Adapting In and Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Black-led Organizations in the California Bay Area

Rogéair Purnell, Melissa Mendes-Campos, and Shiree Teng

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Prepared for the East Bay Community Foundation as part of its Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development: Black-led Organizations (ASCEND: BLO) initiative
Thank you to the many Black leaders on the front lines who took part in the survey. Thank you also to Shiree Teng and Rogéair Purnell for their stellar work in preparing and carrying out the survey and compiling the results and findings.

We are pleased to share the results of our research on how Black-led organizations in the Bay Area have fared during the first two years of the pandemic.

The research confirms what most of us have experienced and felt: Black people have adjusted to a myriad of changes and challenges to continue to successfully meet community needs during the COVID pandemic. Historically, staying adaptive has been a necessary competence for BLOs and Black-serving organizations as they have had to step up to provide crucial and critical support, meet community demands, and advocate on systemic levels to strengthen Black communities and families who are often the most vulnerable to survive and succeed.

These survey findings suggest that for both BLOs and funders the COVID-19 health crisis could provide an opportunity to explore how they relate to one another in the ecosystem, to consider new ways to fund and use funding to support BLO sustainability, and to determine how best to partner in ways that ensure BLOs continue to grow and strengthen to successfully weather future challenges and crises.

As we continue to grapple with the weight of the ongoing global pandemic- the unnecessary loss primarily due to inadequate government response, isolation, and collective impact on health, particularly mental health. This toll has only been exacerbated by the heaviness of living in an anti-Black, racist capitalist country.

We must always acknowledge & name why we are where we are- so that we can work with purpose & clarity towards dismantling the systems & institutions that contribute to intentional inequities- some of which are reflected in this report.

In Community,
Zakiyyah and Byron
The ASCEND: BLO Team
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Black-led organizations (BLOs) have historically played a critical and necessary role in serving as a safety net and advocates for Black communities that are resilient in community yet saddled with generations of systemic extraction, exploitation and being excluded from decision making rooms. Even so, BLOs are adapting, surviving, and longing to thrive through a global pandemic that has disproportionately taken from Black families and communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic shined a renewed spotlight on philanthropic underinvestment in Black-led organizations as they have quickly shifted in response to the disproportionate impact on the Black communities of this health, economic, and social crisis. The East Bay Community Foundation (EBCF), one of many foundations that launched special grants and funding opportunities to support nonprofits as their leadership and staff adapted to virtual work environments and pivoted their work to meet their communities’ immediate needs.

The Research

A survey of over 400 network members of the EBCF initiative, *Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development: Black-led Organizations* (ASCEND: BLO), was launched in February 2022. The purpose of this research is to understand how BLOs are faring 24 months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic with a goal of using these data to inform the field, to plan for future BLO Network activities, and for BLOs to reflect on as a linked fate network.

The Respondents

Nearly one-fourth, or 102 of 430; 24% of ASCEND: BLO Network members who were invited to reply to a 38-question survey responded. Key questions explored how the pandemic had impacted the organization’s communities, staff and staffing, funding, finances, services, and operations, and plans and prospects. Over one-third (32; 39%) of the respondents represent organizations with a geographic service area of Alameda County, followed by 14 percent in San Francisco County and 11 percent in Contra Costa County. In some cases, the organizations serve two or three counties (14%) or four or more counties (12%).
The Findings and Key Takeaways

The 102 leaders and staff who responded to the survey described both challenges and opportunities that had resulted from COVID-related shifts to their work and new funding opportunities.

1. Impact on Community

- COVID-19 has had disproportionate negative effects on the already vulnerable Black communities served by responding BLOs, with the greatest impacts in the areas of mental health, employment, housing, and education.

- Moreover, these effects go beyond the immediate and will have long-term implications for many community members, particularly their financial and housing stability and access to needed resources.

2. Impact on Staff and Staffing

- More than two-thirds of BLOs have had staff directly impacted by COVID diagnoses.

- Although most were able to retain or even hire more staff, secondary impacts of staff illnesses and absences included displaced workloads and significant stress and anxiety.
3. Impact on Funding

- Most BLOs reported having received funding from new funders or donors (85%), as well as benefiting from flexibility in grant restrictions and requirements (95%).

- Although 40% of new funding was for general operating support, 30% was characterized as one-time, COVID-specific support that has already or is soon going away.

4. Impact on Finances

- The pandemic resulted in increased costs for most BLOs, primarily in the areas of staff salaries and programs and services—these two areas remain the top two areas of need for future funding.

- While many said they are confident in their BLOs’ ability to keep operating under the current conditions, 25% or more feel they faced a limit of 12 months or less.

5. Impact on Services and Operations

- Like others in the social benefit sector, COVID restrictions impacted BLOs most noticeably in needing to shift to remote and/or hybrid work models, which has led to both significant challenges as well as some benefits—while local and in-person connectivity largely suffered, going online extended reach to new participants and partners.

- As organizations learn, adapt, and innovate to keep staff and communities engaged in the COVID (and moving-into-post-COVID) environment, the energy required to do so is taking a significant toll on staff, with burnout a very real concern.

6. Impact on Future Organizational Plans and Prospects

- Seventy-two percent, 72% of BLOs anticipate continuing some level of remote and/or hybrid programs; preserving resources and practices in support of staff and volunteer mental health (48%), and maintaining new partnerships developed during the crisis (71%).

