

Greater Cincinnati Foundation

Case Study | July 2023



CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change



Since a watershed trip to the PolicyLink equity summit in 2015, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) has been on an intensive journey to center equity in its work. This journey has reshaped how GCF operates, from its community-facing programming to its own hiring and investment management.

GCF has used data analysis to target specific racial and gender disparities, identifying the economic mobility of Black women as an area of particular focus in catalyzing growth for the Cincinnati region as a whole.

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Introduction

In a groundbreaking 2021 report, The Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) partnered with the Economics Center at the University of Cincinnati to specifically understand the economic mobility of Black women in the region. The impetus for this project was a regional jobs outlook report finding that Black women faced the greatest barriers to economic opportunity. The findings were stark and daunting: nearly half of Black working women in the Cincinnati metro area make less than \$15 per hour, compared to 27 percent of White women. Median earnings for Black women were approximately \$24,100 or 36 percent lower than the median earnings for all workers.¹

For Meghan Cummings, the Vice President of Civic Advancement at GCF, these findings served as a call to action: "Everything we looked at from employment to income showed us that these disparities for Black women existed. How can we have a thriving community unless all parts are thriving? We did a lot of work understanding what that data told us and we were unapologetic about centering [Black women] in our grantmaking." This included a \$75,000 grant to the Women's Business Center of the Economic and Community Development Institute, an Ohio-based microlender which primarily supports businesses

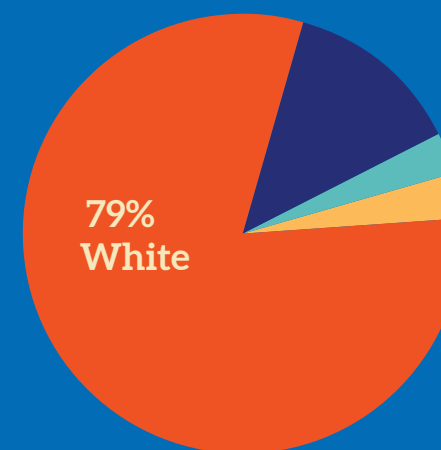
owned by Black women. Through this grant, GCF supported over 600 businesses employing more than 1,600 people. GCF also funded the Corporation for Findlay Market, the nonprofit operator of a historic food market in Cincinnati, to support a residency program benefiting women, Black and Indigenous people, and immigrants interested in the food and restaurant business.² In the policy arena, the GCF Women's Fund worked to support the passage of the city's salary history ban, a policy designed to help address race and gender-based pay disparities by prohibiting employers from inquiring about the salary history of an applicant.³ These are just some of the ways in which a focus on Black women has become a cornerstone of GCF's work.

This story is emblematic of GCF's broader equity journey: an honest and data-driven reckoning with inequities in the Cincinnati region, a bold and straightforward naming of the problem, and a swift and strategic response.



Cincinnati sits on the north bank of the Ohio River

3 Spans 3 states: Southwest Ohio, Southeast Indiana, and Northern Kentucky



13% Black
3% Asian
3% Mixed race⁴

By many measures, Cincinnati is a thriving city:



Home to several Fortune 500 companies including Procter & Gamble, American Financial Group, and Fifth Third Bank



The fastest-growing startup space in the Midwest.

However, it is also an area of deep inequities:



Third-highest child poverty rate in the nation, with Black children three times more likely to live in poverty than White children



Among the top five segregated cities in America.⁵

Origins: "Our Stake in the Ground"

Founded in 1963, GCF serves eight counties across Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. GCF has distributed \$1.63B in cumulative grants since 1963, including \$126M in 2021 grants. In recent years, racial equity has been at the center of the organization's work.

Many GCF staff members identify 2015 as the beginning of the Foundation's equity journey. That spring, Ellen Katz joined the Foundation as CEO, and in the fall, a group of GCF staff and community members flew to LA for PolicyLink's biannual Equity Summit. "That adventure out to LA really catalyzed the whole movement for us," said Katz. "We invited other community members, other leaders from Cincinnati, and equity became our stake in the ground, and what we would really embrace as the biggest opportunity for our region." Phillip Lanham, GCF's Chief Philanthropy Officer, concurred: "That [PolicyLink Equity Summit] seemed to be a watershed moment." The Summit, a gathering of leaders in the equity movement, introduced GCF to new frameworks for measuring equity at the city level, and to new ideas that could "move the needle."

Upon returning, the group of about 30 GCF and other local leaders stayed connected.

