



United Way  
of Olmsted County

## **Investing in Community-Led Solutions: Centering Black Voices through Participatory Grantmaking**

### **OVERVIEW:**

United Way of Olmsted County (UWOC) community grantmaking focuses on investing in programs that ensure people have access to what they need to have a good quality of life. Through a review of community data and hearing from the voices of community members, UWOC decided to focus our next grant opportunity on the Black/African American community in Olmsted County.

Typically, United Way staff members lead the process to design the grant focus area, application questions, and all other parts of the grantmaking process. Knowing that our staff isn't the expert on the Black/African American experience, the concept of a community-led process emerged.

Throughout that process, Black community members reviewed data and heard from their family, friends, and neighbors on how they'd like to see this funding used to positively impact their community. The conclusion became clear: youth development programming for Black youth needs to be bolstered, and the most impactful programming is led by people who share youth's racial identity.

Adolescence is a time of great change and development of identity. Youth development programs can help connect children and families to resources, community advocates, positive social relationships, and opportunities to build key skills. Opportunities afforded and skills built during this time can set up youth for a lifetime of success. High quality youth development programs can positively influence adolescents and help them grow into thriving adults.

A thriving community is one where people can meet their basic needs; have healthy relationships with self and others; and have developed skills to excel at school, at home, and in the community. By investing in young people in our community, we can help support the critical foundations they need to achieve those goals.

### **THE STORY OF COMMUNITY-LED PROCESS:**

United Way of Olmsted County has historically used community input to understand community needs. Often this involves reviewing the results of community surveys, focus groups, and studies. However, unless specifically targeted, some reports and studies still include the most mainstream of voices. We understand that for a variety of reasons, community-level data often does not fully represent the voices of Black residents.

UWOC knew that to have an impactful outcome, we needed to involve Black residents in the design process from the beginning. We worked with eight Black community members to leverage their knowledge, expertise, relationships, and insights to help us understand how a grant investment serving Black residents could be most impactful and how to go about considering partnerships for the work.

Throughout an 18-month process, our team spoke with 19 other Black community members, reviewed outcome data, and had robust discussions on what this grant funding should focus on. Many needs came up in conversation: financial literacy, business development, community connections, and leadership development.

The team hosted a community event for the broader Black community to weigh in on the proposed grant focus areas. After gathering feedback from 30 community members, the standout choice was for our grant funding to focus on supporting youth programming that Black youth participate in. We asked participants to rate proposed focus areas on a number of criteria. Investing in youth development programming ranked the highest in the areas of “reflecting need”, “instilling hope”, and “time well spent”. The team agreed that investing in programs that serve and are led by Black people would be most impactful.

The remainder of this brief describes the data and research supporting this investment in Black-led and Black-serving youth development programming. We also want this brief to showcase that community wisdom and knowledge is powerful. We started this process by listening to the insights from our Black community members and are compiling the data and research that confirms their lived experiences.

## **YOUTH EMPOWERMENT GRANT**

### **Why invest specifically in Black youth development programming led by Black organizations?**

#### *Strengthening Black-led organizations*

United Way of Olmsted County’s mission is to unite people and resources to improve lives in our community. We fight for the health, education, and financial stability of every person in our community. To that end, we invest approximately \$1M annually through our grantmaking processes to support programs that help people reach their full potential.

From 2010 to 2020, United Way of Olmsted County has invested over \$14 million through our community granting. Out of that \$14 million, only 2% went to programs operated by Black/African American-led agencies and/or programs that primarily served Black/African American participants. In a typical year, only one program award would be given to a program operated by Black/African American-led agencies and/or programs that primarily served Black/African American participants. That award amount was, on average, \$33,000, representing only 2% of the entire annual investment UWOC made. By comparison, the average annual award amount during this period was \$38,000.

This historical data analysis shows that United Way's investments in Black/African American-led agencies and/or programs that primarily serve Black/African American participants have been far and few between, and award amounts have been smaller than the average program award.

UWOC is not alone in the need to address inequities in funding allocations. On average, Executive Directors of nonprofits in the US are more likely to be white than any other race (Thomas-Breitfield, 2020). Organizations led by people of color receive much less funding and operate with much smaller budgets compared to their white-led counterparts (Rendon, 2020).