- Having weathered the past two years, the majority of BLO respondents said they are either moderately or very confident in their organizations’ ability to successfully face a future crisis.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Black-led organizations have adjusted to a myriad of changes and challenges to continue to successfully meet community needs during the COVID pandemic. Historically, staying adaptive has been a necessary competence for BLOs and Black-serving organizations as they have had to step up to provide crucial and critical support, meet community demands, and advocate on systemic levels to strengthen Black communities and families who are often the most vulnerable to survive and succeed.

These survey findings suggest that for both funders and BLOs the COVID-19 health crisis could provide an opportunity to explore how they relate to one another in the ecosystem, to consider new ways to fund and use funding to support BLO sustainability, and to determine how best to partner in ways that ensure BLOs continue to grow and strengthen to successfully weather future challenges and crises.

“People died, lost work, lost housing, were isolated for extended periods of time, and their children were under extreme stress and set back in school. There was some relief due to opportunities to come together, but overall, I believe the pandemic was a traumatic wound on this community that we, some of us, survived.”
In 2015, the now defunct Bay Area Black United Fund (BABUF) commissioned a research study conducted by Walker and Associates to better understand the landscape of Black-led California Bay Area nonprofits. The study highlighted challenges faced by California Bay Area Black-led Organizations (BLOs) and involved a survey of and focus groups with 71 of 125 invited nonprofit representatives, many of whom were from mature organizations with small budgets and small but diverse staff with no reserves or endowments and limited resource development capacity (Walker & Walker, 2015). Top areas of dissatisfaction included available income / financial resources and board fund development (Walker & Walker, 2015). Not surprisingly, a critical need was to secure revenue to support growth over the next three to five years (Walker & Walker, 2015). Most of the respondents also expressed a strong interest in a collaborative capacity-building initiative targeting Bay Area BLOs (Walker & Walker, 2015).

In response to the report findings, the East Bay Community Foundation (EBCF) launched the Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development: Black-led Organizations (ASCEND: BLO) initiative in 2018. Designed “to enhance the growth, sustainability, impact and sense of community among Black-led anchor institutions in the Bay Area” (EBCF website), the vision of the initiative is to increase the capacity of BLOs to be more sustainable, to collaborate and partner, and to attract and secure philanthropic support.

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.
A three-pronged approach was designed to provide capacity building and partnership opportunities to a member network of BLOs and to small cohorts of organizations— one of emerging and innovative organizations (Accelerators) and another for executive directors planning a leadership transition (Stabilizers). Figure 1 provides an overview of the initiative. This report provides a summary of responses to a survey conducted with BLO network members.

**Figure 1. Key Components of the ASCEND:BLO Initiative**

- **ASCEND:BLO ACCELERATOR**
  - 5-member cohort-based program
  - Intensive six-month program to bolster the growth and sustainability of emerging, innovative community anchors that have a vision for growth, promising ideas and a willingness to work in new ways to catalyze personal, organizational and community change.
  - Key focus areas include strategy, feasibility, and sustainability plus coaching.
  - Participants will receive a stipend, 3-year investment, and ongoing support.

- **ASCEND:BLO STABILIZER**
  - 6-member cohort-based program
  - Three-year program for mature community anchors designed to minimize risk and guide organizations through transition by providing leadership development, board recruitment, advanced training, and succession planning.

- **ASCEND:BLO NETWORK 2018+**
  - Dynamic learning and community-building for all, launched 2018
  - Peer networking and learning with access to relevant workshops and speakers, an annual conference and more available to all 350 Bay Area BLOs.

**Background on BLO Philanthropic Support**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the social uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor and other Black people at the hands of police turned the cry for more philanthropy funding to Black-led and focused organizations from a cry to a shout (Dorsey, Kim, Daniels, Sakaue, & Savage, 2020; Emergent Pathways, 2019; McCambridge, 2020). Many foundations responded to this call to action including the EBCF, and launched specific and time-limited grant opportunities to help organizations manage necessary changes in how they carried out their mission and engaged with their communities.

Overall, the percentage of annual grant giving for African Americans as a proportion of funding for People of Color has dropped since 2005 from a high of 21.8% to a low of 17.5% in 2014 (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, n.d.). The Candid webpage, Philanthropic response to coronavirus (COVID-19)¹, as of April 11, 2022, highlights the amount of funder investment catalyzed by the global health crisis.

¹ As noted on its website, “Candid connects people who want to change the world to the resources they need to do it” (website). In service to its mission, the organization pulls and presents data and information from available news articles and other public sources, and from funders who upload and share their data directly with the organization.
Over 2,500 funders provided $27.4 billion to nearly 45,000 organizations. When these statistics are filtered by California recipients serving Black communities, the focus of ASCEND: BLO, 56 organizations received 71 grants totaling over $36 million from 28 funders. (Appendix B provides a snapshot of some of the ASCEND: BLO funding collaborative members whose COVID-specific funding is included.)

