

Evaluating The Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund: Centering The Voices of Woman of Color

A LIVED-EXPERIENCE DATA BLACK PAPER

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ABOUT MEASURE

MEASURE, an Austin-based nonprofit, works to empower people impacted by social disparities and the accompanying narrative. MEASURE believes that, when used strategically, data provides a common language upon which community members can meet and increase their knowledge about the causes and work together to create equitable change and increase awareness.

ABOUT THE AUSTIN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION WOMEN'S FUND

The Austin Community Foundation (ACF) Women's Fund was founded in 2004 to focus on the needs of women and children in Central Texas. At the time, there was a lack of philanthropic support targeting the unique needs of women and no comprehensive data tracking their well-being. Since its founding, the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund has granted nearly \$2 million to more than 60 local nonprofits (1).

WHAT DO WOMEN OF COLOR IN CENTRAL TEXAS NEED TO FEEL ECONOMICALLY SECURE AND EMPOWERED?

The Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund sought to understand what women of color in Central Texas need to feel economically secure and empowered. MEASURE conducted focus groups to help them gather this information. This report presents the findings of the focus groups on the problems identified by women of color in Central Texas that prevent them from feeling economically secure and empowered.

In summary, women of color in Central Texas need:

- Increased access to resources
- Access to less restrictive funds
- Access to mental health services and support groups
- Representation and diverse staff
- Access to affordable housing

PHILANTHROPIC RACIAL DISPARITIES IN GIVING

Creating a fair and just social impact system depends on racial and ethnic philanthropy as never before (2). Black leaders apply for and receive less funding overall. Organizations led by Black women receive the least (3). **The Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund has an opportunity to change these outcomes in Austin, TX by using a racial equity lens to evaluate who their 60 grants have gone to thus far.** We recommend that an additional analysis is done to collect and review data on past and future grant recipients to better understand and address inequities in the organization.

Sources

1. Women's Fund. (2020) Austin Community Foundation. <https://www.austincf.org/community-impact/womens-fund/>
2. Building Bridges to Communities of Color: A Toolkit for Engaging Donors of Color. (2007) Coalition for New Philanthropy. <https://philanthropynewyork.org/sites/default/files/resources/Building%20Bridges%20to%20Communities%20of%20Color.PDF>
3. Who has a seat at the table? (2020) Jumpstart. <https://www.jumpstartfundraising.com/grantmakers-blog/20201015-who-has-a-seat-at-the-table>

LIVED- EXPERIENCE DATA & STORYTELLING

“I think one of the problems is the lack of accessible information. I feel like advancement opportunities are often gate kept.”

- **Hispanic Woman in Austin**

"Hire those within the community that need assistance. Hold table talk events that may offer grants for housing assistance, education, food by application. Utilize those who may be willing to speak to reach out, and address some challenges folks may be having."

-**Black Woman in Austin**

"There is so much pre-judgement which makes it difficult for women of color to be encouraged to and empowered to get employment."

-**Black Woman in Austin**

our experience
makes us
EXPERTS

METHODOLOGY

Women of color in and around Austin, Texas were invited to participate in one of two bilingual (English and Spanish) in-person focus group opportunities held over a virtual platform. Participants were recruited by email invitation to register to participate to share lived experiences and provide deeper insights. The women included Black women who were nonprofit founders of organizations in Austin serving other people of color. These nonprofit founders never benefited from the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund. Also represented were women of color who receive services from existing Women's Fund grantees.

The 90-minute focus groups took place on Thursday, October 15, 2020 and Saturday, October 17, 2020. Participants were offered an incentive of \$150 to participate in the focus group to provide their insight and share their lived experience. Both sessions were recorded with participants' consent.

Using MEASURE's Equity Focus Group Tool, Certified MEASURE Educators were able to facilitate the discussion by asking the participants to share their honest thoughts on the following questions:

- What is the problem from your perspective?
- What are some reasons you believe the problem is occurring?
- How aware is the community about the problem?
- How important is the culture change to address the issue?

Two MEASURE Evaluators (1 English, 1 Spanish) were present during the focus group. Upon the completion of both focus groups, using a research framework of thematic analysis, both note takers analyzed notes to determine common themes and key findings to inform recommendations. These findings were then shared with MEASURE Care Leaders for their input using a racial equity lens before sharing with Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund.

