



Rochester Area Community Foundation

Case Study | July 2023



CFLeads | Community Foundations
Leading Change



Rochester Area Community Foundation has been focused on equity for over a decade, but that focus has intensified in recent years. The Community Foundation is deeply committed to using data to measure racial disparities and to spark productive community conversations. In its grantmaking, the organization uses its understanding of regional disparities to support specific groups and push for systems change.



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Introduction

Simeon Banister, President and CEO of Rochester Area Community Foundation, was born and raised in Rochester, NY. For him, the Community Foundation's equity journey is interwoven with his own personal journey: "I went away and came back to town with some life experiences and skills, and a desire to do everything I could do to strengthen our region, and make it as strong and equitable as possible. That is the journey we are on together."

For Banister and the Community Foundation, data is an essential tool for understanding and combating inequities in the Rochester area. Through the ACT Rochester initiative, the Community Foundation has created a repository of research and data on health, education, housing, economic security, and other key aspects of life in Rochester, with a stated goal of changing "the culture of decision-making through the use of credible, independent and timely data."¹ There is a deep focus on racial and ethnic disparities in ACT Rochester's data collection and analysis. For example, the 2017 report, "Hard Facts: Race and Ethnicity in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area," found that African American children in

the region were four times as likely to be living in poverty as White children, and that African American and Hispanic or Latino residents were less than half as likely as White residents to own their home. Furthermore, these disparities in the greater Rochester region were greater than in New York State or the U.S. as a whole.²

According to Banister, having this data is essential to framing productive conversations on the issue of equity. "Data can be like an oven mitt for hot issues," he said. "It can help people acknowledge that we have an issue with racial equity in this community." Of course, this acknowledgement is just the beginning. Based on an understanding of the deep racial and ethnic disparities that exist in the Rochester area, the Community Foundation has dedicated itself to two goals: creating an equitable community and strengthening the region's vitality.³



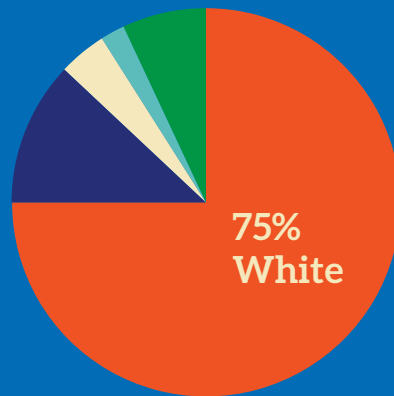
The Greater Rochester Area

consists of nine counties in western New York, shore of Lake Ontario.



Over One Million

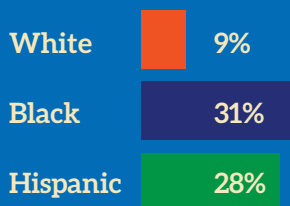
people live in the metropolitan area, including both rural farming communities and the city of Rochester as of 2020.



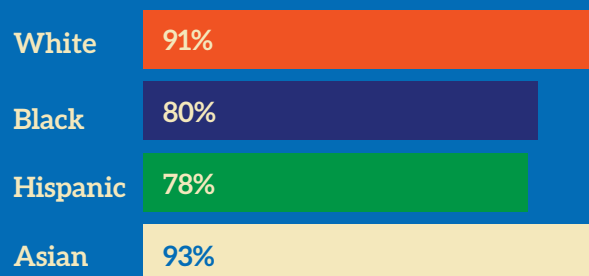
12% Black
7% Mixed race
3% Asian
8 % Hispanic or Latino⁴

Within the Greater Rochester Area, there exist significant disparities along racial and ethnic lines.

Living in Poverty (2017-2021)⁵



Graduated High School in Four Years⁶



In criminal justice, the 2021 arrest rate for African American residents was 43 per 10,000, more than five times the arrest rate for White residents.⁷

Origins: A Long History of Equity Work

Rochester Area Community Foundation was founded in 1972 and has awarded more than \$625M in grants and scholarships since its inception. Simeon Banister joined the Community Foundation in 2017 as a program officer, and he notes that the organization was already focused on equity at the time of his arrival. “Our equity journey began before the zeitgeist really shifted,” he said, recalling that the Community Foundation named equity as a priority as early as 2010. In 2013, the Community Foundation funded an exhibit at the Rochester Museum & Science Center called “RACE: Are We So Different?”⁸ The exhibit featured scientific content on the range and causes of human variation, as well as people’s lived experiences of race and racism. Over 45,000 people viewed the exhibit. At the same time, the Community Foundation supported the “Facing Race, Embracing Equity” (FR=EE) initiative to foster

even more intimate and engaged conversations. FR=EE brought together community leaders from across sectors for discussions on race, racism, and equity, resulting in 20 specific goals to advance equity in the region.⁹

Since Banister joined the Community Foundation, the organization’s equity journey has intensified. This culminated in the creation of the organization’s latest strategic plan in 2021, which centers equity in the organization’s vision statement: “We lead boldly to realize a more equitable, inclusive, and vital region.” Even with the Community Foundation’s history of equity-focused work, Banister was pleased at the ease with which this vision took hold: “There was a lot of alignment ... a lot of enthusiasm in the Community Foundation to focus our energy and effort on these issues.”

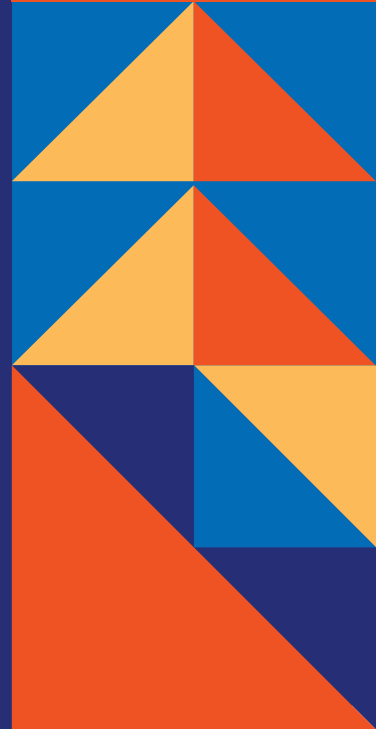
“ We lead boldly to realize a more equitable, inclusive, and vital region.”

Simeon Banister

President and CEO of Rochester Area Community Foundation

A Diverse Board Buys In

Having buy-in and leadership from the board was essential to adopting an equity-focused strategic plan, and the board's diversity was identified as a key asset here. Currently, about one-third of the Community Foundation's 27-member board identify as people of color. According to Simeon Banister, "The board is one of the most diverse boards in the community, and I think that's been a key factor in having the agency and leadership to move forward with this agenda." Banister credits Jennifer Leonard, his predecessor as President and CEO, with this push to diversify the board. Leonard shared that creating more board turnover was key to this process of diversification: "There used to be no limits on how long someone could serve [on the board], so we put a 12-year limit on someone's consecutive service ... and we were able to move participation a lot." According to Banister, the board has been leading the way on the organization's equity work: "We have a board that brings different perspectives to the issues we're encountering, and that diversity has been key to really foregrounding equity in all of our work."



Equity and Vitality

Rochester Area Community Foundation has two broad goals: to create an equitable community, and to strengthen the region's vitality.¹⁰ These twin goals have informed the Community Foundation's programmatic work.

Under the goal of creating an equitable community, there are three primary pillars to the work: "closing academic achievement and opportunity gaps"; "fostering racial and ethnic understanding and equity"; and "partnering against poverty."¹¹ These areas of focus were selected based on the Community Foundation's extensive work (through ACT Rochester and other initiatives) to understand disparities in the region. According to Erin Barry, Vice President of Community Programs, "We determined through community needs assessments that these are the areas that are causing the deepest disparities, and most impact Black and Brown people."

In addressing these disparities, the Community Foundation has been intentional in its framing. Simeon Banister reflected, "One of the things that became clear from the data was the confluence between high levels of poverty and low educational performance ... We did not want to get caught in the traditional trap of victim blaming or looking at symptoms instead of causes. We presented a more historical analysis – what were the decisions in the past that created these circumstances?"

In its grantmaking, the Community Foundation has also embraced a systems change approach. For example, the Community Foundation funded the Commission on Racial and Structural Equity

(RASE), a collaborative focused on examining local laws and recommending new policies to dismantle systemic inequities. In 2021, RASE released a report outlining its findings and making a series of recommendations to the Mayor of Rochester and the County Executive of Monroe County. These recommendations included: implementing a \$15 minimum wage for positions with the City or County; ending the use of pretextual police stops (which disproportionately impact Black and Brown people); and decentralizing the Monroe County Health Department so that there are more locations in neighborhoods with high concentrations of people of color.¹²

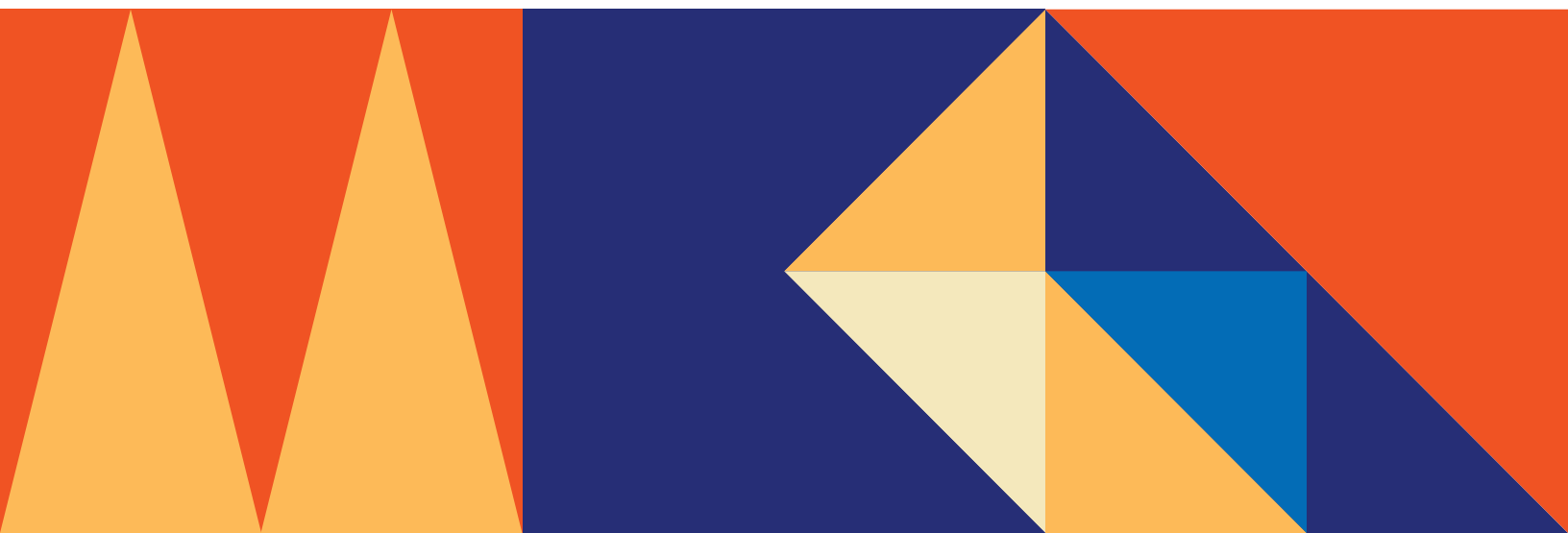
In combating poverty, the Community Foundation has funded several initiatives, including the HOPE Works project, designed to provide job training, placement, and other services to people coming out of jail, receiving county assistance, or at high-risk for gun violence. The project makes contact with incarcerated individuals before they are released, encouraging their participation in the 12-week program focused on job readiness.¹³ Another program funded by the Community Foundation, the Greyston Center for Open Hiring, advances the practice of hiring people for entry-level positions without applications, resumes, interviews, background checks, or references. This practice is beneficial to both businesses and individuals attempting to break into the job market. According to a 2018 analysis by the Yale School of Management, every dollar invested in open hiring translates to \$9 of social return, and staff turnover rates are lower in businesses that practice open hiring.¹⁴

In the area of education, the Community Foundation supports equity-focused initiatives from infancy through college, hoping to drive the closure of academic achievement gaps. In support of early childhood, the Community Foundation funded the Children's Institute to create the Rochester Area Parent Program. The program pays parents of children aged 2-8 to participate in parenting workshops, and has achieved satisfaction ratings of over 95%.¹⁵ Targeting the adolescent years, the Community Foundation funded the Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Rochester to provide financial education to children aged 11-18.¹⁶ And in the college readiness space, the Community Foundation funds the Rochester Education Foundation's College Access Fund, which helps students with the paperwork and decisions involved in applying to college.¹⁷

The Community Foundation has also created "giving circles" to encourage philanthropy from minority groups, and to target grant dollars to meet the needs of those communities. For example, the African American Giving Initiative was established in 2011 and designed to support grantmaking specific to the African American community in the Rochester region. This fund has distributed several grants, including

to the Commissary Fund (which supports expenses for incarcerated individuals), and the Interdenominational Health Ministry Coalition (which provides mental health and wellness programming for underserved populations). This fund also commissioned a report called "The State of Black Rochester 2013," which featured data on racial disparities from ACT Rochester along with essays from notable community leaders and equity experts.¹⁸ The Community Foundation has established similar giving circles focused on the Latino community, the LGBT+ community, and families of those living with developmental disabilities.

Simeon Banister credits participation in the CFLeads Equity Network, a national network of community foundations interested in advancing equity in their work, with moving the organization forward in its journey. Specifically, Banister recalled a talk given by Michael McAfee, President and CEO of PolicyLink, which instilled the idea that there should be a focus on specific groups of people rather than abstract problems. This approach is reflected in several of the Community Foundation's most meaningful programs and initiatives.



Continuous Evaluation Drives the Journey Forward

From the beginning, Rochester Area Community Foundation has focused on using data to understand and address regional inequities, and this practice continues to be a defining feature of the organization's equity journey.

In 2021, Rochester Area Community Foundation and the local Democrat & Chronicle newspaper sponsored an analysis of racial and ethnic disparities, and personal experiences of race and racism in the region. The analysis consisted of over 700 interviews with local residents, and replicated similar analyses conducted in 2012, 2015, and 2018. Troublingly, many residents felt that disparities had gotten worse over the years. Of those interviewed, 52% believed that the gap between Black and White residents in terms of overall standard of living has gotten

larger over the past ten years; and nearly half of Black residents interviewed reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace or other settings.⁴⁹ While these findings are stark and potentially dispiriting, the leaders of the Community Foundation do not shy away from them. In fact, many at the Community Foundation see the increased awareness and perception of inequities as a positive step, demonstrating that the community is increasingly aligned about the existence of problems that the organization is attempting to address. According to Simeon Banister: "We've gotten people to acknowledge that there is an issue with racial equity in this community ... There was a time in Rochester where it was taboo to talk about racism, and our work has played a role in pushing our community to acknowledge these issues are real."

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President and CEO of Rochester Area Community Foundation

Rhetoric vs. Action

Despite increased awareness of racial inequity amongst the region's community members, leaders at the Community Foundation still perceive a gap between rhetoric and action. According to Simeon Banister, "Probably the biggest challenge [in the community's equity journey] has been the disconnect between rhetoric and action ... I think a number of organizations, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, put out statements and did demonstrations about racial equity. But I wonder if some of that was performative, and whether our community will have the endurance to stay committed to those issues."

Banister believes that the community still has a long way to go to truly embed equity into every aspect of life:

"There's another level for us to reach as a community, where equity is not a sidecar ... How do you be a doctor with equity, a lawyer with equity, a salesperson with equity? How do we get everyone to feel invested in that work?"

To disseminate principles of equity throughout the community, the Community Foundation has begun hosting more webinars, listening and discussion sessions, and data salons.



An Expanding Scope

Looking to the future, leaders at Rochester Area Community Foundation identified several priorities in expanding the organization's equity work. In terms of governance, the journey towards board diversification is ongoing, with a particular focus on recruiting board members who are differently-abled and who represent different socioeconomic groups. Geographically, much of the Community Foundation's equity-focused programming has targeted the urban center of Rochester itself. Erin Barry, Vice President of Community Programs, wants to see this expand to all of the counties that make up the region: "We are starting to think more broadly about what rural equity looks like."

President and CEO Simeon Banister emphasizes that the Community Foundation's equity journey is an ongoing one, and compares the practice to that of the Garth Fagan Dance Company (a troupe rooted in Afro-Caribbean traditions and a grantee of the Community Foundation since the early 1980s). "Their dance approach is to allow the body to do the most that it can do, to stretch, and train, and discipline your body," he said. "How do we, the Community Foundation, train ourselves and exercise discipline to expand our capacity to do more?"

Endnotes

- 1 ACT Rochester, [Home Page](#)
- 2 ACT Rochester, "[Hard Facts: Race and Ethnicity in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area](#)," August 2017.
- 3 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[Mission & Vision](#)"
- 4 US 2020 Decennial Census, [Rochester, NY Metro Area](#)
- 5 ACT Rochester, "[Economic Security](#)"
- 6 ACT Rochester, "[Education](#)"
- 7 ACT Rochester, "[Public Safety](#)"
- 8 WXXI News, "[RACE: Are We So Different?](#)"
- 9 Justin Murphy, "[Facing Race. Embracing Equity sets goals, plans summit.](#)" May 22, 2014.
- 10 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[Mission & Vision](#)"
- 11 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[Grant Opportunities](#)"
- 12 Commission on Racial and Structural Equity, "[No Time for Excuses: It's Time for Action.](#)" March 12, 2021.
- 13 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[New Social Innovation Grants Turn Ideas Into Reality.](#)" October 2022.
- 14 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[No-Questions-Asked Hiring.](#)" September 2020.
- 15 Children's Institute, "[Rochester Area Parent Program](#)"
- 16 Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Rochester, "[Go For Gold](#)"
- 17 Rochester CAN, "[Welcome](#)"
- 18 Rochester Area Community Foundation, "[African American Giving Initiative](#)"
- 19 Michael Kilian, "[What Siena College poll tells us about diversity and inclusion in greater Rochester.](#)" April 5, 2022.

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