

# ASCEND:

## Black-Led Organizations

### LOOK BACK REPORT



# Foreword

When the East Bay Community Foundation first set out to listen — really listen — to Black-led organizations across six counties in 2018, what we heard was both a charge and a call to action. These organizations were doing transformative work in their communities, often with inadequate resources, insufficient support, and without the recognition they deserved. What they told us didn't just shape ASCEND:BLO. It changed us.

At a time when focused investment in Black-led organizations was not yet the prevailing conversation in philanthropy, we stepped out boldly and unapologetically to launch ASCEND:BLO. What we knew then, and what seven years of experience has only reinforced, is that investing in Black-led organizations is not a niche commitment. It is a blueprint for how the philanthropic sector should show up for communities.

So much has changed in our communities and our country, especially since 2020. ASCEND:BLO has adapted at every turn, expanding its focus and deepening its investment in the connection, wellness, and sustainability of leaders and their organizations. The lessons embedded in this work now inform everything we do at EBCF. Trust, responsiveness, long-term commitment, and investment in the whole leader are not principles unique to ASCEND:BLO. They are principles for the field.

As we take this moment of reflection, we do so with clear eyes and firm resolve. Our commitment to Black-led organizations is not contingent on the political moment. It is foundational to who we are. We have both a responsibility and an opportunity to deepen our partnerships, move resources with intention, and ensure that the Bay Area's ecosystem of strong, community-rooted Black-led organizations endures — not just for today, but for generations to come.

Brandi Howard  
CEO, EBCF



# Introduction & Overview

From its inception in 2018, the East Bay Community Foundation’s Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development Black-Led Organizations (ASCEND:BLO) initiative has been unapologetically focused on uplifting Black authenticity, Black-led organizations, and the predominantly Black communities they serve. ASCEND:BLO demonstrates a model for how to invest in the capacity, impact, and sustainability of Black-led organizations (BLOs) and leadership.

**“THANK YOU! For being the models for leadership we aspire to be. For the trust, the love, the conversations, the sacrifices we know you’ve made. Complete gratitude. You changed my life, and hopefully I am able now to help change the lives of many more.”**

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*

This report, prepared by Audrey Jordan, Ph.D., is a retrospective account of the ASCEND:BLO initiative. The account is based upon a document review (see [Appendix A](#)) and interviews of key informants (see [Appendix B](#)) who participated in the initiative in various roles (e.g., funder, grantee partner, coach, learning partner). It elevates key achievements and learnings from those involved over the past seven years and provides clear advocacy for more of such initiatives, with insights about its critical and unique features, aspirations, and outcomes.

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



# Summary of Findings

**ASCEND:BLO has been a unique and vital source of network-building, uplift, and impact for and with Black-led organizations (BLOs).**

It started as a bold and uniquely Black-led collaborative investment, informed by Black leaders in philanthropy and Black nonprofit leaders, and based upon surveys of Black grantees in the Bay area. The learning partners, capacity-builders, coaches, and grantee partners involved in ASCEND:BLO are all recognized Black leaders in their respective fields and are all focused on, in their own words, the thriving of Black communities. Impact reports and participant responses that shaped this report are all clear: the unapologetic, collaborative focus on and investment in Black leaders is the most direct and aligned path to significant equity impact in Black communities.

*All of the organizations at the table were Black-led, including funders, evaluators, facilitators, coaches. And all were explicit about their commitment in an environment where we often talk about POCs more generally. All felt a commitment to Black communities and had a sense of initiative and action that was needed—not just planning and talking and standing outside the real work.”*

*—ASCEND:BLO consultant*

**It took great courage for EBCF to step-up and lead an effort focused on Black-led organizations at a time when it was not popular to do so.**

Despite exhaustively documented inequities that have spanned decades, there has been and remains hesitation by the philanthropic community to provide full-throated, trust-based investments in Black-led organizations on the front line of services and support to Black communities. Other than a brief moment in time during the course of this initiative, when the COVID-19 pandemic and community uprisings against police brutality and anti-Black systemic violence made it popular for philanthropy and others to respond to the urgent needs of Black communities, philanthropic support to BLOs has consistently been only a fraction of overall investment.



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



### **ASCEND:BLO grantee partners grew (in size and impact) and got stronger through their initiative involvement.**

Some grew their scope from one site to multiple sites, from tens of program participants to thousands, and/or from budgets in the thousands to budgets in the millions. They strengthened their leadership and fundraising capacities, operations, and financial stability, and attributed their success to the training, support, community, and model for leadership they experienced through ASCEND:BLO. Moreover, ASCEND:BLO's small grant investments in the wellness of the leaders of the BLOs gave them strength and determination to avoid the burnout that has impacted far too many Black leaders.

***“We got bigger, better tools, yes—but the belief in self and our power to do big things, that is the biggest gift we got. We are ready and able to work at a larger scale. Foundations talk about scaling up but few help you believe you can and show you how.”***

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*

### **ASCEND:BLO went beyond bespoke investment in individual grantee partners to become an investment in a network of Black authenticity.**

It has funded peer consultation as well as customized trainings and supports, hosted needed inspirational and rejuvenating cross-network convenings, and consistently emphasized shared and facilitated “learning while doing.” It has also built network and field capacity through its collaborative planning and continued funder engagement and advising. Its network-level impact is evident in interviewees' comments that they depend on the trusted relationships they made through ASCEND: BLO and continue to stay connected and support each other, some collaborating on joint projects.

***“I experienced [the commitment] as us in all positions, all levels, dancing together, crying together, strategizing together in public, safe spaces—there is nothing else like it. Didn't realize how much I need this—now it is the way I lead.”***

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



### **The influence ASCEND:BLO has had was not only on its grantee partners.**

The example that EBCF set through the audacious leadership of its Black CEO and President at its inception has inspired other funders and intermediaries (e.g., CA Black Freedom Fund, Bese Saka) to focus boldly on Black-led organizations, and to take-up ASCEND:BLO's collaborative and community-grounded approach (e.g., investments in networking and peer-support, "no strings" operational support, demand-driven training and capacity-building, and accelerator and stabilizer investments).

***“I was invited as a consultant to the kickoff event where all of us in different roles were connected to each other through activities, socializing, planning conversations, which highlighted for me the importance of Black [leadership].”***

*—ASCEND:BLO partner*

### **Continued, broader, and deeper investment in BLOs is clearly a need—though by no means assured.**

The evidence gathered here speaks to the overwhelming value of ASCEND:BLO. However, as expressed by interviewees, its future remains unclear. The boldness, experience, and commitment poured into the initiative by its initial cadre of champions seems to have waned or appears to be on pause. Even so, the current backlash in the broader environment only underscores the need for more initiatives like ASCEND:BLO—and there is much to build on from its example.

***“The body shots of bureaucracy (that have always been there) just turned-up and became weaponized against us. We have seen this before, we know how to navigate it. It is turned-up so we have to turn-up. This is the mindset that ASCEND-BLO modeled, and instilled. They have shown people how to navigate the moment even more by their example.”***

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*



Capacity Builder Reflections on ASCEND:BLO, 2018

# Background and Description of ASCEND:BLO

ASCEND:BLO was the creation of Black leadership committed to finding and supporting what works to elevate BLOs and the predominantly Black communities they serve. It began in 2018 in response to the sudden closing of a Black funding organization and was informed by careful exploration of the experiences of Black-led organizations (Figure 1, right). This exploration was led by a group of concerned Black funders from the Bay Area (led by James Head, then President and CEO of EBCF) and stewarded by a well-established consulting organization, Walker & Associates, LLC of BABUF (the Bay Area Black United Fund). Walker & Associates conducted a survey of 120 BLOs and focus groups with 20 leaders “to uncover and understand the strengths and challenges of Bay Area BLOs to move the field beyond crisis to change.”<sup>1</sup> The findings were used by the collaborative to shape a theory of change (see [Appendix C](#)), from which values- and practices-aligned programs were developed, resulting in ASCEND:BLO.

