THE TWO PANDEMICS: FORWARD PROMISE FIGHTS RACISM IN THE COVID-19 ERA

November 2021
The Moriah Group acknowledges that the classifications used in available research do not always carefully consider the complex layers of identity or recognize how community and identity intersect. One individual can identify with multiple marginalized communities. And imprecise classifications may inadvertently sever communities of color or bind them as monoliths.

For many people of color (POC), the classifications “Hispanic,” “Latina,” or “Latino” are outdated, gender binary, and contribute to the erasure of their Indigenous or Black ancestry. These terms also perpetuate the use of colonialist social constructs that do not respect or encompass a spectrum of people, from various lineages and cultures, who may speak an Indigenous language other than Spanish. For these reasons, The Moriah Group has chosen to use the more inclusive and gender-neutral terms “Latinx,” “Chicanx,” or “Xicanx,” except in direct quotations from research or data.

Likewise, The Moriah Group recognizes the significant cultural, spiritual, language, and geographical differences represented under the umbrella acronym “AAPI.” We will specifically highlight their diverse ancestral lines by individually identifying “Asian American,” “Native Hawaiian,” and “Pacific Islander” communities, except in direct quotations from research or data.
The COVID-19 pandemic is raging. The inequities that existed before the pandemic are deepening, while negatively impacting communities of color. And the organizations on the front lines are struggling to help the people in these communities take care of the basics.

It is clear the helpers need help.

In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Forward Promise virtually convened with grantees to learn about the challenges they and their communities faced, along with the rapid-response solutions they implemented to overcome those challenges. As the issues affecting our most vulnerable communities came to light, Forward Promise facilitated an infusion of general operating funds that allowed grantee organizations to be nimbler and more responsive. The organizations used these funds to purchase software so grantees could offer virtual telehealth services, provide computer equipment and immediate cash assistance to families, offer virtual arts-based programming, add services to alleviate the social isolation of young people, and much more.

Then, the U.S. reversed mask mandates and loosened restrictions on gatherings in May 2021. These changes signaled a return to “normal” for some. As people resume their gym workouts, reschedule their weddings, and rebook their vacations, the lives of the nation’s people of color (POC)—particularly those in poverty—are far from normal. These families are in worse conditions than ever before, and their mental, physical, and economic well-being is more precarious.

The profound inequities that have been exposed throughout this crisis continue to disproportionately and negatively impact communities of color 20 months into the pandemic. Consequently, the people of color leading Forward Promise grantee organizations have been taking care of boys and young men of color (BYMOC) and their villages, while navigating personal and professional traumas during two pandemics—COVID-19 and the pandemic of racism.
Based on their reports from the front lines, our grantees asserted they cannot return to “normal” for multiple reasons:

• **The material and social-emotional needs of young people in communities of color have increased and persisted during the pandemic.** Families have remained economically vulnerable, children and young people have increased anxiety and depression, and illness and death have continued to be a part of daily life in this crisis.

• **The workload and pace before and during the pandemic are not sustainable.** Ever-increasing productivity and efficiency are white supremacist constructs that do not honor the individual and collective requirement for rest and reflection.

• **The healers need healing, too.** Connecting with organizations with similar missions has been paramount—so they can share stories, cry together, and process the traumatizing events from the past 20 months.

• **Space, resources, and support are vital to plan for the future.** Grantees must focus on what a healthy “normal” should become for the fragile communities their organizations serve.

Now more than ever, organizations led by POC on the ground are calling for help. And it is imperative that the nation’s philanthropies respond.
Forward Promise grantees are innovators, translators, amplifiers, and action makers in the communities they serve. While they primarily work with BYMOC, this critical crisis meant that entire families required support to survive. POC-led organizations do not view the family as separate from the child. So, if a community is not healthy, organizations must ensure that young people and their families do not suffer the same fate. Unlike their counterparts from white-led organizations that emphasize helping youth “get out” of socially stressed communities, POC-led organizations—like our Forward Promise grantees—have implemented interventions and solutions for their communities.