**Figure 2: Philanthropic Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall COVID-focused grantmaking</th>
<th>California organizations with focus on people of African descent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of funders: 2,532</td>
<td>Number of Grants: 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of recipients: 44,819</td>
<td>Value of Grants: $36.1 Million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of grants and pledges: 72,046</td>
<td>Number of Funders: 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total dollar value of grants and pledges: $27.4B</td>
<td>Number of Recipients: 56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Candid.org (2022)

**Report Overview**

This report outlines the survey purpose, goals, and methodology. A description of the survey respondents follows along with a summary of data and information focused on the key areas of exploration such as the impact of the pandemic on the communities these respondents serve and the structure and focus of their organizations and their work. Comments pulled from open-ended question responses are included to highlight key themes and takeaways. A conclusion offers recommendations and suggestions for philanthropic support of BLOs moving forward.

**Ascend: BLO Network Member Covid-19 Pandemic Survey**

Two years after the start of the pandemic, the EBCF wanted to explore among their BLO Network Members how the pandemic has affected the organizations, their staff, and their communities; what opportunities and challenges presented themselves; whether and how COVID-specific funding has benefited them; and what are the organizations’ remaining and outstanding needs. The survey also offered an opportunity to understand how the organization’ infrastructure, approaches, and mission have been impacted by the pandemic. The survey instrument can be found in Appendix B.
In 2021, the EBCF’s Senior Program Director, Byron Johnson and the ASCEND: BLO Program Manager Zakiyyah Brewer collaborated with the ASCEND: BLO initiative’s learning and evaluation partners to design a 38-question survey of its 400+ member BLO network members. The questions explored how the pandemic has impacted BLOs.

1. Community  
2. Staff and Staffing  
3. Funding  
4. Finances  
5. Services and Operations  
6. Plans and Prospects

The purpose of the research is to understand how BLOs are doing 24-months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ASCEND: BLO team has plans to use these data to inform the field, to plan for future BLO Network activities, and for BLOs for their reflections.

**Methodology**

The 38-question survey was sent by the ASCEND: BLO staff as a link in an email in February and again in March of 2022 to BLO network members. Potential respondents were asked to focus their answers on the period from March 2020 to the present. A request was made for each organization to submit only one response.

**Respondents**

Of the 430 potential BLO respondents, 102 (24%) submitted answers to at least one survey question. Over one-third (39%) represented organizations with a geographic service area of Alameda County, followed by 14 percent in San Francisco County, and 11 percent in Contra Costa County. In some cases, the organizations served two or three counties (14%) or four or more counties (12%). Smaller percentages noted work in San Mateo (5%), Santa Clara (4%), or Marin (1%).
The following section of the report highlights key takeaways and respondents organized by the survey topics.

1. Impact on Community

Survey respondents were asked to describe how COVID-19 has impacted the community and constituents that they serve including the negative impacts and positive adaptations.

**Key Takeaways: Community Impact**

- COVID-19 has had disproportionate negative effects on the already vulnerable communities served by responding organizations, with the greatest impacts in the areas of mental health, employment, housing, and education.

- Moreover, these effects go beyond the immediate and will have long-term implications for many community members particularly their financial and housing stability and ability to access needed resources.

**Overall Community Impacts**

BLO respondents were asked to describe how COVID-19 has impacted the communities that they serve. Many described the **health and economic impacts** on already marginalized communities and families, from disproportionately high rates of COVID infections and deaths to job losses and housing and food insecurity.

“We serve the most vulnerable among our community, so naturally our constituents were hit pretty hard and are the last to recover.”
We have experienced the loss of family members and loved ones, people who are anchors and pillars in the community and in their families.

Our students have been extremely impacted due to loss of jobs, lack of secure shelter and food, and childcare, to name a few.

Our incarcerated members have faced isolation, lack of family visits, and COVID outbreaks. Our formerly incarcerated members have faced un- and under-employment, housing and food insecurity, and stress.

Mental health impacts on Black families, driven by isolation and stress, is a major impact.

People died, lost work, lost housing, were isolated for extended periods of time, and their children were under extreme stress and set back in school. There was some relief due to opportunities to come together, but overall, I believe the pandemic was a traumatic wound on this community that we, some of us, survived.

It created isolation, anxiety, and general emotional challenges. Folks continue to struggle to get by and are trying to do the best they can.

School closures and online learning have resulted in academic learning losses and social disconnection for Black students.

Now that children are back in school, they are behind but have to rebuild the stamina to be in the classroom and to work through challenges with others. Initially, everyone was talking about a thoughtful return with lots of supports and that seems to have dissipated with a rush to “get back to normal.”

Not only did COVID lockdowns disrupt access to resources for Black communities, including public and community services, but the continued and long-term fallout from the pandemic is now becoming evident.

Community members could not access vital resources such as state IDs, benefits, [etc.].

COVID means family units are separate so less ability to share resources.

Many people negotiate inflation, the end of temporary programming, rent insecurity, penalties for accepting easy access relief money that threatens other forms of government subsidy.

It’s going to take a lot more financially and a great deal of organizing, planning, and strategizing to move our community to healing and creating resiliency.

Negative Impacts on Community

Asked to identify the top three negative impacts, BLO respondents answered: Mental Health (77%); Unemployment/Underemployment (65%); and Housing Insecurity/Evictions (57%).
Positive Adaptations

A few noted unanticipated but bright spots, including stronger partnerships and community engagement.

“Our relationships have become more solidified and [we] have partnered on projects that support the community at large.