**BLOs Said They Needed:**

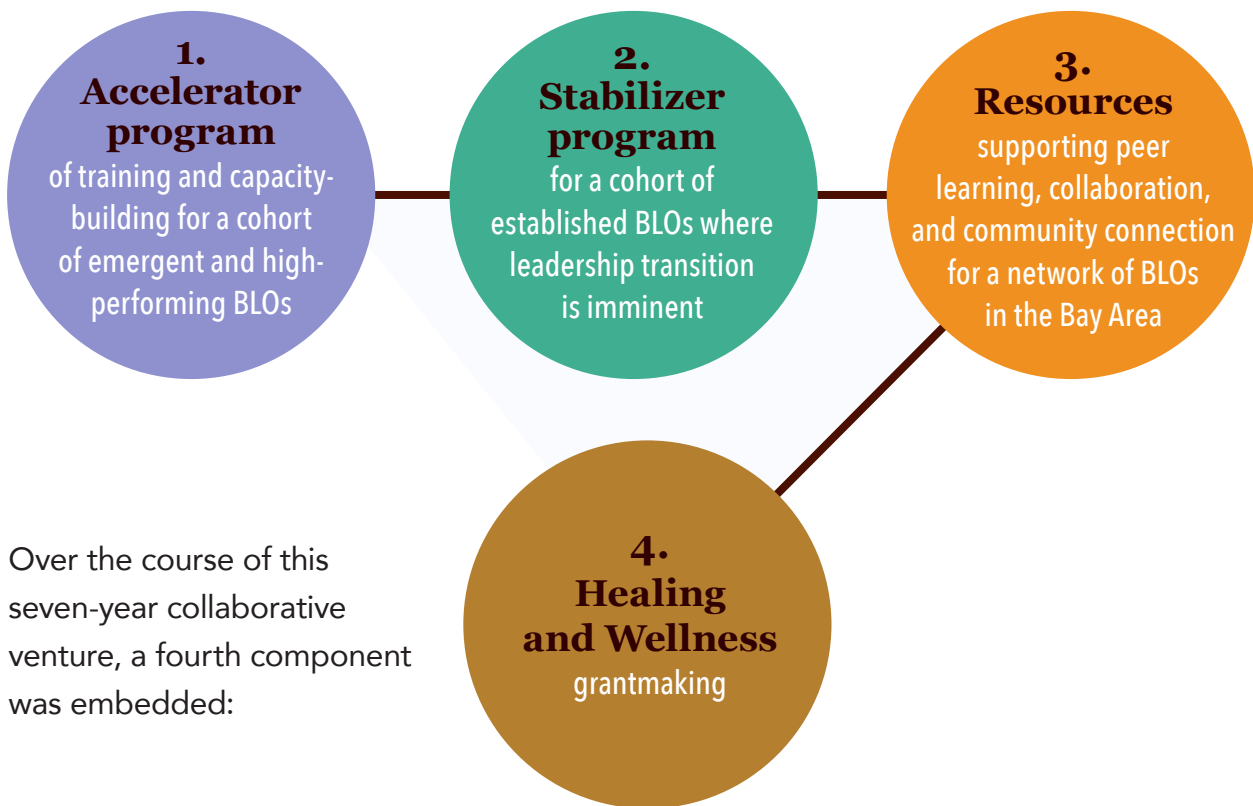
- Capacity building for sustainability and effectiveness
- Support for leadership transitions
- Peer learning network and community
- Trust-based, unrestricted funding
- Culturally-aligned, Black-led support

Figure 1

<sup>1</sup> “Black-Led Organizations in the Bay Area: From Crisis to Change,” by Walker and Associates of Bay Area Black United Fund. February 2018.

In addition to its co-development by an all-Black leadership team of funders, BLOs, and learning partners, **the uniqueness of ASCEND:BLO is its uncompromising centering of Black authenticity and wellbeing in its vision, values, practices, and investments.**

ASCEND:BLO was designed around three program components intended to accelerate the stability and effectiveness of Black-led organizations so that they are sustainable and more effectively responsive to the needs of the Black communities they serve. These three program components (again, based upon the stated needs of BLOs) are:

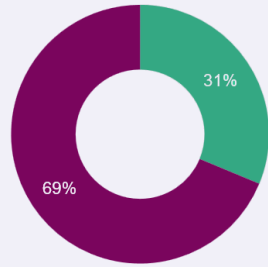


Over the course of this seven-year collaborative venture, a fourth component was embedded:

In that time, ASCEND:BLO grew from five to sixteen funder partners, raised \$5.9M, made grants to more than 41 grantee partners, and supported a network of more than 350 Bay Area BLOs. (Figures 2-4, following page).

Figure 2

## Funder Collaborative Growth



■ Founding Members (2017) ■ New Members Added

### 5 → 16

Funder Partners

- 5 founding members launched in 2017
- 220% growth to 16 by 2021
- Support ranges \$25K–\$500K+
- Inspired CA Black Freedom Fund, Bese Saka
- 14 foundations + County of Alameda

Figure 3

## Seven Years at a Glance

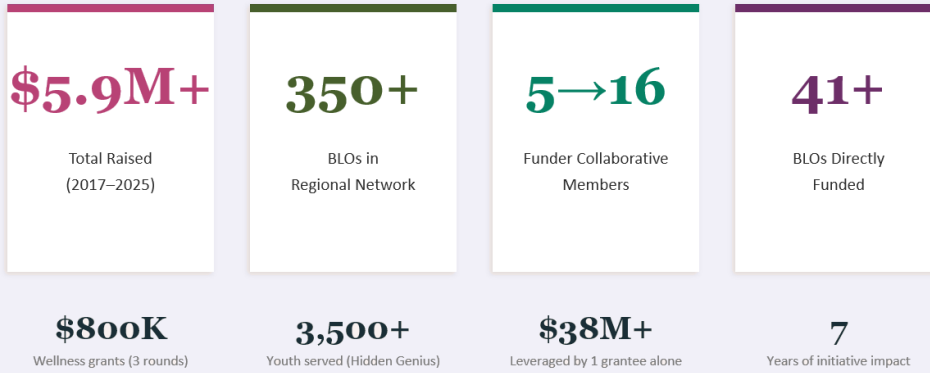
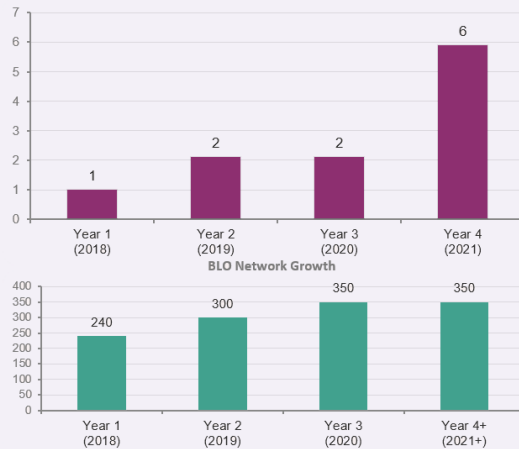


Figure 3

## Funding & Network Growth Over Time



### Key Milestones

- 2018: 5 founding funders, \$1M, 240 BLOs identified
- 2019: 10+ funders, \$2.1M raised
- 2020: COVID & BLM surge — \$6M temp.
- 2021: 16 funders, \$5.9M sustained
- 2023: Wellness grants launched (\$20K)
- 2025: Round 2 & 3 wellness (\$30K each)
- **Network: 240 → 350+ BLOs**
- **Funders: 5 → 16 (220% increase)**



## Key Features

From the start, participants in the initiative affirmed the **unique, motivating, and necessary role** of ASCEND:BLO's investments to: build anchor BLOs for sustainability and effectiveness; attend to leadership transitions of long-standing, front-line BLOs; and support a peer-learning network of BLOs who similarly toil in disinvested communities of color.

**The singular collaboration among people of color, particularly Black people, in every realm** (funders, grantee partners in both the accelerator and stabilizer cohorts, organizations in the BLO network, consultants and coaches, and the learning partners) was experienced as special, creating what many hoped would become a model for future investments by more funders in more locales.