After assessing the challenges in their communities, the grantees have delineated nine primary areas of concern:

- Cash and Food Assistance
- Physical and Mental Health
- Cultural Practices
- Online Learning
- Organizational Resources
- Advocacy
- Community Violence
- Pandemic of Racism
- Re-opening and Vaccinations

CASH AND FOOD ASSISTANCE

Poverty has only intensified for families who struggled economically before the pandemic. The Forward Promise grantees immediately grasped this fact, understanding that a strong community infrastructure is integral to helping BYMOC thrive. So, they provided cash, food, PPE, and technology assistance that was funded through new, philanthropic rapid-response dollars or
through the repurposing of existing funds to help families. This need is ongoing.

Nearly two years later, issues of hunger, housing instability, economic strife, and unemployment remain. Food insecurity, though it decreased in recent months, is worse than before the pandemic. According to recent U.S. Census data, 9% of all adults or about 20 million people, “reported that their household sometimes or often didn’t have enough to eat in the last seven days.”

The statistics were even more devastating for communities of color among all adults. Black (15%), Latinx (13%), and Other/Multiracial (12%) households did not have enough food compared to white (6%) and Asian (4%) households. And large proportions of families have faced homelessness or eviction across the nation, lacking the financial resources to pay bills and cover basics.

While many foundations have viewed their investments in COVID-19 assistance as one-time funds at the beginning of the pandemic, our grantees reported that the need for cash and food assistance continues. The financial obligations of people of color—who have been most heavily impacted by unemployment during this crisis—skyrocketed as states ended their participation in the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program.

The chart below illustrates the stark economic reality many POC-led households have experienced.
POC HOUSEHOLDS STRUGGLED TO FEED FAMILIES, PAY RENT, AND COVER HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES DURING THE PANDEMIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Insecurity</th>
<th>Housing Instability</th>
<th>Economic Struggle</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Households that sometimes or often lacked enough to eat (September 29-October 11, 2021)</td>
<td>Households that were not caught up on rent (September 29-October 11, 2021)</td>
<td>Households that had difficulty covering typical housing expenses (September 29-October 11, 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 19% of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Multiracial (not Latinx) households</td>
<td>• 28% of Black (not Latinx) renters</td>
<td>• 44% of Black (not Latinx) adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 17% of Black (not Latinx) households</td>
<td>• 20% of Asian (not Latinx) renters</td>
<td>• 42% of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Multiracial (not Latinx) adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 16% of Latinx (any race) households</td>
<td>• 18% of Latinx (any race) renters</td>
<td>• 38% of Latinx (any race) adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 6% of white (not Latinx) households</td>
<td>• 18% of American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Multiracial (not Latinx) renters</td>
<td>• 23% of white (not Latinx) adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5% of Asian (not Latinx) households</td>
<td>• 12% of white renters</td>
<td>• 21% of Asian (not Latinx) adults</td>
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SOURCE: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Racism, colonization, and dehumanization have always denied communities of color adequate access to quality and affordable healthcare, paid sick leave, mental health services, and the like. Therefore, it is not surprising that people of color have disproportionately contracted and died from COVID-19 since the beginning of the crisis.

Statistics show that Black and Brown people in rural and urban communities, across Southern states, and in U.S. jails and prisons have been infected and died at much higher rates. As of October 2021, Blacks accounted for a slightly higher share of deaths from the virus compared to their population share; Latinx people represented a larger share of cases relative to their share of the total population; and American Indian/Alaska Native, Latinx, and Black people were at least twice as likely to die from the virus compared to white people, according to age-standardized data. The situation is even more dire in U.S. jails and prisons where people of color are incarcerated at much higher rates, exposing them to COVID-19 clusters. These individuals confront a double whammy. They are disproportionately and negatively affected by discriminatory policing and incarcerations policies. They also face a “death sentence” in these clusters.

As for service workers, they do not have the luxury of staying home to avoid infection—as grocery stores, transit services, manufacturing plants, and other industries stayed open from the beginning so the country could survive. Many of these essential workers expose themselves to COVID-19 by commuting on public transit and going to work—risking their safety and that of their families—often without adequate personal protection and full access to testing.

