

A Journey in Hope

Community-Driven Grantmaking
by The Fund for Racial Equity at ACT for Alexandria



ACT *for* **ALEXANDRIA**

A COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



Grounding the Journey

ACT for Alexandria (ACT), Alexandria's community foundation, serves a city with a complex legacy. Alexandria, a city of 160,000, is known for its wealth, diversity, and charm. Yet, it was once home to one of the largest slave trading operations in the country. The current reputation of the city hides persistent health, housing, education and economic challenges within the community – challenges and disparities that have been and continue to be more pronounced for black and brown Alexandrians.

With this context, ACT began supporting the community and its nonprofits working towards racial equity in Alexandria. By fighting against racial injustice, we can create a better city for all Alexandrians. Beginning in 2019 with a Racial Equity Forum and continuing through multiple capacity building initiatives and workshops, ACT welcomed, convened, and partnered with community members, organizations, business leaders, and local government stakeholders in the pursuit of a more equitable and just Alexandria.¹

This work resulted in the creation of the Fund for Racial Equity (The Fund) in late 2020. The Fund was seeded by ACT and a generous donor with a single goal: to provide a sustainable source of funding dedicated to supporting efforts that dismantle systemic racism and advance racial equity in Alexandria.

The Fund brought donors and community members together to fight against generations of racial injustice in Alexandria in unique ways.

ACT for Alexandria believes the lives of all Alexandrians will improve when everyone can live fully. ACT's intentional, purposeful action strives to build a community where every resident, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, or citizenship status, has an equal opportunity to thrive and achieve their full potential.



The Fund is community-driven, guided by the experiences and insights of the people living and working in Alexandria. Recognizing the importance of centering the voices and perspectives of those most impacted by systemic racism, ACT created a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to establish The Fund's priorities, lead decision-making and grantmaking.

This summary of The Fund's grantmaking journey reflects work of community members who have the wisdom and lived experience to lead Alexandria toward a better, more equitable tomorrow. As of June 2026, The Fund has granted more than \$200,000 to 29 nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and community leaders. It highlights what can be done when community is not only centered but leads. The adaptability, determination, and joy in the face of an increasingly changing and challenging context demonstrate the resilience and hope community brings to (and is required for) this work. Its launch and evolution also leaves a legacy of insights for those others considering their own journey in grantmaking driven by community and trust to advance racial equity.

“Every person had strengths and weaknesses but working together made us a more powerful group.”
- CAB member

The Journey's Pathfinders

Equipped with lessons and growing trust from a community-led strategic planning process in 2022,² ACT committed to shifting the power from institution to community by establishing a Community Advisory Board (CAB) to serve as pathfinders leading the Fund's grantmaking process. ACT valued CAB member time and expertise, offering opt-in stipends for participation and related expenses like transportation and childcare. CAB members came from various walks of life and all lived and/or worked in Alexandria.

The diversity of CAB members' identities, experiences, and beliefs created a unique strength and quickly led to the realization that they needed to create a common understanding and language around racial equity.

The Community Advisory Board



Whitney Parnell, a racial equity activist, practitioner, and founder of Service Never Sleeps³, provided training that led to a richer understanding of racial equity, white supremacy culture, racial equity work, and each other. The CAB embraced The Fund's ambitious goal and recognized the importance of coming together around a common definition of racial equity, included in every meeting agenda to reinforce this common understanding and aim.

“We wanted a big goal to aim for. It was our North Star. It kept us focused and on track.”

- CAB member

The CAB's Racial Equity North Star

The condition where one's racial identity has no influence on how one fares in society. This includes the elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race.

Over the next two years, CAB members did far more than design and review grant applications. They were true pathfinders developing strategy and structure for each funding round and executing it. They created materials, conducted outreach, supported language access, and made difficult decisions when there was more good work to be funded than available funding. They also became ambassadors and fundraisers for The Fund, shaping and sharing Spring2ACTion⁴ fundraising appeals in multiple languages, speaking truth to power, representing The Fund at community events, and sharing their experiences to support learning.

This work took deep, collective effort and members consistently reported that their time on the CAB increased their confidence and agency in advancing racial equity. Members also overwhelmingly shared that their time on the CAB made them feel more connected to the community. Throughout their work, they embraced learning both from each other and other leaders.⁴ This learning journey supported their grantmaking evolution, willingness to think outside of the box, and continued shift towards trust in grantmaking.



“It was important for us to consistently talk about what equity was. We ended up having a better appreciation for the thoughts and challenges amongst people of color.”

- CAB member

A Closer Look at the Grantmaking Journey

The CAB's grantmaking journey began in early 2024 and concluded in late 2025. During that time, the CAB designed and led three rounds of grantmaking, awarding more than \$200,000⁶ in support to 29 nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and community leaders. Though each grant round shifted slightly in strategy, grantmaking remained committed to The Fund's goal of dismantling systemic racism and advancing racial equity in Alexandria. Amid a changing environment and deep learning, the CAB increasingly embraced trust by intentionally reducing the administrative burden on applicants and awardees.

