



# Community Foundation of Greater Flint

Case Study | July 2023



**CFLeads** | Community Foundations  
Leading Change



Equity work began as soon as the Community Foundation of Greater Flint was founded in 1988. The Foundation used both the water crisis of the 2010s and the COVID-19 pandemic to strengthen its equity work and has intensified its focus on equity in every strategic planning process since 2014, buoyed by the support of a proactive board of trustees.



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>FLINT CASE STUDY:</b>	
Deep Equity Roots.....	5
Getting Strategic About Equity .....	6
Centering Equity .....	7
Equity and COVID-19 in Flint .....	8
Changes in the Approach to Equity Work.....	9
Equity in Governance .....	10
Reflecting the Community Among Foundation Staff ..	11
A More Equitable Investment Strategy.....	12
Finding Inspiration Through Collaboration.....	13
Challenges .....	14
Next Steps on the Equity Journey .....	15
<b>Endnotes.....</b>	<b>16</b>



# Introduction

Racial equity has been a priority for the Community Foundation of Greater Flint from its inception in 1988, brought into relief by Flint's majority Black population. Inequities surfaced sharply in the 2010s, when Flint briefly switched its water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River, unleashing a series of physical and mental health crises. The Community Foundation forged progress from calamity, making equity a specific focus in its 2014 strategic plan. Equity became an even stronger focus in the Foundation's 2019

strategic plan, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought equity issues to the fore again, resulting in a successful community effort to improve access to health services for Black and Latinx people. In more recent years, the Community Foundation has strengthened the diversity of its investment portfolio management. A proactive board of trustees has helped support the Foundation's increased centering of equity in its approach to grantmaking and collaboration with communities.

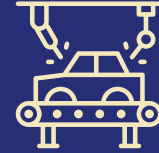


For good. For ever.  
For everyone.



Situated along the Flint River, 60 miles northwest of Detroit, Flint is the seat of Genesee County in eastern Michigan.

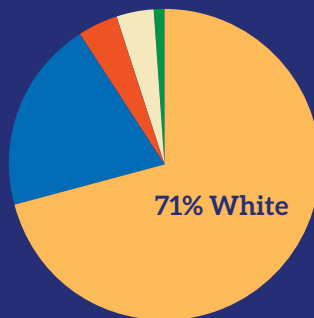
The closure of automobile manufacturing plants in the 1980s and 1990s led to a dwindling economy and shrinking population.



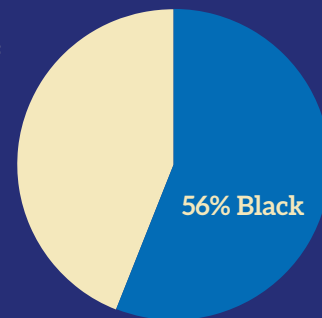
In the 2010s, mismanagement of Flint’s water supply exposed residents to dangerously high levels of lead and other toxins.<sup>1</sup>

As of 2022, the population of the Flint metro area was approximately 400,000,<sup>2</sup> with approximately 80,000 people living in the city of Flint proper.<sup>3</sup>

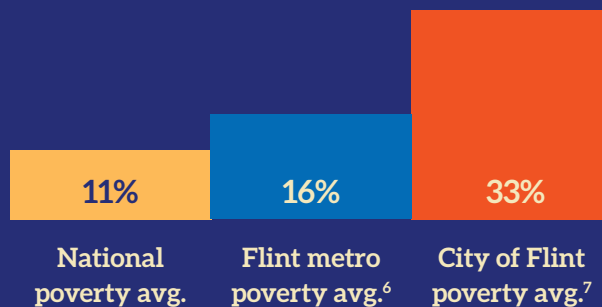
Flint metro is  
19% Black  
4% Hispanic  
4% Two or more races  
1% Asian<sup>4</sup>



The city of Flint is majority Black<sup>5</sup>



Poverty rate



The median household income in the city of Flint (~\$35,500) is less than half of the national median.<sup>8</sup>

# Deep Equity Roots

The Community Foundation of Greater Flint grew out of the 1988 merger of the Flint Public Trust and the Flint Area Health Foundation.<sup>9</sup> By 2023, the Foundation's assets had grown to nearly \$300 million, and in 2021 grantmaking totaled \$10 million, for a total of \$164 million since the organization's founding.<sup>10</sup>

