

Pay it forward: A new way to fund grassroots LGBTQ organizing in the South

By Rev. Jasmine Beach-Ferrara

When we launched the Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE) in 2011, my living room became our “office”, no one was getting paid, and almost every foundation we approached turned us down, either because they didn’t fund LGBTQ work or because they thought our primary strategy at the time – winning marriage equality in the South by 2016 – was laughable.

Across sectors, skepticism is a classic response to innovation and startups. But for grassroots LGBTQ organizers launching new work in the South, the skepticism is intensified because of specific regional dynamics, including the reticence of Southern foundations, local governments and other institutions to support LGBTQ organizing and because LGBTQ Southerners, the natural donor base for local grassroots work, are more likely to be low-income.

Fast forward to 2017: Large national LGBTQ foundations have increased their funding to established LGBTQ nonprofits in the South in recent years. The past year has also shown an exciting uptick in LGBTQ foundation grants to grassroots Southern work. But the fact remains that for most grassroots groups, especially those without 501(c)(3) status in rural areas, there are remarkably limited funding options.



BEING LGBTQ IN THE SOUTH

Most people are surprised to learn that one-third of all LGBTQ Americans live in the South, a community that is diverse in race and gender. We live not just metro areas but also in smaller towns like Morristown, Tennessee, and Petal, Mississippi.

There are more than 750 grassroots LGBTQ groups across the region, many of them volunteer-led and without 501(c)(3) status, working in the hyper-localized context of a specific town or population.² One of the first grants CSE received was for \$250 from Blue Ridge Pride in our hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. This grant made it possible for us to host a free legal clinic, but it was also a vote of confidence.

A PIPELINE OF FUNDING FOR GRASSROOTS ORGANIZERS

Starting in 2015, we began making micro-grants of up to \$500 through our Southern Equality Fund. The goal is to build a pipeline that gets funding

to grassroots organizers who are doing heroic frontline work so they can grow and sustain their efforts and leadership.

You do not have to be a 501(c)(3) to receive a grant through our fund, and we’ve made the application short and sweet, knowing that many grassroots groups have not applied for a grant before and do not have paid staff or consultants who can focus on grant-writing. We get back to folks within a month of applying. To date we have given 111 grants totaling more than \$59,000 to groups across 12 Southern states.

In the coming year, our goal is to increase our grantmaking to 10 percent of our organizational budget. In doing so, we are creating a practice of organizational tithing, drawing on the faith-based practice of giving away 10 percent of your wealth to support good works and acts of mercy.

Other organizations are doing it, too. Equality Virginia has launched a re-granting program to provide funding and capacity building support to transgender leaders and groups across the state. The Southern Vision Alliance provides wraparound support, including fiscal sponsorship and funding, to a cohort of youth-led, North Carolina-based groups focused on social, racial and environmental justice.

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Funding transformation through racial healing

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URGENT NEEDS IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Systems and structures – in the South and in the LGBTQ movement – are changing. The Out in the South Fund, a project of Funders for LGBTQ Issues, has embarked on a multi-year project to increase LGBTQ funding among Southern grantmakers and Southern funding among LGBTQ funders. Southern institutions from hospitals to public universities are building out work and programs around LGBTQ issues, breaking a long silence.

But there is still the urgency of today and tomorrow. Tragically, more than half of the trans women of color who have been murdered to date in 2017 lived in the South.³ The prevalence of HIV rates among gay and bisexual men in the South, especially men of color, dramatically outpaces other regions of the country.⁴ Across Southern school districts, transgender children live without district-level policies that protect their rights under Title IX.⁵ You can still be fired for being LGBTQ in most Southern states.⁶

PAY IT FORWARD TO FUND THE FRONTLINES

Simply put, we need to get more funding into the hands of grassroots LGBTQ organizers across the South, and we need to do so as quickly as possible.

Established 501(c)(3) LGBTQ organizations in the South are well-positioned to lead an effort to fund grassroots work; we encourage more to do so. A quick glance at financials shows that if the six largest LGBTQ organizations in the region were to begin tithing at 10 percent to support grassroots work, it would release almost \$1 million into the region annually.

There's a moral case for doing so: Getting resources to where they are most urgently (continued on page 14)

tool training for 54 major employers and government organizations, so they can understand the forces and policies that led to current conditions. Finally, the foundation is convening five public-private partnerships focused on systems change around key issues.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Despite the optimism surrounding TRHT from grant recipients, there are some serious hurdles:

- Criticism that TRHT strategies, specifically racial healing, are not systemic.
- People and institutions enter at different stages of capacity and will. Cruz shared the challenge of bridging two cities in Louisiana with similar racial inequity but very different cultures. Louisiana communities are segregated, and everyone wrestles with the fact that they have to work together with people they didn't choose. Hosey acknowledged fear around racial healing work across divides, especially in the south. Dedecker and Robinson noted that people in power don't always understand the conditions and effects of racism, and it hinders decision-making with an equity lens.
- Lozano mentioned the power that funders wield and the complexity of funders leading this work in their communities. Many people, often under-resourced, have been doing racial healing work at the grassroots level for years. Foundations who are leading TRHT work could reinforce the power dynamics overlook people already doing healing work.