Round One

In the first phase of grantmaking, the CAB wrestled with what it means to carry out trust-based grantmaking⁷ with a racial equity lens. They met for months to develop consensus around their grantmaking focus, funding amounts, selection criteria, and strategy for outreach and selection. They ultimately designed a simplified, two-page grant application, supporting materials, and selection process that prioritized support for work advancing racial equity in areas with some of the highest disparities across race - health, housing, education, and child welfare.

Guided by their experiences in and with community, CAB members recognized racial equity work is often done at the individual, grassroots level and structured funding to allow for grantmaking to community leaders. The grantmaking process also aimed to reach deeper into the community than traditional grantmaking. Applications and application assistance were available in Amharic, Arabic, Dari, English, Pashto, and Spanish.

\$200,000+

Granted to

29

Organizations &
community leaders



Likewise, the grant opportunity was publicized at recreation centers, places of worship, community meetings, on apartment and grocery store message boards, along with newsletters, the ACT website, and social media. Handwritten grant applications were also accepted. Ultimately, the CAB awarded \$38,000 to 19 organizations and community leaders in October 2024.

“I’m most proud of our community conversations, being present at local events and people knowing that there were community members like themselves who were championing and supporting the cause of racial equity in the city.”

- CAB member

Round Two

The second year of the CAB’s grantmaking began under dramatically different circumstances. In 2025, the CAB navigated a time of increased urgency and challenge amid sustained attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, reductions in nonprofit funding, unprecedented reductions in the federal workforce, and increased targeting of immigrant neighbors. Cognizant of increasing challenges and safety concerns for community members and nonprofits, the CAB first leveraged a simplified \$2,000 award process to support existing grantees going deeper in their racial equity work by centering community voice. Community voice was especially important to recognize and support in response to the evolving environment.

Round Three

Throughout the grantmaking processes, CAB members recognized the importance of community voice and power beyond those sitting around the table. As a result, in the third grantmaking round, CAB members wanted to support organizations building community power and capacity to advance racial equity. They also embraced the need for a deeper and broader understanding of which organizations were partners doing this work. Noting the importance of youth perspectives, CAB members carefully planned focus groups with three youth groups (30+ youth participating).

Grantmaking was further informed by conversations with more than 70 community members in English, Spanish, and Amharic.



Equipped with this understanding and additional research of their funding landscape, the CAB chose not to require an application or justification of an organization's existence or work to make grants. In late 2025, the CAB awarded general operating support grants to 10 organizations. CAB members also aimed to build, not break, trust by providing a grantmaking update to those who informed the process, where possible.