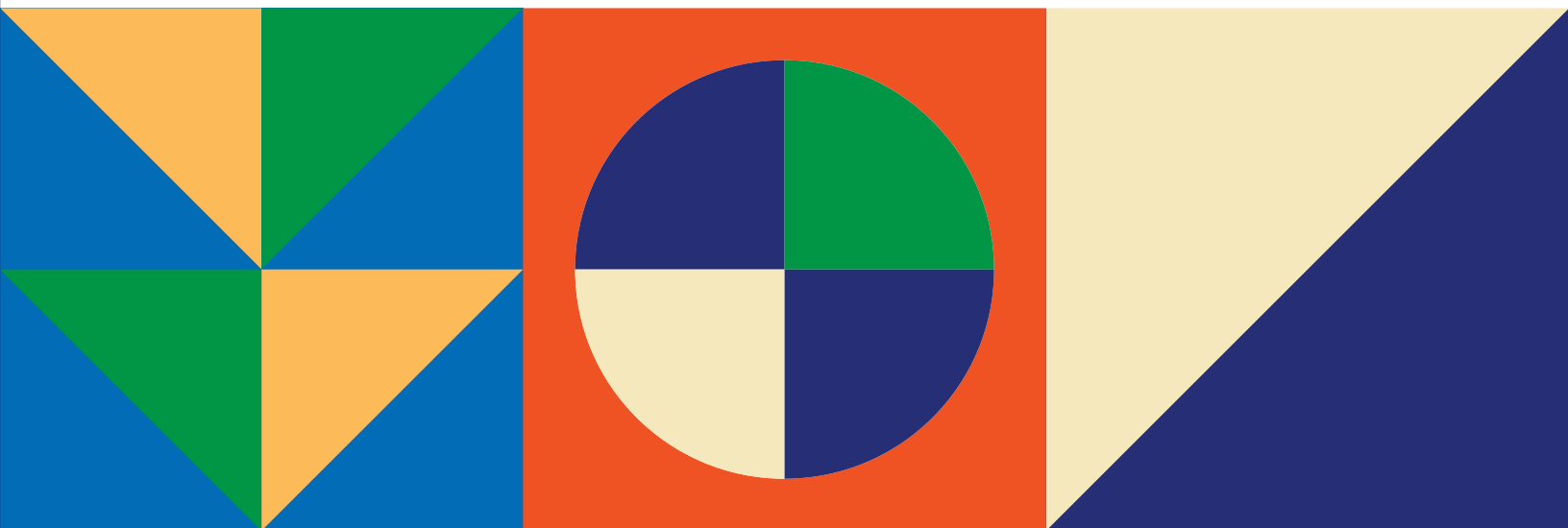
In 1990, with the formation of specialized proposal review committees, the Foundation began issuing small neighborhood and neighborhood leadership grants to organizations that were not registered nonprofits but were in close proximity to community problems. It also began focusing on women and girls. Before this new initiative, these communities did not have access to traditional grantmaking processes or strong ties to the Foundation.

Lynn Williams, Director of Equity and Community Engagement, dates the beginning of the Foundation's "strategic and explicit equity journey" to the 2012-2014 period, when "we had a strategic plan where the board highlighted literacy, access to healthy food, and Flint neighborhoods" as its strategic goals. Each of these areas featured sizable inequities of socio-economic status, race, and other factors. Around the same time, the city switched its water supply from Lake Huron water supplied through Detroit to the local Flint River.

This change caused water distribution pipes to corrode and contaminated Flint's drinking water with lead, Legionella bacteria, and other harmful substances. People reported that the water looked, smelled, and tasted bad, and began complaining of skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin. The contamination of its water supply unleashed an epidemic of health and behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, and uncovered the vulnerability of low-income communities to this blight. Flint declared a state of emergency on January 1, 2016.<sup>11,12</sup>

The emphasis on equity in the 2014 strategic plan was timely. "The water crisis catapulted us," says Lynn Williams. "It helped us understand that the strategic priorities [we identified] were right on target, and the ones we needed to make a difference in the crisis."

Community Foundation of Greater Flint Board Trustee Carma Lewis reports that the Foundation's Equity Subcommittee, in which she participated, began around this time: "This work started because of the water crisis. People were more negatively affected because of a lack of trust in the medical community—there was lack of trust all around."