Participants interviewed for this Look Back report were clear that **ASCEND:BLO focused on investing in BLOs long before it became the popular thing to do—and remains so**, even now that it is again not a popular thing to do. During the in-between time of COVID and the uprising against anti-Black police violence, ASCEND:BLO in many ways served as an example for how to support Black-led organizations when it all-too-briefly became fashionable for others to do so.

Interviewees said that **ASCEND:BLO demonstrated unapologetic support of BLOs** in the following ways:

- **Starting from research** to identify from BLOs themselves the best ways to support them, and by engaging a cohort of funders (initially all Black) to develop and advise the theory of change.
- **Being adaptive and responsive** over time to grantee needs (i.e., providing general operating funds), trusting grantee partners to know best what is needed for them to serve their communities.
- **Supporting difficult conversations** facilitated by professional coaches and investing in strategy for succession planning and transition.
- **Hosting culture informed convenings** bringing funders, grantee partners, consultants, and community leaders together—all sharing, learning, and experiencing cultural activities with joy, in community.
- **Being engaged themselves** (especially the program officer, Byron Johnson), in convenings and network-building across titles and sectors.
- **Doing their own internal work** to be sure that, as staff inside the foundation transition out and capable new staff transition in, the project has the leadership it needs to go on.
- **Having community aligned learning partners** who share similar experiences and values to support the commitment to learning and accountability, from planning to evaluation and retrospection.

**For grantee partners, being a part of the initiative provided a necessary set of culturally specific supports at a time when they were needed most.**

# Stories of Impact



ASCEND:BLO's capacity strengthening investments significantly enhanced participating BLOs' reach, impact, and sustainability. (Figures 5-6, below)

Figure 5 **“Biggest Impact on You & Your Org”**

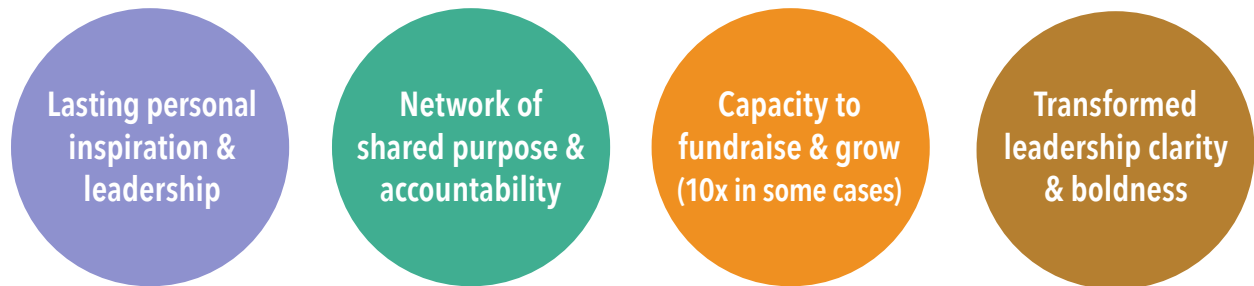
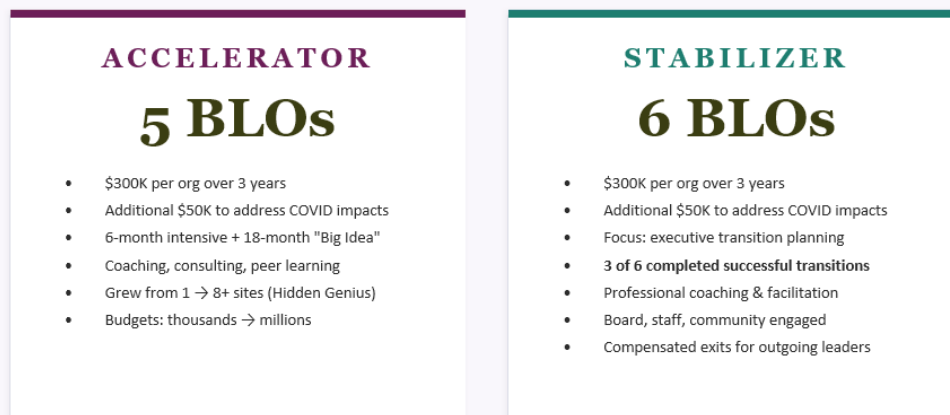


Figure 6 **Capacity Building: Direct Impact**



**Grantees grew in size and impact—from tens of participants to thousands, budgets from thousands to millions.**

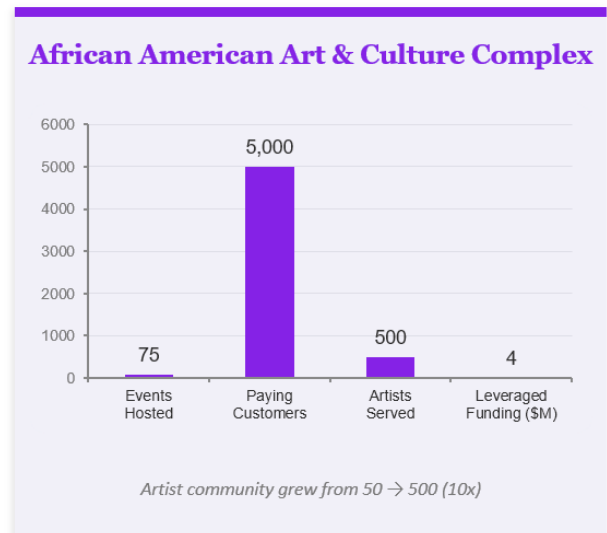
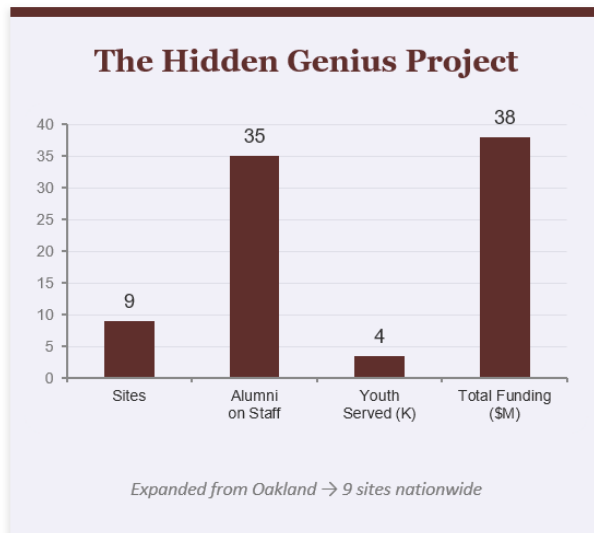
# Accelerator

The documented experiences of two accelerator grantee partners—Hidden Genius and the African American Arts and Culture Complex (AAACC)—illustrate how ASCEND:BLO contributed to their growth and increased clarity of purpose over the seven years of the initiative. (Figure 7, below)

Figure 7

## Grantee Growth Spotlight

How ASCEND:BLO investment catalyzed exponential growth (Look Back Report, 2025)





**Hidden Genius:** Each year, the organization served a growing number of participants in key activities like completing college and financial aid applications, while the quality of applications and postsecondary plans also improved. Over the course of receiving

ASCEND:BLO support, Hidden Genius expanded to multiple locations (from one in Oakland to eight additional sites, in and outside of California), hired alumni to become staff, and attracted individual and corporate donors, garnering support from financial institutions, foundations, and sports teams. As a result, it served 3,500 youth through over \$38M in donor investment.



