

#BlackLivesMatter Philanthropic Action for Racial Justice



The police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and the decision by respective Grand Juries not to bring forth criminal charges unleashed the anger and energy of Black communities across the United States. Black philanthropists were not immune to this moment and today, collectively and individually, we struggle to better understand our roles. #BlackLivesMatter is opening spaces for Black practitioners, allies, and partners in philanthropy to further expand their involvement in this current movement for Black lives. We are Black practitioners in philanthropy who are organizing with urgency to support movement building opportunities that strive to eliminate state violence happening in our communities. We seek to assist in the effort to cultivate strategy and collective action grounded in racial justice and full emancipation for ALL Black lives.

We have begun organizing regular conversations with Black philanthropic practitioners to create a space to talk about the fear, doubt, and struggles that many Black philanthropic practitioners face in environments where racial justice is seen as an afterthought or merely a “diversity & inclusion” checkbox. These experiences mirror those illuminated in a report published by The Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE), called [“The Exit Interview,”](#) which speaks of the challenges of Black funders in philanthropy and includes recommendations for the field. ABFE has been a key leader in prioritizing Black organizing in our sector.

Even as we recognize these challenges some of us feel, within our institutions and the broader field, the need to influence those environments to be more inclusive and just. We must ask ourselves, what risks we are willing to take to engage each other and fund in new ways. At the end of the day, what are we there to do? We are considering models of collective support to determine strategies for how we might show up differently and strategically as funders for this moment. How do we create broader space within our institutions to promote racial justice in funding solutions that seek to bring an end to state violence in Black communities? How does state violence intersect with issues of public safety, health, immigration, income inequality, and education, to name a few? #BlackLivesMatter Philanthropic Action for Racial Justice is an organizing space to support our demands and the strategic funding priorities for racial justice in Black communities.

How will we achieve what we want?

By organizing around Shared Opportunities for Racial Justice in Philanthropy: This moment demands we match the scale, urgency, and intensity of the protest movement on the streets. In philanthropy, this means gifting differently, than what we are accustomed to, for Black-led work, focusing on more intense, provocative strategies than we typically fund, and moving money more quickly.

Simply put, we must change strategies and take risks if we want to see different outcomes.

If we get stuck in the “is this a movement or a moment?” dichotomy to inform what we should fund, we will repeat past mistakes. Community-led advocacy, policy, grassroots organizing and community engagement are all needed in order to eliminate state violence and restore public safety in our communities. The tension between assessing the movement before funding vs. funding emergent strategy and prototyping of approaches for movement work cannot get in the way of making a commitment to support this movement. We believe that funding organizations, coalitions, and movement networks all serve a purpose and will yield transformative outcomes for overall movement building. This is the risk taking that is wanted and needed.

We need to support the direct action of vital emergent Black leadership in this work, and recognize much of it is evolving from a progressive, multiracial, intersectional racial justice ecosystem that is still vulnerable, still under-resourced and critical to the movement’s success. If we have learned anything from the flashpoints of Occupy and the Arab Spring, it is that in these complex times we all have to co-create emergent strategies to address the demands we want to achieve. Most importantly, we want philanthropic leadership that acknowledges that ALL Black Lives Matter.

We have engaged with the Association for Black Foundation Executives, as well as partners like the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, and Neighborhood Funders Group, and others to ensure there is a shared agenda of what racial justice grant-making can look like for this current movement. It is a time where foundations and community-based organizations and movement-building formations get to create strategies *together*. This is an opportunity to preach beyond the choir. It is our collective responsibility to confront structural racism with rigor; ALL philanthropic organizations must be held accountable.

