

Building Power with Environmental Justice Communities: Recommendations for Equitable Grantmaking



The American Public Health Association's Center for Climate, Health and Equity partnered with the Tallahassee Food Network and Moving Forward Network to convene a virtual roundtable called *Building Power Together: Equitable Grantmaking for Environmental Justice*. The roundtable, held in the spring of 2023, aimed to bring together philanthropic funders, funder networks and leaders and organizers in the environmental justice movement. The goal was to identify and co-create strategies and recommendations to address barriers community groups face in accessing funding (see appendix for full list of organizations).

While there is an unprecedented level of federal funding for environmental justice, many smaller organizations are not receiving this funding. Some of this is due to limited capacity to apply for restricted, complex federal grants or mistrust from federal agencies who don't believe these organizations can manage larger budgets –which ultimately leads to bigger, more conventional institutions that have little direct experience in the environmental justice movement receiving the funding. For both federal and private funding, restricted grants often limit an organization's ability to decide what to prioritize and to build their organization's core capacity.

Community-based organizations are the primary advocates for and protectors of their communities and will continue to need private foundations and philanthropy to address key barriers and fund their work. With the strides many private foundations have made in prioritizing funding for environmental justice, these partnerships can accomplish even more.

The following barriers and strategies for organizations and recommendations for funders outline proposed recommendations from the roundtable achieving equitable grantmaking for environmental justice.

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BARRIERS IDENTIFIED IN THE CURRENT FUNDING LANDSCAPE

- Grants are often too small, restricted and don't support multi-year funding.
- Grant application processes and reporting are burdensome and inflexible and often require dedicated accounting or grant management staff that community-based organizations don't always have.
- There is inadequate investment in building an organization's core capacity.
- Some funders, especially federal agencies, misunderstand what environmental justice is.
- There is rarely enough time built in for building trust and meaningful relationships with partners.
- Funders often choose academic institutions over authentic grassroots organizations for activities related to data collection, even as many community groups have been doing this work without support for years.
- Federal funding isn't sustainable and there is concern that environmental justice may not be a priority in government over the long term. A surge of short-term funding can destabilize organizations.
- Reimbursement grants and a delayed period of receiving funding hurt organizations and create more work as they must seek out additional near-term funding to achieve goals.

STRATEGIES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS

1. Partner with funder and nonprofit networks for technical assistance to apply for grants and get connected with private foundations. Networks such as the [Environmental Protection Network](#) can help make connections with foundations and provide technical assistance with grant applications. The [Moving Forward Network](#) builds partnerships between community and big green organizations, academia and others across the environmental justice space, as well as provides and compiles information and fundraises to subgrant to individual organizations.
2. Think outside of the box and find corporate or private partners as you apply to grants.
3. Grant proposals need to demonstrate specifically why your organization needs funding (such as to build core capacity), should reflect realistic project goals based on the amount of funding and should highlight how impactful your work is. Some private foundations will accept grant proposals you have used before with minor edits.
4. Budget narratives are important and need to demonstrate who is responsible for managing your organization's budget and finances. Your budget formula should dedicate a significant portion to staff salaries (~75%) and fringe benefits (~15%).
5. Use sources such as [pilot.com](#) to find part-time chief financial officers (CFOs) to help manage your organization's financial needs.
6. Don't ask for the minimum grant amount, your application is taken more seriously if you aim higher.
7. Have someone such as a board member to review your grant application.
8. Keep in mind that most federal agencies aren't going to fund organizations with budgets under a million dollars, so make sure your organization meets the qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