**African American Arts and Culture Complex**

**(AAACC):** ASCEND:BLO funding helped

establish AAACC as an anchor institution in

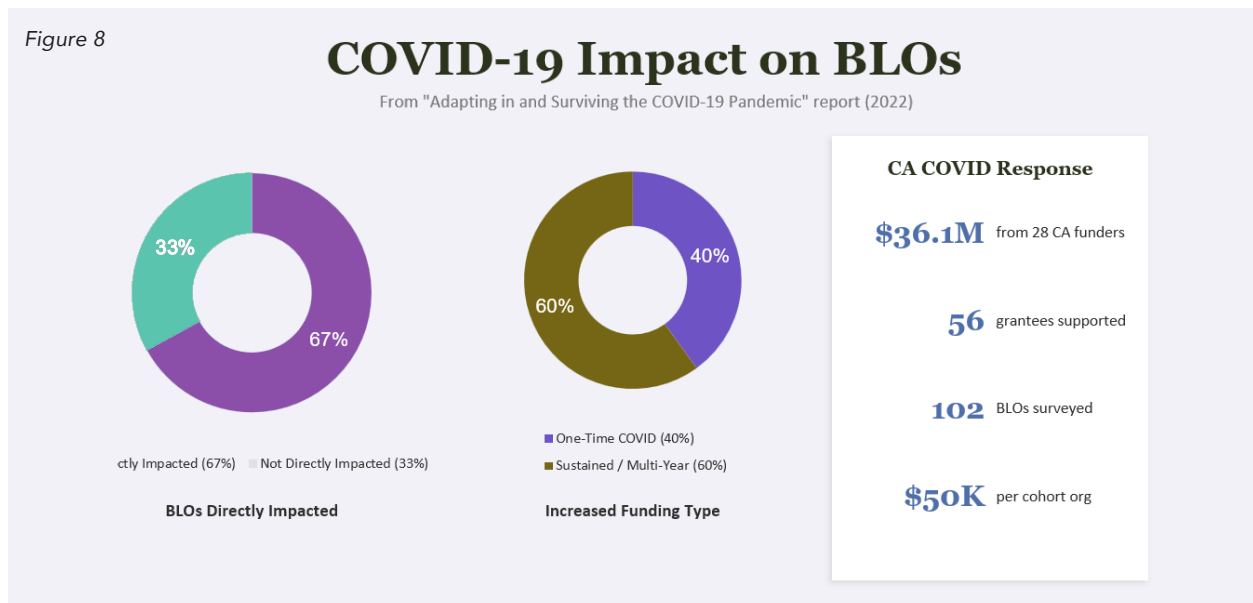
the San Francisco community. According to participants surveyed by the organization, AAACC served not only as a “sanctuary” where they can hone, celebrate, and showcase their crafts, but as a place where these artistic manifestations are honored and championed: “Being an artist can be very lonely, and Black artists, even lonelier. You need to feel the safety of expression. To have someone believe, when you don’t believe, is wonderful.” Over the three grant years, AAACC held 75 events, with over 5,000 paying customers, involving over 475 artists. It also leveraged ASCEND:BLO funding into over \$4.4M in additional support.

## Stabilizer

Because the transitions were happening in the midst of the pandemic, this cohort was slow to evolve and each case was unique. **Three of the six organizations completed transitions.** Success depended on several variables, including preparation and readiness of the outgoing leader; readiness of the organization; preparedness and orientation/mentoring of the incoming leader and their readiness to take on the mantle; and the follow-on support and attention to organizational stability provided by subsequent funding. Interviews with cohort participants indicated that **the funding and support (e.g., coaching and facilitation) provided by ASCEND:BLO was both rare and invaluable.**

# Wellness Grants

The pandemic shifted the plans of the whole world and ASCEND:BLO was no exception. Wellness grants were instituted in response to COVID-19 and the corresponding need to invest in the wellness of BLO staff. Both the pandemic and the uprising for Black lives in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 shined a powerful light on the reinforcing impact of structural racism on Black communities and, by extension, BLOs. (Figure 8, below)



More funders joined the funder collaborative and funding to support urgent investment grew to almost \$6M—temporarily. The BLO network supported by the initiative in some way grew to over 350, and participants again extolled the unique experience ASCEND:BLO provided in gathering Black leadership in convenings (even virtual ones) that provided a rare, safe space to commiserate, celebrate, and find pride and joy in the history, present-day, and future of Black authenticity and resilience. Wellness grants were provided over three rounds of funding. (Figures 9-10, following page)



Figure 9

# Wellness Grants: A New Chapter

Launched Fall 2023 with a Black Liberation lens to address burnout, trauma, and healing

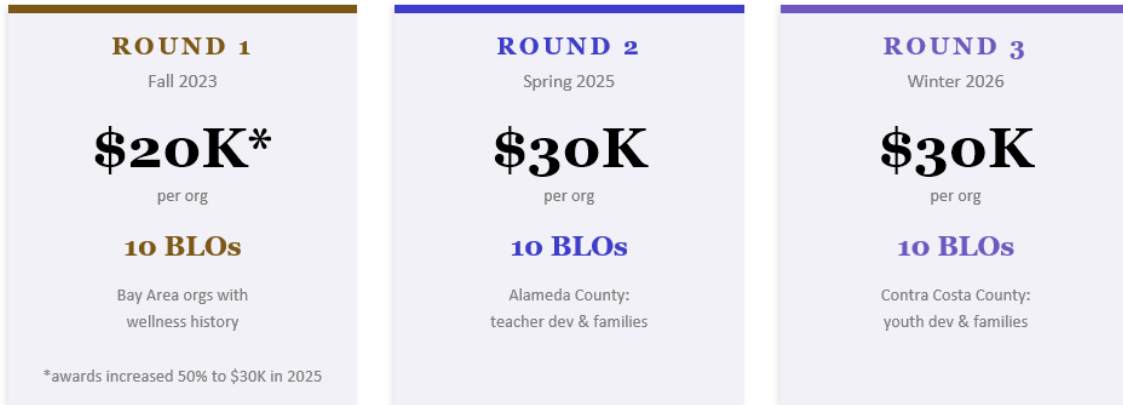
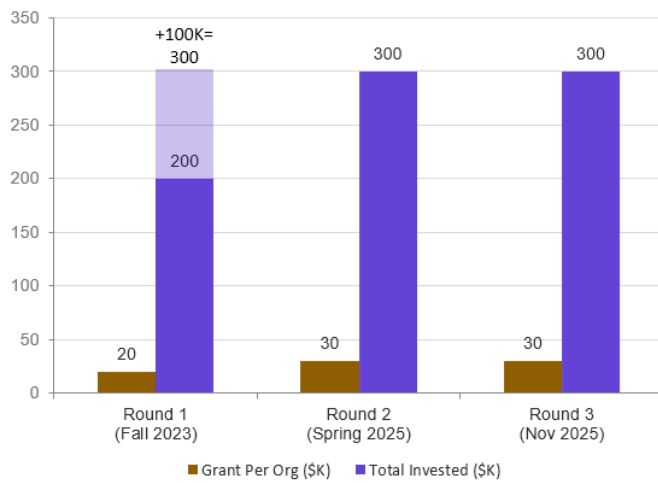


Figure 10

## Wellness Grantmaking: Growth Across Rounds

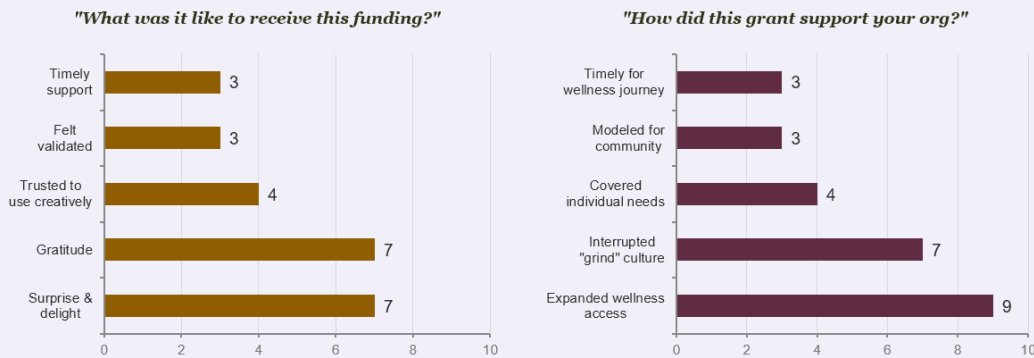


This support gave staff the space and inspiration to carry on, even with the outside toll it takes on BLOs to care for disinvested Black communities. (Figure 11, below)

