

CHAMPIONING BLACK-LED ORGANIZATIONS:

Lessons Learned from
an Unapologetically
Black-Centered Capacity
Building Initiative



Evaluation Report for Year Two of East Bay Community Foundation's ASCEND: BLO Initiative
December 2020

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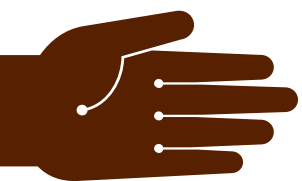
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CONTENTS

This report highlights our experiences, stories and lessons learned as the ASCEND: BLO initiative enters the third year of its proposed seven-year lifespan. We see this report as an opportunity to provide BLOs, funders, capacity builders, advocates, and change leaders insights and observations about its structure, funding, facilitation, and results as well as recommendations in response to nationwide interest in replication of such a race-forward initiative in other communities.

Executive Summary	3
History and Purpose of ASCEND: BLO	5
Evaluation Design and Methodology	8
Structure and Core Components	10
ASCEND: BLO Outcomes to Date	21
Lessons Learned	24
Recommendations	26
Appendix A: ASCEND: BLO Theory of Change	34
Appendix B: ASCEND: BLO Stabilizer Timeline	35
Appendix C: Networking Results	36
Acknowledgments	39



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The East Bay Community Foundation (EBCF) and other funder partners launched ASCEND: BLO (Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development of Black-Led Organizations) in 2017 to strengthen and connect Black-led organizations (BLOs) and to encourage increased funder investment in BLOs and their vital role the ecosystem of social change and justice. This report¹ highlights lessons learned as the initiative enters its third year, including its structure, activities and results, and insights for other funders and community partners that may wish to embark on a similar effort.

ASCEND: BLO has successfully **raised a total of \$5.9 million** over its short three years for this emergent effort.

ASCEND: BLO is made possible by a Funders' Collaborative and supported by a cadre of Black and people of color-led consultants. **To date, ASCEND: BLO has made solid progress on five key outcomes:**

- **The Accelerator**, designed for organizations poised to grow, innovate, and excel, has provided intensive support to five BLOs, with capacity building delivered through cohort experiences and one-on-one coaching and consulting.
- **The Stabilizer**, designed for organizations anticipating impending executive director transitions, was launched just weeks before the COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders. Three of the six selected BLOs have already experienced successful executive transitions.
- **The Regional Network**, open to all 350+ Bay Area BLOs, has given hundreds of leaders an explicitly Black, brave, and supportive space for learning and growth.
- **The Funder Collaborative** has grown from five (5) funders to 16 members who are continually exploring new and more robust ways to support BLOs and are encouraging other funders to join in doing the same.
- In total, ASCEND: BLO has successfully raised a total of \$5.9 million over its short three years for this emergent effort.

¹ The learning and evaluation report summarizing Year 1 outcomes, ASCEND: Black-Led Organizations Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development (January 2019), can be accessed at: <https://www.ebcf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASCEND-BLO-YearOne-EvalReport-Jan2019.pdf>

At the time of this report, we are in the midst of two pandemics that have disproportionately impacted Black communities: COVID-19 and structural racism. As institutions look inward to address their own racism and commit to do more to support Black lives, we see a unique opportunity for collaborative efforts to support BLOs. With this in mind, and in response to expressed interest, **ASCEND: BLO staff and funders and collaborators offer these recommendations** to those who may be considering a similar initiative:

1. **Act now** to take advantage of the unprecedented attention and support that have resulted from the racial justice uprisings to invest in BLOs.
2. Ensure that the **Black community has a meaningful role and a voice** in shaping your efforts.
3. Collect data to **understand the state of BLOs, how your organization has (or has not) supported them**, and what can be done to be more responsive.
4. Ensure that the effort has a **learning and evaluation function from the start**. Link the evaluation to the development of a **strategic communication plan** to share the initiative's priorities, structure, and outcomes with attention to amplify the voices of BLOs.
5. Recognize that **the structures and systems in which BLOs are working must be addressed** to ensure their long-term health, wealth, and sustainability.

Initiatives like ASCEND: BLO are part of the solution to the systemic racism and root causes that have led to a historic and continuing under-investment in BLOs. To ensure that BLOs have the recognition and financial support they need, funders ought to prioritize working closely and co-designing with BLOs to build race-forward power building and movement building efforts.



History and Purpose of ASCEND: BLO

This report highlights the ongoing work of the East Bay Community Foundation (EBCF), its staff, and its Funders' Collaborative (listed at right) to support and champion the efforts of Black-led organizations² as part of the ASCEND: BLO initiative. ASCEND: BLO stands for Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development of Black-Led Organizations. The initiative was launched in 2017 to create a space for more funding specifically dedicated to BLOs.³ Specifically, ASCEND: BLO seeks to:

- Enhance the growth, sustainability, impact, and sense of community among Black-led institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area region in order to ensure the long-term vitality of those organizations and the communities of color they serve.
- Apply a fresh, dynamic and replicable approach to collaborative capacity building that further develops the nonprofit sector with a lens towards race and equity.

Members of the ASCEND: BLO Funders' Collaborative include:

Alameda County Supervisor (District 5), Keith Carson's office

The Akonadi Foundation

The California Endowment*

The California Wellness Foundation

East Bay Community Foundation*

Walter and Elise Haas, Jr. Fund

William & Flora Hewlett Foundation

James Irvine Foundation

JP Morgan Chase

The Kapor Center*

The San Francisco Foundation*

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Sobrato Family Foundation

Stupski Foundation

Target Foundation

Y & H Soda Foundation*

**Indicates founding members*

² For ASCEND: BLO, Black-led refers to organizations where majority of leaders, staff, and/or board members identify as Black.

³ The inception of ASCEND: BLO was inspired by the February 2015 report "Black-Led Organizations in the Bay Area: From Crisis to Change," which was funded by the now closed, Bay Area Black Unified Fund (BABUF), and authored by Walker and Associates Consulting, LLC, a study that highlighted the fiscal and structural challenges and barriers facing BLO organizations.

// We need to ask the question in the field of philanthropy and in particular: What we are doing to really help to stabilize and strengthen organizations that are Black-led? So, we began to have that conversation and it was informal. And then we started to formalize it more by asking other funders to come to the table.”

—Sandra Davis, The California Endowment (TCE)

Guided by the following vision statements below, identified during the development of a Theory of Change for the initiative, the vision for the ASCEND: BLO focused on the following themes: capacity building, sustainability, camaraderie and community, and funders’ role in shifting the ecosystem and their commitments to BLOs.

ASCEND: BLO Vision

- Black-led nonprofit organizations’ capacities and sustainability are strengthened along with the people who lead and guide them. Their increased impact is felt by African American, Black and other constituents they serve. Their role as community institutions to lift up African American political voices, economic assets, social needs and power is advanced.
- Black-led organizations are more connected to one another, experiencing a renewed sense of camaraderie and community that underscores the idea that “we’re in this together and we can get through anything together.”
- Funders increasingly recognize and cherish the vital role that BLOs play in the ecosystem of social change and justice. More funders make financial and moral commitments to support Black-led organizations in their issue areas as they recognize BLOs as a cornerstone to a successful social change sector.

// It was evident to us when we started this conversation...the elephant in the room was: Why concentrate on Black-Led Organizations (BLOs) versus other organizations (e.g., indigenous or people of color)? I had a number of discussions with other leaders on that question. They were extremely supportive to start with BLOs as a model that could potentially be utilized by other organizations led by people of color, gender,

or religion. They trusted us to hold true to the idea to follow this model, refine the model. Today, I'm convinced that we can replicate the model to pay attention to unique cultural issues that organizations led by people of color face."

—James Head, EBCF

The initiative's values were manifest by creating what participants have called an "unapologetically Black" space where leaders can discuss their struggles, successes, and dreams with a shared understanding of the impacts of systemic and institutional racism and the difficulties in gaining and maintain the interest of and support from the philanthropic community.

