



ASCEND: Black-Led Organizations Wellness Grants

HIGHLIGHTS: RESULTS AND IMPACT

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**“WHEN ‘I’ IS REPLACED BY
‘WE’ EVEN ILLNESS
BECOMES WELLNESS.”**

**– MALCOLM X
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X
AS TOLD TO ALEX HALEY, 1966)**

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2023, the East Bay Community Foundation’s (EBCF) ASCEND: BLO team selected ten organizations from across the Bay Area to receive six-month, \$20,000 grants “align[ed] with [their] new direction for the initiative, which now has an explicit Black Liberation lens and framework.”

These Black-led organizations (BLO) had a history of implementing wellness programs, practices, and supporting both internally for staff and externally for the community.

To secure the funding, BLO team asked the organizations to respond to five open-ended questions via Google forms about their internal wellness culture, definition for and practice around community care, vision of/for a well Black community and how they cultivate and promote wellness for their staff.

BLO staff also asked about their willingness to connect with the learning and (e)Valuation partners, Shiree Teng and Rogear Purnell, to reflect on and provide input to help inform any subsequent rounds of funding.

¹ ASCEND: BLO stands for Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development: Black-Led Organizations and this team is part of the Community Investment and Partnership’s [Capacity Building with a Racial Equity Lens](#) program strategy area.

This report summarizes the Learning and (e)Valuation team’s inaugural conversations with representatives from the ten funded organizations. We have organized what was learned by the following five questions that framed these brief interviews:

- **What was it like to receive this funding?**
- **How did this grant support your organization?**
- **What’s possible for you and your organization now?**
- **Have you received similar funding in the past? How hard are these grants to get?**
- **Anything else you’d like to share with us?**

We anonymously and confidentially summarize common feedback, insights, and reflections across the interviews by these questions. The responses to the final question often touched on themes covered under the previous questions and are incorporated throughout the report as appropriate.

METHODOLOGY

In March and October of 2024, the ASCEND:BLO staff team invited the wellness grantee partners to an opportunity to “check in about the wellness grants.” The Learning and (e)Valuation team successfully scheduled virtual interviews via Zoom with a total of sixteen people from ten of the funded organizations. These conversations ran for 30- to 45-minutes. Key themes and quotes were drawn from the interviewers’ notes and interview transcripts.



NOTE: All images in this document are sourced from grantee websites and social media.

FINDINGS

Below, we highlight grantee partners' reflections on and observations about how this funding supported their organizations and the community and the state of similar wellness-related funding opportunities.

• QUESTION 1: What was it like to receive this funding?

/// I think this program is revolutionary for the clients and the communities that we serve; clients deserve to have access... and the people who work with these clients (clients dealing with trauma and addiction) need to ensure people get these services."

- Seven interviewees felt surprise, delight, and excitement at being selected
- Seven expressed gratitude for been recognized, appreciated, and worthy of this care
- Four commented on being grateful for being able and trusted to use these funds creatively
- Three reported feeling validated for their work and especially for any wellness-focused activities
- Three noted how timely this support was to them and their staff

The following quotes exemplify how the interviewees responded to this question:

/// This doesn't happen: being able to use the funds without having specific guidelines, but to be able to have agency, to be creative, in how we take care of our staff."

/// We are grateful to be acknowledged for work that we do and that they understand how challenging this work is, and to support us in this way."

/// Welcome more funding in this area, setting a good precedent for funding staff wellness and supporting Black-led organizations."

/// They got it right. We're a health organization and even though we provide health services...sometimes it's hard as a leader to figure out how to carve out funds to take care of our people...We can't serve the underserved if we're under served."

