

The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy

Sol Price School of Public Policy
University of Southern California

Philanthropy & the City: Local Problem-Solving for a More Equitable Recovery

By Susan Wampler

June 18, 2021- Disruptions lead to innovation. The months since the pandemic hit has provided an opportunity to rethink how cities can address an array of problems that our neighborhoods and communities face, with an accent on how to address race and equity. This is the context for **Philanthropy & the City**, a four-part virtual series presented by The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy about timely ways to achieve lasting impact as we reimagine what a recovery can look like.

Building on The Center's cumulative body of place-based research and convenings over the past two decades, **Philanthropy & the City** explores innovative strategies for a more inclusive and equitable recovery and to achieve meaningful impact in addressing longstanding societal challenges. Each session features leaders with a wide range of experiences, perspectives and vantage points, who shared their insights and ideas for building more vibrant and resilient communities.

“At The Center, we have devoted much of our effort to examining and assessing those strategies where philanthropy works at the intersection of government and business, as well as through greater collaboration within the philanthropic sector,” said Director James M. Ferris, the Emery Evans Olson Chair in Nonprofit Entrepreneurship and Public Policy at the USC Price School of Public Policy. “In the process, we have learned that the greatest opportunity for philanthropy to drive change is at the local level. It is at that scale that you are more apt to see how the various systems come together to impact the quality of life.”

Moderated by Elwood Hopkins – founder and managing director of Emerging Markets Inc. and presidential fellow at the Kresge Foundation – the series delved into a number of interrelated issues that, together, demonstrate the possibilities and pitfalls confronting leaders across the urban landscape.

“American cities confront a crisis of tremendous proportions – a global pandemic, economic downturn, failing formulas for municipal finance and a reckoning around longstanding racial injustices,” Hopkins noted. “At the same time, much responsibility for addressing these challenges has been left to cities to handle without corresponding resources or authority. As a result, business, philanthropic and nonprofit actors are stepping in at the local level, and new cross-sector partnership structures are emerging.”

In the opening session, “**The New Local Problem Solving**,” former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros and Kresge Foundation President and CEO Rip Rapson examined the financial crisis resulting from the pandemic and related stresses of 2020 as well as the changing dynamics of resource deployment and collaboration that may more effectively address these issues.

They noted the shift from “command and control” to a more distributive form of leadership for decision-making. “It’s almost as much about the process as it is about the projects,” Rapson said. He also observed that good policies are for naught if they can’t be implemented. “How are you going to distribute solutions, particularly capital?” he asked. “It is at the ground level, in cities, where that implementation capacity is going to be stress-tested and reinvented.”

Cisneros emphasized the need to “flip the traditional structure of federal aid on its head” to listen to those at the bottom of the pyramid, instead of following a top-down-only approach to allocation of federal resources.

The second installment, “**Community Foundations as Local Anchors**,” highlighted the unique role community foundations play in translating their deep knowledge of place into informed action. San Francisco Foundation President and CEO Fred Blackwell, Chicago Community Trust President and CEO Dr. Helene D. Gayle, and California Community Foundation President and CEO Antonia Hernández discussed local savvy that give community foundations the flexibility and tools to innovate.

They emphasized the necessity of bringing people together – from the diverse community members they serve to the donors they attract. Leveraging resources is equally crucial. “We’re really fooling ourselves if we think we can tackle the issues we’re trying to address and be responsive to without engaging the public sector,” Blackwell said.

Gayle observed a changing mindset in foundation leadership. “In general, community foundations are moving from measuring themselves by size to measuring themselves by impact,” she said. Part of achieving that impact, according to the panel, is assembling people with experience beyond philanthropy. For example, “I hire community organizers,” Hernández said, “people who are as comfortable in an alley as they are in a boardroom.”

“**The Next Generation of Place-Based Philanthropy**” then took center stage with Ballmer Group President of Philanthropy Terri Ludwig, California Endowment President and CEO Dr. Robert K. Ross, and Blue Meridian Partners CIO and Impact Officer Jim Shelton. They noted that systems change occurs at the local level, and discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic unmasked inequality in the health system, public education, economic inclusion, housing and much more.

If we’ve learned a lesson from the past year, Ross said, “it is how profoundly rampant structural and racial inequality is across the nation. It’s been human made – and it can be unmade.”

Scalability and adaptability are essential, according to the panel. A solution for one community “can’t just be plopped into another,” Shelton said. “It needs to be shaped,” and, he added, the community members “need to be the ones to tell you how to do that.”

Appropriately, given the topic, the speakers agreed that the dynamism and social consciousness of youth are the keys to lasting change. In addition to a passion for issues such as racial equity, Ludwig said young people share “a real desire to change the world on a bigger scale.”

The series’ concluding installment, “**Corporations, Philanthropy & Inclusive Markets**,” assessed the potential of market-oriented strategies and business leadership for driving an equitable recovery. Featured speakers were Lata N. Reddy – Senior Vice President of Inclusive Solutions for Prudential Financial Inc. and Chair of the Prudential Foundation – and Shamina Singh, Executive Vice President, Corporate Sustainability, Mastercard, and President of the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth.

Lata Reddy and Shamina Singh shared a conviction that corporate social responsibility should not be compartmentalized from lines of business, but rather serve as a leading edge for growing new markets in low-income communities and an investment in the societal context in which business takes place. “You know that these societal issues are going to intersect with your business, so it’s critical to be engaged” in resolving them, Reddy said. Singh challenged startups to embrace this understanding of social purpose as well, building it into their business plans from the start. Otherwise, she said, “you might not grow in as expansive a way as you can.”

Hopkins observed that all four discussions in the Philanthropy & the City series build organically upon each other, collectively comprising a body of fresh thinking to inform national policy debates at this historic moment. “A common theme across the sessions,” he noted, “is the belief that we are at point where years

of incremental change are adding up to a qualitative leap forward. 2020 was a great disrupter and a great clarifier.”

“It is our hope that the series will lift up new ideas, innovative approaches and the bold leadership to spark the action that is needed to realize the promise of philanthropy and the city,” Ferris said.

The series was sponsored by Bank of America, The Kresge Foundation and Weingart Foundation, with support from The Center’s Philanthropic Partners. More information about the series, including recordings of the discussions, can be found on The Center’s [website](#).

The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy promotes more effective philanthropy and strengthens the nonprofit sector through research that informs philanthropic decision-making and public policy to advance community problem solving. The Center is a part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, which works to improve the quality of life for people and their communities, here and abroad.

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