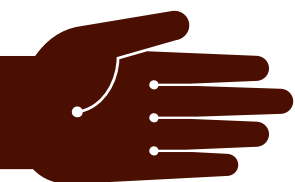
// So, when you talk about ASCEND: BLO, first it's just the **confidence and the mindset to be authentically black** and speak from that perspective and not worry about speaking from anyone else's...."

—Brandon Nicholson, The Hidden Genius Project

"[The initiative leads] have **done an excellent job of anchoring this [initiative] in a spirit and a culture that welcomes people and welcomes Black people who may have felt left out** and hold resentments...this is ceremony, coming home, with how it's staffed, the practices around bringing people together is one that is not patronizing, but nurturing and it's intentionally kind of power building...."

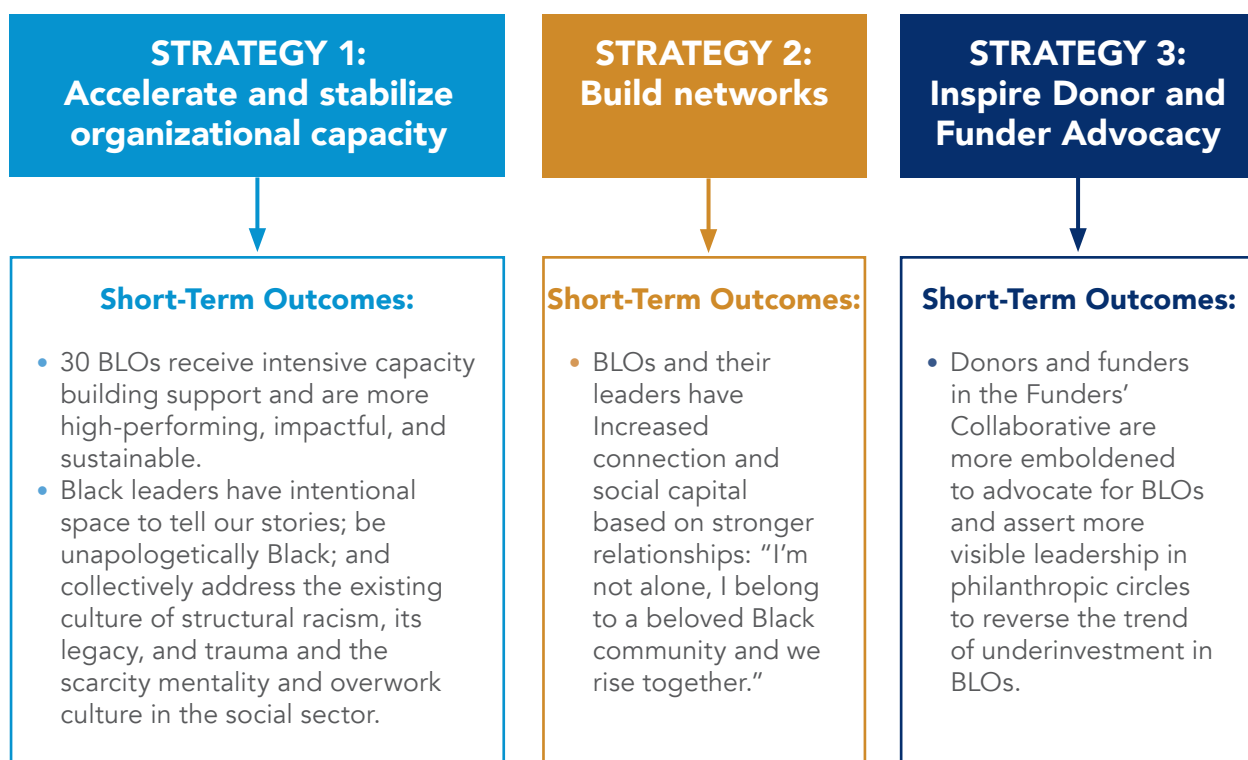
—Vanessa Camarena Arredondo, Akonadi Foundation





Evaluation Design and Methodology

The EBCF's Capacity Building Initiative Officer, Byron Johnson, and ASCEND: BLO then-Intern, now Program Associate Zakiyyah Brewer, who have designed and are directing the ASCEND: BLO effort, worked closely with program learning and evaluation team co-leads Shiree Teng and Rogéair Purnell to draft a theory of action (ToA). A living document, the first ToA was completed in February of 2018 and updated in July 2018 and April 2020. Each version provided updates that attempted to fully capture the initiative's three key strategies and desired outcomes. These strategies and their short-term (2018-20) outcomes are outlined below and described in more detail later in this report. The entire ToA can be found in Appendix A.



This Year-Two evaluation is based on the ToA and informed by data gathered by the Learning and Evaluation team through: event live polls; informant interviews with Accelerator and Stabilizer organizational leads, grantmakers participating in the Funders' Collaborative, and consultants; monthly check-ins with EBCF ASCEND: BLO

staff; and the team's own active participant observations. Highlights from interviews are included throughout this report. The concluding section of the report will offer recommendations and lessons learned.

Current Context

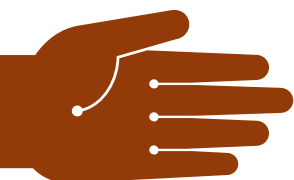
As this report is being prepared, our communities are reeling from the combination of: a global pandemic that has disproportionately sickened and killed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); unprecedented unemployment rates and resulting economic, housing, and food insecurity; and a national uprising against systemic and institutional racism in response to the murders of Ahmaud Aubrey, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and too many other Black people across the gender spectrum. Race is also a central theme in the 2020 general election, arguably the most contentious and consequential in our nation's history to date, in which an incumbent Presidential candidate has aligned themselves with white nationalists and a Vice Presidential challenger is the first Black and South Asian American woman to run for the office.

It is against this backdrop that nonprofits and philanthropies join other institutions in looking inward to address their own racism, many making public commitments to doing better to see, honor, and support Black lives. The news media are now presenting stories and offering data and context on how racism has affected all aspects of Black life, from dealing with microaggressions while going about everyday life to Black home ownership rates that have remained low and relatively unchanged for decades. Individuals, organizations, and communities are beginning to step up to offer funds, volunteer hours, and in-kind services—almost as a form of amends. While these trends signal a period of increased attention to the strengths of and challenges faced by Black communities, decades of disinvestment continue to contribute to disproportionate negative impacts on Black health and wellbeing.

Many Black-led mission-driven organizations (often operating with limited staff) are now overwhelmed with requests for their services and expertise while managing an influx of funds and volunteer requests. Others are rethinking the use of their space and how to carry out their missions in a time of physical distancing in communities where the digital divide remains and grief, poverty, health issues, and food and housing insecurity are more pressing concerns. As a result, many of these organizations have had to pivot and redouble their efforts to take advantage of myriad new opportunities while staying true to their mission, their constituents, and their communities. This is the current reality for BLOs.

// ...the EBCF, being a direct ally, funder, and understanding groups like ours and the others in the cohort as the ones leading, has been just amazing. And it really gives us hope for what's possible with philanthropy. As we're changing a lot of things [during] the pandemic, I feel like philanthropy is in a moment where they're looking at ways to support, and I think that EBCF was ahead of the game with the BLO Accelerator, for sure."