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Lynn Williams

Director of Equity and Community Engagement,  
Community Foundation of Greater Flint

## Getting Strategic About Equity

Buoyed by its long tradition of incorporating equity into its work, and propelled by the ongoing challenges of the water crisis, the Community Foundation of Greater Flint resolved to center equity in its new strategic plan in 2019. Isaiah Oliver, President and CEO from 2017 to 2023, has said that the Community Foundation expected the strategic planning process to take a few months, but it ended up lasting a year: “We started in August 2018 and finalized the process with the full board ratifying a plan that included strategic vision in mission and strategies in 2019.” The new vision became “a vibrant and equitable Genesee County where everyone can thrive,” while the new mission statement was “The Community Foundation of Greater Flint partners and leads by influencing and connecting generosity to Genesee County needs. For Good. For Ever. For Everyone.”<sup>13</sup> Lynn Williams recalls, “we went from the 2014 plan, when equity was not called out but equity

issues were, to a more strategic and explicit plan in 2019 because of the fact that the Foundation wanted to center, highlight, and promote equity externally and internally. It was embedded in all areas of the strategic plan.” Vice President of Community Impact Sue Peters has said that the Community Foundation “redid the plan to reflect more and better what we want to do in equity.” But she doesn’t claim the job is done: “We started to build equity into the grantmaking, but we have more to do.”

*The understanding that there is more to do, according to Isaiah Oliver, came from the realization, beginning in 2019, that “charity is not enough. Where do we focus our resources for maximum impact? You start to see who is marginalized the most, where would the greatest impact happen through investment.”*



# Centering Equity

As a result of the new strategic plan, and the new board-ratified mission and vision, one of the Community Foundation's primary initiatives is called "Centering Equity." Some of the specific programs under this initiative include "Access to Healthy Food," which features the "Flint Fresh Mobile Market" and the "Flint Fresh Food Hub"; and the "Black Philanthropy Fund," which funds Black-led nonprofit organizations as a means of redistributing power. Centering Equity also includes the Mid-Career African American Professionals Network. The Network works to invest resources to prepare, connect, and retain Black area leaders and talent in Flint and Genesee County, for example by linking mid-career Black professionals with senior Black leaders from the business, government, and service sectors. Another Centering Equity initiative, "The Greater

Flint Taskforce on Racial and Social Equity," works to bring "awareness, analysis, and action to the root causes of disparities in order to ensure racial equity within and across organizations and systems to reduce disparities during and following the COVID-19 pandemic."<sup>14</sup>

Board Trustee Carma Lewis feels that "the equity work started to come together. Our community has suffered a lot because of the inequities that exist and have for hundreds of years. We're now in a place where we're also taking the mirror and looking at ourselves to figure out what changes we need to make." Looking inward, Lewis feels, means ensuring that the Community Foundation and its board are listening carefully and not perpetuating those inequities.





# Equity and COVID-19 in Flint

The Community Foundation of Greater Flint recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic painfully underscored a lack of equity in healthcare. Speaking of March 2020, Isaiah Oliver recalls that “we found out a month later that Black and brown people were dying at an alarming rate from COVID-19.” The Community Foundation summoned over 25 community partners to form the Taskforce, which began to identify unequal access to healthcare resources countywide, including access to testing and, later, vaccination. The Taskforce, which met weekly, also began to ensure that people from a wide array of sectors were involved in analyzing data and determining what was needed to address gaps and disparities. These included healthcare and education, in addition to faith, neighborhood, and activities leaders, plus community members. “After 26 weeks of this work,” Oliver remembers, “we could see a shift in the numbers.” In Genesee County, Black and Latinx people became proportionally less affected by COVID than White populations. In its September-October 2021 issue, Mother Jones

published an article on “How Flint Closed the Gap between Black and White Suffering Under COVID.”<sup>15</sup>

“As a result of this shift,” recalls Lynn Williams, “we strengthened our convening muscles.” The Taskforce succeeded in addressing COVID-related inequities and disparities, and the impact on Black and brown communities. The Taskforce continues to meet and now has specialized subcommittees looking at other examples of inequity. “We were able to reverse the disparities and have the Black community show up as the most receptive and biggest proportion of the community that was being vaccinated,” Williams adds. “That was huge.” Isaiah Oliver also hopes that the lessons of COVID persist beyond the pandemic: “We’re now trying to figure out post-COVID what it means to be thoughtful about systemic inequities.” This includes a sustained effort to pull people from the community together to address system-wide problems.

