

Responsive Philanthropy

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The people are beautiful, already

By Nichole June Maher

For Washington state's Group Health Foundation, the current coronavirus pandemic has only reaffirmed the importance of community leadership to advance equity.

*Editor's Note: This piece was written before the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis and the subsequent uprisings in more than 400 cities. Please see **A message from the Vice President and Chief***

***Engagement Officer** that accompanies this issue of Responsive Philanthropy for more context.*

An early and unsettling headline from this pandemic came on a Friday in March from *The New York Times*: "Chilling' Plans: Who Gets Care as Washington State Hospitals Fill Up?"

At the time, we were the American epicenter for the outbreak as hospital and state leaders were planning for what was believed to be inevitable: Washington would soon see more pa-

tients than it could care for. Leaders were drawing up criteria to help hospitals decide who would get life-saving treatment and who wouldn't.

There were frightening implications: People of color, people with disabilities and older people would be denied life-saving care at staggering rates if criteria such as age and underlying health conditions were to move forward.

At Group Health Foundation, we were worried about what would eventually become true: Black, brown and Indigenous (continued on page 11)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

people are overly represented in infections, fueled by longstanding systemic inequities. Our team thought if we didn't speak up in that moment, we would regret it for years to come. As our board chair said: "It's always the right time to do the right thing."

Over the weekend, we talked about what the right thing meant for us. We weighed countless options and struggled to find our voices. We are grant-makers, not health care providers; what would we know about making such painful and unimaginable choices?

While we struggled with our next steps, Disability Rights Washington (DRW) already knew what to do. In reaction to the same news report and within the same weekend, DRW connected internally, organized with partners in and out of state, and filed a complaint the following Monday with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights. Seven other states also sent in complaints modeled after DRW's.

Five days later, the agency issued a statement affirming that "our civil rights laws protect the equal dignity of every human life from ruthless utilitarianism." In the 3 days it took for us to figure out our best role, DRW assumed theirs to reaffirm the rights of people across the country.

Equity is a leading value at Group Health Foundation. We aspire to seek community wisdom for funding decisions and prioritize lived experiences when hiring staff and recruiting board members. We are committed to making mostly general operating grants and minimizing unnecessary hoop-jumping for grantees.

Yet, despite our aspirations and commitments, the rapidly changing, quick pace of this public emergency even got us momentarily distracted from a core belief: trust and follow community leadership on matters that impact them most.

We struggled, but what we did do

right in this case was something we have always done: fund nonprofits that are culture- and identity-specific, multiracial and whose leadership and board are reflective of the communities they serve. We are grateful to have supported Disability Rights Washington in 2019 and 2020.

I share this story because it was humbling for us. And I believe in this moment humility is something philanthropy could use more of, including examining our role in creating the inequities we see today and how we can work to undo them in the future.

PHILANTHROPY IS COMPLICIT IN PERPETUATING HARM

We find ourselves in a pivotal moment, living through a pandemic that

has claimed more than 100,000 lives in the U.S. and nearly 4 times as much worldwide. At the end of it, many of us will likely have lost someone – a family member, a friend, a colleague. We will know even more people who have lost a job, closed a business or missed a mortgage payment.

As a result, we are all grieving concrete losses, even grieving dreams and ideas about how we thought 2020 would turn out. There is certainly a lot of pain, and one of the most painful reckonings as we do this work is admitting how philanthropy is complicit in the inequities we see now.

Modern philanthropy's promise was to make the world a better place. Billions of dollars later, philanthropy has done a lot of good and perpetuated the disparities we see in health, education, employment and other areas of well-being.

Our sector was founded by dynasties of white families who believed wealth equaled expertise. Our professional inheritance is tied to this world view and how it lives on in the way we operate today.

What we now have is the legacy of our decisions: decisions on who gets funding (overwhelmingly white-led institutions), what issues are worth funding (without naming racism as a root cause), which prescriptive strategies to fund (instead of trusting community-designed solutions) and how to measure success (usually through a Euro-centric framework).

In recent years, we have taken best-selling critiques about philanthropy in stride – nodding in agreement as we launched book clubs, joined panel discussions, appeared on podcasts and drafted op-eds. The word "equity" has become ubiquitous, flowing freely from our speeches, annual reports, mission statements and funding strategies, signaling that we have a deeper understanding of the world around us.

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The dollars have not flowed to match our words. Numerous reports show funding for specific racial and ethnic communities have either stagnated or decreased; and the 1,000 largest foundations in the U.S. gave only 10% to communities of color.

The subtext? Philanthropy knows better than community; that people who talk about equity know how to advance it – not communities experiencing inequities every day.

When the coronavirus crisis hit, too many of us put down our newly acquired equity lenses and defaulted to business as usual. Some of us resumed the practice of spreading resources evenly across grantees all the while knowing that this pandemic did not evenly impact communities.

Yet, the best responses came from foundations that understood how racism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism – and other -isms – work, and how they interact to compound inequities.

These funders understood from their grantees for whom social isolation would be most damaging. They understood which communities are overrepresented in jobs that put them at higher risk of exposure: cleaners and janitorial staff, food-processing plant employees, grocery store clerks, delivery drivers and warehouse workers. They understood who could not access public assistance based on immigration status. They understood whose humanity would be denied because of their race or ethnicity. They understood that racism plus classism is a public health crisis.

Here in Washington, we were able to quickly bend our infection rates thanks to our culture- and identity-specific nonprofits. They proactively addressed these challenges and their success was because they had earned the trust of their communities.

