

# Special \$50,000 Grants Support Two Community-Based Social Innovation Projects

In December 2020, the Community Foundation hosted a webinar featuring Florida voting rights activist Desmond Meade.

He shared the many roadblocks in his life journey, which included spending time in prison, getting a law degree, and then being unable to vote or practice law. Turning that around took a coordinated and persistent grassroots effort, led by Meade, that resulted in former inmates being able to once again cast their votes in elections.

But something he said stuck with the Foundation staff: In order to make meaningful change, Meade said the Foundation and other funders need to connect with people in the community *closest to the pain* and give them the money and trust that they know what to do with it.

“In response to that challenge, we have been taking time to listen and learn from those in our community who have creative ideas of how to begin to solve issues that affect them and their neighbors,” says Maya Crane, program officer for equity.

The Community Foundation decided to offer a special \$100,000 grant opportunity for a social innovation project that would make positive and meaningful change in creative and nontraditional ways. The goal was to elicit a variety of proposals that would bring residents and communities together to solve issues that address academic achievement, racial equity, or poverty – all priorities of the Community Foundation. Projects could be new or expansions of already-successful programs, and collaboration with other groups was essential.

“Social innovations are focused on tackling community needs in ways that veer from typical, existing solutions, many of which were born out of systemic injustice. We wanted to invest in out-of-the-box thinking by nonprofits to solve problems they see every day in their work,” says Crane.

This highly competitive grant opportunity drew 25 applications from nonprofits and community groups led by Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Collectively, these proposals requested \$2.8 million.

All of the applications were reviewed by a panel of BIPOC community members from a variety of organizations and businesses. The six proposals that received the top scores were discussed by the entire panel and then ranked based on how well they met the funding requirements and the potential for impact. In the end, two projects were chosen to split the available funding from the Foundation’s Racial Equity Growth Fund.

The \$100,000 was split, giving \$50,000 each to two BIPOC-led nonprofits organizations – the **Father Laurence Tracy Advocacy Center** for its Outreach Zone Program in Northeast Rochester and **Hope Initiatives CDC, Inc.** for its HOPE Works project.

Coincidentally, both of the projects focus on proactively bringing services to those who need them rather than simply referring folks to services elsewhere – and hoping they follow through.

The Father Tracy Advocacy Center plans to expand its on-the-street outreach efforts in the North Clinton Avenue neighborhood where it is located. This means finding and directly connecting residents in need of mental health, substance abuse, and general health services, as well as food, clothing, and access to educational, cultural, and work training opportunities right where they live. This is accomplished through a collaboration with several partners

already serving this area. Plans include:

- Creating more access to tele-health and tele-mental health services;
- Opening a community food pantry;
- Establishing a community learning center for an arts and culturally based education program for children in first to third grades, youth programs and activities, as well as programs for families, teachers in training, and current educators;
- Expanding on an existing work training program with the City of Rochester that will provide daily stipends as individuals learn about employment expectations and gain experience working on beautification projects at the International Plaza and Don Samuel Torres Park.



The Father Tracy Advocacy Center on N. Clinton Ave.

“There are a lot of intangible results that will come out of supporting this,” says Orlando Ortiz, a member of the community review panel who is a manufacturing manager at The

Gleason Works and president of the Puerto Rican Festival.

“We are grateful for Rochester Area Community Foundation’s reinvestment in neighborhoods. We look forward to using these funds to improve the quality of life for the residents of the La Avenida community,” says Rudy Rivera, CEO of the center named for a beloved Catholic priest who served the Latino community in the neighborhood for several decades.

With its grant, Hope Initiatives will enhance its Job Readiness and Retention program to proactively help men and women returning to the community after time in jail. Those who have experienced chronic unemployment or who want to improve their employability also can participate in the program, which will include support and intervention for up to 24 months after being placed in a job.

“I know that in the Black and Brown communities it’s tough sometimes for recent inmates to find housing, jobs, and the right skillsets to be productive. I think it is really important that within the first 30 to 60 days they have the right resources so they don’t end up going back to jail or prison because of the struggles to figure out life as we know it,” said Tashanda Thomas, a member of the community review panel and chief human resources officer at WXXI.

Two of the community reviewers mentioned having family members who had a tough time acclimating to community life after time in jail.

Local law enforcement agencies will help identify individuals deemed low or medium risks and scheduled to leave jail. Once trained, HOPE Works case managers will work with the individuals for 30 to 90 days before their release to assess their interests and readiness, help complete an application for public benefits, secure identification, locate available housing, healthcare and food – whatever is needed to set them up for a successful reentry to the community.

Once out of jail, the case managers will meet with them to help with ongoing needs and begin the process of preparing for employment. They will connect the individuals with hands-on learning opportunities, training on changing behaviors and behavior patterns, and internships, with the goal of obtaining a job and a sustainable career within six to 18 months with selected employer partners.



V. Dale Sedgwick

“Through the years, Hope Initiatives has seen firsthand the life-changing impact that honest work can have,” says CEO V. Dale Sedgwick. “This is such an opportunity to create positive and lasting change in our community by creating positive and lasting change in the lives of citizens who are often overlooked or simply written off.”