



Jackson Community Foundation

Case Study | June 2023



Collaboration with CFLeads was key to incorporating equity values and issues into the work of the Jackson Community Foundation (JCF). Participation in CFLeads Community Leadership and Equity Network cohorts in 2015 and 2018, respectively, led JCF to sensitize its board to the need to address equity within the community, and then make changes to its grantmaking practices.



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Introduction

For the Jackson Community Foundation (JCF) in Jackson, Michigan, CFLeads—a national network of community foundations focused on community leadership—has been an essential partner on the Foundation’s equity journey. Beginning with JCF’s participation in the Michigan Community Leadership Network and continuing through the Foundation’s inclusion in an Equity Network cohort in 2018, the power of coming together with peers helped JCF forge its own equity path. The experiences inspired the Foundation first to take a step back and assess its current status and capabilities, then to gather board members to assess internal equity values, and later to take further steps such as making its grant application process more accessible to smaller organizations, and dedicating funding to tackling systemic racism.

The Jackson Community Foundation began in 1948. In 2022, the Foundation had assets totaling \$42 million and awarded \$2 million in grants (in such areas as education; arts, culture and recreation; physical, emotional and mental health; scholarships; organization capacity building; civil, social, and legal systemic change; and youth development, among others).¹



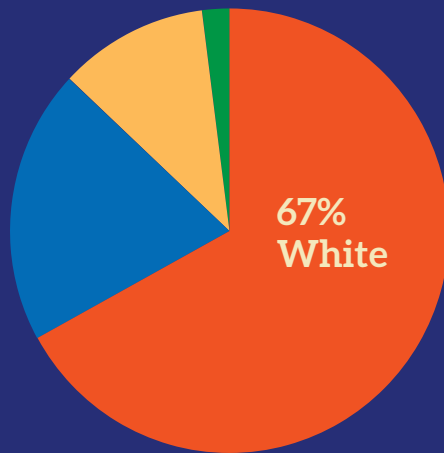
Founded
1832

"Jackson is situated on the Grand River some 75 miles west of Detroit, at the confluence of several Native American trails.



The town became the eastern terminus of the Michigan Central Railroad in 1841 and hosted the first Republican Party convention in 1854. Jackson later became an early center for automobile production.²

While the Jackson Community Foundation serves a population of 160,000, Jackson itself is home to 31,000 people:

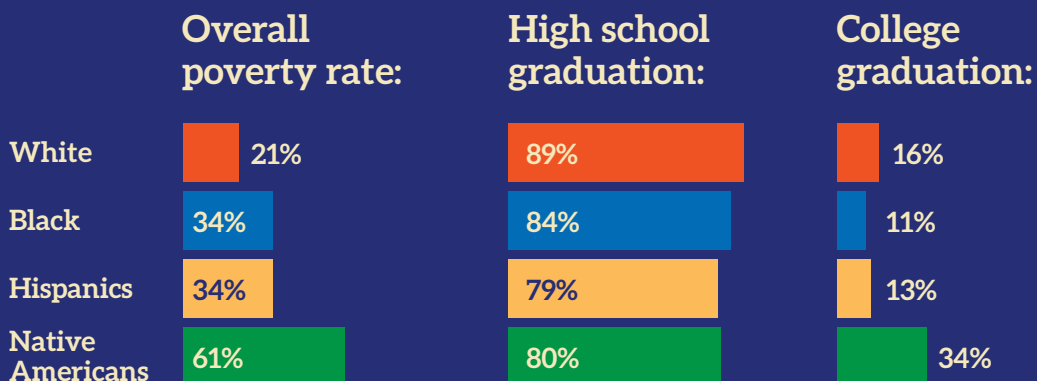


19% Black or African American

10% Two or more races

<1% Asian, Native American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and "other race."

There exist significant disparities between racial and ethnic groups in terms of economic and educational outcomes.