Exploring opportunities for collective action: In addition to being grant-makers and representatives of our institutions, we are Black people, and as such, we must resist the status quo as have activists around the country. We know state sanctioned violence will not restore public safety in our neighborhoods. We are exploring strategies to confront and hold accountable philanthropic institutions, public funding programs, and corporate interests we believe are complicit in or drivers of racist practices and policies such as police foundations and associations who are providing funds that support police strategies that create racial disparities, further social inequities, and jeopardize public safety in predominantly Black communities. We understand that change can and must also happen at the local and regional levels through family, regional, and local community foundations if this work is to be sustained. Chapters of identity-based affinity groups, new regional social justice funder groups, and various other funder networks such as the Neighborhood Funders Group that engage local and national foundations investing in community-driven change can facilitate both learning and mobilizing. Neighborhood Funders Group has established the [Funders for Justice](#) website and has been engaged in conversations about how those foundations can think about what it means to fund community-led public safety initiatives in their own communities.

What Can Foundations Do?

Align and share our power: Philanthropy is a sector rooted in power and privilege. Strategic priorities, grant commitments, and leveraging resources are often decisions made by a small group of people. Those people too often are not those most impacted by the outcomes of these decisions. They are not people of color, working class people, young people, etc. Additionally, many of us in philanthropy disconnect ourselves from the real waves of trauma predominantly Black communities face when dealing with state violence from the police as well as the community violence that is connected to it. We know that the only way to move toward equity and justice in this country is to get behind movements led by those locally in our communities that build off of the collective resiliency of our people.



Photo by Taylor Nichole Johnson, #BlackLivesMatter Ride to Ferguson, Labor Day Weekend 2014

"Calling in" institutions to the institutional racism that happens publicly with grace: When talking about race many foundations enter into the space of disorder and confusion with responses like, "How we should respond to the shootings and no-indictments?" "We need to be careful about what we say politically." "How does community-level and state violence fit into our issue-based grant-making?" This is actually an opportunity for foundations to clarify what equity and equality looks like and to offer some political education. Public safety is an issue that impacts ALL of us! When talking about institutional racism within philanthropy we become afraid of alienating our peers, other institutions, potential co-investors, and donors. We, however, realize that in order for us to advance racial justice, we must have the courage collectively to be explicit in our language. We also have to examine our own institutions – there is so much work we all must do to commit to being anti-racist and for our philanthropic institutions to do the same. This will not happen unless we have the courage to call in our structural barriers, institutional bias, and belief systems and do it unapologetically, so that we can free ourselves from the organizational culture that assumes that locally and nationally led movement-based work that addresses structural racism is not worth supporting.

Support advocacy and organizing led by Black people: We can only change systems through community organizing and advocacy, and building alternatives that make current practices obsolete. More foundations must support movements and organizing work in new and authentic ways. We don't need foundations to professionalize, "neutralize" or "whitewash" organizing. We need foundations to show up differently and take the lead from organizers, and the children and families who are experiencing state sanctioned violence now. Waiting for a tipping point will not be tolerated.



Photo by Taylor Nichole Johnson, #BlackLivesMatter
Ride to Ferguson, Labor Day Weekend 2014

Join Us

We've heard activists and leaders calling on everyone to be courageous, take risks, make sacrifices and be creative. We need to do the same as funders. Now is the time for collective action. In this moment, we must ensure that philanthropy is working to sustain the movement and its leaders. That means doing more than making grants. We must consider ourselves partners. True partnership requires a sustained commitment that can be marked in years and decades, not funding cycles, or financial quarters. Such a partnership can only be built by serious organizing now, building meaningful relationships with one another, making and keeping commitments for action, and eagerly inviting others to act in collaboration with us. This also means leveraging our collective power to persuade our institutions to adopt the courageous strategies that will make change in our communities. Funders can and should be organizers within our own sector. Here are the ways you can join us in Black philanthropic organizing:

1. Joining our webinars, calls, and in-person spaces to assemble and fortify our relationships, and educate each other in co-creating emergent strategy for how we organize in philanthropy.
2. Support the demands laid out by #BlackLivesMatters & Ferguson Action; #BlackLivesMatter and Ferguson Action have developed five demands and a six-point platform. #BlackLivesMatter (You can view all of the demands on www.fergusonaction.org or www.blacklivesmatter.com.)
3. Define, align, and declare the racial justice grant-making framework needed to support movement-building in the Black community.

We don't have to organize in isolation. Join us by signing on to this letter click [here!](#)