

8 Lessons from our Southern grantees in the fight for equity and justice

By Miabi Chatterji

My colleagues and I at the LGBTQ Racial Justice Fund (RJF) have been thinking hard about how our institutions need to respond to the changes the Trump administration will make to our national culture and policies. Particularly for those of us who support vulnerable communities such as immigrants; refugees; Latinx, Muslim and black people; incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals; sex workers; LGBTQ people; youth of color and people with disabilities, we are wondering how we can help defend these communities that have so many solutions to reduce inequality and injustice.

The fund, a collaborative of nine leading progressive funders, supports grantee partners that, for many years, have been working in 10 Southeastern states on issues such as mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline

and state violence against LGBTQ people and people of color. It focuses on the South because of the many powerful multi-issue organizations poised to make an impact on racial justice and LGBTQ rights there and because of how underresourced the region is philanthropically. And, as Southern racial justice and LGBTQ rights organizers are pointing out to us now, they know how to fight against right-wing repression.

We have been listening carefully to our cohort of brilliant and brave movement-building grantees, and I'm eager to share that we've heard:

1. Organizations need time to recoup and to plan for the years ahead.

While many foundations have the capacity to move relatively quickly and want to check in on their grantee partner's activities, grassroots organizations

need to ground themselves in their communities and figure out how their people want to respond. It's terrific if a group has plans already, and you can support with rapid-response or capacity-building grants, but if they need reflective time, we should not see it as a lack of forward movement.

2. National victories and models for social-justice gains are unlikely to be realistic goals, even for groups that were on the cusp of them.

The LGBTQ rights movement was happily surprised in the past few years when the Department of Justice worked as an ally on some of our demands for equity. In the realm of racial, gender and immigration justice, federal policies and precedents have been much less friendly, but organizers still made incredible headway in making cultural change, particularly in making visible the inhumanity and racism of our prison and policing systems.

There will be fewer opportunities to work with federal offices such as the DOJ on state-level legislation (such as when it took a stand against North Carolina's transphobic HB2, one of many "bathroom bills") and the ability to make national cultural change. LGBTQ communities of color can no longer expect that the federal government will continue on a path toward greater equity.

Our partners plan on focusing on local solutions, even if their ambitions may have been national a year ago. What works for one county, one parish or one state is not going to work in a neighboring one, they remind us – par-



Ms. Dee Dee Chamblee, founder of LaGender, part of the Solutions not Punishment Coalition in Georgia, at LaGender's induction into the National Civil and Human Rights Museum.

ticularly in conservative states where governors and states legislatures are using Trump's election as an opportunity to introduce deeply regressive bills.

For example, a House delegate in Virginia recently introduced an HB2-style bill that would require school principals to notify a student's parents if the student makes any attempt to be "treated as the opposite sex." Copycat bills in other states have already followed.

3. Culture and context matters.

Our grantee partners want to hire local trainers that understand the socio-political landscape and organizational challenges in their region. They value being able to identify their own capacity-building needs and the opportunity to apply for RJF funds on a rolling basis.

They can make use of local resources and people who best know the realities on the ground. For LGBTQ people and people of color, this is invaluable. National convenings or trainings can be helpful periodically, but they often support the same circuit of nationally recognized progressive speakers and those with relative privilege.

Collaborating with local sources of knowledge and expertise helps build leadership pipelines in our social justice movements and sends the message that we value the wisdom in vulnerable communities.

4. Holding the line should count as an achievement.

Particularly in the South and other areas where states are governed by Republican super-majorities (the governorship and both houses of the legislature), a huge amount of work has to go into defeating bills before they are voted on and fighting hate-filled misinformation about our communities. This work happens quietly and isn't sexy, but it is vital.

In the cultural sphere, many grassroots organizations work with community leaders that have deep influence in

their towns, schools and congregations on issues of LGBTQ justice, racial justice, police brutality and immigrants' rights. Those relationships can be fraught and take time to build and cultivate. This work is often invisible and does not result in the kind of clear, replicable victories that foundations often look for.