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Lynn Williams

*Director of Equity and Community Engagement,  
Community Foundation of Greater Flint*

# Changes in the Approach to Equity Work

A number of factors have contributed to a shift in the way the Community Foundation of Greater Flint approaches equity work, such as the water crisis, the challenges highlighted by COVID-19, and a majority-minority population. “Once the decision was made that we were going to center equity,” says Lynn Williams, “we began to explore what that looked like externally and internally.” This includes a concerted effort to hire vendors and use services from underrepresented groups, including for catering and maintenance services. The Community Foundation is also adding questions to its reporting about the makeup of the boards of grantee organizations, under the assumption that a diverse board would lead to more equitable decision-making. “But moving that to where we formalize it, and put it in our policies and documents, is a process,” adds Isaiah Oliver.

Since 2017, the Community Foundation has been the recipient of a multi-year \$825,000 grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to create a Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Fund (TRHT). As Lynn Williams notes, TRHT is not so much a program as “a framework with tools designed to build relationships across differences, to really focus on relationship-building for trust and truth-telling.” This focus on relationship-building helps groups, coalitions, and organizations create positive change and community transformation in areas where the impact of racism is most critical. Sue Peters explains that “the whole premise of TRHT is building the connections between humans to have tough conversations. I am hoping this version of working on equity in our community has sustaining power.”

Under TRHT, the Community Foundation funds racial healing initiatives of local nonprofits targeting the following areas:

*“narrative change” (programs that show the full picture of the Flint community; challenge myths; provide new language and tools for communication; support “authentic” community voices; capture untold stories; and develop principles for sharing stories)*

*“racial healing/relationship building” (initiatives that unearth deeply-rooted beliefs and attitudes; heighten awareness of common humanity; maximize the number of people participating in authentic conversations; and engage the community in healing activities)*

TRHT funding has supported training for local healing practitioners, a “racial-healing day,” community-wide visioning sessions, the RACE exhibit at Flint’s Sloan Museum, and healing conversations among the city’s Choice Neighborhoods residents.<sup>16</sup> The 2018 RACE exhibit explored the science of human variation, the history of the idea of race, and the contemporary experience of race and racism in the United States.<sup>17</sup> The Choice Neighborhoods initiative, launched in 2018, aims to rebuild Flint’s Atherton East public housing in more desirable areas in south and north Flint (largely on vacant public land), and to improve education, safety, and economic outcomes for neighborhood residents.<sup>18</sup>

# Equity in Governance

When it comes to equity issues, the Community Foundation's board has traditionally been proactive and responsive. Following the 2019 strategic planning process, the board decided not to set an equity goal, but to use the following five-year period to define its commitment to equity and allow that commitment to evolve over time. The Centering Equity subcommittee is where the equity "deep diving" occurs. In forming the subcommittee, the Community Foundation has paired its most equity-centered board members with some of its most conservative board members, "creating an opportunity to deep dive alongside staff for six months to create a container for work moving forward," according to Isaiah Oliver. "Our board is very diverse in a good way," he explains, "in that it represents all of Genesee County." And as for the more conservative board members, "their voice needs to be heard. If we make a decision [about how to approach equity work], we need to have two or three answers for how or why we are moving this way ... We shouldn't be centering race equity if [a board

member objects], and you can't come up with a good reason why we should be doing it."

The process of including the board in equity work begins with the Community Foundation responding and reacting to needs and pressures in the community. Senior staff then take this information to the board, presenting data and crafting options for board members to consider. "I would say it hasn't been a difficult journey for the board," offers Lynn Williams. This is due in part to the process of presenting data and cases to the board, and "because the board and our committees are populated by people living in the midst of these equity concerns." Carma Lewis agrees that the board is proactive:

*"Our governance leadership pays close attention to make sure there are no gaps on our board: if we need a focus on faith or business—they make sure we have a representative. If there are issues, they'll bring it up. They make things happen."*



# Reflecting the Community Among Foundation Staff

The Community Foundation of Greater Flint has infused equity into its internal operations, ensuring that equity is included in work plans and job descriptions. “Most of our HR functions align to equality, making sure everyone gets the same thing,” comments Isaiah Oliver. This assurance that everyone at the Foundation is focused on equity has extended to staff reading Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*; Rhonda Sanders’ *Bronze Pillars: An Oral History of African-Americans in Flint*; and the writing of PolicyLink Founder Angela Glover Blackwell. “We are learning what equity is and what it means for people,” Oliver adds.