These physical risks—coupled with the compound trauma of living through a global pandemic while navigating the ever-present pandemic of racism—has caused stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders. Children and teenagers, in particular, have been more affected by the isolation of nationwide shutdowns than adults—developing higher levels of depression and anxiety:
Among Native American children who generally have the highest depression rates of any racial group, the suicide death rate was more than double that of their white counterparts aged 15-19.

While Latinx students have similar or slightly lower rates of mental disorders compared to their counterparts, they have encountered obstacles to treatment—such as language limitations that impacted the quality of mental health services they received.

Black students have endured additional emotional and mental trauma due to the onslaught of extrajudicial killings of Black people. They have also witnessed their Black family members dying from the virus at higher rates compared to other populations.4

During this fraught time, BYMOC need more support than Forward Promise grantees can sometimes give. Grantees report that it is difficult to “dig deep” with young people via virtual meetings. Despite this issue, organizations continue to create innovative virtual solutions to help BYMOC and their villages heal.

CULTURAL PRACTICES

Sacred or traditional cultural practices help ground and connect people of color—keeping them on track emotionally and spiritually. Shaking hands, kissing cheeks, touching foreheads, or sharing hugs are how many POC greet or comfort one another. Understanding this, Forward Promise grantees use culturally responsive healing practices that are relationship-centered. However, social distancing during a pandemic has complicated this approach. Forward Promise grantees reported that maintaining and engaging in sacred cultural practice has been crucial during this crisis, but they faced a difficult quandary: how to strike a balance between social distancing requirements and ceremony.

Unfortunately, this balancing act was thrown off-kilter again and again—as large numbers of infections in communities of color were accompanied by many deaths of loved ones they could not collectively grieve for or even bury according to sacred customs.
This issue has distressed and, in some cases, forced families to disobey cultural or religious practices when communities could not gather to honor their kin. Many Muslim families could neither retrieve the bodies of their loved ones from morgues within 24 hours after their death because the hospitals were overwhelmed, nor bathe the bodies before the burial. **Velorios**, or wakes that are traditionally held for days by Latinx families, were not allowed. And rituals—such as touching the dying while anointing them with oil, sharing communion, or praying with them—could not be conducted by religious leaders in hospitals where even family members were banned. Families could only commune and mourn with a loved one via electronic tablets or over the phone, although some priests were permitted to give blessings from hospital hallways.⁵

BYMOC, their villages, and the Forward Promise grantees themselves have been overwhelmed with grief because they could not comfort or mourn their loved ones or follow cultural practices to cope. To assuage some of the pain, grantees have walked with young people or held circle activities outdoors. But these activities have not fully resolved the problem of providing culturally responsive healing that is emotionally fulfilling.

**ONLINE LEARNING**

The digital gap between communities of color and their white counterparts was substantial before the pandemic. It has only widened since then—particularly for POC in rural, urban, and Southern communities where large percentages of students could not participate in remote learning last year. The problems they encountered were endless: data caps on broadband services limited their internet usage; lack of access to internet-enabled devices such as laptops or PCs forced students to use smartphones instead, and expensive or undependable broadband services cut off or constrained their connections.⁶

The greatest percentage of unconnected students lived in Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. That figure ranged from 26% to 28%, which is greater than the national average of 20%.⁷
About one-third of students from Native American, Black, and Latinx households—a disproportionately high percentage—lacked access to high-speed internet. And 1.5 million residents in New York did not have a home broadband or mobile connection, while just two-thirds of rural residents reported they had broadband at home.

Some parents were so desperate to help their children connect for school that they parked their vehicles at libraries and restaurants to access public Wi-Fi.

And even when students of color had internet access and computer equipment, other obstacles materialized. Some remote learners who were supervised by grandparents could not troubleshoot computer or internet problems. Their grandparents were, in some cases, unfamiliar with the technology. In addition, students faced knowledge gaps and privacy complications. Forward Promise grantees reported many youth knew how to use the FaceTime® app, but had no experience with Zoom® or other virtual conferencing technologies. And when large families with multiple children had to quarantine or attend remote learning together at home, some had to compete—unsuccessfully—with the TV, toddlers, and older siblings for a quiet place to learn. Some students also had to share devices with their siblings during school hours.

