

Foundations Pool \$36 Million For Black-Led Organizing Groups

by Alex Daniels, September 17, 2020

A group of grant makers led by the Libra Foundation has pledged a total of \$36 million to 10 Black-led organizing groups, adding to the billions of dollars private and corporate [foundations](#) have committed to racial-justice efforts since George Floyd was killed in May.



Matthew Hatcher / Getty Images

What sets the [Democracy Frontlines Fund](#) apart, says Crystal Hayling, Libra's

executive director, is that the grantees were selected by a “brain trust” of 10 women of color with experience working with racial-justice movement groups nationwide. The fund will provide general operating support for three years.

After police officers in Minneapolis killed George Floyd and protesters took to the streets this spring, Hayling says she was approached by a foundation leader — she declined to say who — wanting to help but not sure where to begin. The panel of experts, which includes Rajasvini Bhansali, executive director of the Solidaire Network, Nicole Boucher, senior adviser to Way to Rise, and Alicia Sanchez Gill, director of the Emergent Fund, provided grant makers a ready-made list of organizations to support.

In what Hayling described as a practice of “[trust-based philanthropy](#),” all of the grant makers committed their support before the list of grantees was completed.

“Most of the foundations don't work in this area. Why, then, would they be the ones to make the decisions about the groups,” that will receive grants? Hayling asks. “Let's put the decision making in the hands of the people who have the deepest experience.”

In addition to Libra, a foundation started by the Pritzker family, the fund is supported by the Kataly Foundation, which was founded by Regan Pritzker and her husband, Christopher Olin.

The list is rounded out by wealthy living donors and established private foundations. They include: Wend, a social-impact fund started by Walmart Stores heir James Walton; the Crankstart, Kelson, and Loud Hound foundations; Someland Foundation; Tao Rising; the Schmidt Family Foundation; Sobrato Philanthropies; and the Hewlett and MacArthur foundations.

The 10 grantees are:

- Black Futures Lab
- Black LGBTQIA Migrant Project
- Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute
- Black Youth Project 100
- Blackbird
- Communities Transforming Policing Fund
- The Movement for Black Lives
- National Black Food & Justice Alliance
- State Voices
- The Southern Power Fund

Focusing on Systemic Racism

Over the past decade, less than 10 percent of the money foundations dedicated to racial equity went to grassroots organizing, according to [Candid](#), which collects data on philanthropy. Since the beginning of the year, foundations have poured more than \$6 billion into racial-equity efforts, more than it had in the previous nine years combined. But it is not clear how much of that money is being directed to [Black-led movement groups](#), something that Hayling and other racial-justice leaders say is key to ending systemic racism in the United States.

Rather than putting money toward scholarships or civil-rights legacy organizations, Democracy Frontlines Fund grantees support smaller grassroots organizations working to help improve the lives and build the political power of Black people, particularly young, disabled, LGBTQ, politically disenfranchised, and formerly incarcerated people.

Hayling plans to organize quarterly calls with the donors and grantees so that grant makers can learn more about the needs of grassroots groups. Through this “learning community,” she is particularly interested in helping build an appetite among grant makers for supporting community organizing.

Often foundations focus on a single issue, like housing or education, that can track improvement based on an established set of metrics like homelessness or graduation rates. Supporting community organizing, she says, involves building relationships in a particular area and investing where residents say there is the greatest need.

“Philanthropy has to learn in order to fund organizing because it's different than funding social services,” Hayling says. “It's different than funding capital campaigns. It's a different skill set.”

Providing Stability

After George Floyd was killed, [ABFE](#), a membership organization of black foundation executives, called upon institutional philanthropy to increase giving to Black-led nonprofits in response to police brutality and the disparate impact the coronavirus has had on Black people. And the [Movement for Black Lives](#), which supports a national network of grassroots groups, challenged foundations and individual donors to commit to giving \$50 million this year.

Including the Democracy Frontlines Fund's grant, donors are about three-quarters of the way to meeting that goal, says Charles Long, resource coordinator for the Movement for Black Lives. The group will likely be able to double its staff of seven this year, and the new support has allowed the Movement for Black Lives to plan a budget for the next six years, Long says.

That stability, Long says, will allow him to devote more time over the next several years to helping smaller organizations that are part of the network develop relationships with donors and hire more staff.

Long says members of the Democracy Frontlines Fund's brain trust are “trusted allies” of the movement, something that could cement a lasting bond between donors and grassroots racial-justice groups. Those ties, he says, are likely to be tested during the current election season when donors to anti-racist groups are likely to experience what he calls “whitelash” from white supremacists for supporting Black-led groups.

He says the educational calls planned by the fund and a call that the Movement for Black Lives is planning for donors and grantees next week are designed to secure relationships between wealthy foundations and community-organizing groups.

Building Trust

Long is “hopeful but skeptical” that the fund signals a new approach among grant makers.

“Foundations often dictate or co-opt the conversation around movements,” he says.

Hayling hopes the speed at which the fund secured commitments is an indication that foundations are learning not to saddle nonprofits with too much administrative work and are beginning to trust that their grantees may have the insights into how grants should be used.

Philanthropy should move from a “bias to study” to a “bias to take action,” Hayling says.

“A lot of these organizations don't want to sit around with foundation leaders and talk and learn and get to know each other,” she says. “If they're not going to actually put money on the table, they don't have time for it.”