Brett Hunkins, the Community Foundation’s Chief Financial Officer, found the CFLeads Equity

Network (of community foundations interested in advancing equity in their work) to be an excellent opportunity and space for talking about finance and equity, and learning from colleagues and counterparts. “We now have an internal equity group made of folks who went to the [Equity Network] cohort,” explains Sue Peters. This group is “leading the charge on doing more internal training, building the culture, looking at policies, and looking at HR practices.” The internal equity group is in charge of “holding our equity feet to the fire.” Carma Lewis has also witnessed Community Foundation staff members growing and even expressing equity-centric views with which some board members might disagree: “Many staff members live in this community. They fight for us in a way I think is amazing. I’m proud of it.”

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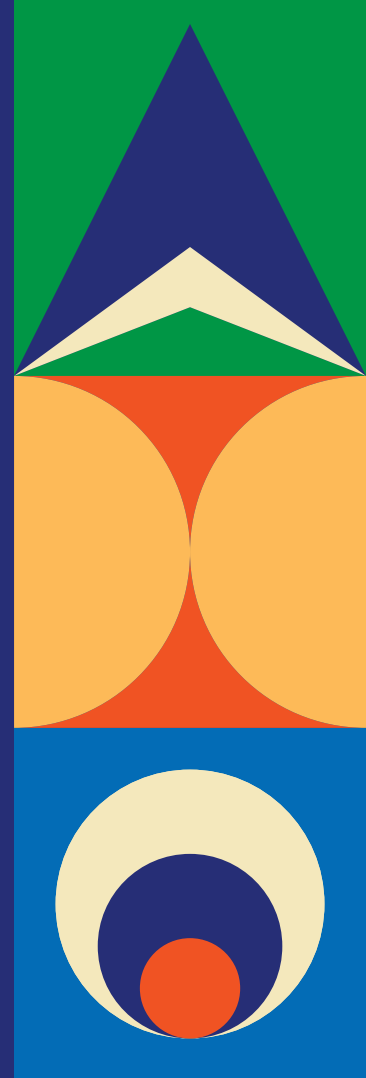
**Carma Lewis**

*Board Member, Community Foundation of Greater Flint*



# A More Equitable Investment Strategy

Isaiah Oliver heard about the goal of members of the Association of Black Foundation Executives who pledged to have 20 to 25 percent of their assets managed by diverse managers by 2025. Since Flint was working with the same investment manager as some of the other community foundations committed to investment diversity, Oliver figured it wouldn't be that difficult to make the change: "I saw their returns, so I thought there would not be a loss here." Work by the internal equity group, CFO Brett Hunkins, and the investment committee also helped the Foundation increase diversity among its financial advisors and its exposure to racially diverse funds. Investment diversity (including representation of Black and Latinx people and women) ultimately increased from 1 percent to 27 percent from 2019 to 2021. But because most of the diversity came from including women as financial advisors, and less of it from Black and Latinx people, Oliver feels there is more to do: "It was clearly an equity sell, but it did not touch the race equity bucket we thought it would be in. We are still working to see how we can get more Black and brown managers included in that mix."







# Finding Inspiration Through Collaboration

The Community Foundation's participation in the CFLeads Equity Network in 2019-2020 came at an opportune time and ended up touching many aspects of its work. "That cohort is really what promoted and pushed us to not only do things differently but to begin to include equity in our strategic plan," says Lynn Williams. Williams found the value of the Equity Network to be critically important. The first assignment that the Foundation received when it was accepted into the Equity Network cohort was to describe its equity journey:

*"We had not been used to thinking in those terms. The cohort was a good boost in helping us begin to examine our equity journey."*

Participation in the Equity Network also gave the Community Foundation "more confidence to make

us feel like we could lead off or catalyze efforts of antiracism—that was huge. From that point we really have become a catalyst [for equity] in the community."

Isaiah Oliver found the Equity Network particularly useful for "creating space where you are getting direct feedback from peers who understand your world. Going through the cohort gets you to the questions to center equity and structure your practice." It allowed Oliver and his colleagues to "bounce ideas off of other people in similar positions," and has helped strengthen the Foundation team, in particular by reminding them that they are not alone in their journey. Foundation staff who participate in the Equity Network can now reach out to other foundations who may be at different stages of their equity journey and know what they have to look forward to.