**// TO KEEP THE BODY IN
GOOD HEALTH IS A DUTY...
OTHERWISE WE SHALL NOT
BE ABLE TO KEEP OUR MIND
STRONG AND CLEAR."
– BUDDHA**

• **QUESTION 2: How did this grant support your organization?**

- // ...receiving this wellness grant was an exciting validation that the work it takes...to hold wellness within a social justice organization with primarily Black and Brown folks is necessary and vital."**
- // For someone like me, who's been doing this work for so long without being able to take care of myself... [it] makes a big difference...a big difference."**
- // Staff are movement-related and movement-raised. Overwork is common, the sense that you don't pamper yourself. There's a need to shift culture: that staff makes time to take care of themselves.... For Black folks, participating in wellness, this could shift our collective/multi-generational DNA... intergenerational healing and harm interruption."**

These grants were often used to support healing and respite activities for staff, clients, and community members along with financial stipends to fund wellness activities for staff. Some interviewees spoke about the "vicarious trauma" that staff must manage on a daily basis and the critical need for engagement in healing and wellness activities.

A review of the interview transcripts revealed that...

- Nine described expanded access to wellness activities (e.g., facials, healing circles, massage, therapy, and yoga) for staff, clients, and the community, promoting the practice of self-care

- Seven highlighted the opportunity to interrupt “grind” work patterns to expand the opportunities and modalities available for cultivating wellness
- Four used funds to cover staff members’ individualized needs on a case-by-case basis and/or more typical compensation and benefits
- Three talked about how the support will allow them to model healing, wellness, and self-care for the community
- Three said the grant was particularly timely, given where they were in their own wellness journeys

The following quotes exemplify how the interviewees responded to this question:

/// We get so caught up in doing so much work ... because we really believe in what we’re doing. But that also can lead to burnout... to heightened stress [that] I know that is not sustainable. But, as the leadership team, we’re able to have those tough conversations because of this grant... to really refocus on wellness, [to say,] ‘Okay, we understand this as a life’s work. It’s always going to be work... even if we are free.’”

/// Being able to take them to places they are not accustomed to; what it means to receive self-care and to be a patron at places where they may not be socially acceptable.... One had never wanted to be touched, but massage helped. A client who was apprehensive, and [going to a] wellness spa [ended up being] a spiritual experience for this client.... Different ways to appreciate life and wellness and caring for themselves.”

/// So we allowed our team members to vote on how they wanted us to spend the money and each full time team member was allocated \$1,000 for whatever wellness is meant to do. Our part time and interns received \$500 on what wellness meant to do and they all filled out a form to share with us what wellness meant to do. So, some of them replied back saying, “if I can get a month early on my rent and not worry about living in [high cost area], that’s wellness for me.””

/// ...this was so timely because it’s something that [we] in the restorative practices have really been focusing on how we can really impact our culture at community works toward a holistic wellness that really resonates with the restorative values that we want to model. And so this whole idea of wellness starting with ourselves and our staff was right on target and right on time.”



/// It's helped...with our Wellness Series. So, we have a number of activities that we offer for our staff, for our clients, and for the community. And one of those things is Black to Yoga...every Monday... And so just anyone in our community and our programs and our staff can come and participate in an hour-long session of yoga led by a Black woman.... So the vision is that every day of the week, there's some wellness, physical, embodied activity that's offered."

● QUESTION 3: What's possible for you and your organization now?

/// So we did a leadership retreat...to really be able to plan and map out not only the year, but ways that we can begin to incorporate wellness within the organization... and think about, 'We're an organization that serves people,' right? But then we kind of realized, 'How are we also serving ourselves? Are we not the people?' Yeah, really having that conversation."

/// The work itself is transformational but to be at an organization that is showing that they care on a different level...is changing the way people view work and working in a nonprofit."

Invited to reflect on how this grant expanded opportunities for their organizations, interviewees shared how the funding legitimized their wellness activities, allowed them to model for their staff and clients and even board members and community partners the importance of engaging in wellness activities. New possibilities for these organizations according to these interviewees including the ability to:

- Host and participate in a retreat or outing
- Incorporate wellness and mindfulness activities as a regular and expected part of organizational practice
- Conduct an organizational “wellness check”
- Model wellness for community partners and other organizations with which they work

The following quotes exemplify how the interviewees responded to this question:

/// We'll be trying to do an 'organizational pause' over the next several weeks, to build infrastructure, design new programming, hire new people—an organizational 'wellness check' to focus on new needs, to support new growth and directions.... This 'pause' is demonstrating for clients by creating a better situation for ourselves."