Figure 11

## Wellness Round 1: Grantee Feedback

16 interviewees across 10 funded organizations (Nov 2024 report)



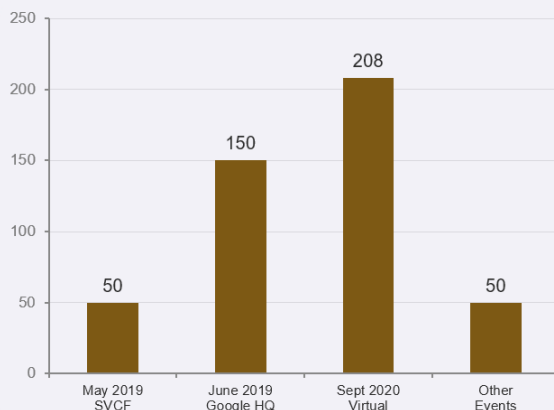
5 of 10 had received prior wellness grants but noted a “huge unmet need”

## Impact Beyond Funding

All grantee partners interviewed spoke of a lasting personal inspiration that came from being included in a network of Black leadership and authenticity—where they could be themselves, know they were not alone, and find the energy to keep going—with a shared sense of purpose as instruments of positive transformation for Black communities. Much of this occurred through summits and other network convenings. (Figure 12, below)

Figure 12

## Regional Network & Summits



### Key Summit Metrics

- 9 Bay Area counties represented
- 37% of SVCF attendees were EDs/CEOs
- 80%+ wanted more capacity building
- 42% at Sept 2020 were first-timers
- Majority "learned something new"
- 125 BLOs originally surveyed (BABUF)

# Participant Reflections

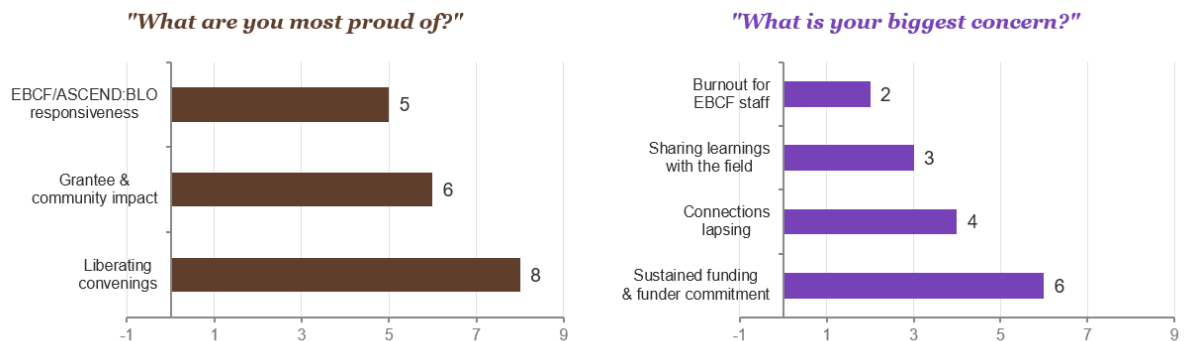


# Points of Pride

When asked what they were most proud of, participants interviewed for this report reiterated the impact on their organizations and leadership, shared appreciation for the network convenings, and expressed praise for EBCF/ASCEND:BLO. (Figure 13, below)

Figure 13 **Seven-Year Look Back: What Participants Said**

9 key informant interviews across grantees, funders, coaches, and learning partners (2025)



**THANK YOU! For the funding yes, but more for showing me the way to lead boldly and be resourceful. And for the amazing community I am forever a part of.**

Remarks on community impact were unique to each grantee partner, but included comments like:

- Just how many participants we have served
- The level of pride our communities have for the work that we do and what it produces
- How much the organization has grown and commands respect in the field
- Who I became as a leader through ASCEND:BLO support
- Connecting and creating opportunities for Black-led organizations to thrive not just survive.

Comments on the communal convenings reveal how unique this opportunity was:

- The joy-filled, liberating community convenings
- The trust and relationships built among a community of Black leadership
- Safe space, shared experiences, ability to share ways to navigate and heal

- Cultivation of unapologetically Black spaces to foster the freedom to be authentic
- A liberating experience like no other. Truly special and magical, and absolutely unique.

Appreciations for EBCF/ASCEND:BLO acknowledge its commitment and the results of this commitment:

- Uncompromising commitment to healing and liberation of Black folks at all levels
- The initiative’s revolutionary approach to change-making.
- Alignment between stated values, goals, and actions—even when very difficult
- Trust built with grantees and the broader Black community
- Building funder collaboratives or joint investments, so as to multiply resources.

## Concerns or Fears

**Invited to share any concerns or fears** coming out of the ASCEND:BLO experience, interviewees spoke about the risk of losing connectedness, the challenge of sustaining funding and momentum, and the need to capture and share lessons from the initiative.

Concerns about staying connected after the initiative ends included the wish to continue convening:

- Nothing substitutes for being together in a shared space the way we were able to be
- Both grantees and funders shared concerns about maintaining momentum in the current environment:
- How to keep it going when funding is diminishing (ASCEND:BLO and others)
- Concern about lack of funding that is happening when we now have so much to build from
- How do we stay in it, to do this with current grantees and new ones

Comments about the need to cull and share learning signaled the potential to inform and inspire:

- Having and taking the time to accumulate the lessons to share with the field
- Concern about all those who are saying “there is nothing we can do” when here is what you can do! The work is there, the results are there, and you can see it.

# On Navigating the Current Backlash

When asked about how to best manage the current climate of backlash led by the federal government with subsequent retrenchment by philanthropy in general, respondents tended to say that the moment in time required that they continue to follow the example set by ASCEND:BLO leadership: stay the course, strategically but boldly. (Figure 14, below)

- Continue the peer network and newsletter
- Healing-centered coaching for resilience
- Cull & share ASCEND:BLO lessons widely
- Non-prescriptive, trust-based funding
- Build community support beyond foundations
- Mobilize Black-led resources & self-sufficiency



Figure 14

***“We have seen this before, we know how to navigate it. It is turned up so we have to turn up. This is the mindset that ASCEND:BLO modeled and instilled. They have shown people how to navigate the moment even more by their example.”***

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*

***“Remaining stubbornly committed to unapologetic black advocacy and support, no matter what my board says. Like EBCF has done (and hopefully will continue to do).”***

*—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner*

Interviewee advice to BLOs focused on building beyond reliance on one source of funding:

- Build community support beyond foundation and government funding
- See themselves as powerful resources to begin with and mobilize their own resources
- Develop diverse strategies to navigate the current political and social climate.

Interviewees also recommended strategies for ASCEND:BLO to navigate the backlash, including:

- Provide continued support to the network (e.g., keep disseminating the resource newsletter, offer demand-driven capacity strengthening, connecting BLOs with funders and each other, etc.)
- Share learning from ASCEND:BLO with other communities who are isolated, targeted, and in need of support (women-led, Indigenous-led, etc.)
- Maintain non-status quo philanthropic behaviors, remaining responsive, trusting that grantee partners know what they need to be most responsive to community needs

## Additional Comments to ASCEND:BLO Staff And Other Funders

### Invest In and Share Learning:

- Get the word out! The window of opportunity exists for a call to action at this time, for sharing ASCEND:BLO as a model for what to do and how to do it.
- Internal advocacy in a foundation for BLO investment is critical—what have we learned about how to do that?

### On Initiative Design:

- Ensure experienced, competent, engaged, and committed Black leadership of the initiative
- Continue, even step up, the co-creation and co-design involving other funders
- Double-down on support for succession planning and transition in BLOs
- Provide support for navigating the legal landmines presented in the current environment around immigration, taxes, right to protest, etc.
- Lift up the need to invest in trusted, Black-led intermediaries and coaches who know Black communities best and are the facilitators for maximum impact (in grantees and in community)
- Build partnerships with donors of color networks to mobilize Black money and support for BLOs
- Be more intentional about engaging Black business, elected officials, and other community leaders to strengthen the network of Black leaders.