# Challenges

Many aspects of the equity work of the Community Foundation of Greater Flint have been positive, including buy-in from the board. But it has not all been smooth sailing:

*“We really had to come to grips with the fact that you can’t do this work expecting it to be a linear path to growth and change,” explains Lynn Williams.*

Events like the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis have galvanized efforts to incorporate equity into the Foundation’s work, yet at other times these efforts can flag. But “we are still doing the work, still convening, meeting, and coordinating. We have a goal.”

Isaiah Oliver also acknowledges setbacks and bumps along the road, including in his own efforts: “I think we live in a world where your executive leaders need to make decisions where they feel good, and know that not everything will be right. I am trying to calibrate how people feel, engage with equity, and what day-to-day management might look like.”

For Sue Peters, while the Foundation’s grantmaking has absorbed many equity considerations, that doesn’t mean that its equity work is done:

*“The other piece that is hard is the traditional governance structures of nonprofits getting in the way of what we want to do around equity: it is all top down.”*

The Foundation is trying to ensure that staff members have input into the equity process and conversation, but given the top-down tradition, this “creates natural tensions. We’re building the trust needed internally to have the tough conversations.” The Community Foundation lost some of its trust-building momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, although it did an equity related online healing circle. “But now we have new staff who couldn’t be a part of that training,” Peters explains.

“For me, the biggest challenge is dealing with the truth,” says Carma Lewis. “A lot of the work we’ve been doing, I’ve been able to compare what I saw growing up [in the South] and what I see now. I’ve been able to understand why we’re in this place, why we need to move forward, how to do it, and how to communicate with others who don’t necessarily agree. The road that we’re on, because of CFLeads and the equity work we’ve been doing, it’s easier to form relationships with people who don’t see things the way we do. We’re able to communicate more effectively and find a common ground.”



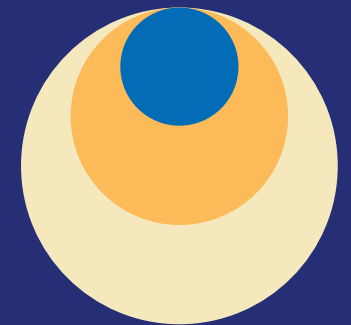
# Next Steps on the Equity Journey

The Community Foundation is continuing to think about what equity will look like in its future. It currently is working with consultants on sustainable development goals as a tool to measure impact, including equity components. The Foundation has succeeded at making grantmaking more accessible, but is still working on ensuring equitable grantmaking for equitable impact.

With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, among others, the Foundation is also part of a group sharing lessons learned from their equity efforts. "I am at the table with groups much farther along on their journey," Sue Peters reports. "I'm fascinated with seeing their strategies and their momentum."

For Carma Lewis, "the sky's the limit. We've done so much. If you had asked me ten years ago, I wouldn't think we'd be where we are. We do so much to bring organizations to the table—we need more of that." The Foundation still needs to step in to augment a local government that is "severely lacking in capacity." It also needs to address gaps in community efforts to address inequities. "I'd like to see the Community Foundation bring siloed organizations together and help them build internal capacity," says Lewis. "If they were more willing to work together, there'd be more funding for all of them."

"Now we are about to become more strategic and create a racial equity plan," Lynn Williams reports. In the past, Community Foundation staff and community members drove a lot of the equity work, with the board "co-signing." But the Foundation is now asking the board to become more actively involved and help identify what role board members should play in an organization's equity work. This will involve ensuring that the board knows what it needs to do to sustain that commitment even through leadership changes.



## Endnotes

- 1 Encyclopedia Britannica, [Flint, Michigan, United States](#)
- 2 Census Reporter, [Flint, MI Metro Area \(2022\)](#)
- 3 United States Census Bureau, [Flint city, Michigan \(2023\)](#)
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- 9 Community Foundation of Greater Flint, [History](#)
- 10 Community Foundation of Greater Flint, [2021 Annual Report](#)
- 11 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Flint Water Crisis](#)
- 12 National Resources Defense Council, [Flint Water Crisis: Everything You Need to Know](#)
- 13 Community Foundation of Greater Flint, [About Our Foundation](#)
- 14 Community Foundation of Greater Flint, [Centering Equity](#)
- 15 Mother Jones, ["How Flint Closed the Gap Between White and Black Suffering Under COVID", September-October 2021](#)
- 16 Community Foundation of Greater Flint, [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation](#)
- 17 Sloan Museum and Longway Planetarium, [Race Exhibit](#)
- 18 Imagine Flint, [Choice Neighborhoods Initiative](#)

# CFLeads

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