

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation



Equity Continuum Toolkit: Case Study

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Background

Founded in 1915, The Greater Milwaukee Foundation (GMF) is the largest community foundation in Wisconsin, having awarded over \$1B since inception. Since 2019 alone, over \$140 million in grants have been made to nonprofit organizations, with most of the grants staying in the greater Milwaukee area. Acknowledging persistent racial disparities in Milwaukee and the systemic biases that underlie them, GMF has increasingly and intentionally committed to advancing racial equity in the greater Milwaukee region over the last twenty years.

The equity journey

Milwaukee is frequently classified among the [most racially segregated](#) metro areas in the U.S., with Black residents making [half](#) the median income of white residents. Extensive internal and external work between 2010-2016 culminated in the GMF board approving a “[generational commitment](#)” to advancing racial equity and inclusion, setting racial equity as the organization’s “North Star,” guiding every element of the Foundation’s work. The organization’s [2020-2025 strategic vision](#) doubles down on this commitment, positioning GMF as a catalytic community leader, mobilizing resources and driving bold, collective action far beyond a foundation’s conventional philanthropic role.

Mission & Vision

In 2010, with the arrival of President and CEO Ellen Gilligan, the board approved new areas of strategic focus for the organization, including the prioritization of racial equity and inclusion. This marked a major shift in GMF’s history, moving away from “diversity” as the primary solution to racial disparity, toward a theory of change that recognizes systemic racial bias across the region. GMF’s mission, vision, and strategies reflect both a recognition of systemic racism and a commitment to achieving racial equity and inclusion. GMF’s latest strategic vision is to realize “a Milwaukee for all” and asserts “there’s a fault line running through every system we’ve built in our community: racism.” The organization’s vision statement aspires to a greater Milwaukee that is: “a vibrant, economically thriving region comprised of welcoming and inclusive communities that provide opportunity, prosperity and a high quality of life for all.”

Program & activities

In implementing its “generational commitment” to racial equity and inclusion, GMF has focused its programming explicitly on equity initiatives as well as applying a racial equity lens throughout its investments and decisions.

Among GMF's earliest actions was to create a requirement that all prospective grantees have at least 10% people of color on their boards as a way to foster greater inclusion in local nonprofit leadership. In 2015, GMF awarded \$1.2M in its first set of grants explicitly focused on advancing racial equity and inclusion. The next year, in response to the police shooting of Syville Smith and subsequent unrest, GMF launched the [Reasons for Hope Fund](#), designed to support community-based, neighborhood-level actions and organizations with small grants. In 2018, GMF launched its Connected People and [Thriving Communities](#) programs using a process designed to involve community members in making grant recommendations and decisions. Funding supported professional skills development, after-school programming, and other social supports in the Sherman Park East and North Division neighborhoods.

With its focus on Reimagining Philanthropy, Recentering Communities and Remaking Systems, the Foundation's strategies for "a Milwaukee for all" build on these successes. Via the ThriveOn Collaboration with the Medical College of Wisconsin and Royal Capital, GMF is making a catalytic, place-based investment on Martin Luther King Drive, including the development of a community hub serving historically Black neighborhoods to drive health equity, economic opportunity and more. GMF is additionally focused on increasing affordable housing in priority neighborhoods and investment in businesses owned by people of color. Finally, through its Milwaukee Succeeds partnership, GMF is working to increase access to high quality early childhood education, and ensure high-school success for Black and Brown children.

Organization & Operations

GMF has undertaken a historic campaign, shifting communications and conversations with donors, resulting in increased co-investment in strategic initiatives. This effort has included intentionally inviting and welcoming more donors of color to invest with GMF and seeking increased representation of people of color on the Foundation's Young Professional Advisor Council, professionals who often connect clients with charitable partners; as of 2019, the share of members of color on this council had increased from 12.5% to 50%. Initiatives in the ThriveOn Collaboration have also received significant support from Black philanthropists. According to CEO Ellen Gilligan: "Engaging more diverse donors in collaborative philanthropy is part of our new era of philanthropy that is more inclusive, collaborative, antiracist and impactful."

In 2019, GMF made a commitment to increase the diversity of the investment managers working with GMF's Investment Pool. As of 2021, more than 22% of GMF's investment managers are people of color, making the Foundation a national leader in this area. GMF is also setting intentional goals in spending administrative dollars with diverse vendors, with nearly \$2 million spent since they began tracking in 2018, an increase of more than 50% over previous years.

Governance

A key aspect of GMF's equity journey has been increasing diversity on its board of directors and developing board leadership on the issue of racial equity. The Board Task Force GMF first formed in 2013

dedicated to racial equity and inclusion is now a standing committee of the board. The board has been engaged in every stage of the organization's equity journey.

Culture

Truly committing to learning, practicing, and advancing racial equity and inclusion is challenging work, both internally and externally. Throughout its journey, GMF has implemented new trainings and opportunities for staff to cement racial equity and inclusion within the organization's cultural bedrock. For example, GMF provided opportunities for staff to engage in community service, building connections and providing first-hand perspective. GMF also developed a racial equity and inclusion curriculum that is now part of mandatory onboarding for all staff. These offerings, as well as the organization's strident calls for racial equity in Milwaukee, have made the workplace more welcoming and comfortable for staff of color. According to Darlene Russell, Director of Community Engagement at GMF: "I've experienced racism and microaggressions in the past; now I can feel like I can show up fully present as a Black woman...and the health benefits of that are huge."