Recognizing these systemic issues regarding who leads organizations and what types of organizations receive more philanthropic support, UWOC staff has spent the past 3 years working to develop and nurture relationships with leaders of color through new grant and program opportunities designed for culturally specific organizations. A culturally specific organization (CSO) is an organization founded to serve a particular cultural community and whose leadership and staff are part of that community.

CSOs are the best advocates for their communities because they understand the cultural norms, beliefs, and traditions of the people they serve; effectively engage community members; recognize and remove barriers to accessing services; and bridge norms between communities and institutions.

These strengths of CSOs are often challenges for established mainstream organizations seeking to better serve a diverse cross-section of the community. At the same time, a lack of resources often keeps CSOs from developing desired capacities in areas such as data management, fundraising, technology, HR, or board development.

Everyone in our community, no matter their racial, ethnic, or cultural background, should be served well and have access to what they need to thrive. Investing in the success of the agencies that are in the best position to serve those members of our community is critical to addressing long-standing inequities.

## Why invest in youth development?

### *Building on community insights*

When our grantmaking team was working on gathering information from community members, youth development came up quite a bit. Much was shared about feeling like there should be more places for Black youth and community members to gather where people can understand and share their experiences. For example, when UWOC staff and community consultants led a community input session, some attendees remarked on how *“nice to be in a room full of other Black people working towards a common cause.”*

One of the most integral parts of youth development is the development of self-identity. Best practices for serving youth of color include space and time to discuss racial, ethnic, language, and other key attributes that define a young person’s identity (Mathew A. Diemer, 2016). Being able to do that alongside an adult who shares those identities as well can provide a deeper and more nuanced explorational experience.

Through a youth development program, a young person can expand their social circle beyond the adults they already know, which can expand a young person’s understanding of the possibilities of the world and their own community. Through our grantmaking team’s work, they heard about the desire for resources that will help keep youth engaged in positive experiences and connected to role models that will show them what’s possible for their own futures. Older adults shared how critical it was for them to see people from their community doing well and pursuing their passions so they could imagine themselves achieving the same things.

Afterschool and other out-of-school youth programming is in high demand in Minnesota; 81% of parents surveyed believed that after school programs provided their children opportunities to learn life skills, and 84% of parents said that after school programs gave them peace of mind knowing their children were safe and supervised. Minnesota families cited program cost, transportation, and a lack of available programs as reasons why their children were not enrolled in afterschool programs. These answers mirrored the experiences shared by our local community members as well (America After 3PM, 2020).

Research shows that having one positive relationship with an adult can lead to better academic outcomes compared to youth who do not have a caring relationship. That positive relationship will also have rippling effects beyond supporting academic achievement. Positive relationships with adults can also support emotional regulation and interpersonal skills which will have profound effects later in life. (Vanessa Sacks, 2020).

Young people who have a supportive circle of relationships have opportunities to discover themselves, their identities, and how they contribute to their community. With

that safe space to explore, youth will gain self-confidence and identify skills to hone for their own personal and professional goals (Vanessa Sacks, 2020).

Supporting young people towards high school graduation, post-secondary education, and stable careers can ensure our community's jobs are filled and our economies are flourishing. Supporting young people in developing a positive self-identity and healthy relationship-building skills can ensure our communities are places with tight bonds and a focus on caring for each other. Supporting young people in their pursuit of their passions and an appreciation for giving back can result in a community where people volunteer, vote, and make their voices heard to enact positive change.

## **What is high-quality youth development programming?**

### *The 5 key elements of a developmental relationship*

A “developmental relationship” is a relationship that is shown to support a younger person's development in a positive way (Jenny Nagaoka, 2015). Having healthy and supportive relationships, opportunities to explore and build skills, as well as opportunities to develop emotional maturity is key to success in adulthood.

Youth development programs typically put positive relationships with caring adults at the center of the work they do. Whether it's a program that focuses on increasing academic achievement or a program that aims to foster a love of physical activity, they achieve their missions through positive relationships with adults.

According to Search Institute's research, there are 5 key elements of a successful relationship that contribute to a young person's positive development. Those elements are express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities (Eugene Roehlkepartain, 2017). See Figure 1.0 below.

## SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

A developmental relationship involves a dynamic mix of five elements, which are expressed through 20 actions. Because relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, each person in a strong relationship engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.






