

Inside Philanthropy

“You Are Worthy; Let’s Go.” A Racial Justice Fund in St. Louis Plans a 100-Year Commitment to Change

[Dawn Wolfe](#) | [July 26, 2022](#)



RACIAL JUSTICE PROTEST IN ST. PETERS, MISSOURI, 2020. RYANZO W. PEREZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

When Inside Philanthropy [first reported on the St. Louis Racial Healing + Justice Fund](#) last year, the initiative was a pilot program with an expected shelf life of three years.

Those days are over. The entire point of the fund, said Deaconess Foundation President and CEO Bethany Johnson-Javois, is to heal community trauma and demolish the conditions that reinforce systemic racism. “You cannot do that without a long-term plan, [so] one of the stakes in the ground I personally put, coming into Deaconess, is a 100-year play, a 100-year commitment to change.”

Johnson-Javois took the helm at Deaconess, which acts as the fund’s grant administrator, in October. [Forward Through Ferguson provides project management](#) and other support for the program. Deaconess, Forward Through Ferguson, the Missouri Foundation for Health, and the InPower Institute originally collaborated to create the fund with the support of a matching grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Other funding partners include the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis, and United Way of Greater St. Louis.

The Racial Healing + Justice fund is unique in the extent to which it gives the community control over where the money goes. Participating funders write the checks, but funds are moved by community governance boards (CGBs) recruited for each grant cycle. As I reported last year, the governing ethos of the fund is to give Black and brown community members the money “and we’ll decide what to do with it.”

Johnson-Javois, who left a 12-year tenure as CEO of the St. Louis Integrated Health Network to lead Deaconess, said that in order to create the future the fund is striving for, “we have to find a way in perpetuity” to sustain its cash flow “because to continue to ask systems that are designed to break you and are designed to keep you unwell to fund healing is counterintuitive.”

A mixed response from funders

While the response from the community the fund aims to serve has been enthusiastic, Johnson-Javois said that the response from specific funding partners has depended “on the level with which they are steeped in traditional philanthropy and steeped in their own racial identity work within their institutions and as individuals.”

Some funders, she said, have approached the Racial Healing + Justice Fund as a way to turn grantees into the kinds of organizations those foundations already support. Some others have said they want to commit to saying that they’re in partnership with the community and have a real intention to do that, but still want to do the process “their way and call it change.”

Sometimes, she said, this mindset has resulted in funders wanting to “cherry pick” and focus on one individual or group, rather than the collaborative approach the fund is seeking.

“And some of that is positive,” Johnson-Javois said, “we want to elevate these leaders, many of whom do not have c3s and don’t have the infrastructure to get on the radar of folks who will invest in their vision and mission.” At the same time, Johnson-Javois urges funders to stick with the partnership, “to unroot and to reverse” the attitudes and practices that have contributed to the current ongoing crises. “The undoing is really important so that we can truly meet the community where the healing and their medicine is taking us,” she said.

That unrooting and reversal is definitely needed — and not just within some of the Racial Healing + Justice Fund’s foundation partners. As IP’s Philip Rojc [reported at the end of June](#), the sector definitely needs some major “undoing” if it wants to live up to its own hype.

But even with those challenges, there are other funders that are fully on board. Funding partners who, when they learned that the Racial Healing + Justice Fund is centered on trust-based philanthropy and that they would

be required to give up control of the money they would invest in it, responded with excitement and curiosity.

They were eager to learn more about how their money could make a difference without relying on the traditional control mechanisms foundations usually employ. Johnson-Javois named the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, TRIO Foundation of St. Louis, Marillac Mission Fund, and Commerce Bank as examples of partners that have responded enthusiastically to the challenges posed by the fund. These funders, Johnson-Javois said, have acknowledged that “the role of philanthropy is not to conform people to our image. The role of philanthropy is to listen in humility, pivot in our posture, and respond to those needs.”

The community governance board evolves

As the Racial Healing + Justice fund prepares to announce its third round of grantees later this summer, Johnson-Javois said that Deaconess and Forward Through Ferguson have begun analyzing how to provide even more support to the community governance board members who are recruited each grant cycle.

During the past cycle, those supports included more media training to ensure that the fund’s public face would reflect a “diaspora of faces and experiences,” as CGB members expanded their leadership roles. Other efforts underway or in the works include increasing the number of CGB members; creating a process to insure institutional memory as former members leave and new members are recruited; and “creating right systems around them of wellness and a group dynamic that is whole and well, before even thinking about criteria and grants and selection.”

Even as the CGBs are distributing funds to help with the healing of the wider community, one member reported back that just being part of the board “was a gift of healing for her,” Johnson-Javois said, because it gave the member a way to look outside of her own and her young child’s

immediate survival needs during the earlier days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cultivating the field of grantees

The Racial Healing + Justice Fund's learning and growth opportunities aren't limited to its funding partners and community governance board members. According to Johnson-Javois, cultivating support for the area's leaders, activists and healers is another part of the fund's work.

For example, many of the healers and activists that would qualify for Racial Healing+Justice grants didn't have c3 status, so Forward Through Ferguson recruited a list of established nonprofits to act as fiscal sponsors for fund grantees.

Building trust and self-confidence is another aspect of the cultivation work. "To receive strong proposals, you have to cultivate the field and cultivate community members," Johnson-Javois said. "And a lot of that cultivation is about trusting, like encouraging people who have brilliant ideas and who are doing healing work that they are the precise people we're looking for to apply."

The point, Johnson-Javois said, is to encourage people to believe that they and their work are enough, and deserving of the money that the fund wants to offer them. The message is "You have medicine to offer, and we are willing to hear about that and celebrate that with you. You are worthy; let's go."

"The more we build that confidence, the more we're seeing more folks who decide I'm gonna give this a shot," she said.

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