- 1. Give Unrestricted, Multi-Year Funding Directly to Environmental Justice Organizations:** Funding that is unrestricted and multi-year supports grassroots organizations doing the work in their communities. It demonstrates that funders trust and value community organizations. It allows organizations to determine their own priorities and helps build capacity to tackle systemic problems such as environmental racism, which requires a long-term, iterative approach. It gives organizations time to focus on their mission rather than searching for next year's funding. Giving flexible funds over multiple years also allows more time for community engagement, relationship building and for organizations to pivot under changing conditions. Funding over multiple years also helps to prevent "dumping money" on a movement all at once, which can destabilize an organization.
- 2. Provide Services Beyond the Check:** Funders can provide different types of technical assistance and services to make the grant application process easier and strengthen the organization's capacity. This can include providing technical assistance in applying for federal grants and other larger, more complex grants. Additionally, funders can work with organizations to identify other needs and services along the grant application process and compile resources and provide training that builds organizational capacity. They can also help alleviate the burden of searching for new sources of funding and identifying new partners by conducting an environmental justice funding landscape analysis that can be shared with organizations.
- 3. Simplify and Make the Application Process Inclusive:** Organizations continue to say grant applications are too burdensome, especially for larger grants that support general operational funding. Funders can make this process easier by streamlining the application process, accepting proposals used for different grants and in multiple languages, or creating a universal application process. For example, Northlight Foundation is using [JustFund](#) to streamline the process and make it universal. Funders can evaluate how inclusive their grant application process is, especially for individuals who struggle with digital platforms.
- 4. Accept Unstructured, Inclusive Reporting:** Unstructured, inclusive reporting allows organizations to fully describe how impactful their work is and report on the nuance of addressing systemic, complex issues. Unstructured, inclusive reporting might include accepting qualitative descriptions rather than quantitative metrics to show progress, reporting in other languages, or verbal reporting done through conversations or storytelling. Organizations can feel overburdened by unnecessary check-in meetings and other forced collaborations. Funders can work with organizations to find more inclusive and effective ways to report progress and alleviate the burden of reporting. For example, the Energy Foundation doesn't require grant reporting, only financial statements and conversations.

5. **Fund and Join Networks:** Networks such as the Moving Forward Network fundraise to subgrant to organizations, which helps funnel money directly to grassroots organizations. Funding networks that use this approach can help ensure money is going to organizations leading in the environmental justice space. New funders in the environmental justice space can join networks, such as the Health and Environmental Funder Network, Environmental Grantmakers Association, and Grantmakers in Health that help funders learn, connect and grow in areas focused on addressing community barriers in accessing funding and implementing best practices. Collaboration with other funders might lead to more efficient and effective ways of streamlining grant application processes and breaking down barriers for environmental justice organizations in accessing funding.
6. **Engage in Participatory Grantmaking:** Through participatory grantmaking (PG), funders can shift decisionmaking power to communities impacted by funding decisions ([Gibson et al., 2018](#)). They can hire or contract with leaders or organizers from within the environmental justice movement to review applications, help set priorities, develop strategies and more. This will help ensure authentic EJ organizations are being funded and can help diversify foundation staff and bring critical lived experience and community expertise into decisionmaking. Since 2019, the [Health and Environmental Funders Network](#) has convened a [Participatory Grantmaking Learning Community](#) that aims to delineate and advocate for PG practices that are aligned with justice, equity and movement-led solutions and demonstrates the value of PG to the broader philanthropic community.
7. **Improve Internal Capacity:** Funders can better serve organizations by understanding the environmental justice movement and centering justice, equity, inclusion and diversity principles. This might involve staff going through environmental justice training or bootcamps, hiring leaders in the environmental justice movement or individuals from the community, and building meaningful relationships with their grantees and community partners in the most impacted areas. Funders can look at environmental justice burdens expansively and systemically so other issues such as energy burden and substandard housing can be addressed and funded.
8. **Create Trust-Built and Meaningful Relationships:** Funders need to recognize that community groups have been doing this work for a long time without adequate support and are the real experts. Building meaningful relationships takes time, trust and humility. Funders can demonstrate how they are working internally to improve their understanding of environmental justice (see recommendation 7). Funders can gather data and stories from grantees to help ensure their work is recognized as legitimate research and information worth publishing, so that it can be referenced in decision-making. Funders should always aim to be transparent and responsive to the needs of their grantees.

APPENDIX

The following is a list of organizations that endorse this summary of recommendations. The Kresge Foundation is the primary supporter of the climate advocacy work at APHA's Center for Climate, Health and Equity.



The following is a list of individuals who participated in the roundtable called *Building Power Together: Equitable Grantmaking for Environmental Justice* and contributed to the development of this summary of recommendations.

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