The work of TRHT is a long journey. The funders who are leading TRHT initiatives offered advice for other funders who want to do such work.

- Show courage and leverage your relationships to get people into the room.
- Learn from those most affected by problems in your communities and iterate your practices and behaviors accordingly.
- Shifting the understanding of people in systems, including grantmaking institutions, is a part of shifting the systems themselves.
- The work is urgent, but the work is a journey. Act with urgency that can be sustained, not panic that will dissipate.
- Start from where you are, with a coalition of the willing.

Funders who are genuinely interested in transforming systemic causes of inequity in their community, especially systemic racism, can use their leadership to support healing the trauma that prevents us from collectively moving forward. ■

Jeanné Isler is vice president and chief engagement officer at NCRP.

Notes

1. W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "TRHT Implementation Guide," <http://www.racialequityresourceguide.org/TRHT-Summit>.
2. The TRHT sites are: 1. State of Alaska; 2. Baton Rouge, Louisiana; 3. New Orleans; 4. Buffalo, New York; 5. Chicago; 6. Dallas; 7. Los Angeles; 8. Richmond, Virginia; 9. Selma, Alabama; 10. Saint Paul, Minnesota; 11. Battle Creek, Michigan; 12. Flint, Michigan; 13. Kalamazoo, Michigan; and 14. Lansing, Michigan.

philanthropic support is needed for this work to be successful.

Census funding has been traditionally viewed by philanthropy as a once-a-decade undertaking, without a midcycle funding stream. But funding for organizations with a proven track record on census issues, as well as for those who can reach audiences that will support and decide census policy, can help make the difference in bolstering efforts to educate and influence policymakers.

FUNDERS: BE A VALIDATOR TO YOUR PEERS.

The census is a classic “intersectional” issue. It has a direct impact on antipoverty efforts, criminal justice reform, racial justice issues, educational access and much more. Thousands of community groups across the country are hoping to play a role in promoting the census to their constituents, but they lack the resources to develop and staff major activities.

Foundations that support the core

work of these organizations should recognize that an inclusive census enables grantees to access the resources they need to provide better services.

We hope that funders will be open to combining portfolios, as many did in 2010, to increase the pot of available funding. Please talk to your colleagues about this critical issue.

When it comes to the census, there are no do-overs – we have only one chance this decade to get it right. ■

Vanita Gupta is president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and former head of the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice.

Notes

1. Jennifer Saindon and Robert Chestnut, “The 2020 Census: A New Design for the 21st Century,” U.S. Census Bureau, October 2016, <https://www.fdlp.gov/file-repository/outreach/events/depository-library-council-dlc-meetings/2016-meeting-proceedings/2016-dlc-meeting-and-fdl-conference/2800-census-2020-slides/file>.

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2. Andrew Reamer. “Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds.” GW Institute of Public Policy, June 4, 2017, <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/census/CountingForDollars-Intro.pdf>.
3. Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.
4. Kim Crews, “Philanthropic Support for 2010 Census Outreach: A List of Grants Awarded,” May 2011, https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/FCI_2010_Census_Grants_Spreadsheet_by_Kim_Crews_final_1.pdf. See also Kim Crews, “Philanthropic Support for 2010 Census Outreach: An Overview of Grants Awarded,” May 2011, https://www.funderscommittee.org/files/2_Overview_of_Grants_Awarded_by_Kim_Crews_final.pdf.

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needed, to be used by those who are most impacted. There’s a strategic reason as well: Creating legal and lived equality in the South requires that we do long-term organizing in every community, not just in large metro areas.

For CSE, funding grassroots work is a core strategy as we build a new model of Southern organizing, just like direct services and litigation. We learn from and build with our grassroots partners. In the shared work and mutuality of these relationships, there is also great joy. ■

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a County Commissioner in Buncombe County, North Carolina.

Notes

1. According to research from Funders for LGBTQ Issues, foundation funding to LGBTQ groups in the South has increased from less than 5 percent to 25 percent in recent years, with grants primarily going to large non-profits in metro areas.
2. Claudia Horwitz, “Out in the South Part Two: The Assets,” Funders for LGBTQ Issues, September 2014, https://www.lgbtfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Out_in_the_South_Part_Two_LGBTQ_Community_Assets_in_the_U.S._South.pdf.
3. Human Rights Campaign, “Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2017,” <http://www.hrc.org/resource/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017>.

[es/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017](https://www.hrc.org/resource/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2017).

4. Susan Reif, Donna Safley, Carolyn McAllaster, Elena Wilson, Kathryn Whetten, “State of HIV in the US Deep South,” Center for Health Policy and Inequalities Research, Duke University, <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/13807/State%20of%20the%20Deep%20Southrevised%20online2.pdf>.
5. Movement Advancement Project, “Safe School Laws,” July 7, 2017, http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/safe_school_laws.
6. Movement Advancement Project, “Non-Discrimination Laws,” July 7, 2017, www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws.