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Can philanthropy pull a country divided along racial lines closer together?

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A horrific July, full of violence by and against police officers in racially charged circumstances, has been a turning point in the way many in Bay Area philanthropy view their missions.

Last month, Baton Rouge and the Minneapolis suburb Falcon Heights, Minn., joined a long list of places in recent years where interactions with the police have ended in questionable deaths of black residents. At the same time, officers themselves have been targeted, most recently in fatal ambushes in Baton Rouge and Dallas.

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It marks in some ways a distressing new chapter — and, in other ways, a depressingly old one — in America's fraught, violent racial history. And in the Bay Area, it is inspiring philanthropic and business leaders to rethink their missions and make racial justice a higher priority in directing their dollars and efforts.

The **San Francisco Foundation** did that last month, giving out 42 grants totalling \$5.3 million to groups focused on racial justice, many intended to extend longer than the organization's typical 12-month window. Salesforce's philanthropic arm is making \$4 million in grants this year linked to moving toward racial justice and fighting inequality, and millions more to improve education in poor school districts. Google's foundation earlier this year unveiled \$3 million in "social justice" grants, and has "doubled down" on its racial justice efforts, Google's Justin Steele said at the Business Times' Corporate Philanthropy event last month.

However, simply handing out more, bigger grants to nonprofits working on economic justice and police reform isn't enough, said Fred Blackwell, CEO of the San Francisco Foundation. "These are issues that require long-term fixes. It's important for everyone to keep their eyes on the horizon."

For Blackwell, a former Oakland city administrator who also once led San Francisco's redevelopment agency, that means supporting projects, organizations and individuals that are working on broader goals: Helping poor communities build power, a sense of community, and more engagement in civic issues.



'We need to strive for a commitment to inclusion. And a recognition that we all have skin in the game.'
Fred Blackwell, CEO, San Francisco Foundation

“We should be deploying our resources in ways that attempt to close income and wealth gaps,” he said. Leaders in the philanthropic world need to use their influence “to try to shape public discourse” on these issues, using “an inclusive tone and tenor, rather than a divisive one.”

Other foundations across the nation are engaged in a similar process, though shifting the trajectory of grants is often measured in years rather than months. Civil rights groups are pushing for more use of body cameras by police departments to capture incidents as they occur. New York-based Bridgespan Group, a consulting firm, argues that much philanthropy is delivered inefficiently, and that way more money should go to improve early education and children’s health in low-income areas. Groups like Black Lives Matter are advocating for structural social and political change, not incremental reforms

Like Blackwell, many foundation executives agree that society’s at a tipping point, and insist that their organizations, especially those embedded in local communities, are ideally positioned to move things in a positive direction.

“Our job is to break down walls and build bridges,” said Emmett Carson, who heads the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, one of the nation’s largest regional foundations.

This is a historic moment to be bold and aim high, Carson said early this month, not a time for small-scale reforms.

Carson wants to see a concerted push by foundations, nonprofits and political groups nationwide to insist on citizen review boards to monitor every local police force and to put a body camera on every officer on patrol. He wants search engine giants like Google to review their algorithms for implicit bias. He wants schools to reevaluate policies and patterns that perpetuate inequality, like handing out harsher penalties for black students who break (or are thought to break) school rules, or giving blacks lower scores for equal performance. He wants employers to do away with boxes on job application forms that ask “have you ever been arrested?” That can be addressed later, during a job interview, Carson said, once an applicant has had the opportunity to meet the recruiter or hiring manager, and explain his or her past.

“This is a moment” — the moment — to take a stand, make a difference, move the needle, Carson argued. “One danger is missing it altogether,” letting it slip away. A second danger is “not dreaming big enough,” not taking advantage of this historic opportunity to make significant change.

Last year, the foundation sponsored state legislation for the first time, helping to get approval for Senate Bill 359, intended to stop schools from placing students in lower-level math classes when they deserve higher placement according to objective measures. Still, Carson’s foundation, and others like it, haven’t devoted huge sums to advancing these causes, receiving criticism in some circles.

For some, the challenge is simply too broad, too deep-rooted, too systemic to be addressed by philanthropy.

“The raw problems of inequity and the looming problems of environment cannot be solved by philanthropy alone,” cautioned Ray Baxter, who retired Aug. 1 as the executive in charge of giant Kaiser Permanente’s philanthropic efforts, at a July Business Times event focusing on corporate philanthropy.

Instead, said Baxter, a longtime Kaiser executive and public health leader, what’s required is something far bigger, and clearly beyond the scope of philanthropy to provide: “fundamental changes in the distribution of wealth and power in our society.”

Susan Hirsch, a consultant to some of the region's wealthiest individuals and foundations on philanthropic giving, said in the past much funding has been given to community groups as if "we knew what the black community needed." Now is the time, she said, to ask questions, and question beliefs and old ways of approaching these issues.