Elements	Actions	Definitions
<p><b>Express Care</b></p>  <p>Show me that I matter to you.</p>	<p>Be dependable</p> <p>Listen</p> <p>Believe in me</p> <p>Be warm</p> <p>Encourage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be someone I can trust.</li> <li>• Really pay attention when we are together.</li> <li>• Make me feel known and valued.</li> <li>• Show me you enjoy being with me.</li> <li>• Praise me for my efforts and achievements.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Challenge Growth</b></p>  <p>Push me to keep getting better.</p>	<p>Expect my best</p> <p>Stretch</p> <p>Hold me accountable</p> <p>Reflect on failures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect me to live up to my potential.</li> <li>• Push me to go further.</li> <li>• Insist I take responsibility for my actions.</li> <li>• Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide Support</b></p>  <p>Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.</p>	<p>Navigate</p> <p>Empower</p> <p>Advocate</p> <p>Set boundaries</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide me through hard situations and systems.</li> <li>• Build my confidence to take charge of my life.</li> <li>• Defend me when I need it.</li> <li>• Put in place limits to keep me on track.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Share Power</b></p>  <p>Treat me with respect and give me a say.</p>	<p>Respect me</p> <p>Include me</p> <p>Collaborate</p> <p>Let me lead</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take me seriously and treat me fairly.</li> <li>• Involve me in decisions that affect me.</li> <li>• Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.</li> <li>• Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expand Possibilities</b></p>  <p>Connect me with people and places that broaden my horizon.</p>	<p>Inspire</p> <p>Broaden Horizons</p> <p>Connect</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.</li> <li>• Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places</li> <li>• Introduce me to more people who can help me grow.</li> </ul>

Figure 1.0

When relationships between youth and adults have these 5 components, the relationship is considered developmental in the sense that it will be impactful for the young person as they continue to grow into adulthood. These key components can show up in a myriad of different ways and should be considered when adults are involved in youth programming.

*Starting with support early*

Our community members shared that relationships with adults they viewed as successful were critical to their own personal success later in life for a variety of reasons. One of those key reasons was how it shaped their own concept of what success is and how to attain it. Financial stability and building generational wealth is a common goal for many, especially for those who have felt tougher financial times.

We know that graduating high school on time is directly linked to financial stability into adulthood. In 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that a person with a high school degree earned, on average, \$148 more per week than someone without a degree (Median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by educational attainment, 2020). For people who pursue some college or obtain a bachelor's degree, their weekly income continues to increase with their educational attainment.

Our community members see this link between positive role models at critical developmental ages and the likelihood for those youth to become successful and financial stable in the future. The late middle school and early high school years have the capacity to set up students for success on the road to graduating high school in 4 years. In 2021, only 75% of Black/African American students enrolled at Rochester Public Schools were on track to graduate in 4 years (Graduation Rate, 2022).

We also know that success in 9<sup>th</sup> grade has great impacts on if a young person will graduate high school or not (Ritter, 2015). This is typically a change in school and is a time of increased peer influence and individual independence. During adolescence, there are numerous factors that protect youth from engaging in unhealthy behaviors which can negatively impact school grades and attendance, meaningful social relationships, and confidence. Some of those factors include engagement and connections in school, peers, in athletics, employment, religion, and culture. Research also shows that the presence of mentors and adult supporters for development of skills and interests as well as the opportunity to engage in the community are protective factors for youth (Youth.gov, n.d.)

If a young person can get connected to positive relationships and outlets such as through youth development programming before 9<sup>th</sup> grade, they may be more successful with the transition to high school, which in turn can make their transition into adulthood more successful.

#### *Mentoring make up: group vs. one-on-one*

Mentor and the National Mentoring Partnership identified 5 types of mentoring: traditional (one-on-one), group, peer-to-peer, team, and e-mentoring. Youth development programming may utilize one type of mentoring or a combination of multiple.

One-on-one mentoring is the preferred method in the youth development field and has seen many signs of effectiveness (Gabriel P. Kuperminc and Nancy, 2021). In a one-on-one mentoring relationship, a young person has more access to their mentor and in multiple settings, as these types of programs are usually not based in a specific setting such as a school or at a community center.