/// ... what's possible for us now is to even begin to think that wellness is possible... to think that it's ok to take the time to breathe, to acknowledge feeling a little bit burnt out, to not feel that we always have to go, go, go and know that it's ok within our organization to take this time."

/// It's great to receive this wellness grant, but to support longer-term core funding (would allow raises) and would bring security... so we don't have to take on small grants to support the organization. With one- or two-year funding, you are just getting to touching the work and making an impact at the end of two years... Can EBCF work with nonprofits to develop solid business models, fiscal sustainability?

• QUESTION 4: Have you received similar funding in the past? How hard are these grants to get?

/// We've gotten other capacity grants, like grants to strengthen our business, but not grants to strengthen our people. And I think that that is really the difference... and it's really hard I think to get these grants, they are few and far between. I am on grant watch on a weekly, if not more, basis. And I don't see a lot of grants, if any, that focus on the wellness of individuals—always the wellness of the business, the organization, as if our people are not the organization.."

Wellness grants like this are rare, and more are needed. When asked the availability of and their access to this type of support, few interviewees had received funding. A review of the interview transcripts revealed that...

- Five mentioned having received grants for incorporating wellness services into client programming but that there remains a huge unmet need there

One interviewee hoped to secure additional funding to support engaging their board members in wellness activities as well.

The following quotes exemplify how the interviewees responded to this question:

/// I don't see too many wellness grants like this, which I think is actually important, especially in this time period of prolonged struggle... where a lot of people are talking about burnout, about fatigue, but also about how do we incorporate wellness into the picture?"

/// It's difficult to identify wellness funding; funding programming for Black mothers and children...a dearth of support for children and families."

We are a funding partner of the [city department]... I think of all of the funders that we're associated with do a great job. [Particularly city] does some good stuff too by providing workshops on wellness and self care. But again, it's not something that you as an organization get to choose that is based on your folks. It's something that they have put together and designed. And so it's more generic and what we're able to do with these funds is to really tailor it to our specific group of folks, the specific stresses that we know our folks have going on based on the work that we know that they are doing. And so again, to be able to tailor and have funds that are unrestricted to, to tailor, the kind of wellness we see is most impactful to our staff is really just really great."

/// And, there can be competition for [these types of grants]. There can be even backstabbing and biting and anger and all that kind of stuff that can happen—that has happened. So, yeah, I think [such funding] it's difficult to get. I think there are not a lot of those resources available."





“ HEALING IS AN ART. IT TAKES TIME. IT TAKES PRACTICE. IT TAKES LOVE.”
-ANONYMOUS

CONCLUSION

The core, six-month, \$20,000 inaugural ASCEND: BLO wellness grants acknowledges the drain on our Black-Led Organizations staff who routinely give of themselves in service to their Black communities. These relatively small grants enabled BLOs to make space to care for themselves **so that** their staff can be more present to care for their clients, and their larger communities.

Buoyed by the ability to legitimize wellness with intention and with resources, this group of BLOs expanded their healing and self-care activities. They received funding to support wellness dreams. They exposed their staff and in some instances their stakeholder / clients / community members to experience healing practices that may have been prohibitive before. Some are starting to consider how to serve as models of how and why intentional care-for-self is important to overall healing and health. This wellness modeling extended not only to their staff, but had the potential to encourage and support wellness and mindfulness for the grantees' external partners and community members.

The wellness grants are a concrete and uplifting example of where small amounts of intentional funding, made in the spirit of love and liberation for Black communities and organizations can be crucially important for communities that have historically done so much with so little. It's time for a change.

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- **Healthy Hearts:** Ray Harts
- **People’s Program:** Abbas Muntaqim
- **Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY):** Teiahsha Bankhead
- **Transgender Gender-Variant & Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP):** Erik Schnabel, Janetta Johnson, Van Dell, and Zy’aire Nassirah
- **3rd Street Youth Center & Clinic:** Joi Jackson-Morgan

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“CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT IS SELF-PRESERVATION, AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE..”
-AUDRE LORD
(A BURST OF LIGHT AND OTHER ESSAYS, 1988)