"It would be wrong to say, 'Let's give a grant' and let it go," said Hirsch, who works with wealthy families and foundations such as Gap Inc., the Hellman Foundation and the Fisher Family. It's a time for asking, "how do we all listen better? It's hugely emotional," she adds.

Of course, the discussions will be tough, and can't be one-sided or superficial if the conversations are to be fruitful, Bay Area philanthropic leaders say.

Acknowledging, for example, the attacks on police officers, and the incredibly high stress loads and expectations placed on them, are a key part of any dialogue.

"To be willing to listen is the first thing we need to do. Not talk past each other," said Daniel Lurie, founder and CEO of Tipping Point, a San Francisco foundation that works to alter the conditions that create and perpetuate poverty in the Bay Area.

Tipping Point raised and distributed \$21.6 million in grants last year to a multitude of Bay Area nonprofits. None of its grantees focus solely on solving racial inequity, said spokeswoman Marisa Giller, "but we know that issues of race and class are inextricably linked in America today. Our grantees' efforts to educate, employ, house and support those most in need across our community in effect target disparity of all kinds."

Americans, and Bay Area residents, need to "listen to people who are experiencing what's going on in the streets every day, not to gloss over them," said Tipping Point's Lurie. But those conversations will be hard, and must deal with issues that have built up over hundreds of years, exacerbated by segregation and often separate lives and cultures.

Like many leaders the Business Times reached out to in recent weeks, Lurie cautioned that "we will not have solutions overnight." In fact, he said he agonized for weeks before composing the Op-Ed essay on these issues that appears on Page 48, searching for the right words to articulate his views.

Lurie is open about the complexities of a white leader attempting to lead his own organization in internal discussions about recent events. It has forced many to confront the depth and the intractability of racial and economic divisions, and "it's been uncomfortable at times." Leaders in philanthropy are predominantly white and predominantly wealthy, he noted, "and we need to be candid about that."

Kaiser Permanente Chairman and CEO Bernard Tyson authored a widely read 2014 commentary on the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and what Tyson and Brown have in common as black males in America. He agreed that frank, open dialogue about racial issues is an essential first step.

"We must listen to understand other perspectives and test our own mental maps rather than to reinforce our own beliefs," Tyson wrote in a July 21 follow-up guest opinion in the Business Times.

In an age of ubiquitous smartphones that can shoot photos and videos, it's almost a cliché that all of America is now seeing what used to be seen only by participants: How interactions between police officers and black Americans can go horribly wrong, sometimes in an instant.

Tyson notes that, even as the head of a \$62 billion health care giant, he's had "that talk" with his sons, about what to do if stopped by a police officer. Most cops are dedicated to public service, he wrote, and criminals "must be held accountable, yet I question the use of deadly force in non-violent situations."

Like Tyson and a great many African-Americans, Carson has his own, very personal experiences of being targeted by police because of his race.

As a graduate student at Princeton University, he "got to know every Princeton police officer" because he was stopped so often when returning to campus or walking the grounds of the Ivy League university. As a black man, he said, "it was presumed that you are not supposed to be here."

There's clearly a need for reforms, Lurie said, such as retraining the police and emphasizing de-escalation tactics. That might win the time needed to keep momentary confrontations from becoming tragedies, he argued, while acknowledging that he can't step directly into Carson's shoes, or those of anyone who's dealt with the same implicit (or explicit) bias.

Bay Area technology giants such as Salesforce and Google are also working along these lines. Still Steele, a principal at its Google.org philanthropic arm, acknowledges that technology companies are fearful of getting too far out in front on these issues, because their own track record of failing to achieve diverse workforces could inspire charges of hypocrisy.

Lurie agrees that it will take larger efforts from many sectors and organizations to have an impact.

"I don't think a company has to be all the way there in order to speak up," he said. In philanthropy, he added, "very few have gotten diversity right. We all have to be better."

And this could be just the right moment to push the resource-rich tech sector forward, "and put the mirror on yourself," Lurie said.

Despite its own issues and failings, philanthropy is located at a special nexus to help with these issues and divides, according to Blackwell, because philanthropic leaders are in regular contact with business leaders, elected and appointed political and policy leaders, grass roots community leaders and a host of others who often don't see or talk to people outside of their own groups.

Due to that, he said, philanthropy has a duty to work to push what he calls "purple issues," including increased civic engagement, and giving disadvantaged people and communities a greater voice and more power, refuting the notion that "power and opportunity is somehow a zero-sum game."

As with other leaders, Blackwell is convinced it won't be easy, or fast. "But we need to strive for a commitment to inclusion," he said. "And a recognition that we all have skin in the game."

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