LIMITATIONS

At the time the focus groups were conducted, MEASURE did not have quantitative data on the distribution of grant funding of the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund. Having a better understanding of how the fund has or has not been responsive to racial equity needs in Austin, TX, would have further helped develop the research protocol. This report includes a recommendation for more research and tracking into the data collected to address racial equity in the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund giving portfolio.

THEMES & RECOMMENDATIONS

LACK OF ACCESS

Women of color in Central Texas need better access to resources. When participants were asked, "what prevents women of color from feeling economically secure and empowered?" Several participants mentioned **insufficient access to resources**, citing challenges with gatekeeping, restricted access, and knowledge of existing resources. The opportunity to establish relationships between people who use existing services and those interested in similar resources through a safe space was also brought up, as this could facilitate the exchange of information of resources, share tips, lessons learned, etc. with peers.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Moreover, as many resources require technology (i.e., online application), **improved access to technology** and the centralized location of resources would help participants locate potential resource opportunities, thus leading them to feel more secure and economically empowered.

LESS RESTRICTIVE FUNDS

Women of color in Central Texas need access to **less restrictive funds** that can be used to cover basic necessities, which frequently include food, housing, education fees, etc. Participants often cited that funds are often too restrictive and require more reporting than their white counterparts, making them feel like there was a lack of trust. It is recommended that funding opportunities are flexible in the way that funds are spent.

ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH

Women of color in Central Texas need **access to mental health services** and social support groups to foster mental health in communities of color. When asked how money from the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund could combat racism in the community, participants overwhelmingly agreed that investing in mental health services with professionals who can engage in mental health issues within communities of color would help women of color feel more secure and economically empowered. It is recommended that Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund invest in cultural competence and anti-racist training to better serve communities of

color.



THEMES & RECOMMENDATIONS

REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Women of color in Central Texas need **representation and diverse staff** that they can relate to. When asked if it mattered who provided services and resources, participants overwhelmingly agreed that relatability and representation were important. They concluded that representation is essential for their self-esteem and sense of empowerment. They would like to see that women who look like them can lead their own nonprofit organizations and businesses. Increasing funding opportunities for Black and brown-led organizations can help increase Black and brown representation. Representation provides black and brown people with security and knowledge in understanding that the service provider has an intercultural awareness and is empathetic to the unique needs of women of color.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

When asked *What threatens your security at the moment?* The most cited issue was housing, followed by education, childcare, and unintended pregnancies. **Access to affordable housing** provides peace of mind to single parents fighting to make ends meet and women of color who have been displaced due to gentrification. Rising rents are associated with increased rates of homelessness, and job losses due to COVID-19 put more people at risk (4). According to the CDC, unsheltered homelessness leads to poor mental and physical health (5).

ACCESS TO UNEMPLOYMENT

Focus group participants mentioned that with COVID-19 came uncertainty of the future and **inability for immigrants to qualify for unemployment**, which increased the threat to their security.

DATA COLLECTION

Last but not least, it is our recommendation that a **data collection** and tracking system is implemented to monitor and address racial equity in the Austin Community Foundation Women's Fund giving portfolio. We provide some guiding questions to help initiate that process: *How many grants have gone to organizations that are led by women of color? How much grant funding has gone to organizations led by Black women? What are the board demographics of organizations that have received grant funding, and are they representative of the target population served? How is racial equity used to evaluate giving?*

Sources:

4. How COVID-19 Could Aggravate the Homelessness Crisis? (2020) U.S. Government Accountability Office. <https://blog.gao.gov/2020/08/25/how-covid-19-could-aggravate-the-homelessness-crisis/>

5. Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials (2020) CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>

CONCLUSION

The women of color included in these equity-centered focus groups shared their lived-experience about feeling economically secure and empowered. Focus groups like these provide women of color with a platform to speak their truth, validating the fact that their opinions matter. A focus group participant said: **"Open conversations about race help others to learn about the needs and opinions of others who sympathize with people when they put a face on an issue."** Addressing challenges like insufficient access to resources, mental health support, inadequate affordable housing, and inadequate childcare would create opportunities to help women of color feel more economically secure and empowered.