*"Thank you, for seeing us."
- Fund grantee*

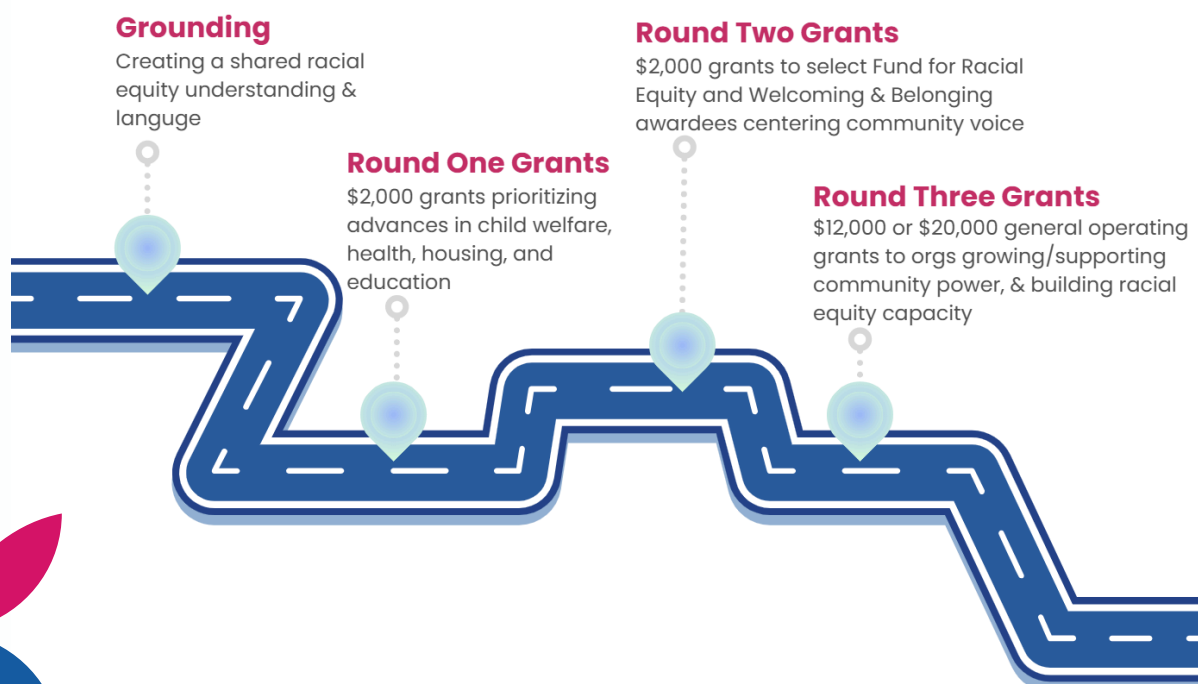
Grantmaking Highlights

- **New support for grassroots efforts.** Fund for Racial Equity grantmaking led ACT for Alexandria to establish new relationships and support for nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and community leaders awardees.
- **Increased and evolving support.** Grant amounts increased and support moved from project-based to general operating support, increasing flexibility for awardees.
- **Stronger community relationships.** Each round of grantmaking deepened relationships and trust with community members.
- **Funding closer to the community and systems change also means funding leaders of color.** More organizations with BIPOC leaders were funded in later grantmaking rounds.

"As a board, we understand that even small investments can make a large difference, especially for the individuals on the community level who are doing the work."

- CAB member

Fund for Racial Equity Grantmaking Snapshot





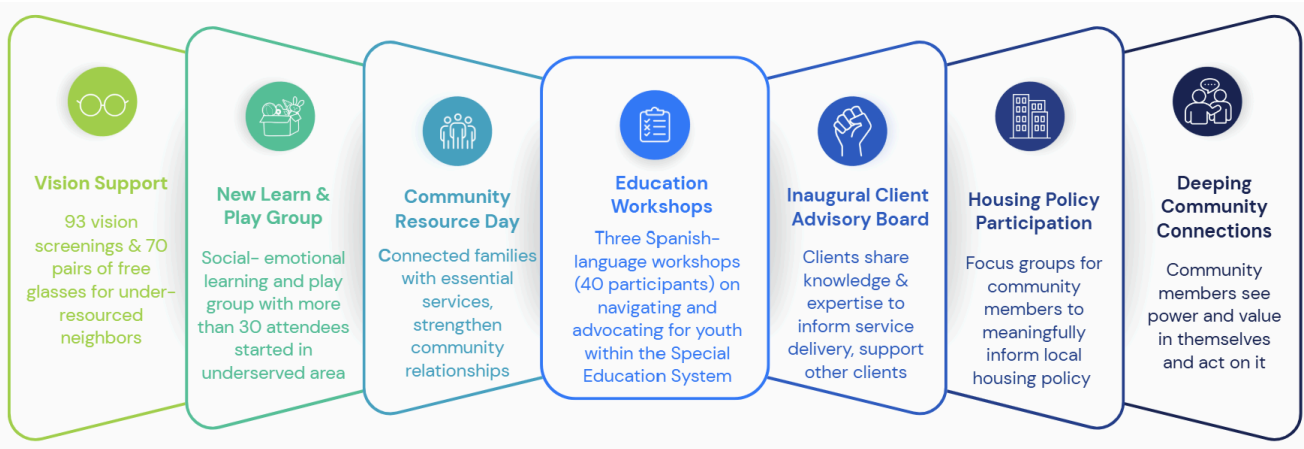
Embracing trust and community in grantmaking wasn't without challenge or tension. Conversations among CAB members required vulnerability, compromise, and trust. Designing grantmaking (something new to CAB members in general) grounded in trust and equity required questioning internalized assumptions and biases, and a recognition that no grantmaking process is perfect. It also took time for ACT and the CAB to navigate understanding around their respective roles.

“Even if 1% of the community is impacted, we’re making a difference. It’s only the beginning, we’re planting seeds.”
 - CAB member

The challenges the CAB, ACT, and the nonprofit community face in an increasingly hostile environment to racial equity work and grantmaking cannot be understated. From fundraising, to how the work is discussed, to safety considerations, the challenges were deep and navigating them continues. The story of The Fund’s grantmaking impact is still being written, but a few highlights to date are shared below. We also note that The Fund grantees’ work often includes relationship and power building in community. The impact of this is long-term and opens a path for creating community-led systemic change.

ACT Fund for Racial Equity Grantee Impact Highlights

The graphic below highlights the diverse range of projects that addressed community priorities, built connections, and advanced racial equity across Alexandria.



This Journey's Lessons for the Field and the Work

The CAB's grantmaking journey offers key insights and lessons for partners and peers looking to support racial equity work. These lessons were developed from conversations with CAB members, ACT staff, funders, and grantees.

