

NEW YORK  
COMMUNITY TRUST

HOW CAN THIS EQUITY  
FUNDER RALLY DONORS  
AND DEEPEN GRASSROOTS  
ENGAGEMENT  
TO FURTHER ITS IMPACT?

APRIL 2016

BY **LISA RANGHELLI**  
AND **CAITLIN DUFFY**



**philamplify**  
honest feedback to improve philanthropy

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York Community Trust is a venerable institution that has enjoyed remarkable stability and leadership continuity in its nearly 100-year history. Its adaptive and collaborative approach has enabled the foundation to respond to changing community needs, including the terrible scourge of HIV/AIDS, as well as to unforeseen emergencies such as 9/11 and Superstorm Sandy. The staff demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring that Trust-held dollars benefit communities of color, those living with poverty or disabilities, LGBTQ residents and other marginalized New Yorkers. While funding service delivery improvement is the primary vehicle it uses to achieve this, other important tools are funding advocacy to improve systems, particularly through the foundation's numerous funder collaboratives, and non-profit capacity building.

The Trust can build on these strengths to achieve even greater progress for New York City in a number of ways. In particular, the Trust can be a true public leader, not just within philanthropy and the nonprofit sphere, but among all sectors of the city, by providing deeper support for community organizing, especially among communities of color, by more creatively engaging donors and by being a more visible advocate for an inclusive, equitable New York.

## FINDINGS

- 1. The Trust is committed to investing in underserved communities and equity. It funds service delivery improvement and advocacy as the primary tools for changing systems and also sees a limited role for community organizing in its grantmaking.**
- 2. The Trust's strategies are well informed and broad enough to respond to emerging needs. However, it has not effectively communicated how these strategies add up to an overarching vision for the city, which results in confusion among many stakeholders about what it stands for.**
- 3. The Trust has initiated many effective funder collaboratives on key issues in the city and often convenes grantees to foster shared learning and collaboration. The foundation works effectively with local government, but rarely uses its bully pulpit to take positions on behalf of marginalized communities.**
- 4. The Trust creatively directs funds from bequests and conducts annual appeals and learning opportunities for donor advisors to respond to changing community needs. Yet the foundation's donor engagement is not particularly robust nor does it foster connections with Trust grantees.**
- 5. Nonprofits praise Trust staff for their expertise, thought partnership, open and honest communication, accessibility and responsiveness. Grantees want more opportunities to connect with other funding sources and like-minded nonprofits.**
- 6. The Trust provides single-year project funding through its competitive grants and also offers capacity building. More than 1 in 3 grantees seek multi-year core support to bolster their long-term capacity and effectiveness.**

## **PHILAMPLIFY URGES THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. Continue the Trust's strong commitment to underserved communities; effective partnership with grantees; and leadership role as a convener of funders, grantees and other community stakeholders.** The Trust is an exemplar for other community foundations in its unwavering support for underserved communities and equity, whether in its health, education or arts portfolios. Continuing to manifest this commitment through convening, collaboration and respectful relationships with nonprofits will ensure the Trust makes an ongoing difference for marginalized New Yorkers.
- 2. Increase funding and capacity building to smaller, more grassroots, community organizing groups and organizations led by people of color.** The Trust staff prides itself on funding an ecosystem of types of organizations from year to year to achieve its broad goals in each program area. An examination of grants shows limited investment in neighborhood-based groups and those that are led by or directly organize residents of color, who comprise the majority in New York City. Devoting greater resources and capacity building to these types of organizations, either directly or through partnerships with other local funders that heavily support such groups, will enable the Trust to spur civic engagement and harness community activism for change. A few grantmakers expressed the wish that the Trust could collaborate with other, much smaller public foundations to leverage its larger assets to support more small and grassroots social change organizations that do not otherwise

receive Trust support.

- 3. Strategically provide general support grants to equity-oriented nonprofits and make further progress to increase multi-year funding. Doing so would free up program staff time to engage and convene more grantees and nonprofits.** The Trust aims to maximize the impact of its limited discretionary dollars through single-year, project-specific funding. This is laudable, and helps ensure that large nonprofits serving broad populations will target Trust resources to marginalized residents. But it limits the ability of smaller nonprofits to be flexible in responding to community needs and new opportunities. We urge the Trust to identify appropriate types of organizations that would most benefit from general support while still being able to ensure alignment of purpose and mission with equity, benefit for underserved communities and the foundation's other goals. The Trust has already set an intention to make more of its competitive grants multi-year, and can continue to make progress in this area. These two recommendations, along with streamlining application processes, would free up both grantees' and foundation staff members' time to focus more on achieving mission.
- 4. Take a stand more often and use the Trust's bully pulpit when it is clearly in the best interests of underserved communities in New York.** The Trust exercises leadership in many ways, including as a convener of other funders and of its grantees. Its program staff also strategically engages local government leaders around issues relevant to its nonprofit partners. Yet peers and grantees see a missed opportunity in the Trust's quiet leadership style at the top. The Trust can further advance its equity goals by raising the voices of its leaders, board and donors as advocates for the

most marginalized across all sectors of the city.

- 5. Explicitly articulate a unifying vision and values statement for an equitable city. Improve communications tools, including the website, to more effectively convey how the Trust's goals and strategies align with its vision and values.** The Trust's grant-making is guided by strategic reviews in each of its funding areas and the foundation's communications tools describe grantee results well. However, stakeholders still do not understand the foundation's larger vision for NYC. More transparency about how the foundation sets strategic priorities within the constraints of its complex funding structure would help stakeholders better understand how the Trust makes decisions. The foundation needs to express a compelling vision that can unify its strategic priorities and more effectively rally donors, other grantmakers, nonprofits and communities around common goals for the city.
  
- 6. Explore and test out more creative donor engagement strategies and foster more connections and cooperation among donors, other public grant-making charities and nonprofits.** The Trust is very adept at cultivating donors who will leave a community legacy through the foundation, and flexible in using such bequests to meet changing needs. However, its ongoing donor engagement activities could more effectively connect donors to the communities the foundation seeks to benefit and to the nonprofits serving those communities. Other grantmaking charities in the city could be allies rather than competitors in exploring creative ways to grow diverse community philanthropy that will direct resources to empowering disenfranchised residents.

## ABOUT PHILAMPLIFY

Philamplify is an initiative of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy that aims to maximize the impact of our country's grantmakers. At the center of Philamplify is a series of comprehensive reports conducted by highly regarded researchers assessing foundation grantmaking and operations. Assessments include key findings and recommendations, along with in-depth analysis of foundations' funding strategies and feedback from peer funders, nonprofit leaders, issue experts, community members and more. By making these assessments public, Philamplify seeks to build a culture of transparency, mutual accountability and knowledge sharing.

[www.philamplify.org](http://www.philamplify.org)



**Address** 1331 H Street NW, Suite 200  
Washington, D.C. 20005

**Phone** (202) 387-9177

**Fax** (202) 332-5084

**Web** [www.ncrp.org](http://www.ncrp.org)