# Lessons for the Field

Through the document review and interviews conducted for this retrospective, lessons emerge for key roles in this, and similar, work moving forward.

**For Funders:** Your long-term partnership in transformation depends on a commitment to invest in BLOs in ways that trust them to know best what they and Black communities need to thrive.

- **Funding:** Follow grantee partners' lead in nonprescriptive funding. Encourage big aspirations to meet the monumental task of systemic transformation. Focus on acceleration, stabilization, and network-building. Invest in Black leaders' health and wellness.

- **Network-building:** Convene and cultivate a network of Black leadership across functions to learn, support, inspire, and celebrate in culturally relevant spaces.
- **Leadership and learning:** Support a skilled, committed program officer to serve as initiative steward and support an intergenerational team in growing their leadership. Engage evaluators as learning partners from start to finish. Participate as a learning partner. Take responsibility for documenting and broadly sharing the learning.
- **Build beyond the initiative:** Combine efforts with like-minded funders and stay involved in the initiative with them. Use your platforms to connect grantee partners to other funders.



**For BLOs:** Insist on investments you know you need to accelerate and stabilize your organization.

- **As grantees:** Dream big, but be strategic and results-oriented about achieving your dreams. Think sustainability (of funding and capacity) from the beginning of your leadership journey.
- **As a network:** Take initiative to be a peer-learner in mutual support and accountability with other BLOs. Find ways to collaborate with other BLOs. Mentor newer BLOs.
- **As leaders:** Remember to stop and rest, reflect, and rejuvenate (the quality and impact of the improvements in Black communities depends on your health and wellness).



**For Evaluators:** Approach your role as a learning partner and knowledge steward, cultivating a candid, trusting relationship in results-based accountability.

- **Being a learning partner:** Insist on being engaged early on in the process and take responsibility for periodic meaning-making with foundation staff and grantee partners. Build the capacity of funders and grantees to use data and documentation for real-time, continuous improvement

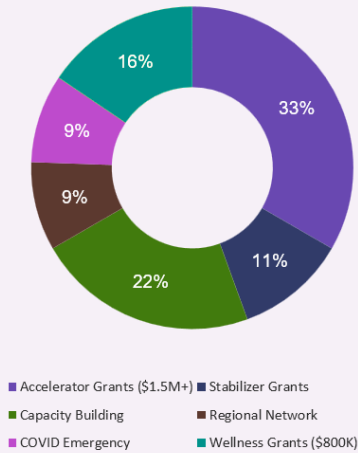


## Conclusion

One message that came through loud and clear is that the experience with ASCEND:BLO, regardless of role, was a singular experience with a funder. From its inception, ASCEND:BLO has been, without reservation, “for us, by us:” the Black community. This unapologetic stance is based on recognition that, despite a history of underinvestment in BLOs and the unchanging and significant inequities in wellbeing indicators in Black communities, status quo philanthropy has not adequately addressed the imperative to fill the gaps. Although the pandemic and the uprising for Black lives that began in the summer of 2020 sparked a burst of urgent response by philanthropy, government, and the private sector to the longstanding and perilous disinvestment in Black communities, it has been BLOs—together with a handful of Black funders and allies—who have been steadfast in their service to Black communities. (Figure 15, following page)

Figure 15

## Full Initiative Investment



### Investment Highlights

**\$1.5M+** to 5 Accelerator orgs

**\$800K** across 30 wellness grantees

**\$38M+** leveraged by Hidden Genius

**\$4.4M** leveraged by AAACC

**6** BIPOC consulting firms

Interviewees saw and experienced ASCEND:BLO's "unapologetically Black" stance in numerous ways:

- the words used in its theory of change (aka "theory of liberation")
- the presence of Black participants from all the various organizations
- the culturally laden activities (e.g., candid conversations about navigating racism; use of wise counsel to support strategy and problem solving; honoring ancestors; music, food, art, etc.)
- the shared experience of grief born from COVID and the sense of urgency to "save our people" (an urgency that is always felt, but intensified during the pandemic and uprising)
- the encouragement to dream big as a changemaker, believing in the power and commitment of Black leaders to dutifully rise to the challenge.

**This matters because none of these comport with what respondents said that they experience in status quo philanthropic initiatives.**

What ASCEND:BLO has done with grantee partners has been described in appreciations of its unique, trusting, and responsive approach. A similar sentiment was shared by all of the interviewees for this report: that, in the final analysis, ASCEND:BLO did what it set out to do—build a networked community of Black authenticity that makes the uplift of Black communities its primary aspiration.

What ASCEND:BLO has done for its grantee partners has also been noted in testimonials about the impact on them and their service communities. Beyond quantifiable and qualitative results in numbers served and funds raised (or other indicators of organizational growth), leaders importantly spoke of the transformation in their leadership, commitment, and clarity regarding their purpose as changemakers in Black communities.

**“Can’t nobody take the evidence of what we have accomplished! Where we are, what we’ve done the respect that is on our names. Undeniable. Aside from the evidence, we got the push to be bold and believe in ourselves and dream big. Invaluable.”**

—ASCEND:BLO grantee partner

ASCEND:BLO set out to show that investment in BLOs could significantly enhance their capacity, impact, and sustainability. With less than ten years to “move the needle” on a decades-long, systemic circumstance of hard-wired inequity, the growth and reach of the participating organizations and the increased accomplishments of their clients and customers point the way. (Figure 16, below)

Figure 16

## The Story in Numbers



**“Investment in Black-led organizations is the most direct and aligned path to significant equity impact in Black communities.”**

**- Look Back Report, 2025**

**The seven-year venture of ASCEND:BLO demonstrates a model for how to build a community of Black leadership connected and committed to the wellbeing of Black communities.** With more time and investment—and uptake by more engaged investors, supporters, and doers—uplift of Black communities, and the community of implementers responsible, can and will happen.

Appendices

“When Black people,

new Africans,

GET SERIOUS ABOUT

Our

**LIBERATION**

There's nothing that can  
stop us.”

radical  
transformation

and

self-determination

for freedom,

survival and the future.

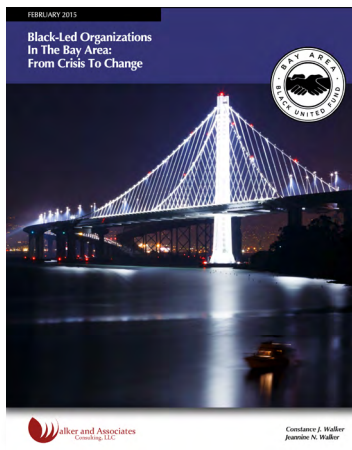


# Appendix A: Document Review

Documents reflected in this review include:

- The foundational study/report conducted by Walker & Associates (cited above)
- ASCEND:BLO reports: year-end reports for the first few years of the initiative (conducted by learning partners Shiree Teng and Rogear Purnell-Mack and associates)<sup>2</sup>
- Additional evaluation reports: reports focusing on COVID-19, the stabilizer cohort, and wellness grants (also conducted by Shiree Teng and Rogear Purnell-Mack and associates)
- Grantee and partner reports: reports from two accelerator and stabilizer grantees' websites and from capacity building partner Blooming Willow

## Foundational Study/Report



**Black-Led Organizations in the Bay Area: From Crisis to Change** (Jeannine Walker & Associates/BABUF, 2018) is a well-researched and well-presented report of research findings from a survey of 71/125 Bay Area BLOs and focus groups with 20 leaders, which served as the basis for establishing ASCEND:BLO. The theory of change that guided the initiative was informed by this report and through the process of co-creating it. It should be noted that the developmental evaluation approach, in which funders were involved in planning the assessment, conducting the research, making meaning of the findings

with ASCEND:BLO staff, and accompanying the initiative in its initial implementation (even participating in the ASCEND-BLO cross-network convenings) is itself a testament to a shared commitment to Black communities and their thriving. A diagram on page 13 of this report (delineating essential elements of a BLO capacity building model) and the list of BLOs that served as the beginning identification of the BLO peer-learning network, are reportedly invaluable contributions to the ASCEND:BLO network, and to anyone interested in similar initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> East Bay Community Foundation "ASCEND:Black-Led Organizations: Accelerating and Stabilizing Communities through Equitable Nonprofit Development, Year One Evaluation Report" (January 2019). And "Championing Black-Led Organizations: Lessons Learned from an Unapologetically Black-Centered Capacity Building Initiative, Year Two Evaluation Report" by Learning and Evaluation Team (December 2020).