We’ve seen a deeper political analysis, some exhaustion but actually a more activated base.
2. Impact on Staff and Staffing

Survey questions explored whether staffing structures or numbers had changed and to what extent and whether staff had been directly affected by COVID-19 during the pandemic.

Key Takeaways: Staff and Staffing Impact

- More than two-thirds of BLOs have had staff directly impacted by COVID diagnoses.
- Although most were able to retain or even hire more staff, secondary impacts of staff illnesses and absences included displaced workloads and significant stress and anxiety.

COVID Diagnoses and Impacts

Three-quarters of respondents (76%) said that since March 2020 they have had staff test positive for COVID.

Respondents were asked to comment on how this is impacting their BLO. Many described safety measures implemented.

“We have had to adapt our policies and practices to keep staff, members, and community safe.

It required that we be vigilant with the safety protocols and emphasize safety in the workplace (social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, providing PPE, etc.). It has created a culture of looking out for one another.

Several noted emotional stress and impact on staff morale.

“The need for self-care has been tremendous, as the stress on individuals and their families extends beyond what we could have imagined. We are constantly strategizing about navigating some level of burnout. There is a lot of fear, and also challenges sorting through information.”
Our team members were emotionally drained and were even more apprehensive about resuming in-person activities.

Comments also cited the impact of staff absences on program and operations.

Member of our team that was impacted by the virus was our executive director. This led to a temporary gap in leadership that resulted in delay of fundraising and programmatic work.

Each person was out of work from three to more days which impacted the work they were holding. This work either was not done or became the responsibility of their co-workers.

Because of COVID exposures we have had to shut down departments and even one health center site. We have had impacts to quality of care and reduced access to service as a result of COVID exposures and positive cases.

A few said that because they were either already working remotely or could quickly pivot, the impact was lessened.

Because the positive tests occurred while we were working remotely, the impact was manageable.

Current Staffing

Respondents were asked how many staff their BLO has currently. Many (44%) with paid staff are operating with fewer than 10 people.

Figure 6: Current Staff Size of Respondents’ Organizations (n=84)
**Staff Reductions**

A majority of BLOs (76%) said that they have NOT had to reduce staff or other personnel due to the pandemic.

*Figure 7: Changes in Staff Since COVID-19 Onset (n=101)*

Of those that have had to reduce staff, the impact has ranged widely: 45% of respondents reduced by 1-2 staff; 17% reduced by 3-5 staff; and 41% reduced by 6 or more staff.

*Figure 8: Staff Reductions at Respondents’ Organizations Due to COVID-19 (n=22)*

**Staff Increases**

Three-quarters of BLOs (75%) said that they have ADDED staff or other personnel.

*Figure 9: Staff Added Since COVID-19 Onset (n=100)*
3. Impact on Funding

Several survey questions explore the types of grants and funding their organization had received during the pandemic to determine how and whether the pandemic had led to new funding opportunities and more flexibility in use of existing funding and funding structures and requirements in general.

**Key Takeaways: Funding Impact**

- Most BLOs reported having received funding from new funders or donors (85%), as well as benefiting from flexibility in grant restrictions and requirements (95%).
- Although 40% of new funding was for general operating support, 30% was characterized as one-time, COVID-specific support that has already or is soon going away.

**New Funders and Funding**

More than 80% of respondents said that since March 2020 their BLO received new funding from donors and/or foundations that did not fund them before the pandemic.
Asked whether any of these new funders/donors have released an external statement on racial equity, 55% said Yes, 30% said I Don’t Know, and 15% said No. (n=82)

**Figure 12: Percentage of New Funders/Donors Who Have Released an External Statement on Racial Equity**

![Pie chart showing percentage breakdown]

Funders with racial equity statements provided grants supporting a range of purposes, with about a third going to general operating and a quarter going to COVID-related activity; they were more likely to provide restricted project support than race/equity-specific funding. Even funders who had not issued an equity statement were just as likely to provide general operating support and were the most likely to fund one-time COVID-related grants. The funders for whom the respondents were unclear about the existence of an equity statement were the most likely to provide general operating grants and also focused significant support toward COVID-related activity.

**Table 1: Percentage of New Funding Type Awarded by Whether Funder Issued Equity Statement (n = 81)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If your organization has received new funding, have any of your new funders/foundations released an external statement related to racial equity?</th>
<th>General Operating Support</th>
<th>Unique, or one-time support related to / specifically for COVID</th>
<th>Race-specific or equity initiative</th>
<th>Restricted to Project- or Program-Specific Support</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 (31%)</td>
<td>11 (24%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
<td>9 (20%)</td>
<td>5 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>14 (58%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The organizations that received new money from funders that had equity statements were most often awarded the following types of grants: “General Operating Support” (31%) followed by “Unique, or one-time support related to / specifically for COVID” (24%) and “Restricted to Project- or Program-Specific Support” (20%).
Table 2: Percentage of New Funding Awarded by Whether Funder Issued Equity Statement (n = 82)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New funding received in the range of...</th>
<th>$50K</th>
<th>$51K-$249K</th>
<th>$250K or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If your organization has received new funding, have any of your new funders/foundations released an external statement related to racial equity?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12 (27%)</td>
<td>17 (38%)</td>
<td>16 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than 25% of those receiving new funding said it was in the range of $51,000 to $100,000.