80%

The U.S. Census reports that 80 percent of Native Americans graduate from high school, but none graduate from college.³

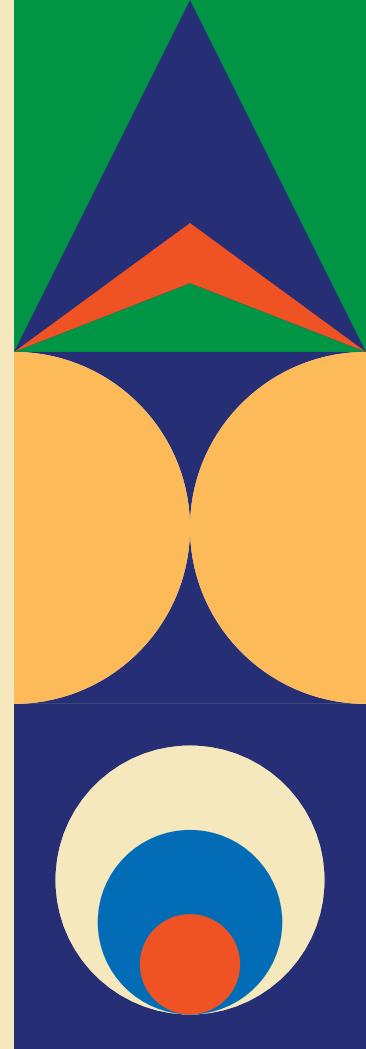
CFLeads Comes to Michigan

The Jackson Community Foundation's equity journey began through a community leadership cohort that CFLeads implemented in Michigan in 2015, according to JCF President and CEO Monica Moser, who took up her position in 2011. "That experience was transformational for me," Moser has said. "One of the things we wanted to do was to lean into equity, but we weren't ready. We had to work on our internal values with the board and staff." JCF's new Board Chair Renell Weathers concurs: "Going to the leadership network, we understood we were not ready. We had to do some things internally first. I think it was brave to recognize that. You learn a lot from what you do wrong versus right. It was critical to reassess and look at where we were and where we thought we were going. That was a big learning curve for all of us."

“ Most of our transformative work happened after the 2018 CFLeads Equity Network cohort ... I don't know if it would have happened without the Equity Network..”

Renell Weathers

Board Chair, Jackson Community Foundation



Shifting from Large to Small

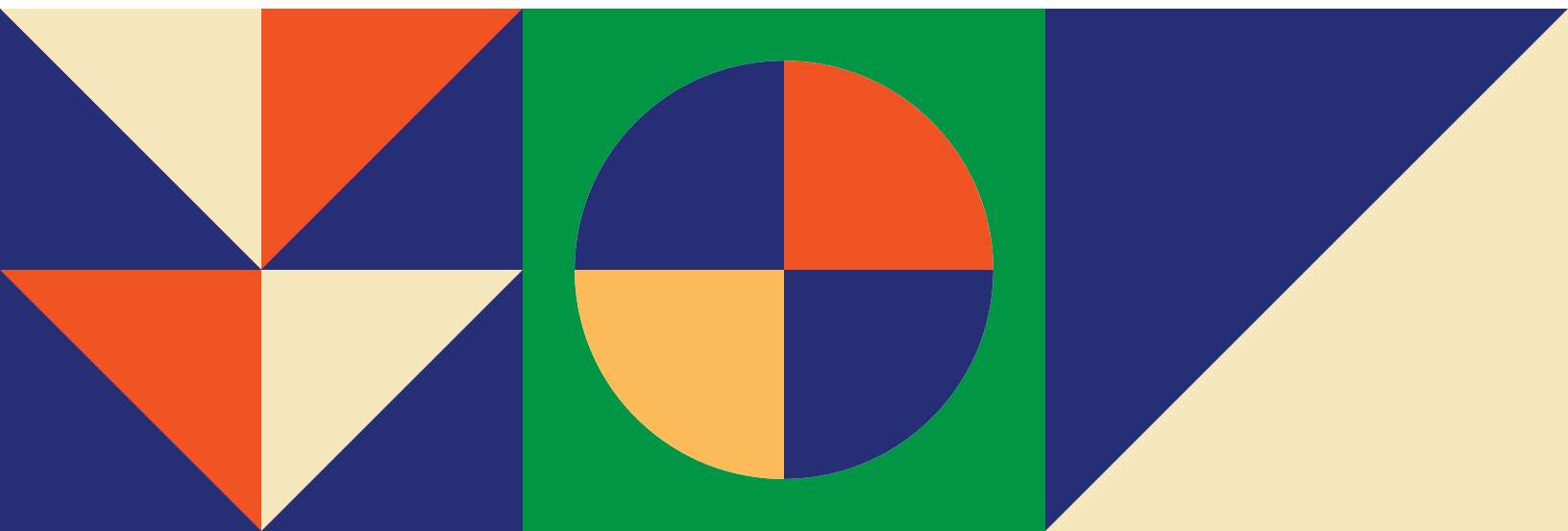
As the Jackson Community Foundation began to think about equity and how to operationalize its vision of creating a community where “all people have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential,” staff and board members realized that they would need to make changes to allow smaller organizations to access grant money. Program Director Dana Ashlock saw this as an important turning point for the Foundation when she began her position in 2011, and noticed the disadvantage in her work overseeing the grantmaking process: “Smaller groups weren’t as well developed, weren’t incorporated as 501(c)(3)s [e.g., nonprofits], and weren’t making it through the grantmaking process. But they were doing really good work in the community.”

At this point the staff and board began discussions about how to help these smaller organizations, and in particular how to help them navigate the application process and access grant money. Ashlock elaborates: “That discussion led us to identify some leaders of community organizations. We sat down with 10-11 people and asked them a series of questions.” These sessions probed on whether the smaller groups had been successful with other funders and yielded suggestions on how

to make JCF’s application process more accessible and equitable. “That’s when I realized how the inequities were affecting my job as the grants manager,” Ashlock continues.

“It turned out to be very emotional ... There was crying and hugging, and it resulted in strong relationships because we made significant changes to the application process for grassroots organizations.”

These included setting aside a pot of money specifically for grassroots organizations so they didn’t have to compete for grants against the more established nonprofit organizations in the community; meeting with potential applicants; simplifying the grant application; implementing a rolling deadline; and reducing the amount of time between when an application is submitted and a funding decision is made. At the same time, Monica Moser suggests, it’s important to ensure that grant recipients are serving the Foundation’s values and vision. This has involved the inclusion on grant applications of questions on how applicants are using their data, how they are authentically engaging the people they serve, and what gaps they’re trying to bridge through their work.



Bringing Equity to JCF Governance

By the time the Jackson Community Foundation had participated in the CFLeads Community Leadership Network in 2015 and begun to think about incorporating equity into its grantmaking process, it was clear that there was more work to do. This realization led JCF to hire an external consultant in 2016 to work with staff members and the board to help define these values. “It is always important to have your board aligned where the organization wants to go,” Renell Weathers explains. This entailed facilitated, in-depth discussions, and deep learning.

“Because we are a group of philanthropy and community leaders, the word ‘equity’ became a real issue,” Weathers continues.

“Having a shared understanding of what that meant took some time. We had to talk it out. I was never doubtful [that the board would sign on]

because I knew the strength of our community.” At the end of the facilitated process, the new values would eventually include the following: “act with integrity & transparency; embrace diversity and inclusion; and advance equity.”⁴

But as Weathers has pointed out, agreeing on equity-centered values was not the end of the process. “Having a facilitator talk about our experiences initially to grow together, there was more of a level set than there had been before. But how do you actually live those values in an organizational setting?” The process took several years, one committee, one operation, and one day at a time. Particular emphases included launching a grant ad hoc committee to embed equity throughout the grantmaking policies and practices and changing investment and board recruitment processes.



Finding Inspiration among Peers

Joining the CFLeads Equity Network in 2018 provided a lot of inspiration for JCF. “When the Equity Network opportunity came,” Monica Moser says, “I sat down right away and applied. When we were notified we were accepted, it was really exciting for the team, including our incoming Board Chair. Those experiences led us down a path we are continuing on, but we have really built our muscles both around community leadership and how we are an important part of the solution in the community on advancing equity.” The new Board Chair Renell Weathers started her community work volunteering at a church youth center, and later became an elected official staffer, a lead staffer, and a congressional staffer. She began her association with JCF in 2008, as a part of advisory committees on education. Weathers later became Chair of the Grant Committee and then of the Board Development Committee, before being named JCF’s Board Chair. “Coming from a majority community that looks like me [in Detroit] to a community that didn’t look like me [in Jackson] was a process,” she comments. “I was very comfortable and confident in those spaces and was able to cultivate that in Jackson.” Like Moser, Weathers feels that participation in the Equity Cohort was a turning point for the Foundation: “Most of our transformative work happened after the 2018 CFLeads Equity Network cohort ... I don’t know if it would have happened without the Equity Network.” One helpful element of the Equity Network was the [PolicyLink Equity Manifesto](#) (a powerful statement about what equity and inclusion mean, and what it takes to achieve them). As Weathers reports, “We had a process at the Equity Network where we all took a paragraph and thought deeply about what it meant for us.” JCF then undertook the same process for its governance committee, examining the same equity statement and discussing its significance, including to individual participants.

They eventually reached an agreement to post the statement on the JCF website while waiting to draft their own equity statement. This helped the Foundation move toward meaningfully including equity in its work.

Dana Ashlock also felt that participation in the Equity Network yielded significant benefits. “The Equity Network was very helpful in that we had designated time to talk about DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] and changes we could make within our organization,” she explains.

“We were the smallest foundation in the room. But it was such an opportunity for us to learn from bigger organizations.”

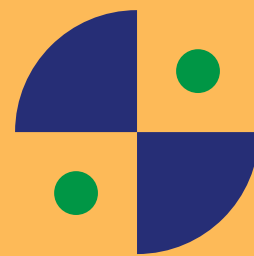
Equity Network participation helped JCF make some significant changes, including earmarking funds for tackling systemic racism.

As both Weathers and Ashlock attest, JCF took the lessons learned home with them and made concrete changes to their programming. These changes occurred in board development, recruitment, orientation, and meeting times. JCF also modified the grants process for grassroots initiatives, Tackling Systemic Racism, and operations, in addition to its investment portfolio diversity assessment. The Foundation made the Jackson Legacy Scholarship renewable, with a focus on low-income, first-generation, and students of color. The hiring process became more transparent and equitable (and now includes salary range), and the employee policy manual is more transparent and equitable.

“Having gone through the cohort,” Ashlock says, “I have a better understanding of why we’d want to make these changes and how to make them.”

The 21-Day Equity Challenge

As a result of their work with board members and participation in the 2018 Equity Network cohort, in 2019 the Foundation implemented a “21-Day Equity Challenge” for staff members, the board, and the community. Speaker and educator Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. developed this online tool in 2014 as a means for participants to practice seeing and addressing racial inequity. Food Solutions New England then adapted the challenge in 2015 as an annual event for their supporters to learn about racism.⁵ At JCF, the tool allowed constituents to learn about culture and different communities and consider policy recommendations for the Foundation from and about diverse communities. As Renell Weathers (who was closely involved in the Equity Challenge) has said, “Some of those folks dug deeply and some who were in it are now talking about being more inclusive. It is interesting that the several years of us being that bridge of knowledge and understanding has [resulted in] folks besides me speaking and saying we have to think about this differently. Now there are five people of color on the board of trustees, and at one point it was only me.”



Tackling Systemic Racism

In 2020, the Jackson Community Foundation had to confront both the COVID-19 pandemic and the powerful reverberations of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. The Foundation decided to issue a round of grants focused on tackling systemic racism. The Tackling Systemic Racism grants address services and policies that are inequitable and do not benefit Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC); BIPOC community members' lack of trust in service providers; and service systems that are difficult for BIPOC to navigate. As Monica Moser says,

“We finally said we are talking about systemic racism and called it what it was. There was zero community pushback.”

JCF used the grant process to help applicants think systematically about equity, and what it means to change policies and mindsets. One local Black leader received a grant to develop videos of real people in the Jackson community who had experiences with racism. Tashia Carter, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Residents in Action, collaborated with a local social worker to develop a curriculum, and produced a series of videos focusing on healthcare, education, and police, among others. “The [JCF] board watched these videos and leaned into the experiences of our community,” Moser comments. The grant was re-issued in 2022.

Other organizations benefiting from Tackling Systemic Racism funding include the College and Career Access Center of Jackson, which established the Jackson Student Anti-Racism Coalition. The College and Career Access Center is particularly interested in closing gaps for economically disadvantaged students, first-generation students, and students of color. The Center was already providing college advising, advising consultation, and advising workshops for high-school students. “When the pandemic shut us down,” explains Center Executive Director Nancy Peters-Lewis, “our team internally was in the process of creating our own DEI agenda ... We wrote a grant to support students aligned with our [equity] vision, to support them and to have a fund dedicated to anti-racism and social equity.” The Jackson Student Anti-Racism Coalition, established in 2020, is dedicated to fighting racial bias in the Jackson community, tearing down systemic barriers related to postsecondary education, and helping students understand what those barriers are. In the first cohort, a fellowship granted students \$100 to write a blog about their experiences dealing with racial injustice. Students also took part in the 21-Day Equity Challenge.

Another JCF partner, the Jackson Collaborative Network, which also participated in the Equity Network, received Tackling Systemic Racism funding to support equity-centered activities.

“Every three years we do a broad community assessment that includes gathering data and talking to community residents about their experiences,” says Jackson Collaborative Network Manager Sheri Butters. “We learned a lot of it in the Equity Network, coming back to look deeper into the racial disparities, and getting targeted on how we talk about them.”

In our most recent report, we looked at who is most affected. In our community, it is Black and brown members. The data [shows] that those racial disparities are really clear and we are not shying away from those conversations.” The Jackson Collaborative Network has shared the data from its community assessments with other community organizations, some of which are using it to lead conversations with their boards. Butters feels that the community assessments are helping shift the narrative around how the Network functions, making a case that outcomes must be improving for everyone.

Another group that the Jackson Collaborative Network supports is “Partial to Girls,” led by Salena Taylor, who grew up in difficult circumstances and had limited resources. Partial to Girls helps women-headed households in Jackson County, including by delivering diapers and formula to their doorsteps. This is an example of the Jackson community embracing equity and “being ready for new types of solutions and new types of leadership,” according to Butters, including supporting people affected by inequity to lead initiatives and implement change.



Looking Inward

In 2022, inspired by its participation in the Equity Network, JCF created an Equity Dashboard as a tool for seeing what its staff, board, and committee composition looks like over time. The dashboard disaggregates these categories by race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status. The Equity Dashboard allows the Foundation to review its current status and monitor progress toward objectives.

To try to introduce more diversity, the Foundation pioneered a more transparent process that outlined all the hiring steps and the salary range for a new position. In addition to general promotion, JCF engaged in outreach to people with potential interest who might not have seen a more generalized promotion of the post. “We didn’t have a ton of applicants,” says Dana Ashlock, “but we had diverse applicants.” The Foundation also worked to promote more diversity among the trustees and community members who sit on its committees, such as the Grants Committee and the Youth Advisory Committee. Two members of the

youth-administered Youth Advisory Committee now sit on the Board of Trustees as well. JCF is currently rolling out a new process for recruiting new board and committee members that will be more open to the community, including an open application rather than a traditional board recruitment process. The Foundation is modeling this approach on the work of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, a fellow participant in the Equity Network. “We are encouraging our board and committee members to use resources for tackling systemic racism out in the community,” says Monica Moser. “We’re practicing authentic engagement, where every committee is reaching out to constituents to make decisions.” Now people experiencing inequities in Jackson communities are sharing their stories with committee members. This has generated a fundamental change in how staff, committee members, and the board talk about and experience equity issues. And the board itself has undergone significant transformations compared to 2015.

“ We are encouraging our board and committee members to use resources for tackling systemic racism out in the community...”

Monica Moser

President and CEO, Jackson Community Foundation

Challenges in JCF's Equity Work

Challenges are nothing new in the work of the Jackson Community Foundation. Sensitizing its board to the need to address equity issues was a major challenge in the beginning, but in the end the Foundation found it had a board that was “brave enough to be put out there in a conservative community tackling systemic racism and articulate why, and able to look at the kind of proposals we got from the community,” as Monica Moser has said. Before participation in the Equity Network, equity issues were so important to Moser that “I was ready to leave the organization because I wasn't sure we could get there. If I'm going to stay committed to an organization, it has to do this work. And I'm still here!” But it's not always easy, she adds.

Predictably, according to Dana Ashlock, there has been some pushback from constituents about focusing on tackling systemic racism. Another challenge has been the population decline in Jackson's urban core. But “there's been a lot of effort to build that core back up,” Ashlock says. And “I get to meet fascinating people who started community gardens for local neighborhood, after-school programs. I wish everyone could see that.”

Board Chair Renell Weathers has also lived the challenge of trying to enlist others in the effort to increase equity. It's been difficult, she says, to “have this conversation with board members who had no connection to folks with challenging lives and speaking to where we could be a bridge to understanding.” And it has been difficult not to put people on the defensive, ensure that blame is not being cast, and instead share conversations about how to build a community in a way that encourages ownership and participation. Monica Moser echoes these sentiments: “I think the challenge is being vigilant and responsive all the time.

*Making sure we are using the right words and showing up in spaces even when it's hard.”
When there is an issue with a donor or another close ally, it's essential to map out all the steps and agree on messaging.*

Jackson Collaborative Network Manager Sheri Butters weighs in: “There are many people in our community who have taken a lot of time to educate themselves and do things differently. Our local government has come a long way, while our county government might be on the opposite side of the spectrum. In some of our communities All Lives Matter is still a thing.”

Because of these differences, conflicts between liberals and conservatives are common, and organizations like JCF must contend with people working against racial justice.

One local conservative organization has weighed in against some of the equity work JCF has been doing, and in particular against the Jackson Student Anti-Racism Coalition and managed to block some of the funding for the Coalition. A school superintendent from one of the focus districts of the College and Career Access Center of Jackson also pushed back about the Anti-Racism Coalition. But the superintendent still allowed the Center to administer surveys to recruit students. Still, the Center was only able to get representation in the Coalition in nine out of 13 districts. Despite these challenges, Butters feels that JCF, the Jackson Collaborative Network, and their partners are doing something right:

“We helped shift the norm, so when they show up and have those conversations, it is beginning to feel more out of place, because we are building our muscles to be ready and help educate as much as possible.”

JCF's Equity Future

In terms of future plans for the Jackson Community Foundation, Monica Moser is beginning to consider how to perpetuate JCF's equity values beyond her own tenure. Both she and Dana Ashlock foresee a time when the Foundation will have a more diverse staff and board, at the level of gender, ethnicity, and age. In addition, "I would love to reconnect with my Equity Network peers and hear their progress ... Our last convening was right before COVID-19 hit. We have all learned so much since then. [I think that COVID-19] accelerated our work and I wonder how that impacted some of our peers."

For Renell Weathers, "we're still a work in progress. This is the ongoing journey."

Weathers feels it is important to recruit future board members who have knowledge of equity issues and are ready to deal with them, and to provide training to supplement that knowledge: "As we do recruitment, we want to make sure folks are in that space." Board members, Weathers maintains, should be clear about the Foundation's mission and vision, and their own role in holding themselves accountable for ensuring those goals.



Endnotes

- 1 Jackson Community Foundation, [2022 Donor Acknowledgement and Financials](#)
- 2 Encyclopedia Britannica, [Jackson, Michigan, United States](#)
- 3 [United States Census Bureau](#)
- 4 Jackson Community Foundation, [“Our Mission and Vision & Values”](#)
- 5 United Way for Southeastern Michigan, [“About the 21-Day Equity Challenge”](#)

CFLeads

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