# ASCEND:BLO Year-End Reports



**The Year 1 report** builds from the Walker & Associates report described above. It was codesigned with EBCF staff and informed by surveys and key informant interviews with participants in the initiative. Notably, the learning partners conducting the surveys and interviews are people of color who are values-aligned with the principles and goals of ASCEND:BLO; as such, they were able to ask questions and probe with respondents from a place of tacit knowledge and connectedness. Key findings include:

- Participants affirmed the unique, motivating, and necessary role of ASCEND:BLO's investments to: 1) build anchor BLOs for sustainability and effectiveness; 2) attend to leadership transitions of long-standing, front-line BLOs; and 3) support a broader peer-learning network of BLOs who similarly toil in disinvested communities of color.
- The collaboration among people of color, particularly Black people in every realm (i.e., funders from the funder collaborative, grantee partners in both the accelerator and stabilizer cohorts, learning organizations in the BLO network, consultants and coaches, and the learning partners) was experienced as singularly special, creating what many hoped would be a model for future investments by more funders in more locales.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations specific to funders, grantee partners, capacity-building, and network-building. These include:

- assign a skilled, knowledgeable, experienced, and Black initiative program officer as an imperative for success
- follow ASCEND:BLOs' 360-degree collaborative approach
- maintain and grow the funder collaborative as an engaged (even governing) component
- move even more in the direction of demand-driven capacity-building and coaching of grantees.

After only one year, the number of funders and the funding increased substantially—from five funders to more than ten, and from \$1M to over \$2M—and resulted in the identification of a network of over 240 BLOs in the Bay Area.



**The Year 2 report** expands upon the findings of the first-year report and importantly notes that as a demand-driven initiative, ASCEND:BLO shifted funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding need to invest in the wellness of BLO staff. The pandemic and the community uprising in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 shined a powerful light on the reinforcing impact of structural racism on Black communities and, by extension, BLOs. As a result, more funders joined the funder collaborative

and funding to support urgent investment grew to almost \$6M—temporarily. The BLO network supported by the initiative in some way grew to over 350, and participants again extolled the unique experience ASCEND:BLO provided in gathering Black leadership in convenings (even virtual ones) that provided a rare, safe space to commiserate, celebrate, and find pride and joy in the history, present-day, and future of Black authenticity and resilience.

## Additional Evaluation Reports



**Adapting in and Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic: Experiences of Black-led Organizations in the California Bay Area (2022)** documented the experience and impact of COVID-19 and the vital support provided by ASCEND:BLO. The pandemic shifted the plans of the whole world and ASCEND:BLO was no exception. The urgency to support those “closest to the pain” (as U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley (MA) has said) became the clarion call. This report, based on 102/430 surveys of initiative participants, found that:

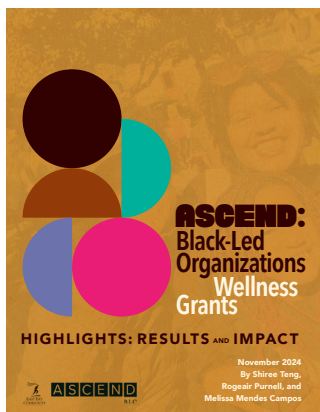
- more than 2/3 of respondents were directly impacted by the pandemic while still serving (increasingly virtually) their communities
- 40% of the increased funding received was one-time, COVID-specific support (in CA, 28 funders provided \$36.1M to 56 grantee partners)
- staff were experiencing high levels of burnout due to displacement, stress, and illness



**The Stories of Transition report** (2022) focused on the stabilizer cohort and was based on interviews with those six grantees. Because the transitions were happening in the midst of the pandemic, this cohort was slow to evolve and each case was unique. However, similar lessons emerged from the interviews:

- the funding and support provided by ASCEND:BLO was rare and invaluable
- an honest and aligned relationship between the current leader and successor is essential and is helped significantly by guided coaching and facilitation through generative conflict
- additional players must be engaged in the transition, including board, staff, and community participants
- investment in the organization’s current and future stability (including clarity of strategies and intended outcomes, resource development, operations, organizational climate, and communications) must be a part of the transition and should include a compensated exit to support the outgoing leader.

Successful transition (although not all successfully transitioned) depended on several variables, including: preparation and readiness of the outgoing leader; readiness of the organization; preparedness and orientation/mentoring of the incoming leader and their readiness to take on the mantle; and the follow-on support and attention to organizational stability provided by subsequent funding.



**The Wellness Grants report** (2024) was based on interviews with ten grantees who received one-time \$20,000 wellness grants, probing how these relatively small grants were used, how they helped the organization, and how receiving this kind of grant compared with other grant experiences. Key findings include:

- It was surprising, and rare, to receive funding with essentially “no strings attached”
- Although small, the grants provided otherwise unattended support for self-care, retreats, development of mindfulness and wellness check-in protocols, etc.
- This support gave staff the space and inspiration to carry on, even with the outside toll it takes on BLOs to care for disinvested Black communities.

# Grantee & Partner Reports

## Grantee Reports

The document review included reports obtained from the websites of two grantee partners: Hidden Genius and the African American Arts & Culture Complex (AAACC). These reports illustrate how ASCEND:BLO contributed to tremendous growth and increased clarity of purpose over the seven years of the initiative. As such, early reports are unsurprisingly broader in vision and less precise about strategies and goals, whereas later reports reveal more focus in both vision and strategies and goals.

**Hidden Genius:** In 2021, the organization reported serving a growing number of participants in key activities like completing college and financial aid applications. The report also included participant testimonies attesting to this. The next year, the organization again reported on numbers served but added the number of applications submitted and how many were successful. The 2022 report also spoke to the quality of participants' postsecondary plans, which included pursuing options other than the university pathway. In 2023-2025, Hidden Genius continued to grow, expanding to multiple locations (from one in Oakland to eight additional sites, in and outside of California), hiring graduates to become staff (with 35 alumni on staff), adding entrepreneur programming, and establishing youth centers. It also attracted individual and corporate donors like Google and Target, and garnered support from various financial institutions, foundations, and sports teams. A marker of success is that 3,500 youth have been served through over \$38M in donor investment.

**African American Arts and Culture Complex (AAACC):** The 2020-2023 report tells the story of the establishment and impact of AAACC as an anchor institution in the San Francisco community for the three years it was an ASCEND:BLO grantee. AAACC is described by artists as a "sanctuary" where Black creatives, artists, and entrepreneurs hone, celebrate, and showcase their crafts, and where these artistic manifestations are honored and championed. Over the three years, AAACC reported 75 events, with over 5,000 paying customers, involving over 475 artists. According to participants surveyed by the organization, AAACC served as a brave space and trusted funder for Black artists and creatives. Illustrative quotes include: "It means everything to people who are used to hearing no," and "Being an artist can be very lonely, and Black artists, even lonelier. You need to feel the safety of expression. To have someone believe, when you don't believe, is wonderful." The organization leveraged the funding it received from ASCEND:BLO into over \$4.4M in additional support.

