

# Newcomers to Movement Funding Join a Collaborative Effort to Support Black-Led Groups

by Philip Rojc, September 18, 2020

When civil rights icon John Lewis passed away only weeks after unprecedented street protests demanded action on systemic racism, Libra Foundation Executive Director Crystal Hayling [called the event](#) “a clarion call to stay in the long and hard fight for racial justice, a fight that left scars on [Lewis’] body.” Hayling’s exhortation to funders to “get in, and stay in”



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reflects what has become a reckoning for philanthropy. How far are funders willing to go to back the kind of “good trouble” Lewis stood for?

Although this year has certainly seen a surge in racial equity funding commitments, Black-led movement organizations [still face a chronic shortage of funding](#), general support in particular. From a strategic perspective, that philanthropic reticence makes little sense. One doesn’t need to look back to the 1960s to see why. Just over the past decade, [what little funding did reach places like the Movement for Black Lives](#) helped set the groundwork for this summer’s protests and an ongoing national awakening around racial justice.

Whether it’s the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of the 1960s or the Movement For Black Lives today, Black-led movement organizations that play an infrastructural role have been crucial to securing social justice victories. And in one

interesting corner of the funding world, they've become the focus via a new collaborative effort called the [Democracy Frontlines Fund](#) (DFF).

Backed by an eclectic mix of funders, many of whom are newcomers to Black-led movement-building, the Democracy Frontlines Fund is an exercise in reimagining philanthropic norms. Over three years, it'll provide \$36 million in general support to [a slate of 10 Black-led movement organizations](#), themselves selected and curated by [a "brain trust" of eight women](#) with deep experience at the intersection between predominantly white-led philanthropic spaces and movements spearheaded by people of color.

### **A Matter of Trust**

The idea for the Democracy Frontlines Fund originated at the Libra Foundation. The solidly progressive Bay Area-based grantmaker has quickly become a movement-funding mainstay, drawing on the fortune of Nicholas and Susan Pritzker to fund hard-hitting activism at the intersection of climate, gender and criminal justice. According to Hayling, calls for philanthropy to step up in the wake of George Floyd's murder led to conversations about "how to bring in funders who don't typically fund this work, or who don't necessarily call themselves social justice funders."

Based on ongoing conversations with other philanthropic professionals, some of whom work in "more traditional" foundations, Hayling determined that "if we put together an invitation to these foundations, a way to work that they might not have available to them," a new avenue for channeling significant resources to Black-led organizers might open up.

We'll go into DFF's funders in greater detail below, but it's worth pointing out that they run the philanthropic gamut from social justice stalwarts like Libra to less ostensibly progressive legacy funders like MacArthur and Hewlett. The giving vehicles of living donors make up most of the remainder, including some notable newcomers to this work like Sobrato Philanthropies and the Schmidt Family Foundation.

Beyond their financial commitment, DFF's funders bring to the table no small measure of trust. In addition to relinquishing the right to micromanage their grant funding, they also commit to fund the initiative before they even know where the money will go. "We are all acknowledging that in order to get better at being in relation to Black-led groups, [philanthropy] must acknowledge that the expertise lies elsewhere, and that's where the decision-making should lie," Hayling said.

Trust and personal relationships are at the core of DFF, both in terms of the funders involved and the movement advisors in the “brain trust.” In either case, Hayling relied heavily on individuals in her own network to secure initial commitments, some of whom then suggested or brought others aboard. “We didn’t put out a big call to the entire field, and we never set out to say ‘let’s raise \$100 million,’” Hayling said. Instead it was, “Let’s set up a table of people committed and interested in being part of an ongoing learning community.”

## Newcomers

So which funders have joined DFF’s learning community? To begin with, there are several giving vehicles associated with Nicholas and Susan Pritzker’s branch of that ultra-wealthy clan. Libra is the couple’s own foundation, and then there are Tao Rising and the Kataly Foundation, both associated with next-gen members of the Pritzker family. Kataly and Tao Rising have so far kept low profiles. At least in Kataly’s case, that’s because the foundation is quite new, having been set up as the foundation of Nicholas and Susan’s daughter Regan Pritzker and her husband Christopher Olin.

According to [a blog post](#) from Arabella Advisors, which helped the fledgling foundation move millions in COVID-responsive funding this spring, trust-based philanthropy is Kataly’s modus operandi. “We are operating at our learning edge as funders, growing our understanding of how to best respond to field need and center the expertise and voices of our partners,” Regan Pritzker said in that post.

