

OPINION

FEBRUARY 06, 2020

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Leaders in Nonprofit Innovation Show How Power Dynamics in Philanthropy Are Shifting

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J.M. Kaplan Fund

If you want to know where philanthropy is headed, look to the social innovators taking on tough issues in unexpected ways and get to know what makes them tick. That's one of the best things we have learned by operating an innovation prize program. We get to learn from thousands of creative social and environmental change leaders who work across America, then share what we're learning and connect other grant makers to vital new ideas.

We recently announced the 10 winners of the latest round of the J.M.K. Innovation Prize, each of whom will receive \$175,000 and join a mutually supportive group of social entrepreneurs over the next three years. Although those leaders and their remarkable projects are poised to make a big difference, it is the 1,354 ideas submitted to us in the competition that can provide a deeper understanding of key trends.

Beyond the individual creative ideas in social justice, environment, and heritage conservation submitted in response to our competition guidelines, analyzing the applications shows distinctly that ideas are evolving about how social change takes root. In particular, we see a shift in how nonprofits think about power and who sets priorities. And we see them exploring connections between social issues that previously seemed disconnected. Here's what is important for people throughout philanthropy to learn:

Social justice work is increasingly led by the people most affected by change.

More and more, we are hearing from social-justice leaders who have direct personal experiences with their cause, including challenges involving the justice system, discrimination against immigrants, violence against LGBTQ people. These people are staking out their own priorities for change, shaping creative new approaches, and insisting to philanthropy that they, not credentialed “experts” are in the best position to run effective efforts to promote justice.

Black and Pink, an Omaha nonprofit, is pioneering a program that serves LGBTQ people after their release from prison or jail. “Most programs say: We need to fix you,” says Dominique Morgan, national director of Black and Pink, a formerly incarcerated queer man of color who seeks to amplify the voices of people who are most often ensnared by the justice system because they are people of color, LGBTQ, immigrants, or mentally ill, as well as those acting outside of rigid traditional expectations, which makes them targets. “We approach system-impacted folks through a different framework, drawing on our own lived experience, and that really empowers them,” he says.

Government is not the enemy of innovation.

Many applicants are enlisting federal, state, and local government agencies as partners in social innovation, and seeking to influence policy or legislative efforts. We heard from probation officers who work with nonprofit journalism groups to teach young people how to tell stories about what got them into trouble and how they want to respond to the harm they caused others. In another example, we received a proposal from a county sheriff seeking to use urban design combined with arts and cultural planning to create safer, more vibrant spaces that nurture a sense of shared community and help advance a forward-thinking approach to policing strategies.

This type of government-nonprofit innovation isn’t limited to the local level. Nicholas Redding, executive director of Preservation Maryland, says his effort, the Campaign for Historic Trades, is working with the U.S. Park Service to expand training courses across the country that teach veterans and underrepresented young people to enter historical trades such as carpentry, electrical, masonry, plumbing and other heavy-industry trades that lead to middle-income careers.

“Nonprofit-designed and philanthropy-supported job-training programs typically fill the lower economic spectrum like food service, building maintenance, and entry-level retail,” says Redding. In partnership with the U.S. Park Service, “We’ve been able to accelerate this in a way that most standalone public-sector or private-sector workforce development programs can’t do.”

Public health and social justice are increasingly intertwined.

No matter what cause innovators were focused on, we found that one in five applicants mentioned health or health care as a key concern of their work. That demonstrated to us a blossoming of cross-disciplinary work as more and more innovators link health to community empowerment. Some are working to abolish medical debt of low-income people while others are promoting equal access to health care.

A significant number of projects that serve the formerly incarcerated are targeting physical and mental health. Yet other efforts are engaging health professionals to conduct their work in ways that focus on social justice, for example, by seeking to reinvent public hospitals as hubs of “transformational poverty care and social medicine” that maximize services for undocumented, uninsured, or homeless patients.

Indian Country is a crucible for catalytic change.

According to Native Americans in Philanthropy, only 0.4 percent of dollars from large U.S. foundations are directed toward Native causes. That’s a terrible gap in support for people who are often at the forefront of some of America’s most awe-inspiring heritage conservation, environmental, and social-justice efforts.

This year in Indian Country — the collective term for land under the jurisdiction of tribal governments — we learned about social innovations that are taking on housing shortages, driving economic development, and equipping indigenous groups with new tools to monitor the environment.

Gentrification is becoming a key focus for heritage conservation.

By embracing new ownership strategies that protect affordable housing stock, build social fabric, and create economic engines, heritage conservation innovators are taking on gentrification to sustain and expand culturally rich communities. In Miami, for example, an equitable development plan has focused on the Allapattah neighborhood’s Dominican-American business corridor, seeking to create long-term solutions for small, family-run

businesses so they are less likely to be pushed out by rising rents and real-estate speculation. It's the kind of approach that heritage advocates can use to help build equity across the board. "I think preservation must engage more fully with partners in the affordable housing and urban-development fields to generate strategies for minimizing displacement," says Patrice Frey, CEO of the National Main Street Center and a reviewer in our prize competition

Climate-change efforts are putting people first.

Some of the most powerful environmental work are those that link climate change to social justice and embrace holistic solutions that make communities more resilient to the changes caused by environmental challenges. The climate-justice organization Our Climate Voices was launched to draw attention to people who are often left out of the mainstream environmental movement, spotlighting the voices of youth, people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, and others to show how everyday lives are linked to the harm produced by climate change.

Aletta Brady, founder and executive director of Our Climate Voices, says, "If we're only talking about taking carbon out of the atmosphere, we're not supporting the communities that are being impacted. We employ the power of ethical, digital storytelling to humanize the climate disaster. When the people and communities on the front lines of climate change are the same people sharing their stories and creating solutions, people around the country will rise up and mobilize around concrete climate solutions."

Reuse of what we throw away can be a platform for social justice.

Among places scarred by environmental injustice, innovators are using a range of strategies to restore ecologies and rebuild economies. Through upcycling — the reuse of discarded waste to create usable products — composting, zero-waste, and other sustainability-focused efforts, innovators are combating climate change while providing economic and social benefits to communities of all types. In rural Appalachia, for example, where more than 6,000 miles of streams have long run orange with iron oxide from acid mine drainage, True Pigments, a project run by Rural Action of Ohio, is harvesting that iron oxide and turning it into commercial-grade iron pigments for high-quality, artist-grade paint.

Philanthropy must support innovation, and to help more grant makers do that, the J.M. Kaplan Fund is, for the first time, opening up our trove of applications — more than 1,300 creative ideas from every state in the nation — in the hopes that other grant makers will expand and extend the work these social innovators have devised — but too often have insufficient resources to carry out.

It's time for more in philanthropy to support the wealth of creativity taking root in communities all across America. By supporting innovation, grant makers can change America for the better.

Peter Davidson is the chairman of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, where Amy L. Freitag is the executive director. Their report, "Growing Grassroots Resilience," offers more details about what the prize applications taught them about trends in early-stage social and environmental innovation.

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