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New Michigan Justice Fund works with nonprofits on addressing racial equity, reforms in justice system

SHERRI WELCH □ □ □ □

- Expects to have road map for multiyear fund by January
- Has raised \$2.7 million so far; will make grants across state at least through 2023
- Six foundations supporting fund now, more expected to join

Melanca Clark

The new Michigan Justice Fund, launched in late May to support efforts to address racial equity and reforms in the justice system, is ramping up its efforts and expects to have a road map by January.

Funders behind the effort have contributed \$2.7 million so far. They've invited [26 Michigan nonprofits](#) working with individuals who have been impacted by the system or on related advocacy efforts to offer feedback on challenges and opportunities and awarded each a \$20,000 operating grant to support their involvement for a total of \$520,000 in grants.

The fund plans to wrap up those conversations in December and announce statewide grant-making strategies and priorities early next year.

The fund's foundation backers include Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, the Detroit-based Ethel & James Flinn Foundation, New York-based Ford Foundation, Detroit-based Hudson-Webber Foundation, the Washington, D.C.-based Public Welfare Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Philanthropy sometimes comes up with ideas for how to address problems on its own, said Melanca Clark, president and CEO of Hudson-Webber.

The Michigan Justice Fund "is seeking input from organizations that are close to this work and then having that authentically inform ... our grant making strategies."

Racial equity is at the center of the impact the fund hopes to have, given that Black and Brown people are disproportionately impacted by the justice system, Clark said. But the goal is to come up with an effective justice strategy for the state.

"We are pouring billions (of dollars) into this system that are not getting invested into education and community, so this is not just a problem for Black and Brown communities, although we are most hurt by it," Clark said.

The fund will seek strategies to stem the flow of individuals into the criminal justice system, support the investment of public dollars to community-driven alternatives to incarceration, and ensure those who are returning home after incarceration receive the support they need to flourish.

Specifically, it will look to:

- reduce Michigan's reliance on incarceration and detention as the primary response to crime, and adopt effective strategies to divert people who are living with a mental illness, drug addiction and other behavioral health needs from incarceration
- embrace an evidence-based data-driven approach to justice related state policymaking and budgeting
- address racial disparity in the juvenile and adult justice systems
- support economic prosperity strategies for people with criminal convictions; and
- reduce crime incidents and victimization through innovative strategies that are racially equitable and that improve community well-being.

Grants will be made across the state, and the fund will last at least through 2023, Clark said.

"All of us at this table are so excited about the opportunities here. We have amazing leaders in this sector at high-performing organizations with varying levels of capacity because the funding has not been as robust as I think it could be."

The fund also brings the opportunity to engage other funders, Clark said.

"There is no Michigan-based funder that has a focus on statewide justice reform. ... We absolutely expect when we launch in January ... we will have more partners at our table."

The Justice and Mobility Fund, a collaborative effort by Blue Meridian Partners, the Ford Foundation, and the Charles and Lynn Schustermann Family Foundation, provided

additional support for the strategic planning and earlier COVID-19 relief grants made by the Michigan Justice Fund.

Spurred by the pandemic, the Michigan Justice Fund provided support to the Center for Behavioral Health and Justice at Wayne State University to conduct COVID-19 testing and support in the Wayne County jail system to slow its spread.

The fund is also facilitating a pilot program designed to support people returning from incarceration who are not eligible for the existing re-entry services available in Wayne County.

Going forward, the fund said it will continue to support initiatives demonstrating that access to health care and education, as well as economic security and mobility, are foundational to building safe and just communities.

"We are pleased to partner with foundations and organizations working to address racial inequities and injustices in the justice system across our state," Mariam Noland, president of the Community Foundation, said in a release.

"The funders' role in facilitating the initiative is to determine where needs are critical and to leverage philanthropic, private, and public resources to best address justice reform and provide recommendations to policymakers."

According to Michigan Justice Fund:

- Incarceration rates have increased in the state for 20 years
- \$2 billion is spent on state corrections each year
- 115,000 people are incarcerated or under supervision annually
- Recidivism is costing the state more than \$100 million each year.
- African Americans comprise just 14 percent of Michigan's population, but are about 53 percent of the state's prison population and 64 percent of Michigan's population serving a life sentence or longer.

Inline Play

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