According to Meghan Cummings, "We kept meeting at GCF, so the Foundation felt like the hub of the movement that grew out of this LA trip... and it became apparent that first year that equity would be Ellen's focus as CEO and that this would become the fight of our generation at GCF."

Katz acknowledged that equity had been a part of GCF's DNA since before her arrival in 2015. In 2001, when Timothy Thomas, a 19-year-old Black man, was shot and killed by a Cincinnati Police Department officer, a period of protests and civil unrest ensued.

According to Katz, GCF was engaged in the response to this regional trauma: "GCF was at the table. We were funders, finding solutions. It was in our DNA, if you will." But Katz's arrival and the Foundation's trip to the PolicyLink Equity Summit represented a step change. According to Cummings, GCF's equity work preceding this was not as fully committed: "Before we were doing good work but it was safe in a lot of areas. We did not have to use a lot of political chips."

In 2021, equity formally became one of GCF's five core values, with a statement reading: "Equity is our NorthStar, our way of being and doing so all can thrive."⁶



“Equity became our stake in the ground, and what we would really embrace as the biggest opportunity for our region.”

Ellen Katz
CEO of GCF

Creating a “Common Language” in the Community

In 2018, GCF launched “Racial Equity Matters,” a series of educational trainings on the root causes of racism and racial inequities. Conducted in partnership between GCF and the Racial Equity Institute, the trainings were designed for leaders spanning the business and nonprofit sectors, sharing key insights on structural racism, and providing space for brainstorming and collaboration.

The idea was inspired by a need to create “common language” around race and race equity within the Cincinnati region. Katz said:

“There’s something about Cincinnati where we really didn’t talk about it [race or equity]... and we realized that we won’t make progress if people don’t talk about those subjects.”

The first session of the training is called “Groundwater,” a half-day introduction that grounds participants in the realities of systemic racism. The philosophy, according to Katz, is that “the only way to reduce disparities is to address the groundwater. Not just the fish affected by it but to get to the water itself.” This leads into “Phase 1,” a two-day training that goes deeper on the root historical and cultural causes of contemporary racial inequities.

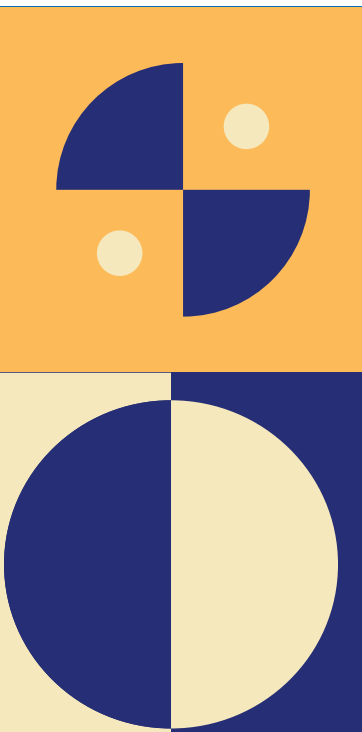
Finally, participants who complete these sessions can join “Impact Circles,” which are run by GCF and bring people together in smaller groups to continue discussion and design action on equity issues.

GCF has attracted more than \$580,000 in investment to support the Racial Equity Matters program, and at least 3,000 people have participated, disseminating principles of racial equity to many of the most prominent leaders in the Cincinnati region. Cummings hopes that this experience will help these leaders “make more equitable decisions in their careers and community lives.” Many leaders in city government and the largest corporations in Cincinnati participated in the program.

One participant, among many City Hall officials, was Cincinnati’s Vice Mayor Jan-Michele Kearney, who said: “I learned a lot. By the end of it, I was

like, oh my goodness, this is something else. They showed a movie about Levittown, a planned community for veterans returning from World War II, and how Black veterans weren’t eligible for these mortgages. It was eye opening ... The people I went through the class with all found it very valuable.”

Another participant, Mel Gravely, the CEO of TriVersity (a large Cincinnati-based construction company), was so moved by his experience in Racial Equity Matters that it led him to write a book called *Dear White Friend*, which addresses the realities of race and power in American life.



580,000

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Leadership from the Board

A majority of the GCF board has also attended the Racial Equity Matters training, an experience that served as an inflection point in the board's own equity journey. Ellen van der Horst has been on the GCF board for nine years and now serves as its Vice Chair; reflecting on the beginnings of the organization's equity focus, she said, "I think that having hired the Racial Equity Institute and having sponsored Racial Equity Matters, those conversations within our board and then within the community really opened eyes for everybody. You think you know, but then you learn how much you don't know."