Take time to build trust. Grantmaking to advance racial equity moves at the speed of trust. It takes time to build, and keep, the trust necessary for forward momentum and meaningful work. Sufficient time and staffing/facilitator resources should also be provided to support the work's development and execution as well as the individual and the collective's learning and space.

Invest in collective (and continual) learning. Racial equity work requires lifelong learning and self-reflection. Training to set a common understanding and language is an important foundation, and a commitment to continuing collective learning and discussions is critical.

Grantmaking can evolve. It is crucial that the community members carrying out grantmaking (and the philanthropic institutions supporting them) have strong, dedicated, and nimble leadership. While The Fund's end goal remained constant, the CAB increasingly embraced iteration and action in their grantmaking as learning and commitment to trust-based funding increased. During the journey, leaders received new information, learned new skills, met new people with different ideas, faced great wins and great challenges; all of those changes are preparing them for their next effort.

Be intentional. It is one thing for an institution to say they are giving power to community members. It is another entirely to lay out and get buy-in on a clear framework, roles, and responsibilities to effectively support community members in a clear understanding of their work.

Be aware of power dynamics. Systemic racism and white supremacy culture have been internalized in institutional philanthropic approaches. It takes constant awareness of power dynamics to unlearn common practices and change to something new centering trust and community.

Lead with community voice. Meaningfully supporting community-driven grantmaking can yield hard conversations and prompt deep self-examination. CAB members' perceptions and biases were sometimes challenged in community, resulting in a more nuanced and richer understanding to guide grantmaking. In particular, youth voice was very impactful on grantmaking.

Understand community context. What a community is navigating impacts everything. It impacts grantmaking, fundraising, strategy, and those doing the work.

Continuing the Journey

The inaugural Community Advisory Board leaves a lasting legacy that will continue to inform ACT’s work and future investments. While this first chapter of The Fund’s grantmaking journey comes to a close, The Fund itself is an enduring community resource. Although fundraising remains challenging in the current environment, the Fund for Racial Equity continues to accept donations and we invite everyone who believes in advancing racial equity in Alexandria to support The Fund and help ensure all members of our community can thrive and feel like they belong.

ACT continues to explore how it works in partnership with the community and recognizes that weaving community, trust, and racial equity through everything it does is a long-term necessity for a better, more equitable tomorrow. ACT also knows that this story matters because it demonstrates the joy of community supporting community, of inviting others in, of sharing learning, of laying the path for a new journey, and of recognizing our greatest strengths and best solutions lie within community.

“We leave not with all the answers, but with a stronger sense of what can happen when we are willing to learn together, lead together, and imagine together. Thank you for believing that a stronger, more equitable community is possible for everyone.”

– CAB member

Endnotes

¹ Learn more about ACT’s commitment to racial equity at <https://www.actforalexandria.org/our-commitment-to-racial-equity/>.

² *Listen, Learn, ACT: One Funder’s Lessons from a Participatory Strategy Process*, Feb. 2024 <https://fundforsharedinsight.org/case-study/listen-learn-act-one-funders-lessons-from-a-participatory-strategy-process/>.

³ Learn more about Service Never Sleeps at <https://serviceneversleeps.org/>

⁴ Spring2ACTion is Alexandria’s Giving Day. Spring2ACTion campaigns raised more than \$30,000 for the Fund.

⁵ The Community Advisory Board also recognizes and thanks leaders Tamara Benitez & Brigette Rouson with DiverseCity Fund as well as Dawnn Leary with the Greater Washington Community Foundation for sharing their racial justice and community driven grantmaking expertise. Likewise, they acknowledge all community members who shared their wisdom and guidance.

⁶ Matching grant dollars to the Fund were also generously provided by the Greater Washington Community Foundation.

⁷ The CAB also held a learning session to better understand [trust-based philanthropy](#) principles.

⁸ Additional information on grantees can be found on the ACT Fund for Racial Equity [webpage](#).

⁹ These learnings were captured by consultant Edith Bullard



Fund for Racial Equity



El Fondo para la Equidad Racial



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Fund for Racial Equity Community Advisory Board Members

Patricia Amaya
 Bill Campbell
 Cecilia Garcia Meruvia
 Lisa Guernsey
 Kimberly Hurley
 Naima Kearney
 Richard Merritt
 Lawrence Smith
 Mahlet Tefera

Fund for Racial Equity Awardees

The following is a partial list of organizations that received funding and agreed to be publicly recognized.



Thank you for sharing in the Fund for Racial Equity's grantmaking journey. To learn more, contact grants@actforalexandria.org or scan the QR Code.
 (<https://www.actforalexandria.org/the-fund-for-racial-equity/>)



www.actforalexandria.org

ACT for Alexandria is Alexandria's community foundation and the home for philanthropy and people who want to make a difference. ACT amplifies the work of the community by bringing people and resources together.