

2021

The J.M.K. Innovation Prize

The J.M.K. Innovation Prize seeks to identify, support, and elevate innovators who are spearheading transformative early-stage projects in the fields of social justice, the environment, and heritage conservation.



Now More Than Ever, Social Innovation Matters

In recent years, America has been reshaped by seismic social and environmental forces. A worldwide pandemic has laid bare deeply-rooted inequities. Communities from coast to coast have been upended by growing climate impacts. And efforts to dismantle democratic institutions have struck at the bedrock values of our nation. These compounding crises —affecting communities both rural and urban, from historically underrepresented voters to undocumented immigrant farm-workers—have forced social-impact organizations to reimagine how they respond to systemic societal challenges. In short, we need social innovators like we never have before.

The J.M.K. Innovation Prize was made for moments like this. Since 2015, over three biennial Prize cycles, we've reached across the country to support thirty wildly creative social and environmental initiatives, ranging from neighborhood-led youth justice councils to researchers using wastewater to pinpoint COVID-19 hot spots. Leveraging a legacy of catalytic grant-making at The J.M. Kaplan Fund, the Prize seeks out visionary non-profit and mission-driven for-profit organizations that work within, across, or in a manner related to one or more of the Fund's three program areas, listed to the right.

In 2021, we will award up to ten Prizes, each including a cash award of \$150,000 over three years, plus \$25,000 in technical assistance funds, for a total award of \$175,000. Awardees also receive guidance through the Fund and its resource network, providing tools and training that can help turn innovative ideas into life-changing social impacts.

1. Social Justice

Buttressing democracy, voter education, and reforms to the criminal justice and immigration systems.



2. The Environment

Slowing the pace of climate change and mitigating climate impacts.



3. Heritage Conservation

Conserving the places that communities care about most.



Tailored for Early-Stage Social Entrepreneurs

Amid a time of unprecedented uncertainty in the philanthropic world, we know that support is scarcer than ever for untested ideas being piloted in the social innovation field. The Prize's unrestricted funding is designed to fill this gap, allowing awardees to deploy resources where they are needed most. A flexible bank of technical assistance funds has also proven instrumental—whether invested in a tractor engine that awardee Growing Veterans urgently needed to sow crops, or used to purchase a state-of-the-art scanner that helped awardee Advancing Real Change more efficiently process case files and reshape a retributive criminal-justice system.



“We’ve received several federal grants that were very strict, and the unrestricted nature of the J.M.K. Innovation Prize allowed our organization to flourish, particularly considering our focus on social-enterprise models.”

Molly Hemstreet & Sara Chester, *The Industrial Commons*

Above all, we know each organization must follow its own path to achieving a change-making vision. With its three-year term, the Prize gives awardees room to evolve at their own pace, with support tailored to their needs as innovators.

“Many early-stage prizes in the innovation field are focused on speed, scale, and markets at the expense of depth and connection. What we so appreciated about the J.M.K. Innovation Prize is that we were part of a cohort of people who approach their work from a community-centered perspective, and who are working on longer, more lasting time frames.”

Michelle Miller & Jess Kutch, *Coworker.org*

An Innovation Community

Over three rounds of the Prize, twice-yearly convenings have been a fulcrum of the awardee experience. These meetings spotlight awardee organizations, foster peer learning, and offer mentoring from experts in organizational development, leadership training, and more. Until in-person programs can safely resume, our virtual convenings will continue to support each Prize cohort through an invaluable community of change agents.

“This experience has been incredibly rewarding. I’ve made enduring friendships and solidified an extensive network of powerful individuals.”

Antonio Aranello, *Jolt Initiative*

Throughout their Prize term and beyond, awardees also benefit from the Fund’s considerable resource network. Whether providing guidance on non-profit management or an introduction to a fellow funder, the Fund and its staff are there for awardees—both to celebrate the successes and offer strategic counsel amid the stresses of a social innovation startup.

“J.M. Kaplan Fund staff have been cheerleaders and morale-boosters, which is an important if often overlooked role in philanthropy.”

Brandon Dennison, *Coalfield Development Corporation*

Like everyone in the social-impact world, we at the Fund are adapting to a time of extraordinary change. Our work to safeguard a functioning democracy—such as seeding innovative ideas to advance voter education and counter voter suppression—is just one way we’re responding to evolving societal needs. In all we do, however, one thing stands firm: our commitment to the value of social entrepreneurs. The 2021 Innovation Prize embodies our belief that far-sighted solutions to entrenched social and environmental challenges are a smart investment in the future.

The Prize Process

Individuals or teams representing non-profit or for-profit organizations are eligible to apply for the 2021 J.M.K. Innovation Prize. The Prize will be awarded to projects or ideas that:

- represent a game-changing answer to a clearly identified need;
- are innovative within one or more of the Fund’s three program areas;
- demonstrate the potential to develop an actionable pilot or prototype with Prize funding; and
- hold out the promise to benefit multiple individuals, communities, or sectors through a clearly articulated theory of change.

A first-round application will be made available on the [JMKFund.org](https://www.jmkfund.org) website on **February 3** and will be open until **April 30**. Select applicants will be invited to submit a more detailed second-round application in late spring. Finalists will present their ideas to the trustees of The J.M. Kaplan Fund in the fall, with awardees formally announced in November 2021.

About The J.M. Kaplan Fund

The J.M. Kaplan Fund champions transformative social, environmental, and cultural causes through inventive grantmaking. Established in 1945 by philanthropist and businessman Jacob Merrill Kaplan, the Fund has since its inception been committed to visionary innovation. Over more than 75 years, the Fund has devoted \$280 million to propel fledgling efforts concerning civil liberties, human rights, the arts, and the conservation and enhancement of the built and natural worlds. The J.M.K. Innovation Prize continues the Fund’s legacy of catalytic giving, reaching across America to provide early-stage support for entrepreneurs with twenty-first-century solutions to urgent social and environmental challenges.

Read about our previous awardees, and sign up for email updates at: [JMKFund.org](https://www.jmkfund.org)

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