Figure 13: Range of New Funding Amounts Awarded Since COVID-19 Onset (n=82)

For the majority of BLOs, the new funding came from one to five donors.

Figure 14: Number of Donors Awarding New Funding to Respondents Since COVID-19 Onset (n=81)
The purpose of this new funding was primarily General Operating or COVID-Specific Support.

**Figure 15: Type of New Funding Awarded Since COVID-19 Onset (n=81)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Support</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Operating Support</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted to Project- or Program-Specific Support</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique, or One-Time Support Related to / Specifically for COVID</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race-specific or Equity Initiative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Funder Flexibility**

Asked what flexibility funders/donors have offered since the onset of the pandemic, BLO respondents cited a range of examples, the most common of which are Grant Extensions and Flexible Funding. Ten out of 21 “Other” responses named relaxed or waived grant reporting requirements.

**Figure 16: Flexibility in Grants Offered by Funders Since COVID-19 Onset (n=95)**

- Grant extensions: 51 (54%)
- Flexible funding: 47 (49%)
- Change of grant purpose: 42 (44%)
- Need-based funding: 26 (27%)
- Other: 21 (22%)
- No flexibility offered: 5 (5%)

BLO respondents were asked to describe how this flexibility has impacted their organizations. Many said that funding flexibility helps them be more responsive, creative, and innovative in meeting the needs of their community. The ability to simply focus on programming has been greatly valued.
We’ve been able to continue our programming, hire more folks, and redesign our approach to impact our community. This allowed us to meet our community needs the way THEY asked of us, without all of the extra paperwork and other bureaucracy.

We have been able to re-imagine our programming and truly spend more time building relationships with community.

Several responses cite the ability to provide direct assistance (cash, vouchers, etc.) to community members and/or mini-grants to community partners to meet COVID-related needs.

We were able to give $300 gift cards to 20 Black families with children with no strings attached.

Several said they appreciate the general flexibility to complete activities during a period of disruptions caused by COVID, noting that this has also reduced unnecessary stress.

Extended time for performing scope and flexibility due to the COVID-19 restraints.

These last 18 months have been extremely stressful and relaxation of processes has helped to eliminate some stress.

Some said that funder flexibility frankly helps them maintain operations, including the ability to bridge staff absences and vacancies as well as to pivot to online/remote operations during the shutdown.

We were able to keep our doors open and not lay off staff.

Others described the ability such flexibility gave to invest in infrastructure and capacity building, such as strategic planning, staff training and development, and improving staff benefits. For a couple of respondents, the infrastructure and capacity building investment has meant finally scaling/right-sizing to the level of need and building toward the future.

It has positioned us to manage sustainable operations while also exploring growth.

We have seen an unprecedented uptick in funding for Black-focused work, which has meant increased sustainability for our work and our staff. We are able to begin scaling up to the level of staffing and supports that is appropriate for the work that we are doing. We are able to look at long term solutions for the changes we are working to create versus a year-by-year strategy that insecure, very rigid funding streams in prior years.

A couple acknowledge that one-time funding has been only a temporary benefit.

Funders provided one-time grants and decided to support our currently running programs, but we really needed investments and staffing at a moment like this and their support was not enough to do that….

…the funding increases were one-time contributions that have not maintained at that level in 2021 and 2022.
4. Impact on Finances

Several survey questions explored how the pandemic has affected overall organizational sustainability and survivability with attention to changes in operating costs and funding needs.

Key Takeaway: Financial Impact

- The pandemic has resulted in increased costs for most organizations, primarily in the areas of staff salaries and programs/services—these two areas remain the top two areas of need for future funding for BLOs.

Cost Increases

Most BLOs (69%) report an increase in overall costs during the pandemic.

Figure 17: Changes in Overall Organizational Costs Since COVID-19 Onset (n=94)
Among those reporting an increase in costs, the most commonly cited primary drivers include Programs/Services (67%) and Salaries (66%). Other responses are included in the chart below.

**Figure 18: Primary Drivers of Increasing Organizational Costs Since COVID-19 Onset (n=67)**

![Figure 18: Primary Drivers of Increasing Organizational Costs Since COVID-19 Onset (n=67)](image)

**Survivability and Sustainability**

Asked how long their organization can continue to operate under current conditions, about half (52%) said they are financially sustainable, while the remainder anticipate a limit of up to 12 months, up to 6 months, or that they didn’t know.

**Figure 19: Organizational Sustainability Under Current Conditions (n=94)**

![Figure 19: Organizational Sustainability Under Current Conditions (n=94)](image)

**Funding Needs**

Asked in which of the following areas their organizations most need funding, nearly two-thirds of BLOs indicated Salaries (73%), followed by 60% naming Programs/Services.
### Figure 20: Areas of Funding Need (n=96)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Need (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salaries</td>
<td>70 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs/services</td>
<td>58 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fund development</td>
<td>48 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and skill building of staff</td>
<td>46 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications/Marketing</td>
<td>42 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health/healing support for staff</td>
<td>41 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board engagement and development</td>
<td>35 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT/technology</td>
<td>34 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking/relationship building</td>
<td>24 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting/financial management</td>
<td>23 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent/mortgage</td>
<td>15 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID and/or other relief programs</td>
<td>14 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Impact on Services and Operations

The ways in which the pandemic has affected—both positively and negatively—the organizations’ services and operations was also explored.