DFF’s backers include several other rising givers. Twitter co-founder Evan Williams’ Someland Foundation is on the list, as is Wend, a social impact fund founded by Walton scion James Walton. The Someland Foundation has already been supporting big-name social justice nonprofits like the ACLU, but neither of these funders has a significant history of known support for Black-led movements.

Two major legacy foundations are also supporting DFF: the MacArthur Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. While both have funded adjacent work for some time, MacArthur and Hewlett are making major overtures to racial justice in 2020. In July, Hewlett committed nearly \$170 million to racial justice work, a definite first for the foundation, including an \$18 million pledge over the next several months following that announcement. MacArthur, which has previously funded DFF grantees like the Black Youth Project 100, recently joined the [Just Action Racial Equity Collaborative](#), a coalition of organizations dedicated to “shifting power to historically marginalized groups” in Chicago.

Last, but certainly not least, DFF has been successful in courting the support of several living donors with vast fortunes at their disposal and little or no history of support for Black-led organizing. The most progressive among them, at least in terms of his philanthropic profile, is venture capitalist Michael Moritz, whose Crankstart Foundation already supports plenty of bigger left-leaning organizations, including ProPublica, the ACLU and Everytown for Gun Safety's 501(c)(3) arm.

Then there's Sobrato Philanthropies, the primary grantmaking vehicle of the billionaire Silicon Valley real estate family. Though the Sobratos haven't been known to support much movement work in the past, the family's giving has moved in a more progressive direction of late, notably via [a COVID-19 relief fund designed to aid undocumented immigrants](#) in San Mateo County.

Finally, the Schmidt Family Foundation has also signed onto DFF—as in Eric and Wendy Schmidt, whose tech fortune so far hasn't been deployed toward social justice movements (although the couple's funding on climate change through the 11th Hour Project does support grassroots activism, as we've [reported](#)). The Schmidt Family Foundation mostly funds environmental work, while Schmidt Futures focuses on things like scientific research and workforce development. And yet, Hayling reports that the Schmidt Family Foundation was the first funder to join DFF, “giving us the early spark to say we can build this into a learning community.” [In a press release](#), Schmidt Family Foundation Executive Director Joe Sciortino said, “Now is the time for philanthropy to increase their support of frontline Black organizations and communities and to recognize that doing so is critical to their own missions.”

### **“Democracy Is Multifaceted”**

The fact that DFF is a group effort may account for some of these funders' comfort supporting work that they may not have backed on their own. But it's still remarkable to see so many mainstream names with little movement funding experience get behind grantees with profiles that much of the foundation world considered unacceptably radical only a few years ago.

According to Hayling, the “brain trust” of movement advisors who selected those 10 grantees considers them nothing less than keystone civil rights organizations for the next few decades. Like their 20th-century predecessors, many of them play infrastructural as well as activist roles. Some of them coordinate coalitions of state and local activist groups—the Southern Power Fund, State Voices and the National Black Food & Justice Alliance fit

that bill—while others, like the Movement for Black Lives and the Black Voters Matter Capacity Building Institute, serve the wider movement.

Still others, like Borealis Philanthropy’s Communities Transforming Policing Fund, are regrantors. Rounding out the list are groups like Black Youth Project 100 and the Black LGBTQIA + Migrant Project, which organize and build power among specific marginalized groups, as well as media, research and civic engagement organizations like the Black Futures Lab and Blackbird.

There is, of course, a lot of strategic overlap between the 10 grantees, and as movement organizations, their work may not fit into the neat categories some foundations use to evaluate impact. The infrastructural interplay between these organizers is part of the point. Leaders from the field often link organizing among Black communities and other people of color to the long-term health and well-being of American democracy. “Give us R&D dollars,” LaTosha Brown of Black Voters Matter [told us in August](#). “[Give us] resources that support our innovation and that support us as problem-solvers—not just for Black people, but problem-solvers for the world.”

Hayling put it another way: DFF “is about helping funders understand that for the Black community, democracy is multi-faceted,” she said. “It’s not simply about learning how to register to vote. It’s about organizing people who are talking about what it takes to build safe communities.” This year, as even many privileged Americans are feeling less insulated from the consequences of unjust and unconsidered policy, it’ll be telling to see how many funders follow DFF’s lead and take on edgier work that shifts power along with money.