Together, the grantee reports lift up the following achievements:

- Significant growth and reach, with increased capacity to serve exponentially more people (i.e., from less than 100 to hundreds or even thousands, from one site to multiple sites in California or, in one instance, nationwide)
- Significantly more investment by significantly more investors (i.e., ten-fold or greater budget increases, and tripling or more the number of investors and the levels of their investments)
- Testimonials and quotes from recipients of services and support that speak to the singular impact program participation and network connections had on their lives, for example:
  - » students completing college, starting businesses, and becoming mentors and/or staff to future service recipients
  - » becoming a model leader in a community of peers based on the example set by ASCEND:BLO staff
  - » increasing capacity to fundraise and build a cadre of next generation leadership.

## Partner Reports

**Blooming Willow:** This report describes the Conductors Community Coaching Certification Program, in which ASCEND:BLO grantee partners participated in 2020-2021. Participants identified several new or strengthened skills obtained from the coaching and consulting they received, including:

- improved goal setting, aligned with purpose
- identification of coach's stand (individual coaching style)
- better self-management in challenging times
- improved engagement with community
- being able to share coaching with a broader community
- understanding coaching's important function of inviting curiosity
- asking empowering questions
- listening better while having difficult conversations.

The icing on the cake for participants was to become a part of a go-to community of co-learners that provided a space of support, healing, and accountability.

# Appendix B: Interview Questions & Highlights

## Interview Questions:

- 1.** As a foundation, EBCF started this initiative by having to make the case for an “unapologetic focus” on Black organizations. In your experience and observations over the last seven years of the investments, how has that case been lifted further if at all for you? What’s unique, if anything, about ASCEND:BLO, and its support to grantees?
- 2.** The ASCEND:BLO set of values is special, and unapologetically Black:
  - Black Unity is the process and goal
  - BLOs are stalwart supporters of Black communities
  - Commitment to each other with accountability
  - Commitment to learning and sharing learning
  - Collective responsibility
  - Commitment to community change
  - Black power felt especially in Black communities
- 3.** During this time of federally led backlash and outright elimination of focused supports (public and private) to BLOs, how do you believe ASCEND:BLO and BLOs in general has/can navigated this huge challenge?
- 4.** What are you most happy about / proud of relative to your experience with ASCEND:BLO? What is your biggest concern / fear?
- 5.** What, in your opinion, is the biggest impact (biggest difference) that ASCEND:BLO has made/makes, for your organization, for BLOs, for Black communities, and/or the field?
- 6.** What are plans for 2026? What do you need most to accomplish them?
- 7.** What are any closing comments you have for ASCEND:BLO as it considers next steps, AND what might be comments you have for funders considering a similar initiative?

# Appendix C: Theory of Change

ASCEND:BLO's Theory of Change/Action is a dynamic framework that has adapted and evolved over the course of the initiative. The snapshot below reflects the initial Theory of Change, followed on the next page by a revised Theory of Action based on new learnings.

## THEORY OF CHANGE FOR A JUST EAST BAY (2018)

### STRATEGIES

#### Grantmaking

Provide strategic & responsive grants that have an interdependent approach to building power that connects populations, issues and strategies  
Use community organizing as a primary strategy

#### Fundraising & Donor Alignment

Influence donors/DAFs & other philanthropic partners with our grantmaking to expand our full pool of resources

#### Capacity Building

Provide intentional &/or sustained efforts that help leaders, organizations, and movements committed to social justice to realize their full potential

#### Advocacy, Policy & Narrative Change

Resource & amplify campaigns, change narrative thru messaging, OpEds using EBCF's voice  
Conduct and support mission-aligned lobbying

#### Network Building & Connections

Weave & strengthen public + private sector partners across the ecosystem: community, business, government & philanthropy

### SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES 1-5 YEARS

**For boys and girls of color, immigrants, low-income, undocumented, system-impacted youth, LGBTQIA, formerly incarcerated folks**

Grantee partners & EBCF together achieve a minimum of 40 concrete policies resulting from organizing and policy campaigns across the two counties

\$250M in public resources, newly generated or re-allocated aligned to support our priority populations and issues

\$1.5M in donor resources, newly generated or re-allocated aligned to support our recommended groups in our priority strategies (2:1 anchor leverage)

The language of racial equity is more the norm. Perspectives on our priority populations shift from deficits to assets. Oppressed communities see themselves differently as positive change makers

Nonprofit infrastructure in historically under-resourced areas are stronger: southern Alameda, central and east Contra Costa & other potential areas—increased resources, stronger leadership bench, more efficient & effective mission work

### INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES 6-10+ YEARS

Equity gaps decrease: Concrete policies & resources result from organizing & policy campaigns

More tangible people power: Community organizing result in stronger individual and collective power: leadership, skills, civic engagement, agency, voice

More collaborative funding with a regional mindset with more donors in alignment

Community groups are more resilient, able to adapt to changing environments & responsive to community context

Social narratives promote community strengths, hope & opportunity; challenge & denounce white supremacy & promote racial equity; elevate values & roles nonprofits add and play

Art & culture

EBCF's investments are aligned with our stated values

### LONG-TERM TRANSFORMATIVE OUTCOMES 25+ YEARS

**People who call the East Bay home and who are historically excluded are organized, control resources, set the agenda and shape narratives about themselves and their beloved communities**

**Health, opportunities and life outcomes are not pre-determined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or zip code**

**EBCF is seen and experienced as the catalytic "Go-To" place that connects donors/funders and community organizations, government and business to bring about systemic change for equity and social justice**

# THEORY OF ACTION (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 D: BLOs

Honoring all BLOs that participated in this effort:

## **ACCELERATOR INAUGURAL COHORT**

African American Art and Culture Complex  
Black Organizing Project  
Community Housing Development Corporation  
The Hidden Genius Project  
Roots Community Health Center

## **STABILIZER INAUGURAL COHORT**

ABEN  
APEB  
Cypress Mandela Training Center  
EOYDC  
Hannah Project  
Safe Return Project

## **WELLNESS GRANTEES**

African American Community Services Agency  
Black Teacher Project  
Community Works West  
Essie Justice Group  
FIERCE Advocates  
Healthy Black Families  
Healthy Hearts  
Inner City Bliss  
MISSEY  
Parent Voices Oakland  
People's Program Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY)  
The BIZ Stoop  
Urban Strategies Council  
The Oakland REACH  
The Mentoring Center  
The Teaching Well

The Village Method  
Transgender Gender-Variant & Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP)  
3rd Street Youth Center & Clinic  
Village Connect

### **CORE CAPACITY BUILDING TEAM**

Be the Change Consulting  
Blooming Willow Coaching  
Jeweld Legacy  
MMAPEU Consulting  
Saad&Shaw

### **FUNDERS' COLLABORATIVE MEMBERS**

Alameda County Board of Supervisors 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



# Acknowledgements

Appreciation to all of the interviewees, listed below. Special appreciation to Zakiyyah Brewer for all of the planning conversation and support for the development of this report. And much gratitude to Jeannine Walker, Shiree Teng, and Rogear Purnell for providing excellent documentation for me to build from.

## **Interviewees**

Brandon Nicholson, Hidden Genius Project

Melanie & Melorra Green, African American Arts Culture Complex

Selena Wilson, East Oakland Youth Development Center

Leslie Avant-Brown, Blooming Willow Coaching

Jeannine Walker, Walker & Associates LLC

Byron Johnson, consultant

Quinton Sankofa, Bese Saka

Zakiyyah Brewer, East Bay Community Foundation

Julius Crowe Hampton, East Bay Community Foundation

Shiree Teng, Teng & Smith

Rogear Purnell, consultant

Thank you all for the important and transformative work you do and the way in which you do it.

Gratitude and liberating love go to James Head, Byron Johnson, as founding staff leadership of ASCEND:BLO, and Zakiyyah Brewer and Julius Hampton for bringing this work to the homestretch.

Authors of this Look Back Report are Audrey Jordan, PhD, Co-Author; Melissa Mendes Campos, Editor and Research; Shiree Teng, Co-Author. For the last seven years, Shiree Teng and Rogear Purnell have served as the ASCEND:BLO evaluation consulting team.