



Greater Washington Community Foundation

Case Study | July 2023



CFLeads | Community Foundations
Leading Change



Born of the civil rights movement in 1973 and the imperatives of a majority Black population, the Greater Washington Community Foundation had racial equity issues woven into its founding. Strong leaders propelled the Community Foundation forward, as did a groundbreaking ten-year strategic framework, initiated in 2021, that aims to close the racial wealth gap. Today the Foundation is confronting the need to establish a sizable endowment and the issue of reparations.

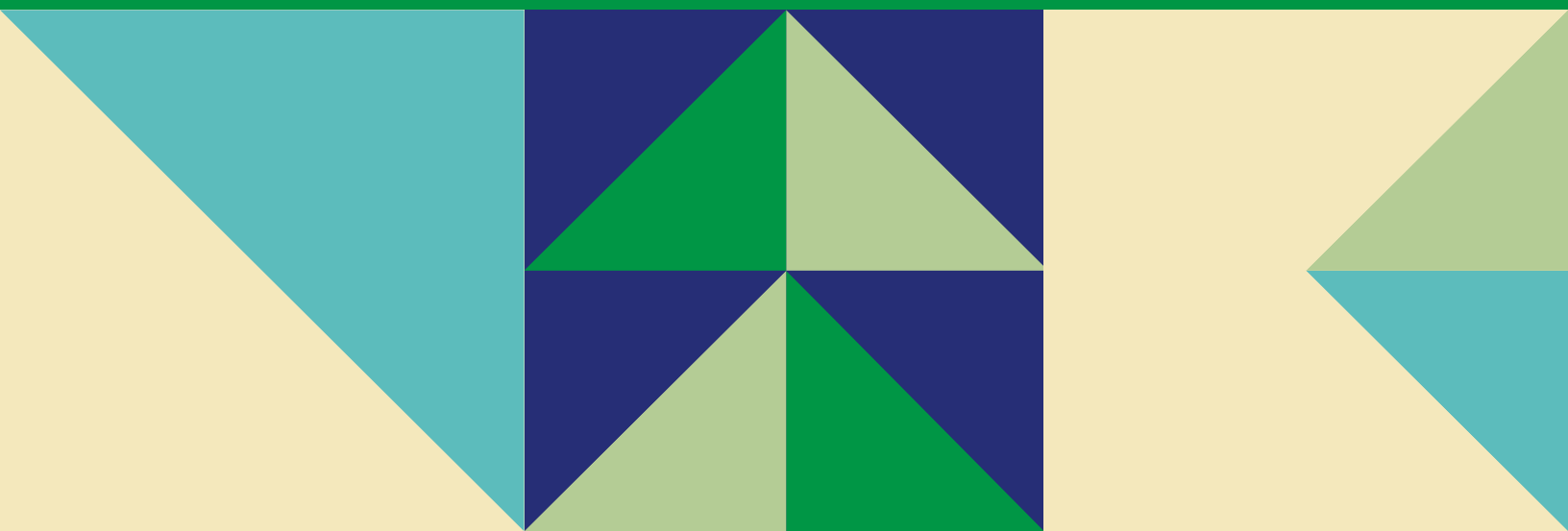


Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
GREATER WASHINGTON CASE STUDY:	
Born of Equity Imperatives	4
An Ambitious Strategic Framework.....	5
Diversifying the Board.....	7
Equity in Programming.....	8
Setting an Example and Learning from Others	10
Facing Headwinds	11
Equity in the Future	12
Endnotes.....	13



Introduction

While some organizations take time to grow into their equity commitments, the Greater Washington Community Foundation had celebrated civil rights leaders among its founders in 1973. Terri Lee Freeman was the Community Foundation's longest-serving and first Black female President and CEO, from 1996 to 2014, and helped advance equity with a lecture series focused on racial equity.



More recently, in 2021, the Foundation developed a new ten-year strategic framework that outlines solutions to problems of segregation, race, and class in the Washington, D.C. area, targeting the closure of the racial wealth gap. The strategic framework led to programs such as the Health Equity Fund, designed to improve the health outcomes and health equity of D.C. residents; the Partnership to End Homelessness, which confronts the causes of homelessness in the region; and Together, We Prosper, which funds strategies like children's trust accounts, guaranteed income pilots, and community wealth building.

Washington, D.C. is located on the banks of the Potomac River on land ceded by Maryland and Virginia, both states with significant slave populations. This location bridged the Northern and Southern states, and established a significant Black population in Washington, D.C. Its proximity to Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, kept Washington close to the front lines of the Civil War.



Washingtonians achieved self-government in 1871, leading to a long period of expansion and improvement for the city.¹

The population of Washington, D.C. metro area was about 6.35 million as of 2022.²



43% White

25% Black

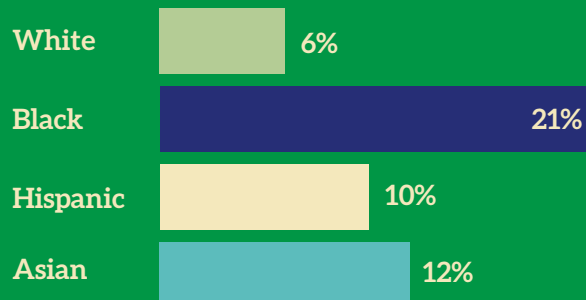
17% Hispanic

11% Asian

4 % Multi-racial or other³

The area has an average household income of \$120,000 and an overall poverty rate of eight percent.⁴

Citywide poverty rate⁵



Born of Equity Imperatives

Founded in 1973, the Greater Washington Community Foundation recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and currently has over \$500 million in assets under management. The Foundation has invested over \$1.5 billion in communities since inception, with grants totaling \$92 million issued in 2022. In addition to Washington, D.C., the Community Foundation serves Montgomery County and Prince George's Counties in Maryland, and Northern Virginia.⁶

The Community Foundation came into existence against the backdrop of the civil rights movement. The District Home Rule Act, signed into law in 1973, made Washington a self-governing city (with a majority Black population) for the first time since 1871.⁷ The organization's founders included such Black luminaries as Bishop John T. Walker, Maceo W. Hubbard, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and Marie C. Barksdale.⁸ "I would say our centering of peoples' rights and civil rights is woven into our founding," says Foundation President and CEO Tonia Wellons.

"I think it's part of what makes us an interestingly unique and complex community foundation. You can't be in the town of policymakers, lawyers, civic leaders, and activists and not have the outgrowth ... of all of those things."

Other catalysts for the Foundation's focus on equity, according to Wellons, include the election of Doug Wilder as the first Black U.S. governor (of Virginia, 1990-1994), the election of Nelson Mandela as the first Black head of state in South Africa from 1994 to 1999, and the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States from 2008 to 2016.

Wellons also identifies Terri Lee Freeman, the former Community Foundation President and CEO, as a pivotal figure for the Foundation in the recent past. Freeman "put a stake in the ground around race," Wellons explains. "At that time, equity was not part of the broad discourse, but she introduced a concept of putting race on the table in 2003, then pivoted the Community Foundation's strategy to focus on equity and opportunity in 2008." Reverend Ronnie Galvin, current a Senior Fellow in Community Investment at the Foundation, and formerly the Vice President for Racial Equity and the Democratic Economy at the Democracy Collaborative, agrees with Wellons that Freeman's tenure was key to the Community Foundation's current equity efforts: Freeman "represented in her body, intellect, and presence the possibility of racial equity," Galvin offers.

"It was when [Freeman] started asking the questions and created the forum when I think the Foundation began its trajectory in a conscious way."

The forum Galvin refers to is "Putting Race on the Table," a series that the Community Foundation designed and launched in 2006 to help philanthropists think about racial equity and racial justice. The first lecture featured Enid Lee, a Canadian "anti-racist professional development specialist, leadership coach and writer."⁹

An Ambitious Strategic Framework

Greater Washington Community Foundation's next big step forward in its equity journey coincided with the appointment of Tonia Wellons as President and CEO in 2020. Wellons "aimed to implement a bold and strategic vision by following evidence about what is best for the region," offers board member Rashawn Ray, "and the way the Foundation could be a model and blueprint for others around the country." The Community Foundation commissioned the Brookings Institution to produce a study on which areas of the region needed the most resources and focus. The study determined that the Washington, D.C. area was highly inequitable, due to problems of segregation, race, and class. To respond, the Foundation decided to use top experts and scholars to help identify the optimal approaches for attaining equity in the region. This led to

the development of a new ten-year strategic framework. Board members Seán Morris, a strategy expert, and Artis Hampshire-Cowan, who spent 23 years at Howard University in positions that included Senior Vice President and Acting President, co-chaired the Foundation's strategic planning committee.

"It's easy to get a strategy associated and narrowly focused around 'we will have a brand of X,' or raise this much money," Morris comments. "We took a step back and said, 'what is the actual impact we want to have as an organization?'"

The committee also examined how the Foundation would use relatively limited funds to have the biggest impact possible on communities that needed it the most.

“ The people who have benefited most from the system that has produced racially inequitable outcomes are the very people whose money we need in order to make progress on racial equity.”

Reverend Ronnie Galvin

*Senior Fellow, Community Investment,
Greater Washington Community Foundation*

The strategic framework was inspired by some dramatic data that the Brookings Institution Race, Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative and the Metropolitan Council of Governments provided, including that White households in Washington, D.C. have 81 times the net worth of Black households, and that closing racial income gaps in Fairfax County, Virginia, would increase its gross domestic product by \$2 billion a year.¹⁰

With the help of expert advisors, the Community Foundation landed on seven core goals for its new strategic framework, including community leadership (investing in strategies to close the racial wealth gap and increase economic mobility) and racial equity and inclusion (leading with racial equity and inclusion in every aspect of the Foundation's work).¹¹

The new strategic framework was a dramatic change for the Community Foundation and its board. Sharing DC Fund Committee Chair (and Foundation fund-holder) Renee Licht weighs in: "We had to reconceptualize how we made our grants ... Previously, it was a fairly typical giving

circle process in which every year the group would convene and choose a particular focus area, like healthcare or food insecurity, or housing issues." With the new framework, foundation-wide goals began to guide the work. "It changed significantly," Licht adds, "because for the first time we had a broad framework informing our philanthropy."

Senior Fellow Ronnie Galvin sums up the impact of the new framework:

"The strategic plan that got approved two years ago is the boldest in the history of the Foundation ... When you look at the Foundation's life cycle/timeline, it's a major pivot point. I'm not certain that everyone in the Foundation really knows what we signed up for, but the fact that in one way or another the Foundation family said yes, that is significant."

Licht agrees that the framework and its goals are bold: "I think there is a question broadly shared whether [closing the racial wealth gap] is achievable, but it is a great North Star."



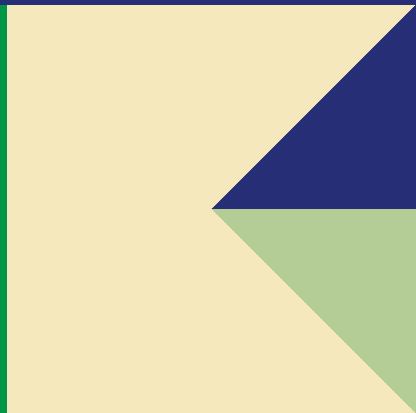
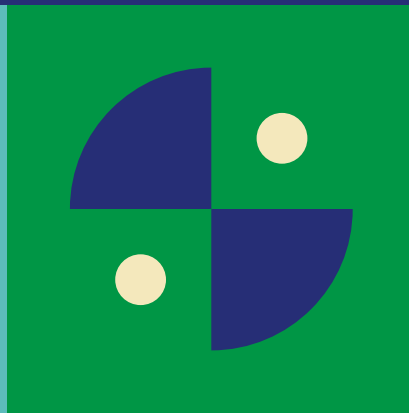
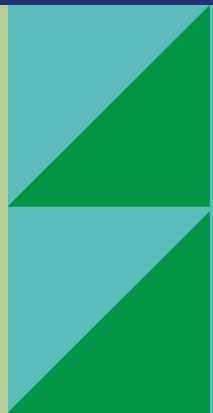
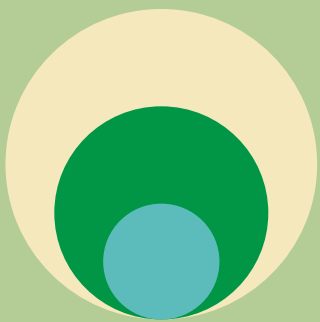
Diversifying and Educating the Board

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque The Community Foundation's recent equity history has led to it having "one of the most diverse boards in the Foundation over the past 20 years," Tonia Wellons comments. "It used to be strongly fund-holder-based and now it is 50 percent community representative." The board includes representatives from multiple industries, academia, and across the ten jurisdictions of the Foundation's region. "We want to make sure we are fairly representative of the people that make it up, [including] racial, gender, and diversity of sectors," Wellons adds.

Seán Morris feels that the Foundation board is more engaged now than when he joined it five years ago. "When you start to define where you're going," Morris says, "in a comprehensive manner that people can understand and reiterate to aspects of the community, you get a more involved board." Wellons believes the diverse board is "holding us accountable to the targets and goals we set as an organization and really being thoughtful in their own equity journey, exposures, and experiences, and commitment." Rashawn Ray has identified defining terms like "equity" and "racial equity" as crucial to the board embracing the concept. "That took some work," says Ray, "because people have different knowledge levels and knowledge gaps." Using a racial equity framework to explain the

concepts was key, "because there is an asset-based approach requiring something to be done about it."

Ronnie Galvin feels that having a Black board chair (Richard K. Bynum) is significant for the Community Foundation, but that the board as a whole still has a long way to go in learning about equity issues and challenges. Despite the diversity of the current board, dealing with equity isn't always easy, Wellons agrees: "It brings up all of people's built-in biases. Because boards rotate ... you oftentimes have to reopen issues that a prior version of the board has addressed." One of these issues is whether championing racial equity means that the Foundation is not going to help White people. Some people ask, "Are we not going to serve White people? Are we going to exclude White people?" according to Wellons. "The answer is no, we are not going to discriminate against White people." But "when you look at the gaps on almost every indicator in our region ... it is not necessarily White people. If we were describing low education rates, low income, low home ownership ... it is more likely the gaps are falling on a majority African American, Latinx, and then other people of color." This occurs from a place of protectiveness, Wellons explains, though most board members are less conservative and more comfortable embracing racial equity advocacy than they would have been 20 or 25 years ago.



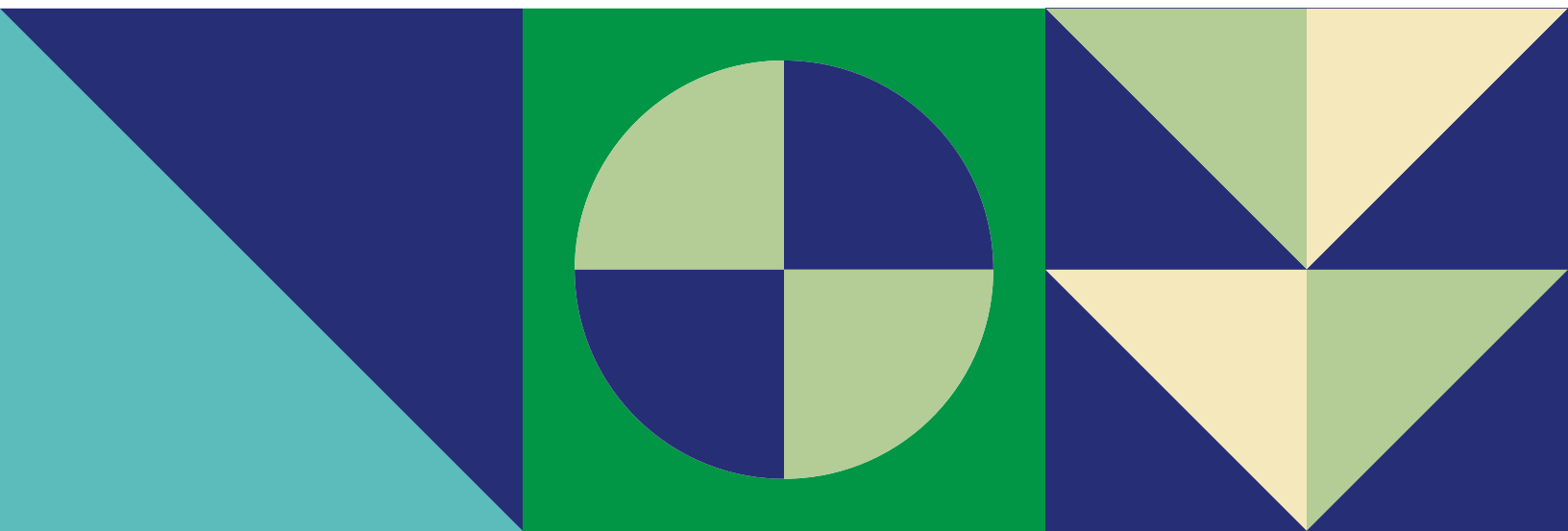
Equity in Programming

The Greater Washington Community Foundation has focused on issues of equity in its programming since inception, but its 2021 strategic framework gave new purpose to this focus. The Foundation launched its \$95 million Health Equity Fund in 2022 to improve the health outcomes and health equity of D.C. residents. The fund not only works to close healthcare gaps, but also targets social determinants of health, such as education, employment, income, housing, transportation, food, environment, outdoor environment, and community safety issues.¹² In its first round, the fund issued over \$9 million in grants to such organizations as Bread for the City, whose cash assistance program focuses on the social determinants of health to reach people affected by poverty; Capital Area Asset Builders, which provides Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in D.C.'s lowest-income neighborhoods with emergency savings and access to mainstream financial resources; First Shift Justice Project, which helps working mothers and Latinx and BIPOC people in low-wage jobs assert their rights to reasonable workplace accommodations and access paid leave benefits for job retention and stability to increase economic mobility; and Yachad, which preserves and rehabilitates existing homes for low-income Black and brown multi-generational households in Wards 7 and 8,

allowing families to remain in their homes and benefit from increased property value.¹³

In Washington, D.C., 87 percent of people experiencing homelessness are Black or African American, and Black residents comprise 47 percent of the overall population.¹⁴ Together with the D.C. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Community Foundation formed the [Partnership to End Homelessness](#), which works with government agencies, nonprofits, philanthropists, business leaders, and D.C. residents to address the root causes of homelessness in the region. The Partnership issues grants to organizations like Enterprise Community Partners, which plans to expand its Faith-Based Development Initiative into Prince George's County, Maryland, to convert unused land into affordable homes.¹⁵

Through the Partnership, Tonia Wellons says, "we were prioritizing two things: 1) the affordable housing continuum with the least amount of government support where philanthropy could have a role to play [which disproportionately affects Black residents and other people of color]; 2) neighborhoods that are BIPOC, low-income, and have low housing ownership rates and lower life expectancy [per the 2021 strategic framework]."¹⁶



The Foundation's three-year, \$50 million campaign "Together, We Prosper" addresses the racial wealth gap directly. The campaign funds strategies such as children's trust accounts (to redeem at age 18 to pay for higher education, purchase a home, or start a business). This strategy is based on research showing that children's trust accounts with an initial deposit of \$7,500 have the potential to reduce the racial wealth gap in a community by as much as 28 percent.¹⁷ "Together, We Prosper" also funds guaranteed income pilots (to enable people to pay off a debt, move into permanent housing, further their education, or stop working a second job to spend more time with their families). The campaign supports regional guaranteed income pilots such as Let's Go DMV!, and Arlington's Guarantee, Montgomery County's Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot, and a similar pilot project in

Prince George's County.¹⁸ The third pillar of the campaign's strategy is community wealth building (to expand entrepreneurship, microenterprise, worker and employee ownership, and community land trusts). Also under the aegis of "Together, We Prosper" is a campaign to establish a sizable endowment at the Foundation "to stabilize our operating budget with permanent resources and ensure our ability to respond to the community's needs for the next 50 years."¹⁹

Rashawn Ray praises the Community Foundation's current grantmaking: "It's not always focused on the bigwigs, but funding smaller enterprises and organizations doing innovative work that, without the support of the Foundation, would not be able to do their work."



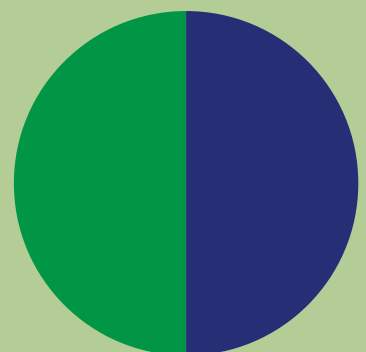
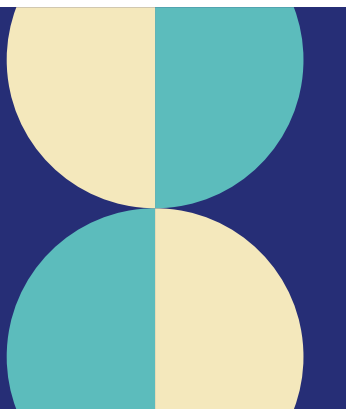
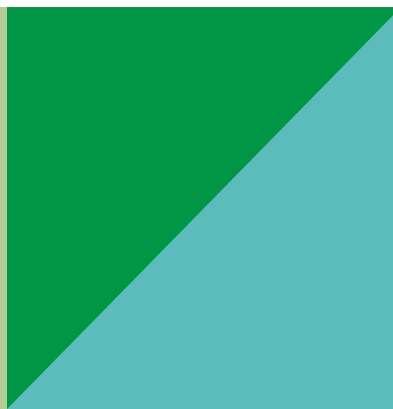
Setting an Example and Learning from Others

The Greater Washington Community Foundation was a participant in the CFLeads Equity Network (of community foundations working to advance equity) in 2021-2022. Having just developed its new strategic framework, it was both a hectic and heady time for the Community Foundation. “This is why the cohort was so timely,” comments Ronnie Galvin. “[It allowed for] the kind of community building and reflection and challenge and encouragement and alignment that you need to deepen the culture in the practice.” Tonia Wellons also found participation in the Equity Network opportune: “Almost all of us played a role in the emergency response in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, so it was timely to be in communication and relationship with each other as we best figured out how to center racial equity and inclusion, how to sustain it, and how to grow it.”

Sharing DC Fund Committee Chair Renee Licht also found the Equity Network experience valuable: “I loved learning about what the other foundations in the cohort were doing, where they were in the journey, what roadblocks they were facing, and how that could help us avoid similar pitfalls.” A particularly helpful exercise during the Equity Network cohort, according to Licht, was devising a four-month plan for the Foundation.

Having been established due to equity efforts in 1973, and having adopted such an ambitious strategic framework, the Community Foundation stood out among its peers, according to Rashawn Ray: “The Foundation has been a leader in this space ... When it comes to being bold and putting our money where our mouths are, and where our mission is aligned, a lot of Foundations shy away from that.” Despite its decades of experience with equity issues, “the team building they engaged in really helped them think through ways to elevate what is happening in the region,” Ray adds.

Wellons agrees. “I think we brought a level of confidence about where we were landing,” she says, “particularly on the racial wealth gap. Even as early as 2021 it was not as commonplace for a community foundation to decide that closing the racial wealth gap was its North Star.” Despite the Community Foundation’s experience and commitment, it still had things to learn from peers about equity work. Wellons sees the Foundation returning to issues that other participants raised (like “assets under influence”): “We are going to be spending time thinking about our advisory services and how we can use the framework that we have to provide advisory services to other entities who are trying to have an impact.”



Facing Headwinds

One of the Greater Washington Community Foundation's biggest challenges has been the lack of a substantial endowment. Tonia Wellons acknowledges the complexity of this issue: "As progressive as we have been trying to be programmatically, there is still room for our business model to evolve, particularly to provide the kind of influence we want to have in the region for the next 50 years." Renee Licht agrees that the lack of an endowment "hinders to some extent their financial picture in that they can't confidently count on a known budget every year to facilitate their work." Having a sizable endowment with consistent returns would help foster financial stability, she asserts. She also feels that establishing community goals could motivate donors to build the endowment. Donors who want to fund issues like cancer research or reproductive health will always exist, says Licht, but "there are a lot of donors who would be happy to do more to invest in the community."

Rashawn Ray underscores the difficulty of building an endowment tied to racial equity: "A lot of people can talk about race but do not like to talk about racism, which confronts us with racial equity. We experience race everyday, but really addressing racism and why that exists, and then getting into racial equity are more cumbersome and complex steps." One solution, according to Ray, is engaging a new set of donors, or existing donors in new ways. "We need individuals who are being racial equity advocates, [and] who can advocate for a cause," he adds.

The unique status of Washington, D.C. also presents challenges, according to Ronnie Galvin. "What happens in D.C. is always subject to [the] federal government. You could have a liberal, progressive city and a conservative congress and nothing is done ... When the federal government changes, a quarter of the city flips. What base are we able to build over the long term when the city flips specifically with the power change?"

Moving the needle in this way takes time, according to Wellons. "This is the part that is the most frustrating at times," she says. Moving from plan to action "does not happen overnight. I wish it could." The Community Foundation has to determine who its partners should be, raise money to do things differently, and convince other people, including fund-holders, to join in.

Even when conditions are ideal, equity efforts do not always bear fruit immediately. "People need to have some layered benefits before you taper them off to move up the socioeconomic ladder," Wellons explains. "But because the layering of benefits is cut off before forward mobility, then you will see sharper declines and people not reaching stability because the system is not reflecting the current reality that people experience."

Ronnie Galvin evokes a dichotomy in the work of community foundations: "The people who have benefited most from the system that has produced racially inequitable outcomes are the very people whose money we need in order to make progress on racial equity." This begs the question of how to approach these people, how much to say to them, and how much the Foundation should compromise to procure financing for structural changes to promote racial equity. "That is the tap dance we have to do now," he appends. But the future may hold even more dramatic confrontations, Galvin explains. "The subject of reparations is coming up," he says, generating the need to create a framework for reparative practices. Even more candidly, he comments: "The money for philanthropy was built on the backs of Black people, Indigenous people; they are asking this question of organized philanthropy now."



Equity in the Future

Equity issues for the Greater Washington Community Foundation are a journey rather than a destination, Tonia Wellons asserts. “It really is a complex unlearning of things that we have done without even knowing sometimes. That is the way that the vast inequity we are trying to undo now ... was built into systems and practices and we perpetuated it unknowingly and sometimes knowingly.”

For Seán Morris, future equity success will depend on sharing program results not just with affluent donors, but with communities that have benefited from these programs. “For us,” says Tonia Wellons, “it is building the coalition of the willing to do the additional work of building community, of shifting our economy, and of changing our trajectory.”



Endnotes

- 1 Encyclopedia Britannica, [History of Washington, D.C.](#)
- 2 Data USA, [Washington-Arlington-Alexandria Metro Area](#)
- 3 Data USA, [Washington-Arlington-Alexandria Metro Area](#)
- 4 Data USA, [Washington-Arlington-Alexandria Metro Area](#)
- 5 [United States Census Bureau](#)
- 6 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“About”](#)
- 7 Greater Washington Community Foundation 50, [“History”](#)
- 8 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Faces from the Past: Looking Back at the Community Foundation Founders”](#)
- 9 Enid Lee Consultants, [“Enid Lee”](#)
- 10 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [Ten-Year Strategic Vision](#)
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Health Equity Fund”](#)
- 13 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Greater Washington Community Foundation Announces \\$9.2 Million in Health Equity Fund Grants”](#)
- 14 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Partnership to End Homelessness”](#)
- 15 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“New Partnership with Prince George’s County Faith Community Has Potential to Transform Affordable Housing”](#)
- 16 Greater Washington Community Foundation, Partnership, [“Our Mission”](#)
- 17 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Together We Prosper”](#)
- 18 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Guaranteed Income: A Strategy to Support Economic Mobility”](#)
- 19 Greater Washington Community Foundation, [“Together We Prosper”](#)

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change

info@cfleads.org
www.cfleads.org