One unforeseen and problematic issue was actually spawned by virtual learning. The requirement that students turn on their video cameras during class was viewed as culturally insensitive, classist, and racist by some educators. “Requesting or requiring students to let you inside their homes and private spaces can be culturally insensitive and ultimately racist. Students have the right to control their presentations of self and their intimate spaces. Demanding cameras on protects white racial privileges and traditional Western hierarchies of culture. Why? Because, even in face-to-face settings, traditional markers of engagement are highly cultural. For example, maintaining eye contact as a sign of respect or engagement is a norm that some cultures do not practice. Instructors should not demand the right to claim unrestricted visual ownership of students’ bodies and spaces,” wrote professors Margaret Finders and Joaquin Muñoz in Inside Higher Ed. Plus, this camera policy impeded active engagement for some students.
ON THE FRONT LINES

Forward Promise staff have ensured that BYMOC and their communities have the resources to weather the pandemic. More than three-fourths of the grantee organizations have added new services, programs, or offerings in response to youth needs during the pandemic.

However, the mental and emotional toll of the crisis on staff is apparent—as most of them have navigated the same difficulties as the communities they serve.

As a result, several grantees have changed their PTO benefit to include mental health days, overtime pay, and days off for the entire organization.

this and other online learning challenges likely drove kids already anxious about missing their friends, dealing with the pandemic, and being stuck at home to disengage—contributing to the ever-growing learning gap among students of color.16

ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Nearly two years into the pandemic, Forward Promise grantees, their youth, and their communities have been reeling from its ramifications. In response, many organizations have fundamentally changed the way they operate. More than three-fourths of the Forward Promise organizations have added new services, programs, or offerings in response to youth needs during the pandemic. And they have continually revised their responses as concerns and needs shifted.

One major shift involved the transition of the grantees’ staff and their workload. This included providing virtual services to community members, changing their offerings, adding new advocacy work, or even ceasing operations temporarily. As the organizations have transformed the way they worked, they have explored new solutions on their own.

One challenge—lack of funding or inflexibility with existing funds—has prevented organizations from contracting business consultants to help them pivot in a different direction or hiring communications strategists to help them disseminate messaging about this change. In addition, the transition to virtual platforms was both time consuming and costly, Forward Promise grantees reported. Any savings accumulated from buildings being closed was shifted to other priorities. Furthermore, many organizations that previously relied on face-to-face interactions lost revenues due to operational changes. And although virtual offerings have generated some income, these revenues do not match the pre-pandemic levels. This has left some organizations in a more fragile state because they relied on in-person activities for their earning potential.

The pandemic has also exposed how interdependent organizations are when they rely on their community networks. Without the ability to operate at the usual capacity or in the same ways, these community
FIGHTING RACISM IN THE COVID-19 ERA

Grantees have led efforts to eliminate school resource officers. Whole-school safety approaches, which offer mental and behavioral health support, are a better alternative over policing in schools.

They have also fought for the release of incarcerated youth who are at risk of catching the virus in COVID-19 clusters and pushed for the establishment of restorative programs to help these young people thrive.

networks sometimes disintegrated when partner organizations scaled back or disagreed with the value of serving the community “by any means necessary.”

ADVOCACY

This time has been pivotal for communities of color. Long-ignored demands for systemic policy reforms have been enacted as emergency measures to deal with the consequences of the pandemic. Advocating for the permanent establishment of these measures, which disrupt dehumanization and restore humanity in the treatment of BYMOC in public systems, has been crucial for Forward Promise organizations.

The grantees have also worked to thwart the negative policies that have specifically harmed BYMOC and their families during the past 20 months. If left unchanged, these policies will continue to destroy their lives. And America will magically forget about the plight of people of color until the next economic downturn or health crisis.

But we do not have to remain silent and watch America repeat this shameful history. Real-life models of how we can effectively advocate for long-term change for BYMOC and their villages exist across the country:

- The virus thrives in jails and prisons, so Forward Promise grantees have sponsored “car rallies” and led caravans to advocate for the release of incarcerated youth. They have also used thousands of their own dollars to provide housing for the young people.

- Grantees have spoken out against “disaster capitalism,” which funds the systems that oppress people of color the most. For example, federal resources have been funneled to police departments in the name of public safety over youth programs that have been largely ignored.

- Accurate stories about how COVID-19 has affected communities of color should be shared, so grantees have advocated for the use of disaggregated data in publications and media coverage. For example,
racial and ethnic groups such as Pacific Islanders and Native Americans have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, but their stories have not been amplified.

• High-quality education should be reintroduced in prison, grantees declared. People who are incarcerated should still have rights and access to an education.

• Grantees have advocated to remove police officers from schools and replace them with mental health counselors.

Because of the urgency of this moment, many Forward Promise grantee organizations have demanded change. They have led advocacy efforts around education and policing reform. They have spoken to media outlets about juvenile justice in the age of COVID-19. And they have led community coordination efforts. The grantees must now build on that momentum.

COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Our mental and emotional health has been challenged daily during this pandemic. According to a NIH report, “… the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the inequities that exist in communities of color that place them at risk for exposure to violence.”

So, while the existence of violence in 2020 was far from surprising, its breadth devastated communities. Last year ushered in the highest rates of gun violence-related deaths in the past 20 years, and it is estimated that these deaths will likely exceed 40,000. Many factors contributed to this increase, including a surge in gun sales during the pandemic. Moreover, the presence of guns in more homes with children has led to more unintentional shooting deaths by children, which rose by nearly one-third.

This lethal relationship between violence, isolation, trauma, job loss, lack of childcare, and financial instability has also destroyed the lives of people of
color in their homes. The lockdowns, quarantines, work and school closures, and layoffs—all situations that restricted our movements and forced people together during the pandemic—created a dangerous opportunity for abusers to isolate their victims from their support networks. And calls to domestic violence hotlines across the nation have soared since the pandemic started.

“Co-workers’ support is integral to supporting victims of domestic violence but COVID-19, which has enacted work-from-home or remote working on a mass scale, is affecting people’s social circles, their daily conversations and, more importantly, preventing in-person support teams from continuing their roles and helping victims to survive abuse.”

Though there was no planning or outreach for these factors on a federal or state level, Forward Promise grantees quickly intervened to keep their communities safe. Grantees typically would have introduced BYMOC to culturally responsive healing practices through home visits, group sessions, case management, and trauma-specific therapies for those injured by violence. Due to the pandemic, they conducted healing practices virtually. Several grantees, however, cited the importance of being attuned to youth needs and making adjustments, as some did not feel safe conducting therapy sessions at their homes due to toxic conditions in their home environments.

### PANDEMIC OF RACISM

In the December 2020 Mott Poll Report, 82% of Black parents and 65% of Latinx parents ranked racism a top 10 health concern for youth (#1 and #6, respectively). White parents did not rate racism in their top 10. In addition, COVID-19 was ranked #2 among Black parents (72%) and #8 among Latinx parents (64%). The virus and its effects on their children were also not a top concern for white parents. This discrepancy clearly showed a correlation between the verifiable risk we see for communities of color and the increased concern they assign to those factors in their children’s lives.

While the vile evidence of white supremacy is indisputable for those who care to acknowledge it, several incidents have captured our national
attention and sparked action. Last spring, many Americans heard about the tragic murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, followed by the brutal killing of George Floyd and countless others in quick succession. The barrage of violence is heart wrenching—people of color can barely take time to catch their breath, address their ongoing trauma, or stabilize their emotions because they are already dealing with the consequences of COVID-19. The destructive—and deadly—aftereffects of racism haunt them in their daily lives, through their television screens, and on their electronic devices.

Staff at our grantee organizations are just as traumatized by these events as BYMOC and their villages. And the youth they support want to do their part and protest for change. In response, these organizations continue to pivot by organizing protests and hosting special group mental health sessions. Even though these and other activities fall outside their missions, they are directly connected to the grantees’ purpose.

RE-OPENING AND VACCINATIONS

Only 30% of Americans had been vaccinated as of May 2021. Even with those low numbers, many states relaxed masking mandates. The general consensus in the country was that the majority of those who wanted the vaccine had already received at least one dose and misinformation abounded. Some myths claimed that communities of color drove up COVID-19 infections because they were the most hesitant about vaccines and did not help to stop the spread. But “… a recent population-based survey found that Black and Hispanic individuals report significantly higher concern than white individuals about contracting and spreading COVID-19. Choice and personal behavior have not driven these disparities. Platitudes such as this one ignore the structural inequities that drive increased exposure and our collective responsibility to protect those most at-risk.”23
These barriers to getting vaccinated have frustrated people of color because:

- Many Black and Brown people lacked access to a computer or the internet to register for online appointments.

- Workers did not have flexible work schedules or vacation time that allowed them to take off to stand in long lines.

- Commuters and those without cars lacked transportation to distant vaccination sites.

- Community members feared they might reveal their immigration status to authorities by visiting sites staffed by U.S. National Guard members dressed in military uniforms. Some undocumented people also worried about facing restrictions because of their immigration status or being asked to show identification.

In addition, the great disparity in vaccine distributions and unlimited access delayed POC in securing appointments. According to data from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 23 states that tracked the race and ethnicity of the vaccinated showed that white people received shots at disproportionately high rates compared to people of color. In another example, 28% of the population in Dallas County, Texas, is white and non-Latinx, yet they accounted for nearly 63% of the registered vaccine appointments. It turns out white people traveled to locations outside their home county to get vaccinated. Even when vaccines were set aside to try to distribute them more equitably among the most vulnerable populations or communities of color, white residents drove far from home to secure the vaccinations first.

Additionally, schools reopened in many states in August 2021—potentially exposing personnel, students, and their families to the virus. For example, in Tennessee, Hamilton County Schools closed two buildings just hours into the first day after reporting confirmed COVID-19 cases. Just like last year, slack federal leadership on schooling during a pandemic meant that children, particularly those in communities of color, are in riskier conditions. They also experience unbelievable stress—as the politicization over the reopening of schools, wearing masks, and getting the vaccine has only worsened an
anxiety-inducing situation. This process has been a tug-of-war between opposing parties—with the health and well-being of our children hanging in the balance.

**OPPORTUNITIES**

The sustainability of POC-led organizations—and the communities they serve—is vital as America’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic winds down. Therefore, Forward Promise grantees have identified four key areas of opportunity where philanthropy can substantially support their work by:

- Providing larger investments
- Reframing harmful narratives
- Allowing greater flexibility
- Honoring the need to connect and reflect

**PROVIDING LARGER INVESTMENTS**

Forward Promise organizations have battled for their communities, stretching their funds and recalibrating their focus on immediate necessities and systemic racism. They have continued services, listened to youth and their villages, and acted on their behalf. Nevertheless, most of the grantees are flat-funded for the next fiscal year, despite their list of unaddressed concerns. And they reported they do not have the luxury of returning to business as usual.

Most of them have, in fact, added new services/programs during the pandemic. So, they could accomplish so much more for BYMOC and their communities if they had ample resources. The vast needs in their communities have made the grantees “scrappier;” especially when their non-POC counterparts have a wealth of resources in comparison. The grantees have done their best with less but new concerns continue to emerge and they must reconsider their recovery plans for the future. This is why we urge philanthropic organizations to increase their investment in communities
of color and to be ethical in how they support the populations most affected by our nation’s societal woes.

**INVEST IN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:** Larger investments in technical assistance will help Forward Promise grantees address myriad business development needs.

- **Communications training** will help them establish organizational presence and value, as well as capitalize on interest in their work.

- **Training on effectively engaging funders** around needs and solutions for communities of color will guide grantees on pursuing funding relationships.

- **Assistance on regrouping and rebuilding** after the mission creep and changes caused by the pandemic will help them plan a path forward.

- **Training on developing sound revenue models** once disaster funding retracts will help grantees strengthen their foundation.

- **Coaching on incubating smaller POC-led organizations** will show them how to pay it forward in their communities.

- **Assistance teaching existing systems partners to become thought partners** who are centered on healing and listening will help them support BYMOC and their villages.

**INCREASE FUNDING AMONG SEVERELY UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITIES:** Forward Promise grantees reported that they have often competed with one another for a fraction of philanthropic resources. Foundations and corporations with temporary guilt are suddenly targeting work in social justice spheres, so organizations have scrambled to maximize the opportunity before the window closes. But, POC have been systematically overlooked for decades in philanthropy and there has been a longstanding lack of interest and
involvement in our issues. These problems are ongoing. Many funders pretend they need “more education on these issues” instead of owning the historical missteps that initially led them to ignore funding in this space years ago. What can funders do to be more ethical and equitable? First, they can dispel the myth of “overlap,” then pay attention to organizational missions and not just the populations they serve. There is less overlap than may be assumed.

**BOOST FUNDING FOR MENTAL HEALTH:** BYMOC have repeatedly requested mental health services in discussions with Forward Promise grantees. Traumatic losses due to COVID-19—coupled with the pandemic of racism, the fear and anguish driven by police violence, and white terrorist violence—have overwhelmed young people and their villages. In addition, changes to the Medicaid funding model have resulted in some mental health providers being paid less per session and therapy practices not earning enough to pay therapists. These are just some of the factors that have made it more difficult to find culturally responsive mental health services. School leaders have also been fearful about the mental health of students who returned to school, so they have sought partners to help them bolster a thin or nonexistent school counseling infrastructure.

**EXPAND FUNDING FOR SYSTEMS REFORM:** Grantee organizations have been frustrated by the policy conversations that shift blame and responsibility to youth and their families, yet fail to hold systems accountable. For example, children and their families have been blamed for the students’ academic struggles during a pandemic. Yet the real culprits are the systemic inequities that, for example, caused the digital divide in the first place. Any reform will require that all systems be infused with culturally responsive practices.

Many policy reforms that were resisted before the pandemic are now under consideration. Consequently, Forward Promise grantees have built coalitions to advocate for reform since people within those systems are now motivated to enact changes; however, these activities typically have not been well-funded. Philanthropy should bolster these coalitions as the grantees push to enact permanent reforms.
REFRAMING HARMFUL NARRATIVES

As the pandemic persists, so do negative narratives about why the virus has slammed communities of color. Many media reports have blamed the spread of COVID-19 on the cultural habits of people of color, particularly those in communities with high poverty. In April 2020, former U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams claimed that people of color are “socially predisposed” to contract COVID-19 and implored them to stop smoking, drinking, and taking drugs to slow the spread of the virus. This narrative has wrongly vilified people of color as the driver of the rampant spread of this virus and falsely led some whites to feel safer from contracting it. Moreover, this narrative has failed to acknowledge the connections between the social problems that have persisted for generations and the virus.

Even though vaccines are more readily available today, people of color continue to contract the virus at higher rates. The reasons for this are obvious: People of color are more likely to be frontline essential workers, which increases the probability that they will be exposed to COVID-19. They also have higher instances of chronic health conditions—making them susceptible to complications from the virus due to conditions of poverty, racial stress, lack of access to quality food, exposure to toxins in their living environments, and myriad other challenges rooted in white supremacy.

The narrative about students and parents of color during this pandemic is equally damaging. Many students of color struggle with remote learning and their parents are blamed for those issues. The pervasive narrative that parents of color do not cooperate and encourage their children to remain engaged ignores the realities. Many frontline workers are not at home and cannot assist and monitor their children. Families in low-income neighborhoods lack consistent access to a computer or the internet. And parents of color are more likely to experience layoffs—making economic concerns their priority.

These factors—on top of housing instability and food insecurity—add even more uncertainty, anxiety, and stress for BYMOC. Blaming parents and students for inconsistent engagement or achievement in online learning is shortsighted and deplorable. The potential of lingering impacts on students...
due to this narrative were seen in the fall of 2021 as students returned to school. Many teachers overtly blamed or subtly inferred that students of color were at fault for their academic struggles.

Philanthropy should actively use its influence to counter these negative narratives about people of color and the communities in which they live. We view this as an essential component of investing in communities and people of color.

**ALLOWING GREATER FLEXIBILITY**

The idea that POC-led organizations require stringent oversight when spending their grants and must write complicated reports that record incongruent outcomes is patriarchal and colonial on its face. Instead, organizations deserve the flexibility to work as they see fit so they can serve the real needs of the community in the moment.

In the spring of 2020, Forward Promise grantees reported that the general operating funds they received to conduct rapid-response work has literally saved lives. And these dollars remain essential. The grantees have transformed their communities and reconstructed their organizations, so they require general operating support for internal obligations such as:

- Shifting their compensation and benefits policies to allow staff to rest and provide funding for new hires
- Financing the planning time that is needed to re-think their organizational structure, staffing, and programming that makes allowances for their “new normal”
HONORING THE NEED TO CONNECT AND REFLECT

Without real and targeted recovery efforts, America will move past this pandemic and return to “normal”—with people of color suffering in more fragile conditions than ever before. Absent attention and intervention, their recovery will be protracted and difficult, as has been the case during every economic hardship and health crisis experienced in this nation.

Forward Promise grantees have ensured that their communities are supported—with all of the compassion and culturally responsive resources they could muster—so they could survive with as few scars as possible. Their accomplishments have proven they are up for the task. However, the helpers still need philanthropy’s help.

The weight of re-establishing and maintaining connections with youth and their families during the pandemic has fallen squarely—oftentimes solely—on the shoulders of frontline staff. Having a funding partner who recognizes the need for organizations to recharge and offers resources to plan for the future will help grantees prioritize resting, reflecting, and healing.

True commitment to justice and equity recognizes that we must guard against losing our leaders to exhaustion, burnout, and chronic mental and/or physical trauma as a result of years on the frontlines. The time and space to rest, reflect, and heal is critical to their sustained ability to carry the work forward and to build sustainable momentum in their movements.
POC-led organizations have diverse staff with lived experiences in the community. These experiences are both an asset for the BYMOC the grantees serve and a double-edged sword.

The leaders in Forward Promise grantee organizations are people of color. As such, they deal with greater mental anguish and trauma, and they are directly impacted by the repercussions of the pandemic along with the racial unrest. Given the way that COVID-19 has ravaged communities of color, many of them have persisted while sustaining devastating personal and professional losses.

Once potential philanthropy partners understand this, they must then be willing to trust POC-led organizations, acknowledge their lived experiences, and listen when they speak. Philanthropy partners must also prioritize the need to:

- **Offer flexible general operating funds**—showing that they trust and value the expertise of POC-led organizations. This will help organizations ensure that communities of color heal, grow, and thrive.

- **Acknowledge the traumas and losses experienced by POC in the present and from the past.** We cannot move past the stain and pain of racism and colonialism until we acknowledge these systems, then dismantle the policies that have fueled them for generations.

- **Interrogate their traditional ways of conducting work, decentralize philanthropy, and expand their notions about communities of color.** It is philanthropy’s duty to help fund and support these trailblazing organizations, so they can invent the next bold solutions that will ultimately transform individuals, families, neighborhoods, and the nation.
Right now, many Forward Promise grantees are asking themselves, their colleagues, and their youth, “How can we come together to rebuild loving, supportive environments for BYMOC and their villages without the culture of policing, surveilling, and blaming?”

But we are also looking to you—America’s philanthropies—to ask these same questions of yourselves, to reject the racist systems that led us here, and to fund all community organizations fairly and equitably.

After all, philanthropy does not exist to only uplift some of us. It exists to uplift all of us.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Despite experiencing their own personal and professional stresses for nearly two years during the pandemic, our Forward Promise grantees have remained steadfast in serving BYMOC and their villages. We are grateful for their commitment to the work and inspired by their resilience.

Amistades, Inc.
Asian Counseling & Referral Service
Beats Rhymes Life, Inc.
California Youth Connection
Cities United
Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color
Communities United
Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice
Deep Center
Drexel University Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities
Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children
Kumukahi Health + Wellness
MetroMorphosis
Moms of Black Boys United
National Youth Alliance for Boys and Men of Color
Native American Community Academy
Native Like Water
RYSE, Inc.
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