These groups responded to immediate needs: child care when schools were closed, food and supplies during shelter-in-place orders, technology for



Let's Stop COVID-19 sign in downtown Bellevue, Washington, during the pandemic.

mental health counseling and culturally specific and non-English communication to prevent spread. Our nonprofits also stood up to systems by stopping evictions and foreclosures, pushing for better unemployment insurance and work conditions and, in the case of DRW, ensuring federal protections are in place for treatment. The work was going to happen with or without philanthropy, but our dollars helped defray costs, allowing them to serve more of the community.

“Center those most impacted,” is not new insight. Yet we in philanthropy have largely ignored this advice, even when presented with a plethora of data, reports and stories that prove it is the fastest path to change. We come up with sophisticated reasons for our inaction, but they all boil down to a lack of willpower.

Many of us in philanthropy are afraid to lose what this world offers us: job security, access to power and the chance to influence and shape the work of others. Afraid of damaging our reputation and dismantling the cozy places we've found ourselves in, we have made choices that protect our role and hedge against “risks.”

However, the real risk is allowing our privilege to become our expertise.

REMEMBER WHO IS DOING THE WORK

We at Group Health Foundation are fortunate because we are new and get to build our organization from the ground

up. Our team has benefitted from all the insight our peers in philanthropy have shared with us and we will forever be grateful for the lessons learned. If there is a common sentiment I can share, something I have heard time and again from both nonprofit leaders and retiring foundation presidents it is this:

Be more courageous, take more risks and remember who is doing the work.

Let's remember who is doing the work and recognize that anything we want to accomplish is entirely dependent upon the community organizations we fund, not us. Let's commit significant resources to organizations that are for and led by Black, Indigenous and people of color, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people who have experienced poverty.

And when we do, let's resist the urge to position ourselves as the expert, leader or savior of their work.

Let's also stop normalizing and promoting the notion that certain communities are destined to suffer. This narrative upholds a society where it is acceptable to undervalue whole groups of people. We recently saw this play out nationally when too many people were quicker to decry broken windows over stolen Black lives.

Let's take more risks by shouldering the burden that comes with challenging the status quo. Let's apply pressure on those with whom we share institutional power to echo what generations have been asking for: comprehensive unemployment insurance for all workers, humane immigration policies, abolition of the prison industrial complex and health care as a human right.

Let's demand a government that is accountable to the people it serves and ensure that future leaders reflect their communities. There is no shortage of brilliant leaders all around us. They are running nonprofits and organizing in their communities, and they can tell you off the

top of their head – without a request for proposal process or a slide deck – what equity looks like for their people.

Let's build a society where those who design policies are the people who experience inequities rather than those people who just talk about equity.

Let's be courageous and acknowledge the generational harm that chattel slavery and attempted genocide has had on Black and Native communities. Let's work to truly understand how its legacy has created a blueprint for racism and fascism that has hurt everyone in this country and apply that understanding to how we approach our work. Let's always call racism for what it is.

We can create a better society if we put our full support behind the nonprofits doing the work. These organizations and leaders show they can do a lot with

a little; imagine what we can build together if we develop the courage to trust and follow community leadership.

In philanthropy, we hold the trifecta of power: economic, political and social. Now is the time to wield it so that communities can lead us through recovery and what comes after.

The last time I wrote an NCRP article was 15 years ago. I was a young executive director of a Native American organization. Ironically, the piece was called "The New Same Old Story." I was deeply frustrated with philanthropy and wanted change. I was not naïve; I understood I was just one more person in a long line of leaders who had been asking philanthropists to believe in community-driven solutions, trust community leaders and get real resources to those who carry our society's burden of inequity.

I never imagined that one day I would be part of philanthropy, let alone a foundation CEO. I closed that article with a principle gifted to me by a friend and lifelong mentor from the Quinault Indian Nation:

"The people are beautiful, already."

I believe this more today than ever before. We will all be fine if we remember this when we make grants. ■

Nichole June Maher is president and CEO of Group Health Foundation. She previously served as the CEO of Northwest Health Foundation and executive director of Native American Youth and Family Center. Nichole is also co-founder of the Coalition of Communities of Color.

New and Renewing Members

Advancement Project
African Communities Together
Alliance for Youth Organizing
Amy Mandel and Katina Rodis Fund
Arca Foundation
Arch Community Fund
Arcus Foundation
Blue Shield of California Foundation
Bonfils-Stanton Foundation
Borealis Philanthropy
California Wellness Foundation
Cleveland Foundation
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights
Community Change
Conant Family Foundation
David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Deaconess Foundation
Demos
Dr. Bronner's Family Foundation
Dyson Foundation
Embrey Family Foundation
Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation
Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
Florida Immigrant Coalition

The From Now On Fund
The Fund for New Jersey
George Gund Foundation
Georgia Appleseed
Heising-Simons Foundation
Hill-Snowdon Foundation
The Hyams Foundation
Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation
The Kresge Foundation
LA Voice
Legal Aid Justice Center
Lloyd A. Fry Foundation
Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy
Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants
Marguerite Casey Foundation
Maryland's International Corridor
Community Development Corporation
Mentes Puertorriqueñas en Acción
The Needmor Fund
North Star Fund
Northwest Area Foundation
Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition

The Perrin Family Foundation
Public Welfare Foundation
Racial Justice NOW!
Raikes Foundation
Refugee Congress
re:power
Sagner Family Foundation
Scherman Foundation
Schott Foundation for Public Education
Silicon Valley Community Foundation
Solidaire Network
Stupski Foundation
Surdna Foundation
Texas Criminal Justice Coalition
Tides Foundation
Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock
Virginia Coalition for Immigrant Rights
Walton Family Foundation
Weissberg Foundation
Welcoming America
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Yelp Foundation