—Jasmine Williams, Black Organizing Project

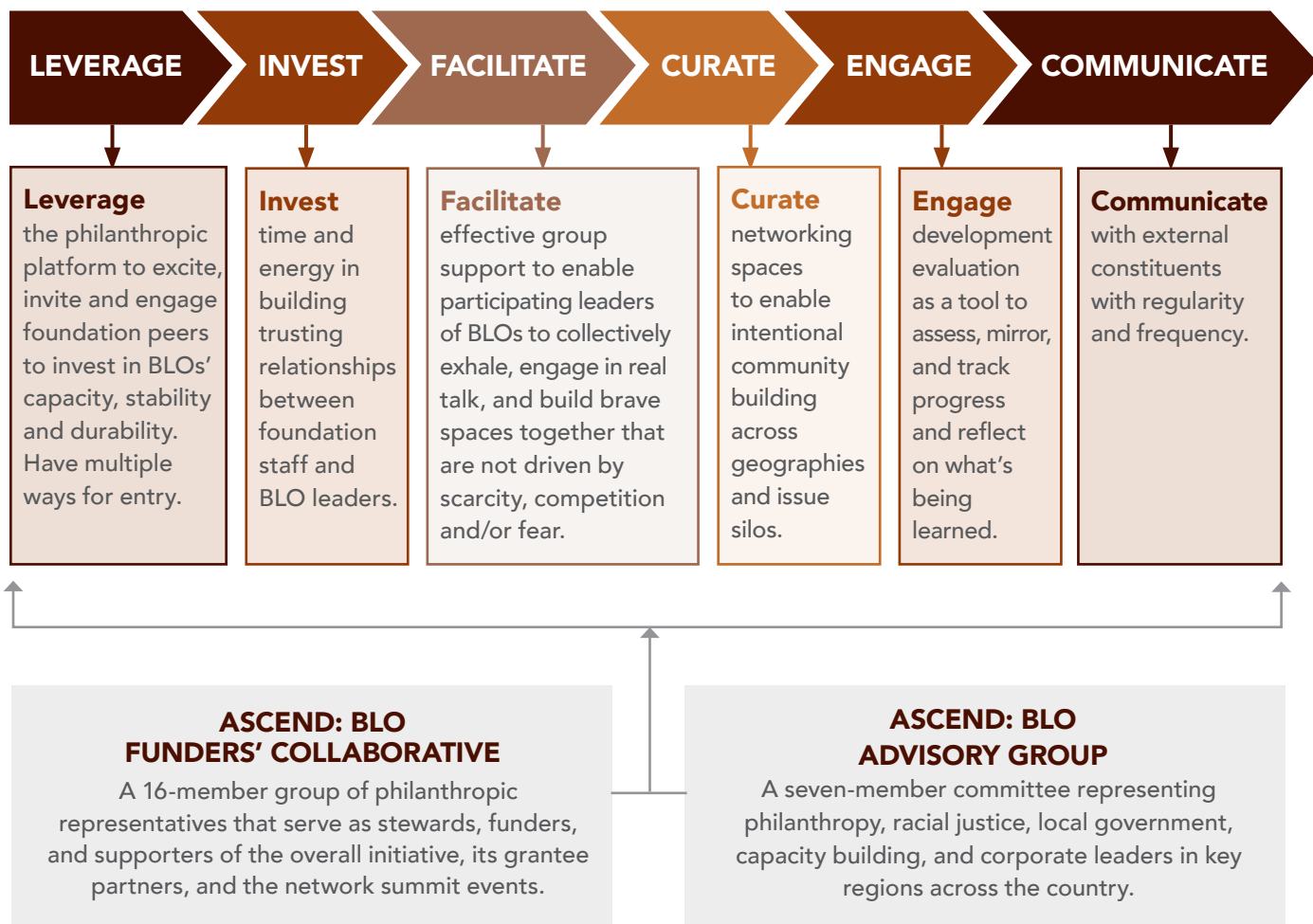


Initiative Structure and Core Components

The ASCEND: BLO initiative has the following key components that are structured to build the capacity of and to catalyze philanthropic funding to BLOs. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the various elements and the values, developed as part of the Theory of Change, undergirding this effort.

Figure 1. Key Components of the ASCEND:BLO Initiative





ASCEND:BLO VALUES

Black Unity:

belief in Black people, their collective possibilities, potential, power, desire to be in community with each other is affirmed and amplified.

BLOs are stalwart supporters of Black communities: they are the voice of, and advocates and direct service providers for historically African American neighborhoods and their residents, often providing support for those most marginalized by the mainstream.

Commitment to Learning:

we continue to lead in our communities and in philanthropy by bearing witness to, creating the narrative for, and giving voice to what's really happening in Black communities.

Collective Responsibility:

we stand on the shoulders of folks who have given so much, and we have a responsibility to do the same for our fellow / sister organizations.

Commitment to Community:

a core responsibility is identifying and lifting up the assets, opportunities, and addressing challenges and needs of African American residents and positively supporting neighborhood level growth and change.

Black Power:

coming together to fight isolation, share knowledge and expertise, and to have a stronger collective influence and reach to maintain and build a Black ecosystem in the Bay Area.

Commitment to Each Other with Accountability:

expectations of excellence that BLOs should and must be sustainable for the good of the African American and all communities.

Philanthropy Support

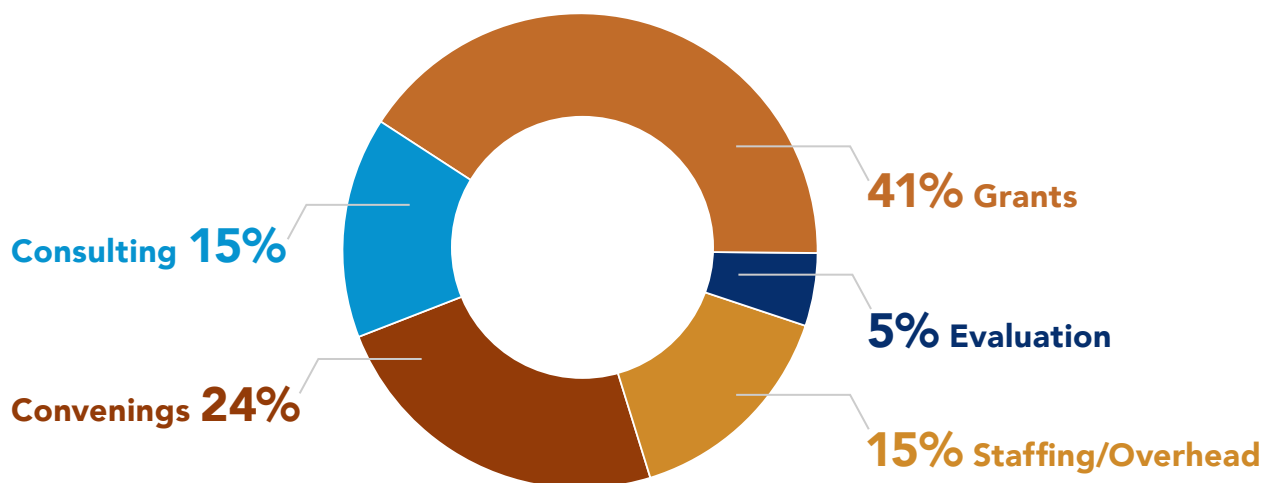
The ASCEND: BLO effort is led and coordinated by the EBCF and supported by the advocacy of partner philanthropic organizations whose representatives fund and advance the capacity of BLOs. This Funders' Collaborative meets quarterly to discuss initiative progress, to identify additional funding sources and opportunities, and to serve as ambassadors for race-based and race-forward work at their individual institutions and across the state. Currently, 16 foundation partners and the County of Alameda round out this advisory and planning body.

// During the early days, we had to make the case for why Black organizations. It's about supporting Black social change. How do we build in and build the narrative, develop more foot soldiers to spread the message? Today, it feels like more people understand why Black led. Now it's about why Black led in this way? Yes, we get it...we haven't been funding BLOs. This is how you make sure they're sustainable."

—Byron Johnson, ASCEND: BLO Capacity Building Initiative Officer, EBCF

The EBCF and its funder partners successful raised and contributed a total of \$5.9 million to support the core components of the initiative. Figure 2 outlines the percent of the overall funding dedicated to key initiative components including the grants provided to the Accelerator and Stabilizer organizations.

Figure 2. Percentage of Funding Dedicated to Initiative Infrastructure and Grantee Partner Funding



ADVISORY GROUP

In addition to the Funders' Collaborative, a national group of advisors have joined ASCEND: BLO to provide advice, insights, and ambassadorship. Comprised of representatives of national philanthropy, racial justice, local government, capacity building, and corporate leaders is convened twice a year. The Advisory Committee has met once, and plans are in place to meet twice in the 2021.

Capacity Building Components

ASCEND: BLO has three overarching intentions:

1. Build the capacity of Black-led organizations through Accelerator and Stabilizer programs;⁴
2. Provide a safe, brave, proud space for the 350+ BLOs in the region to build a network; and
3. Connect BLOs to a group of Black capacity builders in the region.

