

# LEARNING IN ACTION



Fairfield County's Community Foundation (FCCF) is one of the largest of Connecticut's community foundations. FCCF was formed in 1992 when the Danbury, Greenwich, Stamford, and Five Town foundations merged with the Fairfield County Foundation, which was part of the New York Community Trust. In 2008, the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation also merged with the organization.

## Context for Racial Equity Approach

Since its founding in 1992, FCCF has been strengthening nonprofits, guiding strategic charitable efforts for donors, and uplifting the greater community through philanthropy. The journey to incorporate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) strategies in the foundation's work has focused on two goals:

- Gather and share examples of funders who are taking economic equity, justice, and antiracist approaches to help other grantmakers understand that economic justice practices in grantmaking strategies and internal practices are important and accessible and to inspire grantmakers to change their grantmaking strategies and internal practices that further equitable wealth building and economic justice.
- To ensure diversity is included in the foundation's footprint via targeted investments in particular geographical communities, populations, and philanthropic partnerships.

## CORE VALUES

Addressing and dismantling the root causes of inequity through:

- Equity
- Collaboration
- Respect
- Inclusivity
- Humility
- Courage

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*Bringing together bright minds, bold leaders, and trusted resources to close the opportunity gap.*

## Investment Strategies Linked to Our Racial Equity Approach

This year, FCCF unveiled *Fairfield County Forward*, a strategic plan that enacts the foundation's commitment to addressing the root causes of inequity by working to dismantle systems and structures that limit opportunities. FCCF continues to build on the community engagement it created in the last two years, which was centered in meetings with people from throughout the community and engagement with staff and the foundation's board. The journey to *Fairfield County Forward* can be found in six profound statements of FCCF's core values:

**EQUITY:** We commit to fairness and justice in our work and are accountable to the highest standards.

**INCLUSIVITY:** We work to share power and amplify systematically excluded voices to advance equity.

**COLLABORATION:** We create solutions through transparency and authentic relationships, harness Fairfield County's diversity, and partner with our community to accelerate change.

**HUMILITY:** We practice humility by listening first, respecting different voices, and searching for ways to continually learn.

**RESPECT:** We honor every person's basic human rights and treat each person with dignity.

**COURAGE:** We seek the bravery and conviction to live our organizational values, confront wrong, take strategic risks, and pursue solutions that advance positive social change.

## Internal Practices and Developing a Shared Language

To accomplish lasting change in the communities that FCCF serves, the staff, which has extensive knowledge of philanthropy and deep roots in Fairfield County's nonprofit community, work collaboratively across sectors to foster innovative solutions. The organization has emphasized the importance of understanding bias and its impact on

grantmaking and dedicated resources to reshaping internal operating processes and procedures. Over the two-year period before the launch of *Fairfield County Forward*, the Board and team worked with consultants to unpack latent bias in the foundation's policies and procedures.

## Examining Internal Operational Processes and Making Specific Changes

FCCF is guided by a commitment to DEI, collaboration, and integrity. To accomplish its goals, the foundation focused on strategies that supported staff and board understanding of the organization's vision and long-term sustainability.

During the journey, the organization took specific steps to support participants and guide the process. First, FCCF staff and board members worked closely with a grantee partner that provided training to help the team understand and identify ingrained gender bias. This process led to a comprehensive review of the entire recruitment and hiring process that produced substantial changes. For instance, job descriptions were revised to remove unconscious bias, for instance by replacing he/she pronouns with they or you, avoiding language that could be seen as male-dominant, and being more inclusive of experience versus education. Traditional identifiers such as names, home addresses, and college names are now removed from resumes before hiring managers review them. Jobs were then posted to inclusive job boards to ensure a diverse array of applicants.

The performance review process was also updated to incorporate employee feedback to managers. The foundation engaged in a discussion of 360 formats as a potential next step for receiving reflections from others. These changes were instrumental in reaching and retaining potential team members who are representative of the community and bring key insights that make the grantmaking process more inclusive.

The changes are reflective in the current demographic profile of the foundation's staff, which has shifted from 50% white/50% BIPOC before the process to 60% BIPOC and 40% white. With this progress in creating a more diverse staff, the organization has leaned into new ideas and gained a better understanding of communities and their needs.