These conversations led to the board's creation of a Racial Equity Pledge, codifying the organization's commitment to racial equity in both its community-facing work and its internal operations. The creation of this pledge began in the governance committee, then involved co-creation with staff, and culminated in an official vote from the full board. The final pledge, approved and published in 2021, includes a series of commitments with details about how those

commitments will be demonstrated. For example, the first principle reads: "GCF commits to a process of total alignment to anti-racist practices in our organizational practices." And underneath this are a series of goals, including: "Diversification of our staff and board to mirror our community"; "Investing in mandatory employee and board education"; and "Building culturally competent HR policies, programming and practices that focus on equitable employee hiring, retention and growth into leadership roles."

The impact of this Racial Equity Pledge has been significant. According to van der Horst: "It really matters. It really drives a lot of subsequent activities."

More recently, fulfilling a goal of the Racial Equity Pledge, the board passed an anti-hate policy, preventing any grant dollars from flowing to organizations classified as hate groups. The board was in conversation about this policy for a year before ultimately finalizing it in December 2021.

“It really solidified our vision of an equitable society, equitable board, and equitable decisions about grantmaking. It made it part of our DNA.”

Steven Jemison
GCF Board Member

Reflecting on the process, van der Horst said:

“It was really challenging... Initially, some of us said, ‘That’s easy, of course we don’t want to give money to hate groups.’ That is easy to say until you get into the weeds of what is a hate group ... But we worked through it and got it through committee, then through the board, and we’ve had to apply it in less than a handful of instances. To me, that’s putting your money where your mouth is.”

Designing and implementing a board-level commitment to racial equity was not without challenges. Jemison expressed his concerns about losing donors with a different vision; and, to an extent, this fear was borne out. "There were long-term donors who said, 'I don't know this organization anymore,'" van der Horst recalled. But the board understood that while they might lose some donors, they would gain others, and that commitment to the organization's equity vision was the most important thing. As van der Horst shared, the board was even willing to lose board members: "Not every board member had the same degree of belief about the importance of this ...

You navigate that by meeting people where they are and having conversations of trying to bring them along. But if you can't ... you still have to stick to your principles, even if that means losing board members."

GCF leaders also benefited from participation in peer learning networks run by CFLeads, a national network of community foundations. Between 2019 and 2022, GCF participated in both the CFLeads Equity Network (of community foundations interested in advancing equity in their work) and the Economic Mobility Action Network (of community foundations focused on improving the economic circumstances of low-income families). GCF leaders saw participation in these networks as a key inflection point in the board's journey. Ellen Katz spoke specifically of the value of having board members in attendance: "The work we have done with the board was helped by bringing them with us [to the Equity Network] ... It accelerated their commitment to the work we were doing in a way that was really profound."



Investing in Cincinnati's Black Community

Focusing so explicitly on the Cincinnati region's Black community, and on Black women in particular, was new territory for GCF. According to Cummings: "That was new language for us. That was a hard pill to swallow among some of our board members, but the evidence was there." Critically, the research showed that improving the economic mobility of Black women would be a boon to economic growth in the region overall.

The peer learning aspect of the CFLeads Equity Network may have contributed to GCF's ultimate decision to focus so explicitly on elevating Black women in the region. Speaking generally about the value of her Equity Network peers in other community foundations, Cummings said,

"The connections to peers in our cohort were so important, being able to problem solve with them and to build that trusting, long-term relationship ... You cannot buy that. It was built in day-long sessions when we were really doing the gritty work, and it probably sped us up two years in terms of what we needed to learn."

Phillip Lanham remembered a specific lesson he took away from the Seattle Foundation, a fellow participant in Cohort 2: "I still quote what the Seattle Foundation said to us about focusing on a particular population: that focus is explicit, but not exclusive. And it's about explaining to an audience why we are focusing on that population, and the ripple effect it has on the region. We are not favoring that population, we are just choosing it

because of the data behind it." In many ways, this thinking is reflected in GCF's focus on closing gaps for Black women.

GCF implemented several programmatic strategies in line with this theory of change. In 2017, GCF partnered with individual donors and the GreenLight Fund (another funder with a footprint in Cincinnati) to bring UpTogether, an anti-poverty nonprofit, to the Greater Cincinnati region. UpTogether provides low-income families with "unrestricted cash," which families can use as they see fit, with no strings attached. This is a proven model; nationally, after two years of support from UpTogether, participating families saw a 23 percent increase in monthly income, a doubling in annual income and assets, and improved educational outcomes for children.⁷ In Cincinnati, UpTogether set out to partner with 1,000 families. Brittney Williams was one of the residents who received \$400 per month from UpTogether, which helped her with expenses for her six-year-old son while she pursued a college degree in business administration.⁸ This type of no-strings-attached financial support became even more of a focus as GCF honed in on Black women as a target population: "It [UpTogether] became a big grant, and it showed how we were trusting women to know what their families' needs are," said Cummings. Of UpTogether participants, 90% have been Black and 83% have been women, all of whom have at least one child in their home.

