

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Community Foundations Band Together to Fight Structural Racism

By *Alex Daniels*

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Nine regional grant makers will develop common measurements and share strategies and progress reports with each other as they work to combat structural racism in the hope they can generate nationwide progress and attract philanthropic support from wealthy donors and private foundations.

The foundations are members of the Community Foundation Opportunity Network, a group of 45 grant makers that first came together in 2016 to find ways they could ensure that children of poor parents had the same chances of success as children of the rich.

Since the start of the pandemic, and following the killing of George Floyd, wealthy donors and big foundations have made promises to devote hundreds of millions of dollars to end racism. Terry Mazany, the network director, said the nine grant makers chosen to participate in the Nexus for Equity + Opportunity Nationwide, or NEON, group will help ensure that money is put to the best use.

“If we do this well, it will make the case to foundations and ultrahigh-net-worth donors that this is a highly effective way to dismantle racism and increase economic mobility,” says Mazany, the former president of the Chicago Community Trust.

The members of the group include the Central Indiana Community Foundation; Cleveland Foundation; Hawaii Community Foundation; Lincoln Community Foundation; Seattle Foundation; and Silicon Valley Community Foundation. In addition, three Connecticut grant makers — the Fairfield County’s Community Foundation, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, and the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven — will work together as a group to test statewide approaches.

Shifting Gears

The Community Foundation Opportunity Network was in the process of establishing a group of foundations to compare notes on methods they used to close the so-called opportunity gap when the pandemic hit. At first the group put those efforts on hold, believing member foundations needed to concentrate on responding to the health and economic crisis.

But as it became clear that the pandemic was exacting a higher toll on people of color, and following the killing of George Floyd in May, Mazany says member community foundations decided that difficulties closing the opportunity gap were “inextricably linked” to racism in America.

The creation of the NEON group follows a report released by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy showing that regional grant makers devote a tiny portion of their grants to organizations with an explicit mission to serve Black people. Many community foundation leaders [called the report misleading](#) and argued that many of their grants that provide services and support programs that benefit Black people weren’t picked up in the data the committee used.

Mazany says he was “dismayed” by the pushback from community foundations.

“Community foundations, by and large, reflect our larger societal systemic racism,” he says. “We need to be truthful about that.”

Building Power

To start, the group will focus on two areas in the fight against systemic racism: building power and leadership among underrepresented people and increasing income and wealth.

The NEON group is an attempt to take lessons learned in local situations and apply them nationwide. Using what it calls an “aligned action network” approach, the group designs different approaches to fighting racism that hold promise in their respective cities, starts supporting programs in a “build” phase,” tests the effectiveness of the programs using an agreed upon set of common measurements, and then works to help grant makers in other cities adopt successful approaches.

But the idea is not simply that other foundations will replicate programs developed by the grant makers in the network. Instead, using an approach outlined by Jeff Bradach of the Bridgespan Group, the group commits to a common set of goals and uses the same data to measure progress. In the aligned action network approach, Bradach wrote, the focus is on disciplined learning and innovation — not strict adherence to a single model.”

To that, Mazany adds that the goal of the NEON network is to add other members so approaches can be tested and tailored to specific communities nationwide.

“It is not simply a peer learning exercise where each community foundation will go back to their own corners, their own communities, and keep doing their own thing,” he says.

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INNOVATION

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Before joining the *Chronicle* in 2013, Alex covered Congress and national politics for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. He covered the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns and reported extensively about Walmart Stores for the Little Rock paper.

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By Nicole Wallace

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By M.J. Prest

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OPINION

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By *Ellen Friedman*

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