We urge funders to see this defensive work as a form of accomplishment. Make it clear on your reporting forms so that grantees will tell you about this type of labor and what they've resisted.

5. Emergency needs require flexibility.

In the field of LGBTQ rights, many groups are focusing on helping transgender people update their IDs and other

documents and address their emergency mental health needs. One brilliant example is our New Orleans grantee BreakOUT's Trans Defense Fund. Immigrant rights' groups are doing parallel work (and there are groups, such as the Transgender Law Center and its new initiative the Trans Immigrant Defense Network, that work at the intersection of these two communities).

This type of work may look different from what we originally funded groups to do – for example, campaign development or policy advocacy – but working to meet emergency community needs strengthens future campaign work – and could keep people safe, sane and in the country with their families.

6. People are reaching out for direct-action training.

In Trump's first week in office, we saw a blossoming of mass protest by those who are not already involved in activism. Racial Justice Fund grantees such as Southerners on New Ground and Southern Vision Alliance are experiencing a dramatic uptick in the number of people contacting them, requesting information and training.

They anticipate more direct action and nonviolent civil disobedience in the coming years, a great deal of it from first-timers. Many of our grantee partners provide small, grassroots groups with training on direct action and safety, such as Project South, GetEQUAL and GSA Network. They all need more resources to continue this work.

7. Digital security is a significant need.

As organizations reflect and regroup, there are concrete ways foundations can help them. One is in funding particular projects that can help them become safer, stronger and more secure in their work.

Many organizations, particularly in rural and small-town areas, are run by those who are (continued on page 14)

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20. Alex Daniels, "50 Grant makers and philanthropy organizations protest Trump's travel ban," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/50-Grant-Makers-and/239124>.
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new to nonprofit leadership. They are expressing a need for digital security training to help them with everything from secure communications to dealing with opposition attacks and even hate crimes.

8. There's a need, now more than ever, to create "unity fights."

As Mary Hooks, co-director of SONG, puts it, "unity fights"¹ allow us to connect issues like immigration, incarceration, educational equity, bodily self-determination and fair wages. As Marisa Franco, leader of Mijente, an RJF grantee partner, writes, "We seek to move with other communities who have had a target placed on their back and more than ever connect the dots between the criminal justice system and immigration enforcement system."²

Groups with intersectional lenses on social justice like SONG and Mijente are most poised to bring groups together, build alliances and create progressive platforms of resistance and power. But bringing groups together takes resources, and very few funders

provide specific support to coalitions and networks.

Examples of intersectional coalitions to look into are the Southern Movement Assembly, immigrant and refugee rights statewide coalitions and Safe Schools coalitions.

RJF chooses to reside within a public foundation with a history of providing long-term support to intersectional organizing that connects issues of sexual orientation and gender identity with race, migration, class, dis/ability, national origin and age. Partnering with the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice means that their expertise and credibility with activists around the country becomes our strength as well.

Working with public foundations in this post-election moment has deep meaning. Public foundations feel the ups and downs of political swings on their budgets and are therefore in touch with the grassroots in a particular way. They, too, need our support.

The next four years will ask us to arrive at work with our best selves and to

share good practices with one another. We will have to stay on our feet and work together. In this spirit, we at the LGBTQ Racial Justice Fund welcome chances to work with other funders and funding networks such as Grantmakers for Southern Progress, NCRP and Funders for LGBTQ Issues.

We are always looking for new ways to engage with a wide variety of funders and would love to hear from your institution. Please send inquiries and ideas for partnership to lgbtqracialjusticefund@astraeafoundation.org. ■

Miabi Chatterji is program officer of the LGBTQ Racial Justice Fund. She has been on the funding side of the table as well as the grant-writing side, as a volunteer and member of several community-based groups for young people, people of color and workers.

Notes

1. View <https://vimeo.com/162723706>.
2. From a letter sent to funders and allies on November 16, 2016.