In the seven counties that make up the Bay Area, there are approximately 350 BLOs. The Regional Network is open to all of these organizations. Participation in the Accelerator was based on a competitive application process and five organizations were selected. The Stabilizer program was launched in February 2020 (just prior to the COVID-19 public health crisis) with six organizations. Each of these components, and the funder collaborative, are described in the sections that follow.

ACCELERATOR

The five BLOs participating in the Accelerator are: **African American Art & Culture Complex, Black Organizing Project, Community Housing Development Corporation, The Hidden Genius Project, and Roots Community Health Center.** All are receiving a three-year financial investment as well as ongoing coaching, capacity building, and mentorship. The figure on the following page (Fig. 3) provides an overview of the selected Accelerator organizations.

⁴ In this cohort-based model, the Accelerator included Black-led organizations with "a vision for growth, promising ideas, and a willingness to work in new ways to catalyze personal, organizational, and community change," and the Stabilizer was designed specifically for BLOs anticipating executive director transitions within the next two years.

Figure 3. An Overview of the Accelerator Organizations



The only City-owned arts and cultural center in San Francisco dedicated to promoting social justice and the artistic and financial development of Black art and culture



A Black membership-led organization working on racial, social and economic justice through grassroots, multi-generational organizing and community building



Provides high quality affordable housing, economic development and supportive services that create and sustain vibrant communities



Trains and mentors black male youth in technology creation, entrepreneurship, and leadership skills to transform their lives and communities



Provides culturally responsive, comprehensive healthcare, behavioral health, and wraparound services identifying and addressing root causes of illness and suffering; and emphasizing self-sufficiency and community empowerment



BLO Accelerator Cohort, 2019

They completed the six-month collaborative capacity building phase in December of 2018 and have 18 months toward realizing their “big idea,” a bold, 36-month, stretch project developed over the course of the six-month capacity building work and implemented with \$300,000 (\$100,000 for each year).

// ... we’re talking with Hidden Genius. We’re trying to develop a resource center in one of our new projects, and we want to have them be one of the anchor folks there. Definitely needed in the community. So we think that’s going to happen probably within a year. Then we have been working with Roots Community Clinic to find a project that we can work together, where we can bring their facility into one of our housing developments, or just have a commercial space over there for the community. We’ve also talked with African American Art & Culture Complex about helping them with their property because [they are] in the midst of folks wanting to take it over and develop it...leaving them out of the loop...”

–Don Gilmore, Community Housing Development Corporation (CHDC)

BIG IDEA PROJECTS

Participants’ big idea pitches included expansion of efforts related to programming, housing and employment, predatory lending practices, and opening or moving into new locations. Organizational leads describe these in their own words below.

// ...our big idea was to host a season ...Our Closer Six Feet Apart project launches in August and will go through December to early January. And I’m really excited about our opportunity to be a destination virtually and physically, and we’re now being prepared or preparing ourselves to not be reliant upon physical space.”

–Melorra Green, African American Art & Culture Complex

“Our big idea was housing around the able-bodied and willing community members ready to go to work.”

Aquil Naji, Roots Community Health Center

“So our bold idea was basically to address some of the predatory [lending] activities that have been going on in the black community, particularly around black property owners. And we focused on property owned by churches.”

–Don Gilmore, Community Housing Development Corporation



“The Black Organizing Project’s big idea was launching our chapter in East Contra Costa County... we’ve launched the chapter in 2019.”

–Jasmine Williams, Black Organizing Project

“So, we have a full-time staff and team in Los Angeles and a cohort that’s launched there fully virtually, which has been great. When we look at this idea of [expanding to] regional areas, like the Delta, and Tracy, and Stockton, and Sacramento...I think where we started landing as time progressed was that we would try and build out our curriculum in a way that we could have licensing partnerships with organizations that might be based there....”

–Brandon Nicholson, The Hidden Genius Project

STABILIZER

The six organizations selected for the Stabilizer cohort include: **A Black Education Network (ABEN)**, **AIDS Project of the East Bay (APEB)**, **Cypress Mandela Training Center**, **East Oakland Youth Development Center (EOYDC)**, **Safe Return Project**, and **The Hannah Project**. A process map highlighting the various phases of the engagement with and components of the Stabilizers work is included in Appendix B. Initial organizational assessments were planned (and one was completed) in the weeks just prior to California’s shelter-in-place order. Attempts to engage the Stabilizer leads by telephone to discuss potential capacity building support were not successful and were postponed allowing the organizations to address the unexpected demands and constituents’ needs in the face of the pandemic. In the meantime, three of the six organizations have undergone successful leadership transitions. The figure on the following page (Fig. 4) provides an overview of the selected Stabilizer organizations.

Figure 4. An Overview of the Stabilizer Organizations



ABEN assists our children and youth in reaching their full potential by facilitating academic and cultural excellence wherever they are, using culturally informed research, technology, visionary parent education and networking in our communities here and in diaspora contexts.

APEB

APEB provides comprehensive sexual health education, testing, and treatment services, while continuing to provide enhanced specialty services for people living with HIV in Alameda County.



Cypress Mandela Training Center is dedicated to improving the lives of the people it serves by providing pre-apprentice construction and life skills training along with employment assistance.



EOYDC develops the social and leadership capacities of youth (ages 5-24) so that they achieve excellence in education, career, and service to their communities.



Hannah Project boosts the academic proficiency and college attendance of Marin City and other low-income youth of color—utilizing culture and the arts to undergird its educational programming, to both build community and promote the value of achievement among Black and Brown youth and their families.