If a youth development program is utilizing a group mentoring method, experts point out that the ratio of adults to youth, the training and support provided to mentors, and the degree to which group sessions are structured and supported by curriculum all have a hand in impacting the effectiveness of the group mentoring program (Gabriel P. Kuperminc and Nancy, 2021).

For example, a program may be more effective if there are multiple adults available in a large group of youth. This provides youth opportunities to have more time with any individual adult and provides the adults an opportunity to have multiple groups of youth engaging in different activities at one time with adequate support and guidance.

As mentioned above, multiple types of mentoring can occur in one program. A mostly one-on-one program can implement regular group opportunities, and a mostly group mentoring program can implement regular one-on-one opportunities. As an added nuance to best practices, some studies have shown that in particularly Black/African American contexts, group opportunities reflect the cultural norms of interdependence. This is an example of how a program can be both effective and responsive to cultural contexts at the same time.

Similarly, no matter the type of relationship building (one-on-one or group), programming should include ways for youth to provide feedback and co-create programmatic elements. Co-created programs are more likely to be relevant and embraced by participants. Giving youth the opportunity to generate programmatic elements also provides hands-on leadership and professional development opportunities.

### *Supporting positive identity formation and critical consciousness*

An important aspect of human development is self-discovery. For Black youth specifically, mainstream classroom discussions or content in the media doesn't necessarily share or celebrate the rich history and contributions of their community members. Creating spaces and places where youth can reflect on their racial and cultural identity and explore what theorists refer to as "critical consciousness" can lead to many impactful outcomes.

Critical consciousness was first developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as a part of his efforts to promote literacy. He continued to refine and expand his theory to



propose that by developing critical thinking and language skills, people may be able to harness the power of their collective forces to combat oppressive structures of Brazilian society (Mathew A. Diemer, 2016).

There are four aspects of critical consciousness: **critical social analysis** (discussing how individuals interact with oppressive systems), **collective identification** (individuals building a sense of belonging through similar group experiences), **political self-efficacy or motivation** (when a person moves from reflection toward the idea of taking actions to create positive change), and finally **critical action** (the step where people take personal or group action to address harmful systems) (Mathew A. Diemer, 2016).

One of the most important long-term outcomes of youth increasing their critical consciousness is forming a positive racial identity that remains secure despite outward negative messaging. A young person having one or more positive adult relationships that encourages the development of these critical thinking skills can set them up with skills to cope with oppression and stay resilient in the face of racism (Mathew A. Diemer, 2016).

### *Supporting positive connections between youth and caregivers*

Research has shown that high levels of family engagement and positive relationships with caregivers result in many positive outcomes. Our team members heard from people sharing their stories of just how important caregivers being present in the lives of youth is. They spoke about the different ways they've seen those relationships suffer due to the criminal justice system separating children and caregivers as well as caregivers being pulled away from home due to working multiple jobs to earn a livable wage.

Community identified the importance of seeing programs support the positive connections between youth and their caregivers. Strong family connections make it more likely that youth rely on health coping skills and avoid negative ones like smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. When caregivers are more involved in their youth's lives, youth achieve better grades, better attendance, and are less likely to drop out of high school (Youth.gov, n.d.).

By involving caregivers in youth programming, it responds to the call from our local community members and improves youth's health and education. When both youth and families are centered, they can meaningfully share important information that impacts opportunities for additional support.

When youth, families, and programs work together, it can result in more relevant and culturally appropriate referrals to services that will address needs and draw from community support. Ultimately, connecting youth and families to the right resources at the right time will build on the families' strengths (Youth.gov, n.d.).

## CONCLUSION

Through this multi-year partnership between the Black community and United Way of Olmsted County, we have developed a deeper understanding of how Black community members experience life in Olmsted County. Through our **participatory grantmaking process**, we have aimed to live up to the concept and practice of “ceding grantmaking power to affected community members and constituencies by putting them at the center and giving them the power to choose who and what to fund” (Kabia, 2021).

While information can be gathered through surveys, focus groups, and other types of research, that same information can also be gathered through trust-based conversations and relationship building with real people. While “data” is often touted as the most important thing, looking to community for answers, more often than not will be just as insightful.

We know that locally, many of our Black-led and serving organizations have a focus on youth development. Through our grantmaking process, community members shared that youth development was at the top of their list of priorities. This shows how in line our local organizations are with what the community wants and needs.

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