**Key Takeaways: Services and Operational Impacts**

- COVID restrictions impact BLOs most noticeably in needing to shift to remote and/or hybrid work models, which has led to both significant challenges as well as some benefits—while local and in-person connectivity largely suffered, going online extended reach to new participants and partners.

- As BLOs learn, adapt, and innovate to keep staff and communities engaged in the COVID (and moving-into-post-COVID) environment, the energy required to do so is taking a significant toll on staff, with burnout a very real concern.

**Changes to Services**

BLOs providing services were asked what changes to these services have been necessary because of the pandemic. The most common responses include: Moving Most Services Online (54%); Moving All Services Online (33%); and Adding New Services (45%). The “Other” responses include reducing the numbers served.
Other Changes and Impacts

The BLOs NOT providing services (n=15) were asked to comment on how their programs/work have adapted or changed due to the pandemic. Six of those responding cite shifts to virtual or hybrid models. Two other examples include needing to suspend some programs entirely and making mutual aid part of their community organizing strategy.

ALL BLOs were asked to describe how these changes made in response to the pandemic have impacted their organizations. Many answers focus on the consequences of shifting to remote or hybrid work models—the negative and positive. The costs of virtual work include loss of staff connectedness and decreased access to the community (including for those impacted by the digital divide), whereas gains have included the ability to include new program participants who, by virtue of geographic location or mobility, would otherwise not be able to participate.

"It made it difficult to connect with the most vulnerable impacted communities, such as elderly, low-income families, who could not afford broadband services.

It impacted our attrition rate, our retention rate, and prevented us from the kind of connection we need with our youth, and they need with us.

We were able to reach more of our senior clients who normally wouldn’t attend workshops due to lack of transportation—now they’re able to attend on a weekly basis.

The virtual programs have increased participation from people living in other states.

We’ve adapted and have a wider global impact but less in-person impact.

We have been surprised by how well we are able to do many functions remotely, and it has helped us stay healthy, feel safe, and attend to family needs. However, I feel that 100% remote work has impacted the strength of staff relationships, the depth of our coalition network, and the ability to grow our organizing program."
Similarly, the **challenge of constantly adapting** to the shifting COVID environment has had positive and negative impacts on BLOs, leading to innovations and new ways of working as well as increased levels of stress.

> I think we’ve become more adaptive and anchored to our values as a result of navigating crises for two years now.

> It's more stressful to manage a virtual team. It’s a different skill set needed by managers to do so. Staff also have to juggle family responsibility because of the lack of childcare and changing school schedules and openings.

> There was a need to skill up to increase the capacity to provide services and programming online. There is still need in this area and as we move to a hybrid delivery model.

> Trying to learn how to successfully implement new businesses, retire old ones and make necessary modifications to currently running programs is an exhausting process.

> Every day is just another day of making it work.

Asked to identify the top three positive adaptations they have made, BLOs most frequently cite: More Flexible Work/Hours (73%); Increased Attention to/Valuing of Self-Care (67%); and Increased Access to/ Use of Technology for Greater Connection, Access to Resources (66%).

**Figure 22: Top Adaptations Made Since COVID-19 Onset (n=100)**
5. Impact on Future Organizational Plans and Prospects

A final set of questions asked respondents to reflect on how the pandemic has positively and negatively affected their ongoing capacity, capabilities, and work in terms of programming, operations, staffing and service provision.

Key Takeaways: Future Organizational Plans and Prospects

- Many BLOs anticipate continuing some level of remote and/or hybrid programs (72%), preserving resources and practices in support of staff and volunteer mental health (48%), and maintaining new partnerships developed during the crisis (71%).

- Having weathered the past two years, the majority of BLOs said they are either moderately or very confident in their organizations’ ability to successfully face a future crisis.

Adaptations to Keep

We asked BLOs what new strategies (if any) that their organizations have adopted since the beginning of the pandemic will be maintained post-pandemic. More than 70% cite Online Programs (72%) and Collaboration/Partnership with Other Nonprofits (71%).

Figure 23: New Strategies Adopted Since COVID-19 Onset (n=99)
Anticipated Resilience in Next Crisis

Asked about their level of confidence in their BLO’s ability to successfully face the next crisis, most participants indicate moderate to high levels of confidence overall.

Figure 24: Respondents’ Level of Confidence to Successfully Face Next Crisis (n=95)
BLOs have been hit hard. This is not news. BLOs continue to adapt, shift and pivot to meet community needs during the COVID pandemic. Historically staying adaptive has served BLOs and Black-serving organizations as they have had to step up to provide crucial and critical support, meet community demands, and advocate on the systemic levels to strengthen Black communities and families who are often the most vulnerable to survive and succeed.

The pandemic has pushed many BLOs to a make-or-break juncture and while the COVID-specific funding and support provided have been a blessing, these new funds may not help BLOs do more than maintain and survive versus build infrastructure, grow and scale their work, and become sustainable. What happens when these grants end?

To build on the good will and needed support extended to BLOs, we offer the following recommendations and suggestions based on what these data and stories tell us.

**For Funders:**

- **RECOMMENDATION #1:** Offer BLO partners support for healing in face of so much trauma in recognition of the tremendous emotional and physical energy required to support and advocate for vulnerable populations. The staff of BLOs need to be recognized and supported.