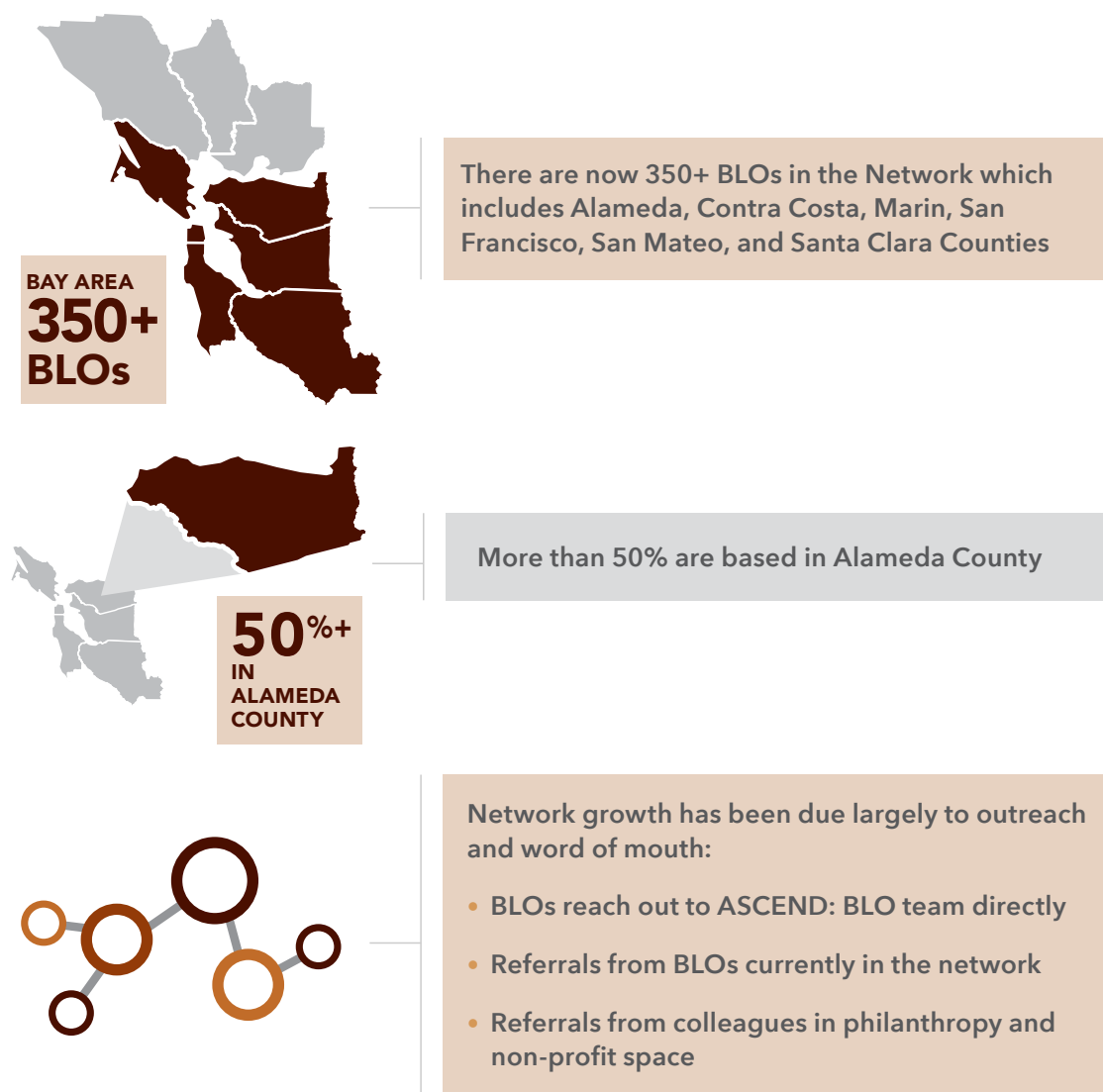


Safe Return Project empowers formerly incarcerated individuals through leadership and capacity development to identify strategies that respond to community needs, lead on the issues that impact their communities, and build their sense of agency.

REGIONAL NETWORK

Currently, 350+ BLOs located in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties are registered to be part of the ASCEND: BLO Network. Network members have access to workshops, convenings, and resources that support peer networking and learning. ASCEND: BLO staff has organized and facilitated four networking events, hosted by EBCF in partnership with other Bay Area funders and local business leaders. A snapshot of the network organizations is provided in the figure below.

Figure 5. A Snapshot of the Black-Led Organizations in the East Bay



These events have brought together over 200 BLOs, providing an opportunity for BLO leaders to come together, celebrate each other, hear from Black movement and philanthropic leaders, and share and access opportunities and information to build capacity and lift up Black success. Capacity building sessions and presentations have covered a variety of areas, including fund development; acquiring land and property; organizational infrastructure; programming; uplifting Black women's leadership and staff development; strategic planning; promoting Black resilience and wellbeing, all centering Blackness. A summary of the feedback evaluation collected after each networking event are presented in Appendix C.

CONSULTANT POOL

Strengthening the work of BLOs often requires having a pool of Black capacity builders and consultants that aligns with the values of ASCEND: BLO. At the initiative's inception, five BIPOC-led firms of consultants, trainers, and coaches were selected through an RFP process to support participating BLOs.

An assessment of existing strengths, assets, and challenges along with conversations with the organizations' leaders informed capacity building provided through a cohort learning community and one-on-one capacity building; linking values to practice; using coaching as a transformational tool; strengthening fund development, marketing, and communications; and design and preparation of a big idea to pitch to funders.

The initial consultant pool included: **Be the Change Consulting**, **Blooming Willow Coaching**, **Jeweld Legacy Group**, **Mmapeu Consulting**, **Saad & Shaw**, and **Teng & Smith, Inc.**, the program learning and evaluation partner, and **Walker and Associates, LLC**, the initiative convener and program consultant.

// Part of this effort is not just about these organizations but building a cadre of consultants of color to be much more competitive and visible. They face racial and other issues organizations of color face. Building a cadre of consultants was partly considered an offshoot, but is now a major component in the ecosystem that's been missing for a long time."

—James Head, EBCF

"So we've been working with Be the Change...the '10 Days of Action' was our fast-paced action run to win the elimination of the Oakland School Police Department

and Be the Change provided support with the media consultant and press ...They're just great partners that understand that the community needs to lead. So even their approach, the tools that they bring, are actually supportive and not necessarily taking you away from how you think. It's just adding to it."

–Jasmine Williams, Black Organizing Project

"We have expanded our partnership with Blooming Willow for a Black coaching certification program to provide 11 sponsorships. One person from each of the Accelerator and Stabilizer groups cohort can receive coaching training, so each organization [can potentially have] a coach internal to the organization. I'm excited to see where this goes and the lessons we're learning."

–Zakiyyah Brewer, EBCF

COVID-19 Response

After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EBCF surveyed each of their grantee partner organizations to identify areas of need and to provide additional financial assistance. This resulted in the Accelerator and Stabilizer groups each receiving \$50,000 grants in May of 2020.





ASCEND: BLO Outcomes to Date



Strategy 1: Accelerate and Stabilize Organizational Capacity

A core tenet of ASCEND: BLO was to offer capacity building provided by a selected pool of equity-driven, social justice-focused, and culturally rooted Black and consultants of color to be available to build on the organizations' strengths. The following describes current progress toward two short-term outcomes in this area.

OUTCOME 1: 30 BLOs receive intensive capacity building support and are more high-performing, impactful, and sustainable.

- A pool of Black and consultants of color was vetted and invited to support the BLOs to address key areas highlighted in the needs assessment and issues that arose as they worked on their big idea. Many Accelerator organizations continued to work with members of the consultant pool who they felt understood their challenges and supported their missions.
- Five BLOs selected to participate in the Accelerator cohort received six months of intensive support from members of the consultant pool and continue to work with the consultants on marketing and communication, fund development, organizational structure, and programming.

- Six Stabilizer organizations participated in an initial kick-off meeting facilitated by consultants and three of the six organizational leaders joined two virtual community building calls to discuss coaching needs and share updates on their succession planning.

OUTCOME 2: Black leaders have intentional space to tell our stories; be unapologetically Black; and collectively address the existing culture of structural racism, its legacy, and trauma and the scarcity mentality and overwork culture in the social sector.

- Accelerator leads have commented time and again during interviews over the last two years about how unusual, refreshing, and empowering it has been to have the safe, supportive, unapologetically Black space where they did not have to explain the challenges and obstacles they and their communities faced. This space, intentionally created by EBCF and the consultants, provided an opportunity for true reflection, hard conversations, progress, and movement.



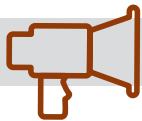
Strategy 2: Build Networks

The grant seeking process can often pit BLOs against each other for limited resources and discourage real transparency about the challenges these organizations are facing, which may further limit their access to available funding. The ASCEND: BLO network is designed with the understanding that we are stronger together. Current progress of this work summarized below.

OUTCOME 1: BLOs and their leaders have increased connection and social capital based on stronger relationships: "I'm not alone, I belong to a beloved Black community and we rise together."

- Although Accelerator leads have discussed various ways to partner (e.g., providing co-located services and programming and technical assistance on relevant topics), these plans have not come to fruition. However, they continue to be in contact with each other (e.g., inviting each other to events) and consider themselves to be a bonded and networked community that will remain connected and could call on each other at any time.

- Almost 350 BLOs are now part of a network geared to raising awareness and increasing regional collaboration; the four summit events were well received with participants indicating that the convening topics and presenters were inspiring and informative, that they were able to effectively network and seek out partnerships with other BLOs, and that they looked forward to finding additional ways to be involved in ASCEND: BLO.



Strategy 3: Inspire Donor and Funder Advocacy

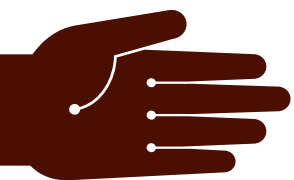
Black nonprofit leaders and funders who had struggled or knew of BLOs that were struggling to attract and maintain philanthropic support recognized the need for a coordinated effort—not just a one-off capacity building initiative, but a strategic, collaborative effort to make the case and advocate for a true commitment to identify, fund, and build the capacity of BLOs. The following describes current progress in this area.

OUTCOME 1: Funders in the Funders' Collaborative are more emboldened to advocate for BLOs and assert more visible leadership in philanthropic circles to reverse the trend of underinvestment in BLOs.

- Funders interviewed spoke of advancing social justice-focused priorities and strategies, exploring new and more robust ways to support and build the capacity of BLOs, and considering how to lift up the voice of BLOs and encouraging other funders to examine their own work and to do more to strengthen BLOs.
- The Funders' Collaborative which meets quarterly has more than doubled from five founding funders to the current 15 members.
- A total of \$5.9 million has been raised, mainly philanthropy contributions, for the initiative since 2017.