## Engaging Staff with New Internal Practices that Enhance Communication

The journey toward a more inclusive organization required ensuring that every individual working at FCCF has an opportunity to thrive. Key changes in operating practices that led to a more robust organization included encouraging staff members to run monthly all-staff meetings, to allow different styles and personalities to lead and shape conversations; providing maximum flexibility by adding floating holidays to benefits; closing the office during Thanksgiving Week to allow a longer break in recognition of staff's mental health and well-being needs; and providing a more flexible remote work schedule to staff members' needs. This change is now a policy standard across all positions.

## Strengthening the Strategic Planning Process

In addition to making great strides in implementing more equitable human resource policies, FCCF has also modified several other operational practices. Internal leadership and operating teams have been redefined and reorganized to be more inclusive of diverse voices and increase opportunities not only to participate in decision making but also to influence the foundation's larger strategic direction and operational decisions. The current leadership team, which is tasked with shaping strategic goals and objectives, now has a greater degree of decision-making power and is more broadly composed of staff members critically involved with or leading strategic work. The Operations Team, which focuses on aligning the foundation's operation work with its mission, vision, values, and strategic objectives, has been expanded to include a cross-level perspective.

These internal changes led to a desire to learn more from stakeholders and deepen the foundation's engagement with the community. A donor survey and engagement survey were both conducted, and within five months, staff members were engaged in conversations with donors and key stakeholders. The result was a forum from which staff and leadership could gain deeper knowledge of donor ideas and identify opportunities for investment and collaboration. Both the leadership and operational teams had ownership of the content from the engagement surveys and were eager to begin implementing key ideas.

## Ensuring Accountability Via a Formal DEI Taskforce

The development of DEI within the organization is an evolving process, constantly improved, tweaked, and activated. To centralize the DEI work more formally, and ensure accountability to and sustainability of the foundation's goals, FCCF created a DEI Taskforce. In 2019, the DEI Taskforce was charged with focusing on seven critical levers:

- Build capacity, commitment, and accountability among senior leaders
- Provide compelling data to drive storytelling to our communities
- Improve employee engagement through teamwork, equity, respect, and inclusion
- Commit to and promote development through inclusion for maximum organizational impact
- Engage the Board of Directors in the execution of the strategic plan and DEI strategies
- Develop and educate partners and donors to expand FCCF's impact in the community
- Develop knowledge and DEI competency

This charge included adopting existing DEI terms and definitions; this language has been collected in a reference document the Board can use as it seeks to develop a common language. In addition, the Equity Committee is being expanded to include Board Members, who will set the pace of FCCF's DEI journey, allowing everyone to work from the same expectations and toward the same goals.

## Developing Competitive Grantmaking Processes

The grantmaking process and the investments made by an organization shed light on the value placed on equitable grantmaking. FCCF has focused on specific goals and formalized two objectives:

- Create and execute a more equitable grantmaking process
- Create greater transparency and ease in the application and award process, paying particular attention to the burden on smaller organizations

More specifically, the application review process and ways to improve the internal grantmaking process were examined and, where necessary, reworked. Several surveys of FCCF partners were conducted, including a general survey of grantee partners (173 respondents), along with a focus group of nonprofit partner organizations' leaders of color, and a best-practices review via a survey of select local and national foundations. The partner feedback was incorporated in changes to the foundation's grantmaking policies. These changes were presented to the Board's Community Impact Committee for review, and they were subsequently adopted.

## Creating a Transparent Process Through the Collection of Key Data

To be sure that a more equitable grantmaking process is being implemented and meeting critical needs in targeted communities, modifications were made to critical tools. Demographic questions on the grant application were revised to include questions about the organization's DEI-relevant work; the demographic makeup of leadership, staff, and board; and client community representation within the organization's structures. This information is collected alongside more conventional demographic data regarding the race, ethnicity, gender identity, education level, household income, and demographics of clients served by the applicant organization. In the case of programmatic grants, the same data are collected for direct service organizations. This new data allowed FCCF to increase support for programs led by leaders of color and directed to underserved and underresourced communities. In addition, the General Operating Support grant opportunity was changed from an invitation-only process to an open process. The mid-cycle written reporting, which had been obligatory for all grantees, has been made optional for at least some grantees, especially those with longer-term funding relationships with FCCF.

## Aligning the CEO Grant Process with Strategic Goals

Previously, FCCF's CEO Grant Process was difficult to access. Organizations had to have an established relationship with the foundation or an experienced development staff that understood common community foundation practices to identify and access that grant. However, as part of the changes throughout the organization and the renewed commitment to living DEI, staff members began generating

ideas for nonprofits to be considered for funding, with particular focus on alignment with FCCF's strategic plan and the proposed organization's impact in the community. This process is now published on the organization's website, which creates an environment of greater transparency and enables further alignment with other FCCF community impact initiatives to advance racial and economic justice.

## Ongoing Learning and Reflections

The focus of FCCF's Center for Nonprofit Excellence on racial and economic justice is critical to its programming development. Now, partners and participants are at the core of its efforts. With this new direction, FCCF aimed to partner with organizations offering programming that addresses unique barriers faced by historically underserved BIPOC communities, challenge generally accepted philanthropic best practices that upheld those barriers, and create opportunities that better serve communities that FCCF has traditionally underserved. The changes made to support those objectives have led to intentional engagement in capacity-building for emerging BIPOC leaders and BIPOC-led organizations to build critical skills and increase their support network, with a focus on helping these leaders and organizations establish early relationships with funders.

Below are a few examples of how aligning FCCF's work with a DEI lens led to equitable and inclusive partner engagement and investments that included intersectionality approaches—connecting race and gender rather than looking at them in siloes.

### Fund for Women and Girls Gender & Racial Equity Cohort.

FCCF awards \$600,000 annually to help women and girls meet health and safety needs, build self-esteem, and develop job and life skills. The Gender & Racial Equity Cohort was an extension of that focus. Launched in fall 2020, the Cohort grew out of a recognition that gender cuts across all aspects of identity—race, class, sexual orientation, ability, health, and immigration status. The Cohort collected a group of nonprofit organizations that deliver gender-specific programming for women, girls, and gender-nonconforming persons. The cohort provided a non-judgmental space for learning, sharing, questioning, reflecting, and growing; organizations explored overlapping identities and their impact in the areas of education, health, and economic security. The

sessions were designed to deepen participants' understanding of issues affecting diverse populations of girls, women, and gender-nonconforming persons. At the close of the program, participants, now better equipped to use an intersectional lens in their work, received a mini grant to put toward advancing racial and gender equity within their organizations.

**Economic Opportunity Portfolio.** Prior to 2019, the Economic Opportunity Portfolio was in a state of ambiguity. Through internal conversations at the staff and board level and in-depth community stakeholder engagement, the Foundation identified and prioritized a set of strategies focused on ending/preventing homelessness and promoting equitable access to and development of affordable housing. Now, the portfolio is further expanding to support initiatives that improve equitable access to wealth and assets in our community. Together, donors and partners have addressed the challenge to ensure all Fairfield County residents have access to safe, stable, healthy, and affordable housing in communities of opportunity. Over the last two decades, FCCF has united 29 funders and helped build the will of municipal leaders across the county, resulting in the production of 1,100 affordable housing units, an increase in production among collaborative members of more than 300%. The collective investments of nearly \$5

million were estimated to reach 5,000 low- and moderate-income Fairfield County residents and generate \$472 million in economic activity.

**Get Out the Vote Program.** With the launch of the GOTV Grant program in 2019, FCCF expanded its support of grassroots organizations and smaller nonprofit partners working toward race and economic equity and serving traditionally underserved voter constituencies. Over \$62,000 was granted to support five nonprofits, and 120 community residents were engaged to learn more about the needs, strengths, and areas of opportunity in their communities. Nineteen of Fairfield's 23 towns and cities saw voter turnout increases compared with 2016.

Fairfield County's Community Foundation is partnering with the community to create a county where every person has an equitable opportunity to thrive. We work closely with community organizations, nonprofits, businesses, and philanthropists to address challenges and identify opportunities to create a stronger, more vibrant community. Our work is informed by three decades of partnering with and serving the community. Our success is brought about through the dedication of our staff, Board, and community partners.



**MENDI BLUE PACA**  
President and Chief Executive Officer

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