ***“There should have been more time up front to build relationships and even just meet one another.*** It was too difficult to jump into hard conversations without establishing a baseline of trust — some of the people in the room had never even met before so the only context was funder/nonprofit which is a loaded power dynamic without any relationship building.”
- ***“My frustration is in the action piece of it.*** I feel I’ve had this conversation a lot. At this point, what we doing? Let’s do something. So, yeah, I’m thinking how do we go deeper, wider, do things more immediate? What are the conversations we need to accelerate? Is this even helpful at all? Is there any competitive advantage that’s really different than the last conversation I had a week and a half ago. So, I’m just seeing where it’s going.”
- “I can do what I can do from the seat I’m on, but I recognize I can’t get us in that zoom room where the trustee presidents are. ***I would love beyond set of recommendations, to really figure out who is going to implement and do the thing we are recommending moving forward.***”
- “This process was [an] investment of resources. ***Some number of us [funders] need to step up to make that compensation.*** Even some research — not a deep hole but conversations we’re having here. [There is] groundwork being done — certification in work.”



Coordinating Team

The team that coordinated the dialogues took time to reflect on the overall series.

- There is a tension between action-orientation and having the end goal in mind, and the desire for sustained dialogue.
 - How do we balance creating the container for ongoing dialogue and relationship building while also having a compelling reason to get together?
- What would we have done differently?
 - Choosing this particular topic when we did, got people to the table, but also detracted in some ways from the importance of dialogue in and of itself as a tool to challenge power dynamics and build relationships.
 - We are not sure we got the balance right.
 - There is a strong focus on the issue of getting resources into BIPOC led nonprofits.
 - One of the recommendations is to continue to have opportunities for nonprofits and funders to get to know each other, so to some extent that suggests the basis for ongoing dialogue has been developed.
 - Ensure funding resources to pay nonprofit participants.

Summary and Next Steps

The dialogue series resulted in a set of recommendations each for Detroit and Grand Rapids to more equitably resource BIPOC-led nonprofits. This was a tangible outcome developed alongside consensus-building and a shared sense of the importance of candid dialogue to disrupt and equitably change philanthropic power dynamics.

Sharing the Conversation

As next steps, the dialogue participants noted the importance of distributing the recommendations more broadly beyond the people and organizations initially convened. They identified that this would require themselves to engage other relevant networks in discussion, as well as for the funder participants to take the recommendations to their own boards of trustees. Examples of opportunities included presentations at the Detroit Foundation Presidents meeting, led by the Hudson Webber Foundation, and a monthly trustee retreat hosted by the Council of Michigan Foundations. Dialogue participants also expressed interest in other broader avenues such as conferences or sharing the dialogue process and recommendations through written articles. A key concern going forward will be finding organizations willing to take up the recommendations and adapting the 'right' language and training needed to work with a spectrum of funding organizations. This includes foundation presidents and executive directors working with trustees to identify the ways in which the recommendations can be a part of their own journeys to building racially equitable organizational culture and influence their strategic decision-making.



Creating Mechanisms for Action-Oriented Dialogue

The dialogues created a space for leaders from Detroit and Grand Rapids to think big and candidly about the changes that the sector needs to advance the movement for resourcing BIPOC-led nonprofits. This is part of a larger conversation on the importance of sustained dialogue between nonprofits and funders. The hope is that this would allow the sector to be proactive in building relationships that sustain the conditions for partnership. To this end, there was desire for a next step focused on mechanisms to share about how actions are being taken to fulfill the recommendations, bound up in the belief that dialogue can be a vehicle for change. For example, participants were prompted to dialogue about “what is needed to break the cycle and better position BIPOC-led nonprofits for resource acquisition.” Many of the recommendations generated through the dialogue series laid out changes that funders need to make. (While nonprofit participants expressed the desire to help, they articulated the ways in which the philanthropic system makes it difficult for them to exercise power to make changes in grantmaking approaches and processes — the core of where a lot of changes need to be made.)

There was interest from dialogue participants in convening for a follow-up that was more action-oriented than facilitated dialogue (akin to a communications update or troubleshooting on this topic), if demonstrable actions have been taken to begin to actualize the recommendations. Possible focus could be on troubleshooting issues occurring in fulfilling the recommendations and/or sharing progress made on adopting the recommendations.

Future Dialogues

While this dialogue series focused on resourcing BIPOC-led nonprofits, the model can be used to continue building nonprofits and funders as equals built on deeper and more trusting relationships to co-create solutions for social challenges. Future dialogues might collaboratively explore priorities to address in future sessions, what issues need to be worked on, and how grantees and funders will work together on solutions. This may also consider who is in the room, specifically if programming should convene the same group to continue relationship building on this set of recommendations or expand to include new voices and perspectives.

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- Lake Michigan Credit Union
- Hudson Webber Foundation
- Steelcase Foundation