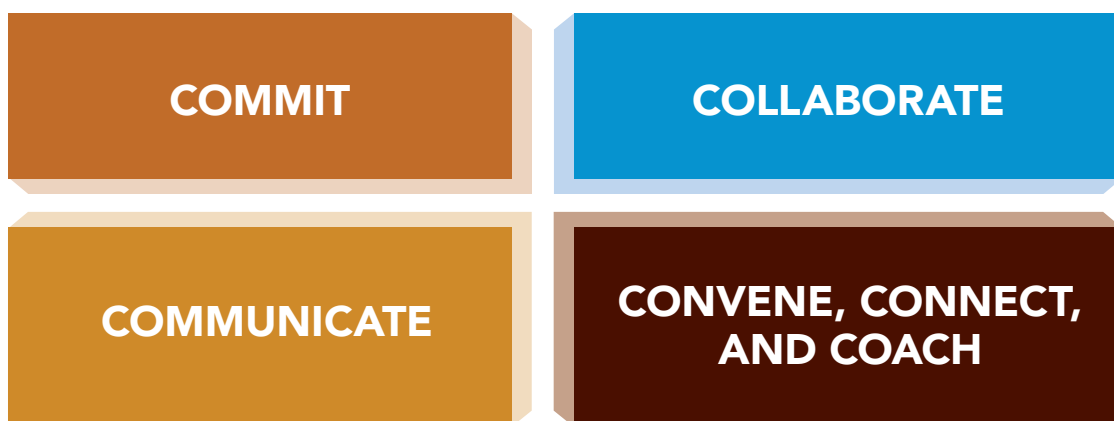
Outcome 2: Donors were inspired by recent events highlighting anti-racism to support ASCEND: BLO.

- ASCEND: BLO received approximately \$2,500 in gifts ranging from \$40 to \$511 between April and Sept 2020 in the form of smaller, one-time unsolicited contributions from individual donors.
- Some donor advised funds totaling \$727,500 were redirected to support the initiative.



Lessons Learned

All stakeholders interviewed for this report offered lessons learned to inform and guide the work of other funders, nonprofit leaders, and consultants committed to supporting the longevity and success of BLOs. Their feedback can be categorized by the following four “Cs”:



1. COMMIT

- Assess your own work and the ecosystem and state of BLOs to help define the scope and scale of the opportunities to build upon and challenges to be addressed
- Naming and supporting a proud and explicitly Black space to create the freedom for BLOs to grow and bond is immensely powerful for the participating organizations
- Decide early on what information to collect and outcomes to track to support your efforts and inspire others to follow your lead
- Access to a pool of BIPOC consultants and conveners can be complemented by working with BLOs' existing consultant base to improve their capacity to identify and effectively work with external strength-builders:
 - Ask about sweet spot for those consultants who are generalists
 - Clarify structure for capacity building support



"[ASCEND: BLO] is the kind of effort that requires an 'all hands-on deck' approach because of what the organizations face and where they're trying to get to. As a result, this work requires significant attention and commitment."

—James Head, EBCF

2. COLLABORATE

- Curate a list and assess the readiness of philanthropic leaders and organizations that are supporting race-based and race-specific funding and capacity building, and invite them to join you:
 - ▢ Outline a clear purpose and intention, including anticipated commitment,
 - ▢ Identify what funds exist and can be merged,
 - ▢ Determine roles and how they will advance anticipated outcomes, and
 - ▢ Consider listing BLOs by focus (e.g., education, health, youth development) to allow funders and others to search for organizations by area of focus.
- Identify leaders from the field and community to help shape the narrative and design of the initiative.

3. COMMUNICATE

- Have a strategic communication plan to disseminate the model, share findings and recommendations, and amplify the voices of the BLOs and their constituencies, and
- Be clear on what the initiative entails and what decisions the funders have made in terms of structure, what elements can be decided collaboratively with the grantee partners, how capacity building will be supported, and in what ways the community and field has informed and will continue to inform the initiative.

4. CONVENE, CONNECT, AND COACH

- Recognize the resilience of and build connections among organizations led not just by Black Americans, but those from across the Black Diaspora who face the same challenges,



- Offer coaching and consulting support to strengthen the ability of BLOs to access and leverage philanthropic, corporate, and public dollars, and
- Build internal capacity of members to serve as coaches and leaders to strengthen and grow the organizations.



Recommendations

Funder Reflections and Recommendations

Five members of the Funders' Collaborative⁵ were invited to share their perspectives on the initiative's successes, what lessons and recommendations they would make with other funders considering a similar effort, and their vision for the future of this work. Some interviewees' organizations have been involved with ASCEND: BLO for less than a year, and others have been engaged since the beginning. Their institutions have provided financial support of \$25,000 to \$150,000 annually, with one providing more than \$500,000 since the start of the initiative.

All of funders described social justice focused grantmaking and capacity building strategies that were already in the works or active at the time they were approached by EBCF to join the collaborative. Participation in the collaborative has led funders to examine their efforts and to plan, launch, or expand grantmaking initiatives to support race-specific efforts, conduct targeted outreach and support to BLOs in their communities of interest, and/or serve as evangelists to other funders about ASCEND: BLO to catalyze similar efforts. Interviewees' suggestions to other funders considering a race-specific and race-forward funding and capacity building effort are summarized on the following pages.

⁵ Interviewees were selected to reflect diverse perspectives and included three women and two men; with tenures of several months to over 15 years; in positions ranging from CEO to program manager and program officer; from public, private, and family foundations.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Act now to take full advantage of the unique and unprecedented attention and support that have resulted from the pandemic and related and concurrent social, economic, and racial justice uprisings.

The Accelerator organizations, the EBCF administrative leads, and the funders all spoke about how the current political, economic, and social landscape provides a time-limited opportunity to collaborate and unite to design and support a long-term strategic effort to identify and strengthen the capacity and sustainability of BLOs.

// ...the situation from March 2020 until now has only demonstrated more why Black-led organizations...why we need such initiatives more than ever, with the attack on civil rights...a false narrative of what the United States is built on and ignore part of our history rather than face it...given all of the tremendous economic and emotional hardship being placed on our organizations, especially those led by people of color. Now is the time to act. We have a moral imperative like no other...I can't imagine if someone is considering [a similar type of initiative] I can't imagine what they might be waiting for...We need action. We need funding."

—Parag Gupta, Stupski Foundation

"Now at the height of BLM...it is important for donors to know that this is cyclical...not just what we're doing this year, but a five to 10-year commitment. Multi-year funding. Commit to five years."

—Byron Johnson, EBCF

"...finding the right ways to be in the right spaces...I would say there's so much interest right now among the funder community, among the general public, for supporting racial justice in general, in a way that I can't believe we're talking about and it feels like we've grown a lot very quickly in terms of our ability to embrace this work as a philanthropic field."

—Prithi Trivedi, Sobrato Family Foundation

"It's like everyone is talking about race, equity, and justice all of a sudden, so...within the context of our work, that has created a space that we didn't have before. So I think that we have an opportunity right now to utilize that opening, where we can

articulate our historical emotion, our ambition and aspirations within the board rooms of philanthropy, [to] be able to organize and to not wait for the next pandemic or the next killing or the next emergency to be united.”

–Mauricio Palma, Director, Silicon Valley Community Foundation

RECOMMENDATION #2: Ensure that the Black community has a meaningful role and a voice in shaping your efforts.

The ASCEND: BLO initiative resulted from a push by Black community leaders and funders, many of whom had led or supported BLOs, and who were aware of the tenuous state of many BLOs in spite of the critical role many played in uplifting the Black community. With a focus on the strengths of these BLOs, the capacity building component was led by Black and consultants of color to reflect these and designed to create a safe space for revamping and skill building for long-term sustainability.

// My [foundation] peers struggle with program work, when to lead, follow, listen, design. Control and power [is a] thing, especially if you spring something on people, “We think this is the thing...” As a foundation, this is an issue we need to tackle... Remember to put community first. Be clear what things you will drive, decisions that you will make. Be clear what they are. And when you will solicit input and how that input will inform or direct your decisions.”

