

# Black Philanthropy Houston

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## An Invitation to Philanthropy

August is [Black Philanthropy Month](#), a global celebration to elevate African-descent giving. The campaign encourages philanthropists of every race and at all levels of giving to invest in Black leadership and Black communities. It is an invitation to join Black people in longstanding traditions of philanthropy, self-help, and collective efforts for liberation.

This year's theme *Foresight 20/20* is especially compelling as COVID-19 and the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd once again called attention to entrenched inequity and the lethal consequences of racism.

Philanthropy has a pivotal part to play in addressing these inequities.

Before the current global crisis and brutal murders, there was widespread discussion about the role of philanthropy in exacerbating inequity and injustice. From best-selling books and countless blogs to conferences and webinars, a high energy national critique was taking place on the inherent power imbalances present in all forms of philanthropy.

This is a particularly compelling challenge for Houston's philanthropic community.

As one of the most prosperous U.S. cities, Houston has twice garnered a top spot on [Charity Navigator's 10 most charitable cities list](#). Houstonians have Texas-sized hearts and a robust philanthropic sector that includes individuals, foundations, corporations, and civic organizations.

Despite our chart topping generosity, Houston remains one of the [most economically segregated](#) cities in the nation. We have become increasingly separated by income, education, and class, with poverty [disproportionately affecting Black and Hispanic communities](#).

**Race remains one the most reliable predictors of outcomes and opportunities in Houston.**

Yet, Houston's historically Black neighborhoods and Black-led organizations have a wealth of assets and are ready for strategic investments to strengthen infrastructure and expand impact.

**If Houston philanthropists do not prioritize racial equity- the condition that is achieved when race no longer determines a person's opportunities or outcomes- we risk reinforcing the status quo and possibly harming the very communities we aim to help.**

To be clear, philanthropy alone cannot create the change that is needed to make Houston a more equitable city. System, policy, institutional, and personal change must be accompanied by an explicit, intentional, and sustained focus to reduce race inequities from all sectors.

For philanthropists at every level- individual, corporate, and foundation- advancing racial equity may feel like a daunting invitation. They may not know where to begin or how to build competency. We offer the following suggestions as starting points for those ready to take action in the near term. These ideas are not an action plan or substitute for the developmental work and transformation needed to operationalize racial equity.

### **Acknowledge Black Giving Traditions**

Mutual assistance and self-help in Houston's Black communities began as early as 1865 when the first freed slaves left plantations and arrived in Freedmen's Town in Fourth Ward and later established Emancipation Park in Third Ward. Black givers in Houston continue this tradition today.

Black Philanthropy Houston conducted the first-ever survey of Houston Black donors. Respondents reported that [48% of their charitable donations go to Black-led and primarily Black-serving organizations](#) in addition to spending 50% of their volunteer time with these groups.

The "equity conversation" is not new in Black communities. Black social entrepreneurs, Black donors, Black nonprofit leaders, and Black-led organizations have been sounding the alarm about gaps, lack of support, and inequitable practices. Yet, Black neighborhoods remain underinvested in and [Black-led organizations are underfunded](#).

This is one of the reasons for the increase in Black giving circles, where individuals with shared interests pool their contributions into a single fund and then donate to nonprofit organizations. Black people want to provide resources to the communities and organizations that often do not receive support through traditional philanthropic channels.

### **Listen to Black People**

Despite the good intentions of many well-meaning people, philanthropy struggles to upend the status quo. Research and information shared by colleagues and friends is helpful but should not serve as a proxy for deep listening. There is an untapped reservoir of ideas and genius in Black communities, as people closest to community challenges often create the most innovative responses. Ask Black people for their ideas, listen to their suggestions, and defer to their decision-making.

### **Alter Board Recruitment**

Despite data that clearly demonstrates that diverse organizations outperform homogenous ones, only [4% of CEOs and 8% of board members of U.S. nonprofit organizations are Black](#). This is an enduring trend with people of color never having represented more than 18% of board membership. Foundation boards report that [85% of board members are white with the lack of diversity most concentrated in family and community foundations, which report board members are 91% and 90% percent white, respectively](#).

The multiple blind spots created and maintained by homogeneity further promote racialized inequities. Tokenism is not a solution, as simply having diverse representation changes optics but may not provide the skill, cultural competency, and keen abilities needed to understand community context. Existing boards should replace informal recruitment processes with strategic recruitment and retention efforts to unlock the vast potential of Black leadership.

### **Share Power**

Many of the policies, practices, processes, and structures in philanthropy are self-imposed, which means there is an opportunity to move away from top-down decision making and shift the power for determining how resources are allocated to the community members closest to the solutions. Resident-led committees, participatory grantmaking, and community wealth building are a few examples of ways that this is happening around the country. We can and should implement these types of models in Houston.

### **Fund Small Organizations**

Small organizations with accountability to their communities are often not on the radar of philanthropists. These groups may be last in line for funding or entirely unknown to philanthropic decision makers. Larger well known organizations that are able to easily approach funders typically have outsized influence and resources. Individual donors, foundations, and corporations should consider giving more to smaller, community-based organizations.

### **Prioritize Inclusive Contracting**

Whether consulting, communications, accounting, IT or event management, in a city as diverse as Houston, Black-owned businesses should be included in vendor selection. Baseline equity criteria should be embedded in the contract sourcing and selection process with clear metrics that are tracked. This is an alternative to the inherent bias for in-group selection and enables philanthropists to express their commitment to racial equity with every dollar they spend and not just their donations and grantmaking.

## **Speak Up**

Speak directly against racism in personal and professional spaces and ask that others do the same. Explicitly name bias and unfair policies, practices, and norms within your organization. Challenge assumptions and use your privilege to amplify Black voices, experiences, and leadership. Ask questions about investments in and support of Black organizations, businesses, and communities.

## **Invest in Organizational Effectiveness**

Recent data indicates that Black organizations and businesses faced challenges in accessing the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) and may experience significant hardships in the coming year. Donors and funders should reach out now to better understand local organizations' needs for general operating funds and scenario planning. This will help philanthropists make more strategic decisions about how they can increase their giving. Local Black communities are calling for justice and healing. Philanthropists can respond by offering resources to help Black organizations remain viable and continue to thrive.

In true Houston style, our city is facing the current moment with indomitable will.

Individual donors, foundations, and corporations have stepped up for COVID relief and have also contributed to local organizations working for justice. Racial equity and justice statements have been published and people are taking action. These are encouraging first steps.

Our hope is that every equity statement includes a plan with clear metrics tied to outcomes and that we not only measure but that we actually make progress.

Our hope is that Houston's philanthropic community will continue to give big and become equally as bold in their commitment to racial equity.

Our hope is that we co-create a city where every Houstonian has a fair chance to reach their full potential regardless of their race.

The current crisis is an invitation to reimagine what is possible and co-create a different future.

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*This article was written by a group of Houston colleagues with the hope of increasing local philanthropy's commitment to achieve race equity in Houston.*

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