



The ABFE Story: 1971 to today, Our History in Philanthropy

The Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE), a national association membership organization that *promotes effective and responsive philanthropy in Black communities*, was founded in 1971 in Montreal, Canada as a working group and later became an independent membership organization. Founding members organized a like-minded group of people in philanthropy because they recognized and acted on the urgency to bring diversity and inclusion to, and equity in philanthropy.

Sign of the Times

The 1970s emerged as an era of intense political conflict, dramatic economic transformation, and pivotal developments in American race relations. Abroad, this era saw the end of the Vietnam War, the beginning of more peaceful relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the recognition of China. As people of color adjusted to their newly won independence, Blacks in the United States adjusted to the dictates of a new political order, shaped by increasing unemployment, “ghettoization” and a shift in the American outlook toward civil rights.

Dedicated to supporting Black professionals in the philanthropic community, ABFE ***worked to improve the status of Black communities in the United States.***

In the 1980s - an age of conservatism, broad economic investment and expansion, backlash against the Black pride of the 1970s and increasing recession - ABFE confronted the challenges of a new era. ABFE’s programs were inevitably influenced by the changing political climate. In *The Evolution of Black Philanthropy (Carson, October 1987)*, many Americans believed that Blacks did not do enough to help themselves; a view reflective of the prevalent conservatism of the day. Moreover, the **Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life** (1988) declared that the U.S. was “Moving Backward,” with regard to securing equal rights for minorities. ABFE moved forward despite these developments. It sponsored membership retreats, affinity groups sessions and annual meetings. ABFE also continued to support numerous Black causes. Administered by its board of directors, which often underwent changes in leadership, ABFE maintained its focus and momentum.

The changing dynamics of race and class made the 1990s a vastly different decade than the 1980s. The demographics of the Black middle class shifted considerably. During the Clinton years, Black wealth increased, yet the gap in earnings between Blacks and whites remained acute.

Moreover, incidents of racial violence ravaged the country. At the same time, the persistence of poverty in Black communities remained a constant conundrum for public policy makers nationwide.

For more information about ABFE, please contact Erika Seth Davies, Director of External Affairs at edavies@abfe.org

ABFE and the Council on Foundations

While there have been some gains in the field, there is still work to do to ensure true equity and inclusion regarding Blacks in positions of leadership and decision-making; policies and practices that ensure diversity in all areas of foundation administration and grantmaking; and responsive philanthropy that is making a difference in Black communities.

The presence of Black professionals in the field of philanthropy does not guarantee increased philanthropic support and improved outcomes for Black communities, but a stronger ABFE portends stronger advocacy on behalf of Black communities within the field. The goal of this advocacy is to increase investment in a broad range of organizations and initiatives that provide services, offer supports and create opportunities for Black communities to succeed. Not only does ABFE work to direct resources, but also to ensure that investment strategies are grounded in sound data and information, address “root causes” of issues, and are connected to policy change to impact the most children possible. We define these elements as key components of responsive and effective philanthropy in Black communities that aim to eliminate racial disparities and remove the barriers to success for communities.

ABFE Today

Magnified by the nation’s current economic crisis, today, Black communities across the nation are in greater crisis than mainstream communities. High unemployment and home foreclosure rates, disproportionate healthcare, excessive incarceration rates, a widening wealth gap, the daunting achievement gap and the disparity in child and family well-being are many of the issues facing Black communities. Consider these findings in a study by **Rick Cohen**, Senior Policy Fellow with Community Service Society:

Grantmaking for minorities has declined as a proportion of grants awarded by the largest 1,000 or so foundations regularly surveyed by the Foundation Center.² In 1998, 9.9% of the grants of these foundations were designated for ethnic or racial minorities, a proportion that declined to 7.6% in 2004, increased to 8.2% in 2005 and fell again to 7.4% in 2006. For African-Americans/ Blacks, the proportional decrease has been more significant: 3.8% of these grant dollars went to African-Americans in 1998, but only 1.9% in 2005 and remarkably only 1.5% in 2006.

ABFE remains active, engaged, relevant and essential in philanthropy today. On behalf of our members and supporters and through our leadership, programs and staff we remain unwavering in being the voice in philanthropy that highlights the urgency of diversity, inclusion and equity in the field toward our mission **to promote effective and responsive philanthropy in Black communities.**

ABFE is a membership-based philanthropic organization that advocates for responsive and transformative investments in Black communities. Partnering with foundations, nonprofits and individuals, ABFE provides its members with professional development and technical assistance resources that further the philanthropic sector’s connection and responsiveness to issues of equity, diversity and inclusion. Established in 1971 as the Association of Black Foundation Executives, the organization was credited with many of philanthropy’s early gains in diversity. It since has evolved into an influential network. In 2013, the organization shed its descriptor and adopted the simpler ABFE (ab-fee) to better reflect its broadening membership. For more information, visit www.abfe.org.

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Source: ABFE Archives, ABFE Communications