–Byron Johnson, EBCF

“The priority of the ASCEND: BLO program and economic investments are about really trusting...investing and believe in the leadership of Black people and acknowledging the lack of investment that’s happened in the past.”

–Vanessa Camarena Arredondo, Akonadi Foundation

“...with...political times changing...the reality of the field changing...I think it’s really important to make sure that in any initiative like this that the field is helping to shape it.”

–Sandra Davis, The California Endowment

“...recognize the assets that the community brings, recognize the resiliency of the

Black-led organizations and how much they have thrived despite everything that's been thrown at them...that asset-based mentality is just one [perspective] I carry with me even when looking at other person of color-led organizations and what they achieve despite barriers."

—Parag Gupta, Stupski Foundation

Recommendation #3: Begin by assessing the state of BLOs and the ecosystem in which they exist and historically how your organization has (or has not) supported BLOs and what should and can be done to be more responsive.

The power of data and information in making a case for and engaging partners in your BLO efforts are critical.

// ...Each of [the funders] did our own kind of assessments of...what we were doing to support Black-led work...we were all fairly progressive foundations and identified in that way....and ...still looking internally, we felt like we weren't doing enough to support Black-led organizations, and so that was really kind of the...beginning of it and the [BABUF] report...set the stage for then making the case [to the] field."

—Sandra Davis, The California Endowment

"There's no monolithic [Black] community, but I think having a consistent narrative could be really helpful. And I think ASCEND can help out, can help craft that, especially because...one thing that I loved about ASCEND is they grounded us in data to start with. They looked at the data and they were like, 'This is the amount that nonprofits are getting...the amounts that Black-led organizations are getting'...and it created an opening in a good way."

—Prithi Trivedi, Sobrato Family Foundation



RECOMMENDATION #4: Develop a strategic communication and dissemination plan to share the initiative's priorities, structure, and outcomes with attention to amplifying the voices of BLOs to shape the narrative.

Several interviewees stressed the requirement that the community have a seat at the table and a role and voice in the design and development of BLO-focused work.

// ...tell the story well. ASCEND has done a really good job of talking about the need for spaces for Black folks in the nonprofit and philanthropic community...."

—Prithi Trivedi, Sobrato Family Foundation

"What are we sharing with the larger community and the philanthropic community around what is possible when you invest in Black leaders? How can that narrative be really projected and really strong? I think across all of our foundations we have the capacity to take on...larger narrative campaigns that maybe some of our smaller organizations [can't]."

—Vanessa Camarena Arredondo, Akonadi Foundation

"I look forward to ASCEND: BLO uplifting the voices from our vibrant, rich, Black-led organization community, providing the space, the funding, and the capacity for them to thrive better than ever before, and to expand...and for the initiative to really be the blueprint for Accelerators all over the country to push forward people of color-led organizations, whether they be Asian, Black, Latinx...."

—Parag Gupta, Stupski Foundation



RECOMMENDATION #5: Recognize that the larger context in which these organizations are working must be addressed to ensure their long-term health, wealth, and sustainability.

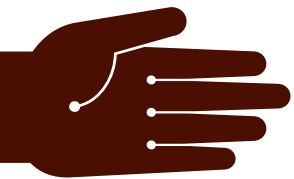
Several interviewees understood that initiatives such as ASCEND: BLO were only part of the solution. Without a concerted and sustained effort to address the institutional racism and biased structures and systems that continually impede BLOs' access to sustained and adequate funding, the sustainability of these organizations will continue to be precarious.

// ...there's a yin yang between working with five groups [in the Accelerator] and serving the 300+ in the field. I'd give more attention and investment to the network. They saw events once or twice a year...those are great events! But...I'd do series webinars, trainings, peer learning circles, different chat rooms to connect people doing similar work, broadening the knowledge. Invest in more events to reach the broader network. The analogy is 15–30 kids in school doing really well but all the other kids failing. We didn't change the face of education, and you don't change the organizational landscape in the Black community, unless your program design is geared to change that landscape."

Omowale Satterwhite, consultant with Jeweld Legacy Group

"...we really do have to get at the core, the root causes, of structural racism. And so for me, the vision would be to really uphold...the work of really bringing in that historical perspective...and what we need to see in the field moving forward to be able support organizations to survive through the kinds of challenges that we see right [now]...with COVID, with the uprising.... What does it really take for organizations to be able to weather...these political environments? What kinds of security measures that really need to be in place for organizations?"

–Sandra Davis, The California Endowment



Moving Forward: A Vision for the Future

The systemic racism that has led to and supported a historic and continuing under-investment in BLOs is a critical issue that is going to require a comprehensive, collective, and strategic long-term effort. The root causes of under-investment have to be addressed. To ensure that BLOs have the recognition and financial support they need, funders ought to work closely with BLOs to develop and support power- and movement-building efforts.

// “We adopted a different model for capacity building...a sustainability model. Sustainability is about envisioning the future of an organization to be able to move to the next level of scale and creativity through the Accelerator program, and [in the Stabilizer] program to envision and prepare for new leadership for the organization. That’s very different from traditional capacity building.”

—James Head, EBCF

“We have to have inside and outside strategies to really push institutions that are racist at the core to be responsive and I also hope that [ASCEND:]BLO can serve as a vehicle to surface our next generation of Black leaders. There can be some intentionality around really growing Black leaders from the field and it is on multiple levels, not just in political office, but folks that can, serve on commissions and boards. I’d like to see that. I’d like to see this [initiative] be a space where issues can be surfaced together [to create] a vehicle to be able to push folks that are in leadership now... in the foundation world to have a way to push foundations to be responsive.”

—Sandra Davis, The California Endowment

CONCLUSION

In a very short three years, ASCEND: BLO is making solid progress and there are much to be proud of. Having a staff that leads the day-to-day work that is respected, with ears, eyes and hearts connected to and respected by those in the Black community and social benefit or nonprofit ecosystem. A group of dedicated and committed funders and donors have come to the table to support this effort with resources and wisdom. BLOs are largely feeling seen, heard, loved and their ideas and insights taken seriously, lifted up in a refreshingly and explicitly Black space. All this are reasons to rejoice, especially in these challenging moments of racial reckoning in our country.

Appendix A. ASCEND:BLO Theory of Change (Updated April 2020)

FUNDER'S COLLABORATIVE TO SUPPORT BLACK-LED ORGANIZATIONS

STRATEGIES

Accelerate & Stabilize Organizational Capacity via cohort model?

Five BLOs will work with a group of culturally rooted and excellent consultants to build internal organizational capacity. BLOs going through leadership transitions will receive intensive capacity building supports to help them navigate through periods of significant change & potential destabilization.

Network Building

Provide an intentional space for building a beloved community among Black leaders in the Bay Area.

Offer a combination of opt-in virtual and in-person community building spaces and times.

Funder & Donor Advocacy

Recognize the leadership of a group of Bay Area Black philanthropic leaders, modeling the change for others to invest in BLOs.

Bringing together funders that recognize the systemic underinvestment in BLOs to reverse the trend with their collective funding, voice & efforts.

Inspiring donors to shift their investments to support racially focused and social justice and equity driven work.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES 1-5 YEARS

Thirty BLOs receive intensive capacity building support organization & are more high performing, impactful & sustainable.

Black leaders have intentional space to be able to tell our stories, be unapologetic Black; collectively address existing culture of structural racism, its legacy, trauma; competitive, scarcity mentality & overwork culture in the social sector.

Increased connection & social capital based on stronger relationships, *"I'm not alone. I belong to a beloved Black community & we rise together."*

Donors & funders in the Collaborative are more emboldened to advocate for BLOs, assert more visible leadership in philanthropic circles to reverse the trend of underinvestment in BLOs.

Six BLOs receive intensive succession planning strengthening org climate, culture, and structure to be prepared for and to attract an appropriate and seasoned leader.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES 4-7 YEARS

Stronger, more impactful & sustainable anchor BLOs.

BLOs are more confident, less reticent to fight back against institutional & structural racism, including in philanthropy.

