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CFON QUARTERLY

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CFON Quarterly June Newsletter

9th Annual Learning & Action Forum in Milwaukee Recap

The Importance & Imperative of Community

As they grapple with unprecedented uncertainty in their home communities, community foundation leaders came together recently in Milwaukee to strategize, share best practices and deepen connections at CFON's 9th Annual Learning & Action Forum.

The flurry of federal executive orders, funding freezes and potential legal threats coming out of Washington added urgency to this year's Forum — which offered sessions on topics such as supporting democracy and civic engagement initiatives, advocacy, the power of networks to accelerate progress and how community foundations are responding to current challenges,

Participants also toured the Greater Milwaukee Foundation's new headquarters, which is the centerpiece of a redevelopment effort that has transformed a long-abandoned department store in Milwaukee's Bronzeville District into multi-use development known as [ThriveOn King](#) — a project guided through the shared vision of neighborhood residents and partners.

The headquarters exemplifies place-based philanthropy in action. Community partners — including Job Works MKE, the Kinship Cafe, a Versiti Blood Center and Medical College of Wisconsin — now share the space with the community foundation.

"We try to be a catalytic engine for opportunity, ideas and convening," said **Vincent Lyles**, executive director of the foundation's Milwaukee Succeeds program, who for decades attended church a short walk from the abandoned building. "We try to set a strategic vision of which the entire community can be part. Strong communities have strong community foundations. When they don't, they don't have the ability to reach their full potential."



‘Stand firm. Hold the line.’

Dr. Andrea Abrams set the tone for the Forum with an impassioned keynote that challenged community foundations to stay committed to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the face of coordinated attacks and federal actions aimed at undermining progress.

Abrams, a college professor and sister of well-known politician and author Stacey Abrams, shared how she shelved work on a novel-in-progress to lead advocacy efforts at American Pride Rises Network.

“When we soften our stance in the face of opposition, we don’t just lose ground,” Abrams said. “We signal that our values are negotiable — and they are not.”

Abrams urged those who believe in the principles and benefits of DEI to be vocal, proactive and consistent in its defense.

“Speak out, refuse to let misinformation define the narrative,” she said. “When harmful laws are passed and truths are distorted, when histories are replaced, we must respond. Silence is not neutrality, silence is complicity.

“Stand firm. Hold the line. No hedging, no backpedaling. No making DEI optional depending on the audience. These are not fringe ideals, they are core to who we are, and who we aspire to be.”



Pamela Gray Payton, CFON Chair, welcomes the group to Day 2 of the Forum

How community foundations are responding

Abrams' call to action was followed by a session assessing the sobering reality of the moment as several community foundation leaders spoke on a panel addressing the ongoing response to rapid change.

LuTonya Russell-Humes, VP Grants & Programs at Fairfield County's Community Foundation, shared how her foundation is facilitating greater collaboration and breaking down silos among local nonprofits to maximize available funding and resources.

The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, meanwhile, has launched a [nonprofit and donor resource hub](#) to track executive orders and federal funding freezes that may directly or indirectly impact nonprofits operating in the community. The foundation has also emerged as a go-to place for local leaders to convene to discuss how to best respond to the current climate.

"In times of crisis, people look to the community foundation to come together," said Foundation CEO **Frank Fernandez**. "They know that is a place to talk about what is happening. It's not like we have all the answers, but we've created space for the conversations."

Dan Kildee — a Flint, Mich., native who served in the U.S. House of Representatives for 12 years before becoming president and CEO for the Community Foundation for Greater Flint earlier this year — shared how the foundation is shifting resources to bolster support for the local Arab American and Latino communities that are facing increased pressures.

He also offered a stark assessment of the current political climate based on his lengthy experience on Capitol Hill.

"We are facing a real challenge to the essential element to the social contract," Kildee said, noting that the court rulings and the upcoming mid-term Election offer the best hope for "stopping them from going even further to undermine the policies we spent our lives supporting and advancing."

Community foundation leaders from the Pittsburgh Foundation, Hawaii Community Foundation and Greater Milwaukee Foundation then detailed policy advocacy strategies aimed at lobbying state and federal lawmakers.

“We see policy advocacy and investment as crucial to how we drive our mission around creating an equitable Hawaii,” said **Justina Acevedo-Cross**, Hawaii Community Foundation’s Senior Director of Community Strategy. “We are investing on coalition work and also work around polling and research to support of action related to monitoring or taking action on 40 different policy issues in the state legislature.”

The power of networks

Despite the challenging environment, community foundations and philanthropic organizations are making progress in achieving their missions. In many instances, that progress is driven by the power of networks.

“Community foundations have been essential to our work,” says **Sukhi Samra**, Executive Director of Mayors & Counties for Guaranteed Income. “They are key partners in supporting and advancing this work in communities around the country.”

Several CFON members are supporting guaranteed income programs, a proven approach to lifting individuals and families out of poverty.

A panel moderated by **Nisha Patel** also explored the impact of local networks to drive change in the areas of housing and early childhood education.

Another example of leveraging existing networks focused on the Community Foundation for Greater Dubuque’s involvement with Democracy Fund, a foundation that works with grantees, donors, and partners to strengthen and expand the movement for an inclusive, multiracial democracy through programs focused on journalism, civic engagement, and voting information and access.

Through the effort, the foundation has explored how different segments within their community get information, with the intention of improving the flow of and access to credible information to bolster civic engagement and community unity.

While the Democracy Fund is grounded in journalism and protecting democracy, its civic engagement activities have led the organization to work on issues such as access to healthcare information. As part of that work, it discovered how a community of people who had immigrated from the Marshall Islands did not have access to Marshallese translators for vital health information during doctor or hospital visits. Often, they had bring their young children to appointments to help translate medical information.

“Imagine having to take your child to an appointment to translate you have cancer,” **Mary Jo Jean-Francois**, VP Impact for Community Foundation for Greater Dubuque. “Not only does that usually take kids out of school, but it’s also just a situation that no family ever wants to be in.”

Working with local media stations, the foundation publicized the shortage, and ultimately ended up supporting efforts to train 12 translators for the community.



Looking forward

Community foundation leaders left Milwaukee with inspiration and insights to accelerate their equity and mobility work, strengthened network relationships, and some essential tools to accelerate progress, such as the [Racial Equity Systems Self-Assessment for Community Foundations](#), developed by CFON's aligned action network, NEON.

"This year's gathering proved so valuable on so many levels," said **Pamela Gray Payton**, CFON Chair and Vice President, Chief Impact & Partnerships Officer, San Diego Foundation. "With so many emerging challenges, simply gathering to share our experiences, ideas and support proved restorative and inspiring. I think all of us walked away with some actionable ideas we can apply in our home communities, as affirmation that the work of foundations within the CFON networks is more important than it has ever been to advancing equity and social justice."

CFON Executive Director **Amy Daly-Donovan** expressed gratitude to the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for their role as welcoming hosts for this year's Forum.

"Our theme for this year, *The Importance and Imperative of Community*, is not only relevant to the daily work of CFON foundations, but we also saw it in action at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation's new ThriveOn King headquarters and throughout the entire gathering," Daly-Donovan said. "We've developed an engaged and inspired community within the CFON network that elevates the work we do, while also creating a support system that is so vital for all of us in such challenging times."

Keep an eye out in coming months for details and information about the 2026 Forum, currently scheduled to be hosted at The Pittsburgh Foundation.