- **RECOMMENDATION #2:** Explore with BLO partners what worked about these funding opportunities and determine what can be more integrated as common grantmaking practice moving forward.

**CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**
• **RECOMMENDATION #3:** Ask BLO partners how you can support the COVID-related adaptations to support their organizations’ ability to weather new and future crisis.

• **RECOMMENDATION #4:** Work with BLO partners to outline what types of support can be offered beyond salaries and program and services to ensure organizational excellence and long-term endurability.

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**For BLOs:**

• **RECOMMENDATION #1:** Embed practices that center on the internal healing of staff, of program participants, of your constituents. Raise up the flag. Take healing out from under the covers. For Black people and our communities, healing is justice. Healing is part of our freedom and liberation. Let go of the shame and guilt associated with healing work. Be loud about it.

• **RECOMMENDATION #2:** Explore with your funders, new and old, about what worked with the funding you received during the pandemic and discuss how that worked. Encourage funders to keep doing what worked.

• **RECOMMENDATION #3:** Reflect on the adaptations you and your team made during the pandemic. As hybrid and/or full-on return to in person work phase in, decide which practices you will keep, and which ones will continue to evolve.

• **RECOMMENDATION #4:** Assess the learnings from the pandemic. Assess which areas of your organization will need shoring up so that as you continue to evolve to meet the opportunities of a continuing pandemic, or the next pandemic, you’ve put systems in place to respond as best as you’re able. Talk to your funders about these reflections. Ask them to support your organizational excellence and infrastructure needs.
References and Resources


Appendix A: Sampling of COVID-specific Giving in the California Bay Area

Descriptions of COVID-related grant opportunities posted on Candid.org for some of the funders serving California Bay Area nonprofits and that are part of the EBCF’s ASCEND: BLO Funders’ Collaborative.

The California Endowment: Urgent Funding Response to Covid-19

Grants will support public health efforts and the immediate social and health services needs of highly vulnerable Californians, including farm workers/day laborers, the homeless and undocumented individuals. In addition to supporting community clinics serving the most vulnerable on the front lines of the coronavirus epidemic, funding will be provided to regional community partner foundations which will deploy the resources to local non-profit organizations that provide essential social and health services to vulnerable Californians and to statewide networks and associations focused on health care delivery and public health systems. Additional funding will be targeted to those most likely to be severely impacted by COVID-19 due to lack of awareness, language barriers, and lack of access to health care, including the homeless, low-wage earners such as farm workers and day laborers, and undocumented Californians. While the Inland Empire and Central Valley have been identified as a priority for these resources, regional funding will also be targeted to Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Diego County and Bay Area and Far North regions.

San Francisco Foundation: COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund

The San Francisco Foundation will focus on making capacity building grants ($3,000 – $25,000) to nonprofit organizations in the region to address the COVID-19/coronavirus outbreak, focusing on worker support, homelessness and renter protections, food security, and addressing racial bias.

East Bay Community Foundation: COVID-19: A Just East Bay Response Fund

The East Bay Community Foundation’s COVID-19: A Just East Bay Response Fund will rapidly deploy resources to organizations addressing the social and economic impacts of the broader COVID-19 outbreak, including the immediate needs of communities and organizations affected by coronavirus-related closures. EBCF community partners are reporting extreme economic hardship across vulnerable populations as well as severe impacts to organizational operations that affect a range of programming including the arts, education, health, housing, civic engagement, youth, economic development, and other vital community services. The COVID-19: A Just East Bay Response Fund will prioritize resources to organizations serving extremely vulnerable populations who are unlikely to receive state or federal support, including: undocumented immigrants, unsheltered individuals, those employed via cash economy (e.g. day laborers, domestic workers), uninsured and under-insured, youth, victims of domestic violence, low-income seniors, and the
formerly incarcerated. EBCF’s programs team took a necessary pause after making the first round of grants to evaluate the intended impact of this fund, which resulted in subsequent rounds explicitly prioritizing organizations that were led and serving Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Funding inquiries are no longer being accepted. Refer to the program webpage for additional information.

**San Francisco Foundation: COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund for Movement Building**

The COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund for Movement Building provides quick-turnaround funds to frontline social justice organizations that are strengthening the voice and power of low-income residents and people of color. The fund offers grassroots organizations small, one-time grants within 30 days of receiving a funding request.

**Silicon Valley Community Foundation: COVID-19 Coronavirus Regional Response Fund**

Funds from SVCF’s COVID-19 Coronavirus Regional Response Fund will support lead organizations representing each of the ten Bay Area counties (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano and Sonoma) and their immediate efforts in addressing coronavirus (COVID-19) related challenges in their respective counties. Funds may also be used to support national response efforts managed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Foundation.
Appendix B: ASCEND: BLO Network Member COVID-19 Survey Instrument
BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey

The purpose of this survey is to get a sense of how Black-Led Organizations (BLOs) are doing 24-months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ASCEND: BLO team will use these data to inform the field, plan for future BLO network activities, and to reflect back to BLOs for their edification.