More intentional spaces for Black nonprofit leaders to come together in community, raise their collective profile and voice.

More donors & funders are joining the movement to support BLOs with their dollars, connections, networks, proliferating the trend across the region, state & country.

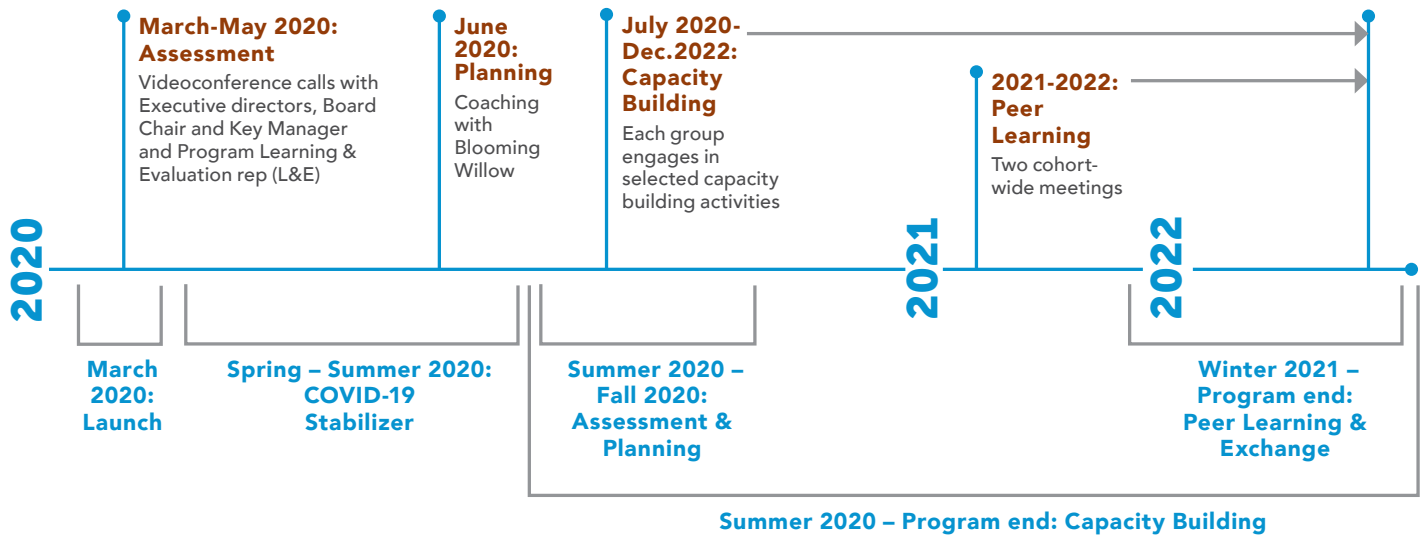
BLOs with new leadership report smooth transition period, more collaborative culture, climate, structure that supports staff growth, shared management, and successful fund development.

LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATIVE OUTCOMES

A vibrant, connected web of visionary & powerful Black leaders & BLOs are in conscious community, more aligned in building a movement to advance social, political and economic structural changes for African Americans in the Bay Area and beyond.

Increased number & voice within philanthropy to confront structural racism & reverse the historical neglect & underinvestment in BLOs throughout the Bay Area, modeling change for funders and donors in other parts of the state and country change for equity and social justice.

Appendix B. An Overview of the Various Components of and Timeline for the Stabilizer Component



Appendix C: Networking Results

Four networking events have been hosted to date, at which live polling and end-of-day surveys were used to gather feedback.

May 2019—Inaugural South Bay Network Meeting at Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) in Mountain View

- **Participants:** Over 50 BLOs representing mainly Santa Clara and Santa Mateo counties
 - 37% of participants were Executive Directors/Chief Executive Officers, 14% board members, 12% managers/organizers, 10% deputies, 9% funders/development professionals, and 18% identified as “other.”
 - Participants had worked at their organizations from less than one year to over 16 years.
- **Focus:** The goal of this event was to promote networking among Bay Area BLOs. A secondary benefit was providing SVCF with an opportunity to reconnect with local BLOs and to share a new commitment to working with “a lens to race and equity” (remarks by President and CEO, Nicole Taylor). In an informal way, the event was the capstone of a listening tour conducted by SVCF to re-engage and reconnect to community leaders and communities of color.
- **Participant feedback:**
 - Asked about key challenges, equal percentages (26%) named engaging funding sources, economic factors, and sustainability and growth. 20% named community changes.
 - Nearly two-thirds expressed interest in attending more BLO networking and learning events, and more than 80% wanted SVCF to host additional networking events and capacity building offerings.

June 2019—“Breaking Barriers, Building Bonds” at Google Headquarter in Sunnyvale

- **Participants:** Over 150 representatives from BLOs located in six counties (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara) attended this event purposefully scheduled around Juneteenth.

- **Focus:** The purpose of this event was “to network, learn from, and be inspired” (see [webpage summarizing this event](#)) by keynote and panel presentations involving national and California-based nonprofit leaders and funders. Presentation topics included:
 - **Setting the Record Straight:** What We Learned about the Challenges & Opportunities Facing the Black Community
 - **The Power of Space & Place:** Design & Real Estate Lease or Purchase for Impact & Sustainability
 - **Demystifying Donors of Color:** Understanding, Engaging, and Networking the High Net Worth Donor of Color
 - **Centering Blackness:** The Path Forward to Economic Liberation for All
 - **Black Leaders Rising:** Building Our Leadership & Lifting Up the Voices of Our Women
 - **Thriving Through Transition:** Strategies for Effectively Navigating Organizational Change
 - **A Bridge to Funders:** Disrupting Philanthropy as Usual
- **Participant feedback:** Several attendees volunteered to participate in video interviews and shared their enthusiasm for the opportunities that the event provided to learn, bond, and convene with other BLOs.

September 2020—“Black Resilience: Building Power in the Bay,” a virtual event

- **Participants:** Over 200 individuals representing BLOs located in four Bay Area counties participated.
- **Focus:** This “virtual” summit provided networking opportunities and a number of breakout sessions addressing relevant topics given the context of a global health pandemic and the national reckoning on race, including:
 - **Advancing Health Equity** Through the Lens of Staff, Community and Partners
 - **Arts as Resistance:** Catalyzing Change, Equity, and Justice
 - **Centering Black Women’s Voices:** A Leadership Strategy for Creating an Anti-Racist Workplace
 - **Criminal Justice in Schools and Communities:** Dismantling Policing and Abolishing Prisons

- **Disrupting Current Narratives** by Powerfully Illuminating Your Story
- **Disrupting Systems of Inequity:** Creative Resource Allocation as Reparations to Support Black People
- **Power Play:** Supporting Youth as Community Changemakers
- **Supporting Youth and Families Through the Dual Pandemics** of COVID-19 and Systemic Racism
- **Participant feedback:**
 - 31 of the 208 participants (15%) completed an end-of-session survey; most were based in Alameda County.
 - Of those responding, 42% said it was their first ASCEND: BLO networking event.
 - The majority “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they learned something new to inform and strengthen their work right away; that the summit offered sessions in tune with the challenges and opportunities BLOs are facing in the light of the multiple pandemics (COVID-19, racism, economic crisis, climate change, etc.); and that they felt more connected to other BLOs as a result.
 - Overall, these sentiments matched those received through live polling, interviews, and in-summit observations.
 - Many participants expressed a desire for more networking events with increased inclusion of “all Black people” including Black immigrants and migrants, and additional opportunities to galvanize and align more funding to BLOs in the Bay Area, perhaps with shared plans and agendas.
 - The main challenges that participants faced were related to the virtual convening platform technology (i.e., Hopin app).

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<https://www.ebcf.org/about-us/#our-team>

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Capacity Building Partners

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Blooming Willow Coaching <https://www.bloomingwillow.com/>

Jeweld Legacy Group <https://www.jeweldlegacy.com/>

Mmapeu Consulting <https://freedomroad.us/who-we-are/rev-dr-diane-johnson-ph-d/>

Saad & Shaw <https://saadandshaw.com/>

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