Racial Justice Fund

In the wake of George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020, GCF committed \$5M over five years to the Racial Justice Fund, with a goal of addressing "the root causes of systemic racism in our community."⁹ There were several organizations and initiatives supported by this fund, including the Ohio Justice and Policy Center (the leading criminal justice reform advocate in the state) and MORTAR (a provider of coaching services to entrepreneurs from economically marginalized communities). And there was also a specific focus on Black women, reflected through a grant to Queen's Village of Cradle Cincinnati, which is meant to create space for Black women to network, support each other, and advocate for the goal of "maternal equity for Black moms and babies."¹⁰

GCF has also partnered with the City of Cincinnati to achieve impact at even greater scale.

Launched in 2022, the Boots on the Ground Fund provides capacity-building grants of up to \$25,000 to small, community-based organizations. To be eligible for the funding, organizations have to be located in the city of Cincinnati and have an operating budget of less than \$1M. According to the request for proposals, "The Fund intends to focus investments on small organizations that have historically received the least amount of funding, but are often the closest to the solutions." GCF and the City of Cincinnati gave priority to organizations serving key issue areas, including homelessness prevention and access to affordable housing, public health and access to health care, and gun violence prevention.¹¹

In addition to the funding, GCF also provided technical assistance to participating organizations. "With Boots on the Ground, GCF also helped these community organizations get properly structured," said Vice Mayor Kearney, "A lot of folks just don't have that knowledge. GCF does free classes for smaller groups that need help in getting established as nonprofits. That gives them the capacity to accept this funding and grow their work."

Partnerships to Drive Policy Change

In addition to its grantmaking, GCF has also partnered with United Way of Greater Cincinnati and Interact for Health to form All-In Cincinnati, a community-led coalition focused on achieving policy change in the name of equity. All-In Cincinnati's core team included representatives from 13 organizations, spanning local nonprofits, national networks, and city government agencies. And many members of this team were among the group of community leaders who attended the PolicyLink summit in 2015.

In 2018, All-In Cincinnati released its first report, highlighting disparities in health, housing, education, economic mobility, and justice. The coalition has focused its advocacy on closing these gaps through a combination of budget and policy advocacy. All-In Cincinnati advocated for \$40M in affordable housing and \$10M in Wifi support in Hamilton County's COVID-19 Federal Relief Budget. In the area of health, All-In Cincinnati partnered with Kroger supermarkets to allow SNAP/EBT card users to shop online and do curbside pick-up, which offers both convenience and COVID-safety advantages. Intersecting health and justice, All-In Cincinnati partnered with

Health Care Access Now to place community health workers within housing authority and judicial offices. Denisha Porter, the Executive Director of All-In Cincinnati, spoke to the theory behind this initiative: "They help people access health services in key moments. For example, they work with judges to modify or add services for reentering citizens."

The coalition's structure is conducive to community involvement and investment. According to Porter, "We always bring any upcoming policy or change to the coalition ... I think the community sees a change, and a change that's been made by them. A lot of the barrier to getting into policy and systems work is people feeling like, I can talk a lot, but do my words matter? This has changed that. When we have meetings, coalition members bring their best selves and really represent the community."

Looking Inward

Simultaneous to the organization's community-facing equity journey, GCF was also transforming its internal processes and operations. Speaking to the importance of this internal equity journey, Meghan Cummings shared,

"It was about the work in the community, but it was also a deep investigation of our own internal work, and I can't imagine doing one and not the other. If we are convening these conversations in the community, and not walking the path and having the hard conversations internally, then it's not really authentic."

Over a multi-year period, GCF partnered with Ellequate (an organization focused on workplace equity) to review the Foundation's internal operations. This process involved surveys and listening sessions to hear the voice of all GCF staff, an in-depth evaluation of GCF policies, and two pay equity audits.

There were several concrete changes that came out of this collaboration with Ellequate, including more equitable hiring practices, and a policy offering 16 weeks of paid parental or caregiver leave for employees of any gender. This process culminated in GCF being certified by Ellequate

as a "Gold Leader in Workplace Equity," which is similar to a LEED certification, but for issues of equity. This work has been well-received by GCF staff; a recent staff survey showed that 97 percent of employees feel that GCF has taken steps to advance racial equity within the organization.

GCF has also taken steps to shift its investment portfolio to funds managed by women and people of color. Thus far, the Foundation has transitioned \$40M to firms with diverse ownership. GCF also prioritized hiring a broader segment of vendors (more inclusive of women and people of color) for services ranging from insurance to catering to office furniture. In terms of internal culture, GCF holds monthly all-staff "Stronger Together" meetings, where the whole organization of 58 comes together for two hours of discussion on racial healing and creating a culture of belonging.

Reflecting on the whole scope of the organization's ongoing internal equity journey, Ellen Katz said:

"We recognized that what we do has to happen from the inside out, and that set us on the path. Until we took on the challenge to get our house in order, we couldn't really lead credibly on this issue."



97%

Percent of employees who feel that GCF has taken steps to advance racial equity within the organization.

\$40M

Transitioned from the Foundation to firms with diverse ownership, in an effort to shift its investment portfolio to funds managed by women and people of color.

Challenges

Engaging in serious equity work is never easy, and Ellen Katz and Meghan Cummings were both candid about the challenges of being White leaders in this work.

Speaking about the organization's strategic decision to focus on Black women, Katz said:

"We did a lot of learning in how we presented the information [about disparities for Black women]... because we were hearing back from Black women that we were retraumatizing them. This was very challenging."

Cummings added: "Showing the truth can be tough. How do you do that without retraumatizing? If you are a Black woman, every single chart in the report shows your community at the bottom." Grappling with this challenge, GCF emphasized assets and strengths in the Black community, and how the foundation saw support of Black women as the most effective way to accelerate economic growth in the region overall. But there is no easy solution; according to Cummings, "As White leaders in racial equity work, we wonder: are we not the right people to work on these issues? There is a lot of personal reflection on what our role is and whether we are being helpful in the movement. We reflect on that deeply and often, and have mixed feelings about what that means."

Relatedly, GCF leaders were self-aware about the historical limitations of the philanthropic field. As Katz reflects: "Philanthropy is complicit with keeping things as they are. If we consider our donors as our customers, how do you appeal to that audience that feels they have so much to lose? There's been that challenge. There's been the board saying, 'what if we lose donors?'" Lanham, GCF's Chief Philanthropy Officer, agreed: "Bringing donors along has been challenging. Some have studied [equity] for decades and understand it ... and other donors have blinders on and don't believe that structural racism exists in our country no matter what data we show or education we provide." GCF had to shift its mindset to accept that not all money is good money, and that losing donors in the short term does not preclude growth.

Lanham reflected: "[Losing donors] was really hard coming from the development world because we want the donor to always be right and happy, but not to the point where we are willing to give up our core beliefs as GCF."

Despite the loss of some donors, overall gifting to GCF has trended up since 2017. In 2022, GCF raised \$103M, compared to \$85M in 2017.

\$85M
raised in 2017

\$103M
raised in 2022

Looking Forward

Equity journeys do not have an endpoint, and GCF leaders recognize that their journey is ongoing. The Foundation's explicit focus on Black women is a relatively recent development, and there's broad agreement that it will be essential to re-assess various metrics from the 2021 report to measure the impact of recent investments. Relatedly, GCF leaders identified housing, racial justice, and partnering with Cincinnati's business community as key areas for programmatic focus going

forward. The strength and unity of the GCF team is a critical asset in continuing down this path. According to Lanham: "It [the equity journey] is really hard, but it's the right thing to do ... and I am happy to be on this journey with this incredible team. It's an organization with trust at the center. We have spent time building a team of people who not only like working together but care about each other. Building that trust and alignment within the team is critical for going on this journey."



Endnotes

- 1 Greater Cincinnati Foundation and University of Cincinnati Economics Center, "Realizing the Potential of an Equitable Economy"
- 2 Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "2021 Annual Report"
- 3 All-In Cincinnati, "Policies to Prosper: 2021 Overview"
- 4 Greater Cincinnati Foundation and University of Cincinnati Economics Center, "Realizing the Potential of an Equitable Economy"
- 5 Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "One City Two Realities"
- 6 Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "Core Values"
- 7 GreenLight Fund, "UpTogether"
- 8 Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "Partnering with UpTogether"
- 9 Greater Cincinnati Foundation, "Racial Justice Fund"
- 10 Queens Village, "Get Involved"
- 11 Greater Cincinnati Foundation and the City of Cincinnati, "Boots on the Ground Fund: Request for Proposals"

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