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OPINION

Getting a fair slice of the pie

As the coronavirus pandemic disproportionately affects already underserved communities, philanthropists need to rethink their priorities.

By **Aixa Beauchamp and Betty Francisco** Updated May 6, 2020, 12:06 p.m.



People wear masks out of concern for the coronavirus while standing in line on Tuesday to receive boxes of food from Massachusetts National Guard soldiers from the 181st Engineer Company in Chelsea, Mass. STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Boston has always been a place of firsts. Our philanthropic community is no different, and it responded quickly to the coronavirus pandemic by providing funds to nonprofits serving the most vulnerable populations, including the homeless, the elderly, and those with food insecurity.

While these rapid-response efforts are heartening, the fact is that the [relief to nonprofits](#) is not being distributed equitably. Recent [headlines](#) are shattering the perception that the virus is a “[great equalizer](#),” as [race data slowly trickling out in Massachusetts](#) confirm that COVID-19 is hitting communities of color (e.g., in Lawrence, Chelsea, and Brockton) the hardest.

We would like to believe we can bring about a fair process for funding, but long-held unconscious and implicit biases, cultural differences, decision-making power, and unequal access to funders make this impossible. It would be difficult to arrive at a point where nonprofit organizations — particularly those serving under-resourced and underserved communities — could equally compete for funding when [less than 2 cents](#) out of every philanthropic dollar targets these organizations. How can we expect these organizations to seek and secure philanthropic support when the gap in available resources is comparable to the decades of rising inequalities in this nation?

Funds that are meant to aid and support in times of crisis can unintentionally perpetuate the same inequities that are found in traditional philanthropy unless they are designed to tackle systemic and structural racial disparities. These funds, like traditional philanthropy, often favor the larger, well-established nonprofit institutions with strong philanthropic relationships, connected civic and corporate networks, and “track records,” which are rarely checked for real impact.



Massachusetts' philanthropic funds can be visionary trailblazers in the COVID-19 crisis by addressing funding inequities, including taking the following steps:

- **Bigger is not always better.** Smaller local organizations led by ethnically or racially diverse leaders who have established trust and deep relationships with community members are often in a better position to develop and implement effective solutions to address the issues within their communities. Unfortunately, these organizations are frequently overlooked by foundations and funds because they may not meet the profile a funder seeks. They might be an emerging organization with an infrastructure that is still in development. Funders worry that these organizations will close their doors during crises, economic or otherwise. However, the financial support provided to smaller, minority-led nonprofits can have an immediate impact because they have a concrete grasp of their community's needs and challenges, do the in-field work, and can rapidly put funds to use. Philanthropy is more effective when it supports capacity-building by providing larger dollars to these front-line organizations.
- **Be race-conscious.** [Race Forward](#), a social justice organization, reminds us to incorporate race as a factor that helps inform how we assess, "Who is most vulnerable? Who is burdened? Who benefits?" To these questions, we add, "Who is left out?" More important, are funders tracking the organizations funded and the percent of dollars to front-line and minority-led organizations? Asking these questions will ensure that emergency-response funds proactively integrate a racial equity lens in their crisis-focused grant-making process.

▪ **Be intentional about inclusion and equity at decision-making tables.** The philanthropic funds created during this crisis have a responsibility to ensure that they are led by individuals doing front-line work in vulnerable communities. Representation and a voice when funding decisions are made can ensure that philanthropic giving is more equitable and that it tempers unequal access to funder relationships. Funds can add new voices by implementing community decision-making structures, transparent processes, and committees that have a say in how monies are allocated.

▪ **Build the capacity of minority-based funds.** The philanthropic sector must commit to supporting these funds, which exist to democratize the nation's philanthropic sector. Funds such as the [Latino Legacy Fund](#), [Blacks in Philanthropy](#), and the [Business Equity COVID-19 Emergency Fund](#) are organized and led by community leaders. Many of these funds have to work twice as hard to raise the dollars to have a significant impact in their communities. The philanthropic sector must commit to supporting these funds, to help ensure no one community is left behind as a result of this crisis.

The historic inequities and disparities facing communities of color existed long before COVID-19 and will be exacerbated if there is not a conscious and transparent commitment to undertake definitive and corrective actions now. Effective and impact-driven funding will occur when funders have a grasp of the communities experiencing the most inequity, then target their resources (grants, technical assistance, capacity-building, and other forms of support) to these communities and their organizations.

Philanthropy can play a bold and meaningful leadership role by ensuring that underserved and under-resourced communities receive the resources, support, and care to counter the coronavirus pandemic. We should expect no less at this critical moment and beyond this crisis.

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