Please have ONE person from your organization respond to the questions below with a focus on the period between March 2020 to now:

Organizational Management

1. Over the past 18 months, we have heard from many people that these are positive adaptations made: (Please select the top 3.)
   - [ ] Mutual assistance networks
   - [ ] Stronger community voice/organizing
   - [ ] More flexible work/hours
   - [ ] Increased access to/use of technology for greater connection, access to resources
   - [ ] Increased attention to/valuing of self-care
   - [ ] Other (please specify)

Shifts and Pivots

2. Have you had to reduce staff or other personnel due to the pandemic?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Not Sure
3. If yes, how many?
   - 1-2
   - 3-5
   - 6+

-- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey --

4. Have you added staff or other personnel?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

-- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey --

5. If yes, how many?
   - 1-2
   - 3-5
   - 6+

-- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey --

6. To what extent has your staff tested positive for COVID-19?
   - Yes, we have had staff test positive
   - No, we have not had staff test positive
   - Not sure

-- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey --

7. If yes, approximately what percentage of your staff have tested positive for COVID-19?
   - Less than 10%
   - More than 10%
8. Please add comments on how this has impacted your organization:


9. If your organization provides services, what changes to your services have been necessary as a result of the pandemic? (Please check all that apply.)

- Moved all services online
- Moved most services online with some in-person services (hybrid)
- Have not changed how we serve our community
- We’ve temporarily stopped some or all services
- We’ve added new services
- Not applicable
- Other (please comment & elaborate)


10. If your organization does not provide direct services, how have your programs/work adapted or changed because of the pandemic?


11. Please comment on how these changes have impacted your organization:


-- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey --
12. What new strategies (if any) adopted since the beginning of the pandemic will you maintain post-pandemic? (Please check all that apply.)

- No new strategies adopted/implemented between March 2020 and now
- Online programs
- Fundraising strategies and campaigns
- Service offerings/programs
- Collaboration / partnership with other nonprofits
- Programming focused on COVID relief or essential services
- Collaboration / partnership with government
- Mental health support for staff and volunteers
- Flexibility in grant agreements
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies
- Community Impact

13. Please describe how COVID-19 has impacted the community / constituents that you serve:

14. Negative impacts have included: (Please select the top 3)

- Disproportionate rates of illness and/or death due to COVID-19
- Unemployment/underemployment
- Housing insecurity/evictions
- Access to education
- Access to child care
- Exacerbated racial discrimination/hate crimes
- Mental health
- Other (please specify)
Funding

15. Since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place began, has your organization received new funding from donors, foundations that did not fund you before?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

-- BLOs’ Experience During the Pandemic Survey --

16. If yes, what is the range of the new funding?

- $25,000 or less
- $26,000 - $50,000
- $51,000 - $100,000
- More than $100,000, but less than $249,000
- More than $250,000, but less than $499,000
- $500,000 or more

17. If yes, how many funders/donors does this sum represent?

- 1 – 5
- 6 – 10
- 10+

18. If yes, is this new funding mostly...? (Please select only one.)

- General Operating Support
- Restricted to Project- or Program-Specific Support
- Unique, or one-time support related to / specifically for COVID
- Race-specific or equity initiative
- Other (please specify)

19. If yes, have any of your new funders/foundations released an external statement related to racial equity?

- Yes
- No
- I don’t know
20. What flexibility have funders and/or donors offered since the beginning of the pandemic? (Please check all that apply.)

- Grant extensions
- Need-based funding
- Change of grant purpose
- Flexible funding
- No flexibility offered
- Other: please describe

21. Please comment on how this flexibility has impacted your organization:
22. In which of the following areas do you most need funding? (Please check all that apply.)

- [ ] Programs/services
- [ ] Salaries
- [ ] Communications/Marketing
- [ ] Fund development
- [ ] IT/technology
- [ ] Training and skill building of staff
- [ ] Board engagement and development
- [ ] COVID and/or other relief programs
- [ ] Networking/relationship building
- [ ] Accounting / financial management
- [ ] Mental health/healing support for staff
- [ ] Rent/mortgage
- [ ] Utilities
- [ ] Other (please specify)

23. How long can your organization continue to operate under current conditions?

- [ ] I don’t know
- [ ] 6 months at most
- [ ] 12 months at most
- [ ] No limit - we are financially sustainable for now

24. How confident are you in your organization’s ability to successfully face the next crisis?

- [ ] I don’t know
- [ ] Very confident
- [ ] Moderately confident
- [ ] Not at all confident

--- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey ---

Costs
25. To what extent (if at all) have your overall costs increased during the pandemic?

- Decrease in costs
- No change
- Increase 1-5%
- Increase 6-10%
- Increase 11-15%
- Increase 16-20%
- Increase more than 20%

--- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey ---

26. If you have seen an increase, what have been the primary drivers of increased overall costs? (Please select all that apply.)

- Programs/services
- COVID and/or other relief programs
- IT/technology
- Salaries
- Office safety
- Marketing/fundraising
- Training and skill building of staff
- Networking/relationship building
- Utilities
- Rent/mortgage
- Other (please specify)

--- BLOs' Experience During the Pandemic Survey ---

Organizational Data

27. Name of your organization

[ ]

28. County or City / Cities in which you work

[ ]
29. How many staff does your organization have currently?

- None, all volunteer
- 1 - 9
- 10 - 20
- 21 - 30
- 31 - 40
- 41+

Thank you for your participation in this important survey!

30. Please type your email address below and you will be sent a $50 Doordash code if you are one of the first 100 respondents:

