



GRANTMAKERS —
FOR SOUTHERN
— PROGRESS

as the south grows

BEARING FRUIT

BY RYAN SCHLEGEL AND STEPHANIE PENG



Photo courtesy of Southerners On New Ground.

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AS THE SOUTH GROWS

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ABOUT NCRP

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy is a 40-year-old organization that envisions a fair, just and democratic society in which the common good is recognized as a high priority; where a robust public sector is empowered to protect, preserve and extend the commonly held resources and the public interest; where a vital nonprofit sector provides voice and value to those most in need; and where all people enjoy equality of opportunity, access and fair treatment without discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, economic status, national origin or other identities.

NCRP envisions philanthropy at its best contributing to this vision of society by operating with the highest standards of integrity and openness, and by investing in people and communities with the least wealth and opportunity and nonprofit organizations that serve and represent them.

ABOUT GSP

Grantmakers for Southern Progress (GSP) is a network of southern and national funders who are committed to fostering thriving communities in the American South, characterized in part by racial and gender equity. We envision a region and a country that is just and caring, where all people truly have the power to live healthy, prosperous and whole lives, free of fear and marginalization. To accomplish this vision, GSP serves as a philanthropic solutions hub that builds relationships, and aligns and leverages resources and learning in support of structural change efforts led by local, state and national partners that address the drivers on inequity, poverty and human suffering. We believe that learning from and investing in the social and economic justice infrastructure in the South will produce tangible positive outcomes for those who are least well off socially, economically and politically in the South, but will also produce lessons that will benefit the entire U.S., as we collectively push for a more inclusive, equitable and safe country. For as the south goes, so goes the nation...

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METRO ATLANTA INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Eugene Allen
Be Present

Lillie Allen
Be Present

Doug Ammar
Georgia Justice Project

Xochitl Bervera
Racial Justice Action Center

Joe Burris
Marguerite Casey Foundation

Taiifa Butler
Georgia Budget and Policy Institute

Cindia Cameron
9to5 Georgia

Stephanie Cho
Asians Americans Advancing Justice

Erica Clemmons
9to5 Georgia

Preye Cobham
Women Watch Afrika

Dazon Dixon Diallo
SisterLove

Lesley Grady
Community Foundation for a Greater Atlanta

Jerry Gonzalez
Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials

Russ Hardin
Robert W. Woodruff Foundation

Lindsay Harper
Georgia WAND

Paulina Helm-Hernandez
Foundation for a Just Society

Mary Hooks
Southerners On New Ground

Angela James
Atlantans Building Leadership for Empowerment

Glory Kilanko
Women Watch Afrika

Kate Little
Georgia Advancing Communities Together

Adelina Nicholls
Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights

Yomi Noibi
Eco-Action

Jennifer Owens
Georgia Budget and Policy Institute

Emily Pelton
Voices for Georgia's Children

Becky Rafter
Georgia WAND

Shannan Reau
Atlanta Jobs with Justice

Laverne Robinson
Be Present

Deborah Scott
Georgia STAND-UP

Nathaniel Smith
Partnership for Southern Equity

Tené Traylor
The Kendeda Fund

Patsy White
Georgia Appleseed

Tamiaka White
Southern Partners Fund

Janelle Williams
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Cindy Zeldin
Georgians for a Healthy Future

AS THE SOUTH GROWS

It seems that all roads in the South lead to Atlanta. Constructed as a railroad hub connecting the Midwest to the Southeast, Atlanta was destined to become an economic powerhouse of the region. Railroads brought industry. Businesses and universities concentrated in Atlanta, laying the foundation for the city to become a political force as well as an economic one. Today, the busiest airport in the world is in Metro Atlanta, and the city has one of the fastest-growing economies in the country. However, Atlanta's growth and its forward-looking political climate have left many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, behind.

While Atlanta is a city of transition and growth, it is also a city of contradictions. Business and civic leaders have thrived, taking advantage of Atlanta's welcoming and progressive reputation and self-branding as the "city too busy to hate."

Meanwhile, communities experiencing generations of disinvestment and disenfranchisement have not been able to partake in the fruit of that prosperity. As economic opportunities expand for people attracted to Atlanta's growing cosmopolitanism, disenfranchised neighborhoods find it increasingly difficult to access those opportunities. Beyond the memorials celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work, the progressive prosperous future that Dr. King and other civil rights leaders fought for has not come to fruition for all.

Like the civil rights activists before them, Southern leaders are building an intersectional, grassroots and often countercultural movement ecosystem. Communities are collaborating across race, gender and generational lines to develop dynamic and innovative strategies to fight for a future where they, too, can experience the safety and prosperity Atlanta promises.

Yet, philanthropy has missed a crucial opportunity to support the people and communities trying to fulfill

the hope of prosperity and inclusiveness that Atlanta has portrayed to the rest of the world. Atlanta is home to the largest charitable sector in the South, but most philanthropic resources deployed in the city have gone to provide direct services rather than to build power and change systems. And, as movements keep growing in power and size, they will need the support to expand their work beyond Atlanta to ensure that their freedom and safety exists at the state level.

In some ways, the grassroots power-building ecosystem in Atlanta may resemble those like it in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere. But Atlanta's historic and political context make the accomplishments of these leaders unique – and merit study by any foundation interested in structural change grantmaking.

Atlanta's civic and business leaders have worked for more than a generation to project an image of a thriving, welcoming city in a region where reactive politics and entrenched poverty are widespread and that strategy has borne fruit. But for whom? How can communities protect, defend and break down barriers to their success? How can these communities build power and resources to expand their work out of Atlanta to make statewide changes? These are the questions that

executive summary

leaders in Atlanta are trying to answer and questions that others, in the South and nationwide, will be watching closely.

THE BOTTOM LINE

“They don’t see a place for themselves in this city,” one interviewee said of multi-generational Atlantans faced by a rising tide of gentrification and criminalization. Atlanta’s explosive growth has kicked off a process of cascading displacement of low- and moderate-income communities. Its roaring commercial sector has turned a blind eye to state crackdowns on immigrant communities, Black communities and LGBTQ communities while it touts a reputation as a city that defies the South’s reputation for regressive politics.

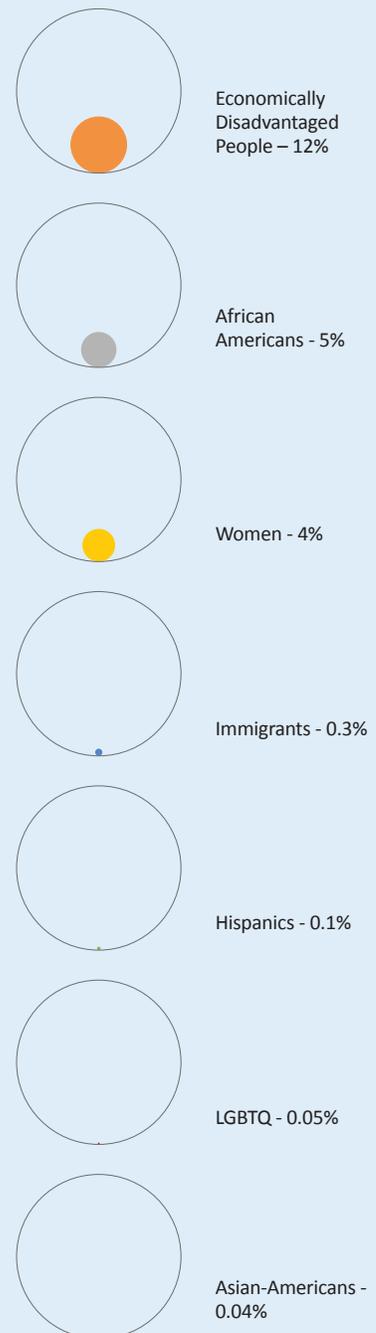
Atlanta’s transition along with that taking place in cities across the South poses a few thorny questions: Who gets to take up space in Atlanta? Who gets a place – at the decision-making table, on a sidewalk, in a home of their own? How can the economy of space in booming Southern cities be made more just?

The South encounters these challenges around spatial economy, displacement and criminalization at a time when they are beginning to become more prominent challenges for the nation. In many ways, Atlanta’s physical and political environment will be the harbinger of things to come for other Southern communities, and then for the nation beyond the South.

In order for Atlanta to “be what it says it is,” as another interviewee put it, grassroots coalitions that build the leadership and voice of marginalized communities need resources quickly. Intermediaries will be part of the resource mechanism for those coalitions, but ultimately foundations within Metro Atlanta and beyond must be willing to commit long-term funding for the messy, forward-and-back work of community organizing.

Metro Atlanta and other cities like it across the South are home to deeply intersectional grassroots power – building movements that have racked up significant policy change achievements by articulating a uniquely Southern vision for what it means to be a “sanctuary.” As another interview respondent put it, “we’re not just trying to win stuff for LGBTQ people.

Metro Atlanta Grantmaking by Population, 2010-2014



We want to win stuff for our aunts and our cousins and our neighbors.”

The successes of Georgia Not One More and Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative have come despite the historic dearth of foundation grantmaking for structural change work in Atlanta and in the region. But foundations can no longer use the “make-do” attitude of Southern organizers – and the success that comes with it – as justification for this continued lack of investment.

Because building the power of marginalized Southern communities within nominally progressive (or at least liberal) cities will never be enough to affect the regional, structural change necessary to liberate the South and in doing so liberate the nation. Foundation grantmaking to build the statewide and regional reach of grassroots nonprofits will be crucial to that liberation.

Southern cities are indeed learning labs for philanthropy and the nonprofits they fund to learn how to act courageously in what can be a hostile environment. As Southern cities attract new residents, sprawl into once-rural areas and begin exploring new definitions of what it means to be welcoming, forward-looking places, they will produce important lessons for cities across the country who have experienced decades of disinvestment and displacement.

Atlanta’s identity as “the city too busy to hate” and the “Black Mecca” are mutually reinforcing articulations of the same self-image. The Atlanta Way has been a robust center of political and economic power in the region for decades and an enthusiastic booster for that self-image. But why should progress in Metro Atlanta require the displacement and criminalization of Black, Brown and queer Southerners?

The Atlanta Way and the complicated, “glossy” image it projects is not isolated to Atlanta. Southern powerbrokers across the region in the civic, business and political spaces have found ways to market the South’s cultural and human resources to sources of capital outside the South for a long time.

And that marketing push has obscured the reality of a persistent racial wealth gap; rampant criminalization of Black, Brown and queer communities; and suppression

of grassroots political power. In the context of structural change work, these marketing ploys focus Southern communal life on individual behavior instead of assigning responsibility for inequity where it often belongs – on decisions being made at the institutional level.

Any funder interested in building the wealth, power and resilience of Southern communities must invest deeply in the region’s cities and metropolitan areas. But they ought to approach the rhetoric of civic leadership with healthy criticism, and ask themselves and trusted community leaders: Who is left out of that narrative? Who benefits from that elision?

The opportunities for foundation investment in Atlanta and other Southern cities are exciting, and with patience, trust and deep relationships with grassroots partners, they have the potential to bear fruit for the broader region.

GETTING STARTED

Are you ready to get started investing in Southern grassroots leadership? Here are a few recommendations to guide the way:

- **Don’t accept that a highly productive economy and robust social service sector are enough for people to have what they need to thrive.** Make sure data that inform your priorities and strategies are disaggregated by race, gender, income, sexual identity, etc.
- **Recognize how much work it takes to organize marginalized communities** against Atlanta’s and other Southern cities’ dominant political culture and invest in the evolution of policy and culture in a way that is defined by people who don’t see themselves in the glossy marketing materials for a bustling city.
- **Be prepared to make long-term investments in grassroots organizations** to build their base and build formal and informal relationships with allies – that means patient, risk-tolerant capital – and coalition on your grantees’ terms, not yours.
- **Give general support grants to your Southern grantees** – invest in infrastructure organizations to exist, not just to complete projects.
- **Understand who your philanthropic partners are** and who they aren’t, wrestling with history, context, power and priorities.

INTRODUCTION

It seems that all roads in the South lead to Atlanta. Constructed as a railroad hub connecting the Midwest to the Southeast, Atlanta was destined to become an economic powerhouse of the region. Railroads brought industry. Businesses and universities concentrated in Atlanta, laying the foundation for the city to become an economic and political force.

Today, the busiest airport in the world is in Metro Atlanta, and the region has one of the fastest-growing economies in the country. However, Metro Atlanta's growth and its forward-looking political climate have left many communities, especially low-income communities and communities of color, behind.

The Atlanta metro area is a region of transition and growth. But it is also a region of contradictions. Business and civic leaders have thrived, taking advantage of Atlanta's welcoming and progressive reputation and self-branding as the "city too busy to hate." Meanwhile, communities experiencing generations of disinvestment and disenfranchisement have not been able to partake in the fruit of that prosperity.

As economic opportunities expand for people attracted to Atlanta's growing cosmopolitanism, disenfranchised neighborhoods find it increasingly difficult to access those opportunities. Beyond the memorials celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s work, the progressive prosperous future that Dr. King and other civil rights leaders fought for has not come to fruition for all.

Like the civil rights activists before them, Southern leaders are building an intersectional, grassroots and often countercultural movement ecosystem. Communities are collaborating across race, gender and generational lines to develop dynamic and innovative strategies to fight for a future where they, too, can experience the safety and prosperity Atlanta promises.

Yet, philanthropy has missed a crucial opportunity to support the people and communities trying to fulfill the hope of prosperity and inclusiveness that Atlanta has portrayed to the rest of the world. And, as the movements keep growing in power and size, they will need the support to expand their work beyond Metro Atlanta to ensure that their freedom and safety exists at the state level. In



Photo courtesy of Southerners On New Ground.

some ways, the grassroots power-building ecosystem may resemble those like it in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere. But Atlanta's historic and political context make the accomplishments of these leaders unique – and merit study by any foundation interested in structural change grantmaking.

In the *As the South Grows* series, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) and its partner, Grantmakers for Southern Progress (GSP), have explored the challenges and opportunities for progressive change work in the South. Southern communities have been working to dismantle racial, ethnic and socioeconomic barriers with little resources and support from philanthropy.

In *On Fertile Soil*, we explored how funders can identify and work with leaders in the South, while featuring inspiring stories from the Black Belt of Alabama and the Mississippi Delta. From there, we explored the connections between protecting community assets and systems change work, with the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Appalachian Kentucky serving as the backdrop, in *Strong Roots*.

Then, in our third installment, *Weathering the Storm*, and, in the wake of three devastating hurricanes affecting the South, we went to the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Eastern North Carolina to talk about the importance of supporting community organizing and sustaining organizations in the battle for climate justice and resilience.

Now, we will explore how Southern cities like Metro Atlanta present opportunities to learn how to confront and break down structural barriers that will have reverberating effects on the rest of the country.

Atlanta's civic and business leaders have worked for more than a generation to project an image of a thriving, welcoming city in a region where reactive politics and entrenched poverty are widespread and that strategy has borne fruit. But for whom? How can communities protect, defend and break down barriers to their success? How can these communities build power and resources to expand their work out of Metro Atlanta to make statewide changes? These are the questions that leaders in Atlanta are trying to answer and questions that others, in the South and nationwide, will be watching closely.

Despite Atlanta's legacy of civil rights activism and the growing challenges to civil rights today, philanthropy has not helped to ensure that organizations and networks have the resources they need to thrive. Atlanta is home to the largest charitable sector in the South, but most philanthropic resources deployed in the city have gone to provide direct services rather than to build power and change systems.

From 2010 to 2014, the Atlanta metro region saw \$453 in foundation funding per person, on par with the \$451 per capita foundation funding for the United States and exceeding the \$349 funding rate for Georgia. However, a closer look at the data reveals that only 2 percent of all foundation funding in Atlanta went to power-building strategies in those five years. And in a city where people of color are a majority and entrenched poverty remains a challenge, just 20 percent of funding benefitting Atlanta was for underserved populations.

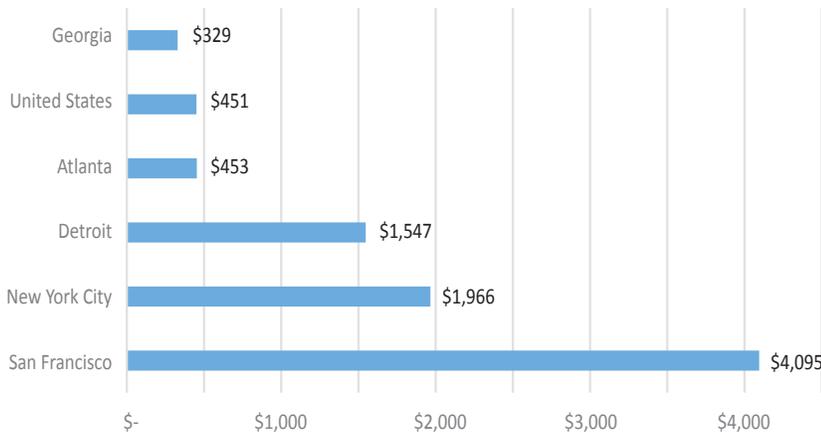
CONTEXT

Atlanta is not just a city – it is a sprawling region that is rapidly expanding as newcomers arrive, attracted to Atlanta's businesses, universities and growing metropolitan resources. Among those many newcomers is a booming immigrant population, fueling the growth of already established communities of Hispanic and Asian Americans.

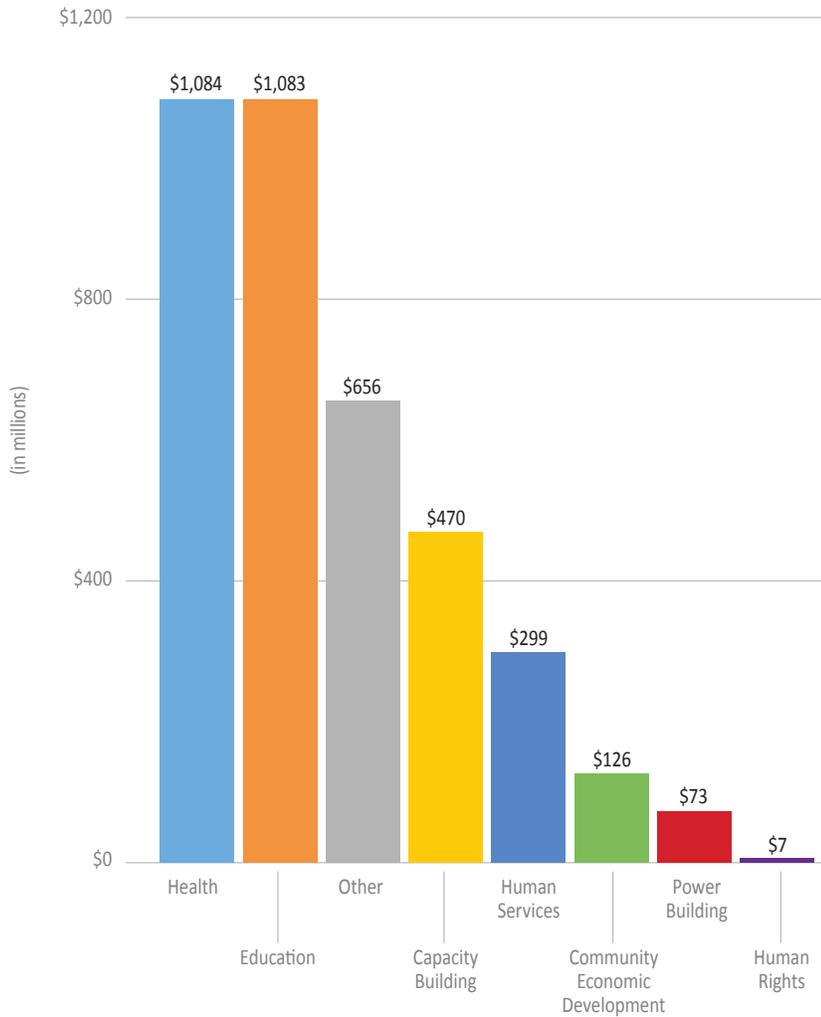
Increasingly, Atlantans – both newcomers and long-standing residents – are struggling to find affordable places to live. A Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta study found that, between 2010 and 2014, the city lost 5,300 units of affordable housing while it gained close to 25,000 “luxury apartment” units. During the same four-year period, the share of Atlantans earning less than \$35,000 per year who spent more than 30 percent of their incomes on rent (commonly referred to as being “housing insecure”) rose from 80 to 84 percent.

And, Atlanta's welcoming reputation aside, Georgia state politics are still dominated by those who see these new arrivals as a threat. In the last decade, state and federal policies have targeted immigrants in Atlanta. Undocumented immigrants have been hit the hardest, and deportations are a constant threat.

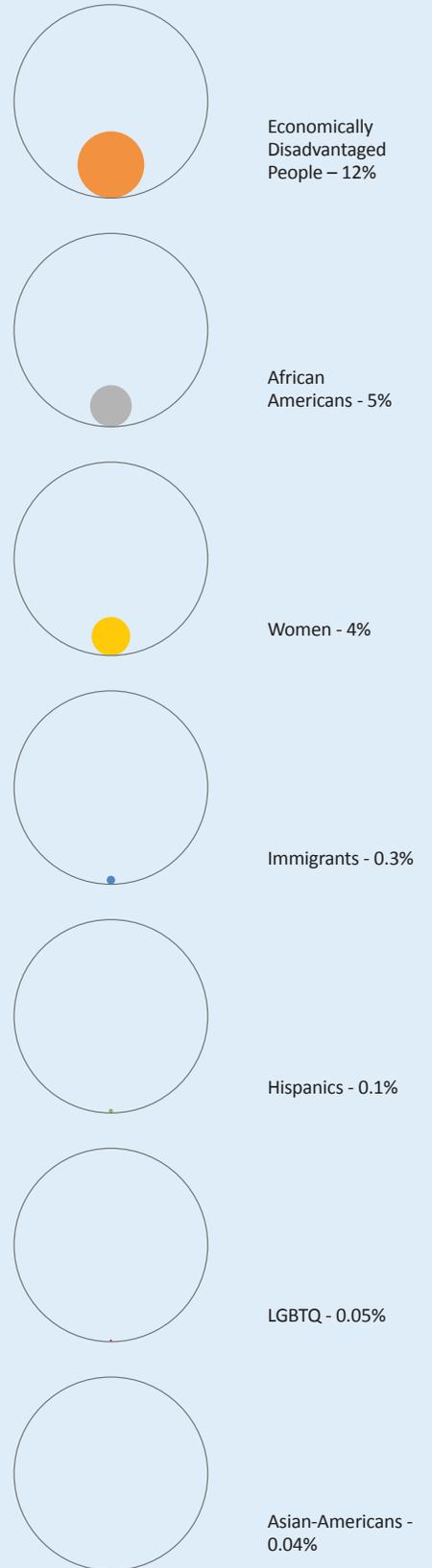
Per Capita Grantmaking, 2010-2014



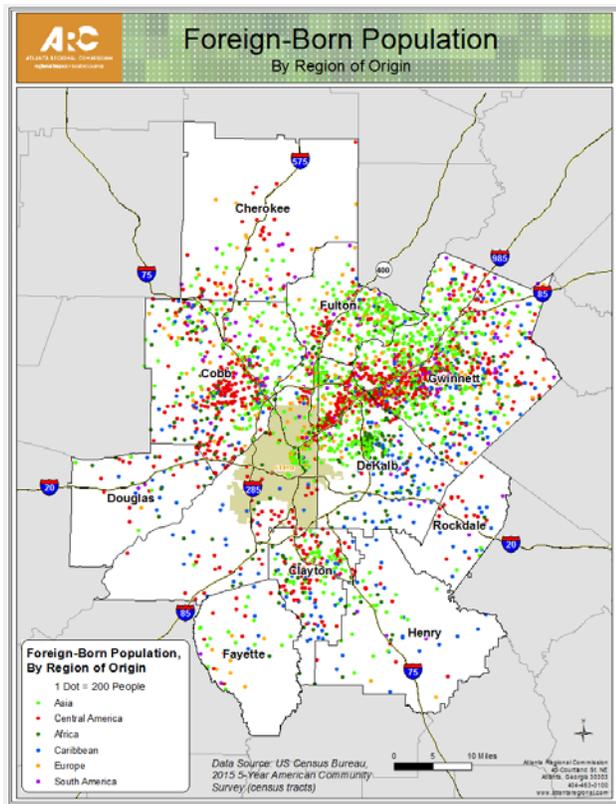
Atlanta Grantmaking by Strategy, 2010-2014



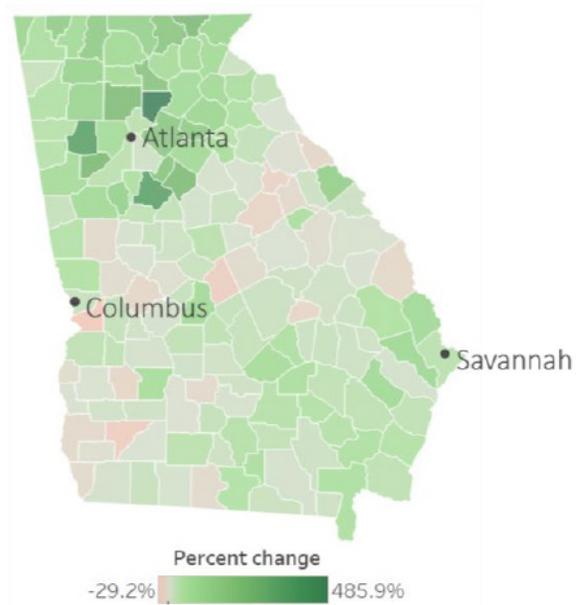
Metro Atlanta Grantmaking by Population, 2010-2014



Source: NCRP analysis of Foundation Center data.



Percent Change in People of Color Population by County, 2000-2015



Source: Institute for Southern Studies research brief.

One such law disproportionately affecting immigrants is SB 350, which increased penalties for driving without a license and made driving without a license a felony after the fourth arrest. The bill required law enforcement to determine the nationality of the convicted individual. Then, in 2011, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act (HB 87) allowed law enforcement to check an individual’s immigration or citizenship status, even for minor infractions such as traffic violations. Individuals who could not prove their status were detained,

where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents could then start the deportation process.

In 2017, many of the guidelines determining who ICE agents could arrest and deport were lifted. As a result, immigration arrests have risen by more than 40 percent nationwide. In the Atlanta ICE office alone, ICE agents made 80 percent more arrests in the first half of 2017 than in the first half of 2016. It’s the largest increase of any field office in the country.

2%

of funding went to power-building strategies

20%

of funding went to underserved communities



VOICES FROM METRO ATLANTA



Photos courtesy of Southerners On New Ground.

MARY HOOKS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Southerners On New Ground



On the surface, Atlanta looks like it lives up to its “too busy to hate” slogan, with a successful African American political and business elite, a pride in its civil rights legacy, and a city welcoming of immigrants and LGBTQ people alike. But among the skyscrapers, new restaurants and developments filled with wealthy transplants are communities struggling to beat back a rising tide of gentrification, displacement and police violence.

From their home base in Atlanta, Southerners On New Ground (SONG) works for a South that is free from fear – for a region where people of color, immigrant, LGBTQ, working class and differently abled Southerners can live with dignity. SONG Executive Director Mary Hooks understands that won’t happen just with policy wins; they will have to change hearts and minds. That starts with acknowledging the contradictions inherent in Atlanta’s self-image, Hooks explained.

“SONG really wants to see a shift in leadership and a shift in the culture, hearts and minds here in Atlanta,” Hooks said. “It’s still a very conservative place in a lot of ways. Progressive in a lot of ways, but very, very conservative in many others. Most of the city leadership, especially in the City Council, has been on there for 20-plus years. A lot of them are the sons and the cousins of folks like Dr. King and Ivory Young, yet they are on the city council making decisions to put people in cages. So those are hard

contradictions, and it’s critical that we intervene around those contradictions.”

The key to SONG’s work is connecting LGBTQ leaders across the South and building their leadership to fight oppression. “The first 10 years of our work were building our kinship network, connecting LGBTQ people across the South,” Hooks explained. “We realized we needed to know where our people are, because isolation is what really kills [LGBTQ people].”

Hooks continued: “SONG has invested deeply in leadership development around campaign organizing. We spent a few years in a democratic process that made sure our members were ready to engage in that type of work.”

“We’re probably one of the more well funded LGBTQ organizations in the South, but we still don’t have capacity to build statewide power.”

Since its founding, SONG has cultivated this kind of powerful queer kinship leadership network in Durham, Richmond, Atlanta and several other cities across the region.

SONG’s key targets have been state interference – often in the form of violence – in the lives of marginalized people: racial profiling, police violence, criminalization of communities of color and LGBTQ people, onerous court fines and fees, and the disparate impacts of cash bail. SONG and its allies recognize that LGBTQ people and people of color are often targeted first in any reactive backlash to significant changes like those happening in the Atlanta region, so they work in coalition with their allies at

the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) and other organizations.

“SONG was founded on intersectional organizing principles,” Hooks explained. “For us that means being able to take on campaign fights that are led by LGBTQ people but have direct engagement and involvement with people from across communities of all different sexual and gender identities. Because we’re not just trying to win stuff for LGBTQ people. We want to win stuff for our aunts and our cousins and our neighbors.”

One example is SONG’s work at the intersection of justice and immigration, or “crimigration,” as Hooks called it. They are coalition partners in the Georgia Not One More Coalition, along with their co-anchors at Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR). The Not One More Coalition is a national effort led by the National Day Laborers Organizing Network to stop deportations of undocumented immigrants nationwide.

“SONG came into the national Not One More campaign to bring in the LGBTQ flank,” Hooks said. “Our role was to organize other LGBTQ organizations to see this as a critical issue to be fighting for. Since 2013, we’ve been able to bring over 20 other LGBTQ organizations into that work to advance immigrant rights.”

The Not One More Coalition work in Georgia is part of SONG’s push for an expansive interpretation of sanctuary city status in Atlanta and the broader region.

“We want Atlanta to declare itself a sanctuary city not just in words, but in deeds,” explained Hooks. For SONG and their allies – including Project South, Jobs for Justice Atlanta, GLAHR and others – that means not just safety from deportation but safety from police violence, safe and affordable places to live, safety in the workplace, justice in the court system and beyond.

“When SONG joined the coalition, we were clear that we wanted to broaden our understanding of what sanctuary actually is,” Hooks explained. “Understanding that it has historical roots in the sanctuary movement of the 1970s.”

She continued: “We knew Black and Brown people were going to be attacked under the new [federal] administration, so we can’t just make Atlanta a welcoming city for immigrants and refuse to demilitarize the police, for example. We needed real action to expand sanctuary so that all people – Black, Brown, queer, trans – all of us would be safe.”

Atlanta is often described as being the “Capital of the South,” and the region’s largest city sets an example that other parts of the South are often eager to follow, Hooks said. However, changing hearts and minds in Atlanta – even changing policy – isn’t enough in the long run to ensure marginalized communities in the South are free from fear.

“When Atlanta shifts, it does create a shift in other parts of the South, but Atlanta doesn’t have the political power on its own to be able to shift the state,” Hooks said.

Across the South (and, in fact, across the country) states have taken extraordinary measures in the last five years to restrict the policymaking power of municipalities and counties, including especially what has come to be called “preemption.”

The most well-known example has been the fight in North Carolina to preempt cities like Charlotte and Durham from passing anti-discrimination legislation to protect the civil rights of LGBTQ people.

Southern cities can lead the region by articulating a moral vision – and often a policy platform – that protects working people, communities of color and LGBTQ people from harassment and deprivation. But, building statewide power among marginalized people is the only sustainable path forward in an era when state governments preempt any progressive policy win, Hooks said. And that will only be possible with more resources.

“We’re probably one of the more well-funded LGBTQ organizations in the South, but we still don’t have capacity to build statewide power,” she said.

SONG, GLAHR and other powerhouse community organizations in Greater Atlanta have changed hearts and minds and galvanized successful policy campaigns at the city and county level, but they need more resources to build them across states and the broader region.

“One of the things that we’re grappling with is how to build to scale. How can we get more money to do what we need to do? How do we get other groups more money to do what they need to do? And what’s our role in supporting those groups to do that?” Hooks asked. “That’s always been one of SONG’s priorities when it comes to funding: It’s not just SONG. There are several organizations doing really good work, and if they were able to be brought to scale it could have some major impact.”



ADELINA NICHOLLS

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights

One such organization is the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), led by its co-founding executive director, Adelina Nicholls. GLAHR is also Project South and SONG’s co-anchor of the Georgia Not One More coalition.

In the wake of anti-immigrant legislation in Georgia, GLAHR has mobilized its constituents and allies in the Georgia Not One More coalition. The main goal has been to stop local law enforcement collaboration with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), who rely on local police to enforce federal immigration law, effectively turning a traffic stop into an opportunity to deport a community member. In the last five years, GLAHR has co- led the Not One More Coalition to victory in cities and counties across metro Atlanta.

Despite GLAHR’s demonstrated track record of policy wins as leader of the Not One More coalition, Nicholls echoed Hooks’ concern about the lack of resources for community organizing work in the Atlanta metro region and the broader South.

“This year was the first that I didn’t panic that we weren’t going to have money for next year,” Nicholls said. “As a Mexicana, I have to do what I have to do. We do this work

not because of the job, but because we have to.”

Nicholls went on to describe what it’s like working without the financial resources to hire a full staff. “I am the one keeping the books, moving around money and paying the bills. I am the one writing the grants. And I am the one leading our community organizing.”

GLAHR is up against a rising tide of police and ICE harassment of immigrant communities, especially, but not exclusively, undocumented immigrants. As immigrant communities in Metro Atlanta have boomed, enforcement of legislation whose explicit purpose is to criminalize basic daily functions has terrorized those communities and locked many in a carceral pipeline that leads to deportation.

“Between 2007 and 2013, more than 78,000 people were arrested by local law enforcement,” Nicholls said. “And out of that number more than 54,000 people were processed for deportation.

So the way that all these laws and policies and new legislation have their muscle is through the local law enforcement, and that’s exactly the reason why you see all of these people being detained.”

Atlanta’s reputation as the “city too busy to hate” is part of what attracted thousands of immigrants and their families to the metro area in the first place. But the

“I’m glad that after those seven years, we now have resources. But the resources are outnumbered by the work; the demand is more than we can give.”

pragmatic civic and business leadership who popularized this image have often responded with apathy to the widespread ICE harassment of immigrant communities.

“We haven’t received any kind of response or even a message of sympathy or support from local business groups,” Nicholls explained.

“Deportations have been so normalized for so many years that nobody cares about who is detained as long as [businesses] keep making money.”

Similarly, GLAHR has struggled to secure pro-bono legal aid for its clients because “lawyers here feel we are in competition with their deportation cases.”

Instead of being afraid, Nicholls, GLAHR, SONG, Project South and others are mobilizing communities and empowering them to fight back. Nicholls spends much of her time in communities across metro Atlanta supporting the development of emerging immigrant leaders to spearhead their own local community power-building.

“Part of the commitment for GLAHR is to engage and help those that are directly impacted by police racial profiling or abuses in their own communities,” Nicholls said. “Even if they don’t speak English, or do not have documents; it doesn’t matter to us. GLAHR is there to help with outreach, organize and give them voice.”

GLAHR’s struggle to secure full-time staff – they currently have three – and crucial legal resources was echoed by Southern structural change agents across the region. But, to Nicholls’ point, leaders like those GLAHR is empowering are some of the most valuable to movement work, because it is often their friends and family members on the front lines.

“I was a volunteer for GLAHR for seven years before I became the founding director,” Nicholls said. “For seven years we didn’t have any money for salaries, and for seven years I visited communities across Atlanta and in rural deep Georgia.”

Where GLAHR has succeeded in halting ICE collaboration:

- Fulton County
- Clayton County
- Dekalb County
- Fayette County
- City of Clarkston
- City of Atlanta
- City of Decatur

The leadership networks Nicholls helped seed are now beginning to bear fruit in the form of increased community power. “Many of the people that I got to know 15 years ago are the ones right now that are having their own comites populares (people’s committees) in different places around the state,” Nicholls explained.

GLAHR has made progress, but the potential in leadership- and power-building across the metro area won’t be fully tapped until GLAHR has the resources to devote to organizing on that scope.

“I’m glad that after those seven years, we now have resources,” Nicholls said. “But the resources are outnumbered by the work; the demand is more than we can give.”

Southern philanthropy has been a crucial partner in GLAHR’s work, Nicholls explained. When GLAHR began collaborating with its LGBTQ allies, its national Catholic philanthropic support dried up. But Southern Partners Fund, an Atlanta-based regional structural change foundation, came on board. That’s in part because it understands the long-term potential in GLAHR’s work, Nicholls said.

“This network plan of course is long-term, and you can imagine, in a couple of years, we could fight to support Latino legislators, for example,” Nicholls added.

One of the biggest strengths of GLAHR’s work is its cross-issue, cross-constituency collaboration, Nicholls said. The Not One More campaign combined the power of LGBTQ communities, Black communities, labor networks and immigrant communities in metro Atlanta by bringing them together around a shared understanding of how reactionary, often violent, government backlash impacts each community.

Like their allies at Project South and SONG, GLAHR understands that building power within marginalized communities is the only path forward in a metro area where the business and civic elite have often turned a blind eye to community needs.

XOCHITL BERVERA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Racial Justice Action Center



In 2013, Racial Justice Action Center (RJAC) executive director Xochitl Bervera and her allies at other grassroots organizations in Atlanta were made aware of a disturbing new trend in the city’s bustling midtown business district.

An alliance of private security contractors, with the tacit support of the city’s business community, was pushing for a so-called “banishment ordinance” that would bar anyone convicted of prostitution from the city’s midtown core. In effect – and in the statements of some of the ordinance’s most avid defenders – the policy was meant as a tool to legalize harassment of trans and other gender-nonconforming people and criminalize their very presence in Atlanta’s shiny business district.

RJAC joined with trans- and LGBT-led organizations like La Gender, Trans(forming) and others to stop the ordinance’s passing. That fight was the beginning of an ongoing effort to bring together marginalized people in Atlanta around a campaign to stop the mass criminalization of people of color, LGBTQ people and others across the metro area, Bervera told us.

RJAC, based in Atlanta, stands with its allies at GLAHR and SONG in opposing state violence toward marginalized people in all its many forms.

Bervera explains that its chief target is the myriad ways communities across Metro Atlanta are criminalized by city, state and federal actors.

“Working against criminalization across communities is the key for RJAC,” Bervera explained. “That is the core issue, and a lot of that is because it’s where white supremacy has dug in its heels the most, is the most aggressive and some ways the most violent toward our communities.”

“We used to joke that a press conference was Atlanta’s idea of direct action. The executive directors of all the Atlanta nonprofits would speak, and that would be an action.”

Xochitl’s leadership, along with that of her partners at other Atlanta-based power-building organizations, has helped nurture collaboration among communities that have not always been able to collaborate in the past. “Criminalization is a place of intersection,” Bervera said. “There are specific campaigns [around criminalization] that unite communities that are often not working together.”

RJAC has brought together LGBTQ people, immigrants and other people of color to build the collective power to fight back against city and state efforts to send more and more Black, Hispanic and LGBTQ to jail.

In 2015, two years after the banishment ordinance victory, RJAC was able to secure a pre-arrest diversion program city-wide in Atlanta that prioritizes connecting people

using drugs and engaging in sex work with the supportive services they may need to stay healthy and safe.

A collaborative grassroots campaign led to the implementation in 2017 of a system “where the police have the ability and the capacity to refer people to programs when they have probable cause to make an arrest,” Bervera said. “Instead of making the arrest they can call a care navigator and have an awesome social service program kick in around the person.”

The program does not revert clients back to jail if they meet stumbling blocks in their case management, either. Instead, it prioritizes client-centered wellness and harm-reduction strategies to ensure community members are keeping themselves safe instead of ending up in jail.

“We had to fight really hard for that,” Bervera added, and their victory has already saved hundreds from jail.

At the center of that success was the Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative (SNaPCo). A collaborative effort incubated by RJAC, SNaPCo literally centers the needs and perspectives of trans people because it is designed to be trans-led.

“SNaPCo has been a really interesting experience,” Bervera explained, because instead of a trans-only space, or a space where “one or two trans people get invited to ‘be at the table,’” SNaPCo is a multigenerational, multicultural space where trans folks are setting the culture and setting the standards for what collective action looks like.

One of the first goals of the collaborative was to change the culture of Atlanta metro area organizing and advocacy so that RJAC’s allies “understand the capacity and potential in trans leadership,” Bervera said. “That’s really happened. There are so many more places where it needs to happen, but you can really feel and see that shift in the organizing culture here on the ground.”

Part of that culture change in the organizing landscape in the Atlanta metro area has been a shift away from the “old guard” way of building community power toward a new approach, Bervera said. “There was an old guard organizing style that was really prominent. There were individuals with access to power and credibility maneuvering things but not mass-based or membership-based work.”

“We used to joke that a press conference was Atlanta’s idea of direct action. The executive directors of all the Atlanta nonprofits would speak, and that would be an action.”

RJAC was founded to help fill the gaps left by that individual leader-focused model of organizing. “My experience and the experiences of other RJAC founders in New Orleans during and after Katrina has given us a much deeper understanding about the impacts of trauma and oppression,” Bervera explained. “So the way we talk about our organizing model is that when we started off, we said, ‘Okay we’re going to build grassroots power of marginalized folks, of people of color.’”

The birth of SNaPCo was a good example of the pivot toward more mass-based power-building in the Atlanta area. The coalition’s four anchor organizations – RJAC, LaGender, Transforming and Women on the Rise – attracted more than 40 other organizations to the coalition after its inception.

“And then what happened was more and more we felt we needed to build a base of Black, trans and queer people as opposed to just bring together nonprofit organizations,” Bervera said. “The old model was to just get nonprofits in a room together, but those nonprofits too often didn’t speak for a base. Our focus has been on building our membership base so that SNaPCo can be really accountable to them before we bring in a ton of other like nonprofit organizations who come with their agendas and their styles.”

That new model of coalition work, grassroots power-building and community accountability in the Atlanta area is still green, Bervera said. It takes dedicated resources and a deep, broad understanding of shared purpose, agenda-setting and other collaborative techniques that Atlanta organizations are still building. The Not One More coalition is a good example.

“There’s so much desire for folks to work together, but there is sometimes not a shared understanding about how meetings should go or what the structure should be,” Bervera said. “[SONG, RJAC, GLAHR and others] have been working together forever. We’ve built relationships; we’re homies. If one calls another when she needs them, everybody will show up. But formal collaborative work is still green here in Atlanta.”



NATHANIEL SMITH

CHIEF EQUITY OFFICER

Partnership for Southern Equity

One of the Atlanta-based organizations working to ensure coalitions like SNaPCo, Not One More and others have the research, capacity and fundraising support they need to thrive is Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), led by founder and Chief Equity Officer Nathaniel Smith.

Smith and others at PSE are about nurturing an ecosystem for change, or what he calls the equity ecosystem, in Metro Atlanta and throughout the American South. PSE envisions itself a strong regional anchor organization that can bring data, capacity-building expertise and philanthropic support to bear in the broader region – much like its larger national peers PolicyLink and Color of Change. PSE also works to bring advocates together and advance public policy by deploying its community organizing capacity.

Crucially, PSE encourages the philanthropic sector to support grassroots “frontline” organizations in the region instead of relying solely on the work on national nonprofits.

“Too often more well-resourced organizations exploit the pain, suffering and hard work of the people on the frontlines,” Smith said. “Predominantly white intermediaries are in a position to leverage their relationships and privilege as a way to receive significant

dollars, while only rarely does a significant amount of those dollars trickle down to the frontline groups and the communities they courageously serve,” he adds. PSE is working to “redesign and reconfigure the relationship between philanthropy, the intermediary and the frontline organizations in the South.”

“What we often see when funders come to the South is they bring their partners from outside of the South and assume that they know what to do,” Smith said of the tendency for national foundations to deploy national anchor organizations in the region. “Southern change needs to be for and by people in the South, so real investment needs to be committed to that. We need foundations to really be strategic and create long-term investment opportunities for Southern-based

organizations they are going to support for the long haul.”

PSE’s key strategy is relationship building, especially in the Southern context.

“We believe that big data, policy and ideas will definitely play a part in the

change that we want to see in the South, but it’s really about big relationships,” Smith said. “How can we begin the process of cultivating relationships between uncommon and common allies for justice?”

“Atlanta is always a city moving forward. We tear down stuff; we’re not big on preservation. New is better in Atlanta, and we don’t have a rearview mirror.”

PSE does this work through “Equity Circles” in the areas of economic inclusion (Just Opportunity), energy equity (Just Energy) and equitable development (Just Growth). More than 70 organizations representing various sectors, jurisdictions and constituencies are engaged in these circles. PSE utilizes them and more localized organizing efforts to grow ecosystems of trust for policy change.

One of PSE’s priorities is knitting together the civic and business communities – those unlikely allies – and leaders from marginalized communities. “We want to work hard at supporting the growth and capacity of frontline organizations and frontline leaders in a way that will begin the process of strengthening the voices of the people who are marginalized – not only in Atlanta but in other places around the South.”

However, building unlikely relationships first requires cultivating trust.

“We have to acknowledge that change moves at the speed of trust,” Smith said. “We have to begin to cultivate a culture of trust between the change agent and the community because the community has been promised so many things,” and too often those promises have been broken.

Those broken relationships can be explained in part by taking a critical look at Atlanta’s “city too busy to hate” self-image, Smith said. Atlanta is known for its role as the logistical home of the Civil Rights Movement and as a longstanding center of power for Black political leadership.

But the city has never fully reckoned with its past. Atlanta has nurtured great leaders, from Dr. King to Shirley Franklin to Hosea Williams to Maynard Jackson, but that hasn’t always resulted in strong institutional power that can weather financial and political storms.

“Atlanta is a city too busy to reflect on our history, on the mistakes that we’ve made, and on the challenges that many of our low-income native Atlantans have faced over the decades,” Smith said. “Atlanta is always a city moving forward. We tear down stuff; we’re not big on preservation. New is better in Atlanta, and we don’t have a rearview mirror.”

This tendency to turn away from its history is troubling especially because Atlanta’s history – and the South’s

history – reverberates in public policy, in the economy and in philanthropy in the region, Smith said.

“There’s a ton of philanthropic dollars in Atlanta; there are a lot of funders in Atlanta,” Smith said, but “most funders fund charity-driven, programmatic work.” In terms of systemic change work, “We’re resource-poor in terms of having philanthropic resources that support advocacy.”

Philanthropy’s history in the South can help explain that dearth of structural change resources. Many foundations maintain “a kind of plantation mentality around philanthropy. They don’t want to support organizations and leaders that are going to rile up the community.”

That lesson is an important one for any foundation interested in investing in community organizing and structural change work.

“A key piece that funders can think about is the reality that many Southern foundations have benefitted from the oppression of people of color. We need philanthropy that is committed to undoing systems of inequity which means that those investments have to be long in terms of the time horizon,” Smith said. “Philanthropy has to be comfortable with failure. It has to be patient capital. It has to be money that is comfortable with failing every now and then because there are lessons that can be learned from that, especially in a place like the South.”

Among those lessons is how to build coalitions that have at their center a radical conception of intersectional collaboration. In part, the cross-constituency coalition work exemplified by SNaPCo and Not One More is an outgrowth of the mutuality and reciprocity that is a feature of Southern culture. But he emphasized that it also stems from the historic lack of resources for grassroots power-building in the region.

“When you’re underresourced, you find a way to make things happen,” Smith said. “Somebody brings a piece of bologna, another person brings some bread and another person brings some mayonnaise and together you make it happen. That’s just how underresourced people work.”

PSE’s role in supporting grassroots power-building in the Atlanta metro region has been in part to begin articulating a “business case for equity” that will resonate with the

city’s powerful and thoroughly pragmatic civic and business leadership.

That pragmatic alliance between civic and business leadership – the same powerful alliance that has largely turned a blind eye to the harassment and criminalization of Black, Hispanic and LGBTQ communities – has a name, Smith said.

“It’s called the Atlanta Way,” Smith said. “And it’s a system that is just glossy enough to keep away deep analysis, and at the same time it’s undergirded by the relationship between the private sector and Black business and political elites. The most effective progressive leaders have had to find a way to navigate through that and leverage that system as a way to realize change.”

Atlanta’s political and business leadership is often pragmatic before it is progressive. That is where PSE’s conception of a “business case for equity” comes into play, Smith explained.

“We’ve been forced to develop a business case for equity before other places,” Smith said. “We’re still fighting many of the battles that folks in places like the West Coast have moved beyond, and our fight requires a level of sophistication [around allies within the traditional Atlanta Way alliance] that other places haven’t been forced to develop.”

Organizations like PSE and its grassroots allies “are trying to push for a new Atlanta Way that is more inclusive, more just and more sensitive to the needs of all Atlantans,” Smith said. “We are pushing Atlanta to become what it says it is to the nation and the world.”

This new way of building and exercising shared power will go beyond just Atlanta or just Southern cities because it has to. As Mary Hooks and Adelina Nicholls attested, building the power of marginalized communities in the South will only be sustainable if and when it extends beyond places like Metro Atlanta.

“Folks who are in positions of power in the region have benefited from the lack of connection between urban, suburban and rural places that make up the South,” Smith said. “It would be great to think through the creation of some type of funding collaborative that is working to connect those dots.”

What happens in Atlanta will have wider implications for the region. But Atlanta is not alone: The tide of organized people power is rising in cities across the South – from Durham to Birmingham to Jackson.

“I think one of the really exciting things about these metro regions in the South is that they provide learning labs and opportunities to refine a strategy, not just in their actions, but in the ways that they are framed and communicated because of the environment they’ve had to grow in,” Smith said. “In many ways, these movements in the South are like the Tupac poem, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*.”

“Imagine a Fannie Lou Hamer doing the kind of work she was doing in Mississippi where they could just walk up to you and kill you,” he continued. “The South is an opportunity to learn about courageous action in a way that could teach the rest of the country how to go up against structural racism and actually beat it.”



Photo courtesy of The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

TENÉ TRAYLOR

ATLANTA FUND ADVISOR

The Kendeda Fund



Atlanta's booming economy is a key feature of the city's confident self-image as a forward-looking, welcoming metropolis. But if growth is not carefully managed, it bears a high cost. Gentrification, displacement, inequitable redevelopment and widening income disparity can make it even harder for already marginalized communities to share equally in the city's ascendency and threaten Atlanta's status as the South's ladder of economic opportunity.

Like many Southern cities, Atlanta has arrived at an important crossroads, according to Tené Traylor, The Kendeda Fund's Atlanta fund advisor.

"The trajectory of Atlanta's growth offers an opportunity for local philanthropy to lean in and invest in building power in marginalized communities," Traylor explained. "This is the time for benevolence reimagined, for building a city where equity is not a fringe effort but an essential and elevated philanthropic strategy. Our goal should be to make Atlanta a place where existing *and new* equity organizations and champions coalesce as a community to influence the established systems that effect our social, political, economic and natural environment."

Atlanta's many assets are attracting new investments to the region, but those assets are not flowing in an equitable

fashion, Traylor said. "Big business is booming and the city is experiencing unprecedented growth. We are headquarters to multiple Fortune 100 companies who support an extremely strong business sector. Thanks in large part to a responsive philanthropic community, we have a strong safety net hospital in Grady and a thriving arts scene. Yet at the same time, the city is divided by Interstate 20, with wealthier, majority-White communities

to the north of the interstate and poorer, majority-Black communities to the south."

In Traylor's view, Atlanta's test is to ensure its assets are developed in ways that genuinely advance economic inclusion and not just growth.

Since 2000, the number of high-poverty neighborhoods in Metro Atlanta has tripled. As Atlanta has grown and spread, so have its disparities.

For The Kendeda Fund, increasing economic opportunity means supporting transformative leaders and ideas that enhance or reinvigorate livable and vibrant communities, especially communities that have experienced a generation or more of disinvestment.

"We have a great opportunity to engage small and emerging nonprofits that are primed for growth and impact," Traylor said. "With equity and sustainability

"Transit is not just the way that we connect to our work. It's the way that we connect to our friends and families, the way that we connect to a quality of life."

at the center of Kendeda’s strategy, we hope to expand Atlanta’s network of transformative and bold community leaders. And through those leaders and organizations, we can begin to tip the balance from marginality and exclusion to well-being for all.”

Traylor believes these leaders will play a crucial role in piloting new models and programs that repair and heal. One of the greatest challenges, specifically as a Southern community, will be sorting through a culture and history that promotes (and at times *rewards*) social complacency and individual activism, but not collective action or organizing rooted in dismantling legacies of harm.

Because economic and demographic vibrancy exist side-by-side with poverty, underemployment, educational disparities and stagnant social mobility, The Kendeda Fund has identified a three-pronged strategy for advancing economic equity in the region. The foundation is focused on two primary areas of focus. The first is economic opportunity with an emphasis on:

1. Developing models for permanent housing affordability.
2. Building community wealth through worker- and community-owned development.
3. Increasing access and connectivity to quality transit.

The second priority is education: transformation dedicated to advancing options for children and families to have a high-quality education by supporting great schools, high-quality school-level talent, community engagement and supportive educational equity policies

As Atlanta grows and becomes more of a sprawling metro region than a city, transit is becoming more important than ever. It’s not just about being able to get from one place to another, it’s another way to think about economic opportunity, Traylor said.

“Transit is not just the way that we connect to our work. It’s the way that we connect to our friends and families, the way that we connect to a quality of life,” Traylor said. “Kendeda is looking at transit in that broader sense of quality of life, thinking about walkable communities,

innovative and sustainable mobility, and access to green space. And we’re encouraging our transit authorities to think about transit as it relates to affordability and housing.”

In many ways, Atlanta’s current transit challenges pose barriers to shared prosperity, Traylor explained. “Housing prices have pushed many low-income workers to the south of the city, while the job hub is to the north. So there are substantial infrastructure challenges around fair access to employment – both in terms of how people initially get hired for a job and then around how those same people can get *to* that job.”

The racial and historical context for Atlanta’s transit challenges reflect the broader themes within the city around systemic racism and access to public spaces. It is common knowledge in Atlanta (and attested to in scholarly research presented in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*¹) that MARTA, the region’s mass transit system, was for decades referred to inappropriately as “Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta.” Political opposition to deeper and more equitable investments in transit infrastructure are of a piece with tacit approval for – and even sometimes explicit endorsement of – the state harassment of immigrant and LGBTQ communities.

As leaders like Traylor and the grantees in Kendeda’s Atlanta Equity portfolio begin to speak of transit access as an important piece of the regional development conversation, philanthropy is getting more engaged. Kendeda grantees such as The TransFormation Alliance are leading the equitable transit-oriented development conversations. A collaboration of private, public and nonprofit groups, the alliance works to ensure that the needs of low-income residents are represented, as pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use communities are built around rail stations.

“Equity issues are increasingly present in public education conversations among Atlanta-area funders, yet we haven’t really figured out how to do community development in a way that incorporates all of our players,” Traylor said. “It’s definitely a friendlier environment than it once was. The funding community is becoming more sophisticated and open to solving questions about increasing transit ridership or improving access to employment centers and services for all Atlantans.”

1. Jason Henderson, “Secessionist Automobility: Racism, Anti-Urbanism, and the Politics of Automobility in Atlanta, Georgia,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol 30 (2) (2006), p. 293-307, http://online.sfsu.edu/jhenderson/Writings/ijur_final.pdf

But the region's philanthropic community still has more work to do on integrating an equity lens into every level of its transit, housing and economic development grantmaking.

"The funding community will certainly lag behind the organizing community, but when it comes to working on an issue that grantmakers feel they have a stake in, funders are finding ways to work together," Traylor noted, pointing to a recent meeting that included foundations from across the "charity-to-systems change" spectrum.

"We recently participated in a conversation focused on economic opportunity with local funders such as Woodruff [Foundation], the Blank Foundation, the Community Foundation [for Greater Atlanta], Kaiser Permanente and Annie E. Casey [Foundation]," Traylor said. "It was a good group, a great meeting. And I remember thinking to myself: 'Well that doesn't happen very often.' So I would definitely say there's been progress."

Traylor and Kendeda believe it is crucial for nonprofits and foundations alike to understand that Atlanta philanthropy – and Southern philanthropy more broadly – is not a monolith.

"Philanthropy in Atlanta is simple and dynamic at the same time," Traylor explained. "It's primarily family foundations, and that's probably the simple part, but it's dynamic, too. There's no single, shared definition [among the region's grantmaking foundations] of what equity even means."

Grantee organizations and other foundations that fund structural change work in the Atlanta region should not expect all foundations to follow their lead, Traylor added.

Some Atlanta funders lack the structure, the staff experience and the board expertise to engage meaningfully and effectively in structural change grantmaking, she said. They serve a purpose, and when they are ready to partner on things that make sense to them, they will. But it would not be realistic to expect those foundations to be something they are not.

On the other hand, grantees and foundations ought not underestimate the potential for collaboration with some of the corporate foundations prevalent in Atlanta and the broader region.

"You'll see [corporate foundations] show up in ways that doesn't necessarily apologize for the things they do, but shows them in a different light," Traylor said. "While I wish I could convert even half of these organizations into social justice funders, I do think the corporate community recognizes the income inequality gap. They recognize the challenges that flow from a lack of social mobility. And they recognize that the economic competitiveness of Atlanta can be challenged if we don't *all* figure out ways to invest in community."

But as public and private entities think about how to increase economic opportunities in Atlanta, Traylor also emphasizes that, in order to think about an economically viable Atlanta, we must also start to think about Atlanta as an expanding metro region.

"I don't think you can talk about the city of Atlanta without talking about greater Atlanta," Traylor said. "It's hard to have a thriving city and not have a thriving region because they're connected. We're seeing a lot of growth in the surrounding counties; we are seeing leadership strengthen and evolve in those areas; and it is incumbent on foundations to move in a similar direction. We've got to encourage philanthropy to keep looking outward, beyond the city's boundaries alone."

Just as funders have learned how better to fund systems change work following the lead of power-building grassroots partners, Traylor also thinks social justice funders will be responsive to the nonprofits and intermediaries doing cross-county and regional work.

To that end, The Kendeda Fund and some of its peers have already begun investing in work that extends beyond the city of Atlanta, but it is just a beginning.

Atlanta foundations have begun to fund service providers to work in the metro region, but "some of the social justice work has to get outside the city, too," Traylor said. "As we have more nonprofits and intermediaries cut across different areas, I think you'll find philanthropy will be responsive."



JANELLE WILLIAMS, Ph.D.

SENIOR ASSOCIATE, ATLANTA CIVIC SITE

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Despite its rich civil rights legacy and booming economy, Atlanta remains a divided city – communities of color are largely cut off from the progress and prosperity seen in more affluent white neighborhoods.

Janelle Williams, a senior associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s (Casey) Atlanta Civic Site, is working with her colleagues and several local partners to turn this tide. The foundation supports strategies that increase access to good jobs, good schools and stable housing for *all* families and communities – and that means confronting the policies of the past that have discriminated against people of color and disconnected them from these opportunities. Resilience, power and the know-how to effect the type of change folks want to see for themselves is embedded in these communities, Williams said.

“We cannot continue to call Atlanta a Black Mecca without first confronting the deep racial inequities that exist,” Williams explained. “As of 2015, 80 percent of the city’s Black children lived in high-poverty areas that keep them from realizing their full power and potential.”

She went on to say: “Georgia has been ranked a top state, and Metro Atlanta is second amongst 12 peers for job growth, but it is still one of the top cities for income inequality in the country. The reality is: Long-time Black residents are seeing a city that is changing, too often, without them.”

“How do we show up in a way that is respectful and supports them to lead, to create the type of community and the type of home that they want?”

Ultimately, success for grassroots movements in the South and for the funders supporting them requires an honest reckoning with the South’s sometimes painful history and an understanding of its promising future, Williams said.

“While supporting direct service is important, we must also tackle advocacy because the policies that got us here will not change unless we invest in true, resident-led organizing,” Williams said. “That’s why we invest in advocacy and research efforts like those of the Georgia Justice Project and the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, while concurrently working with partners to

support a community-oriented ecosystem that can influence the systems and practices that ultimately affect the lives of millions.”

Casey continues to embrace the hurdles that come along with investing in a power-building infrastructure in

Georgia. “It’s very messy and unnecessarily complex,” Williams said. “We have deepened our work with system partners to provide targeted assistance on some of these administrative policies that can be hard nuts to crack.”

Sometimes, those “hard nuts to crack” within the state policy-making machinery are differences in values, not just lack of information. Casey has learned to rely on a mixed approach to its systems-change work, Williams said.

“We have to work with specific agencies and provide technical assistance and support while also investing in research, advocacy and organizing to change practices that are perpetuating inequities,” she said. “We heavily rely on partnerships to tackle these issues.”

For example, Georgia Justice Project recently partnered with another Casey grantee, Atlanta CareerRise, to launch a collaborative of business and community leaders, policymakers, grassroots organizations and funders that will examine strategies for supporting residents returning to their communities after incarceration.

Atlanta is one of two civic sites, along with Baltimore, where Casey has a special connection and long-term commitment to child and family well-being. Its status as a national foundation gives it a perspective that some local organizations may not have.

But, that does not change the fact that working in historically disinvested communities in Atlanta requires a certain level of grounding.

“It is really about being thoughtful around how we show up with and for communities that have experienced decades of systemic disenfranchisement,” Williams explained. “How do we show up in a way that is respectful and supports them to lead, to create the type of community and the type of home that they want?”

Having a local presence enables Casey to build deep, long-term relationships within communities. It also allows the foundation to leverage the resources and support of its national network, Williams explained. “The leverage we bring as a national funder is to elevate how this work in place can happen.”

Williams and her colleagues also recognize the value a funder like Casey can bring to the national conversation. “We can also lean on the support of our national colleagues to elevate a new narrative of the South that is counter to mainstream perception.”

Williams echoed much of what Southern grantee organizations had to say about the dominant narrative about work in the region. In conversations with national allies and potential funders, many Southern organizations encounter the perception that Southern grantee organizations lack capacity or lack strong effective leadership. This is especially true for organizations that work to build power among communities experiencing displacement and economic distress.

“The movements we’re seeing in the region now are highly organic,” Williams said, echoing points made by Mary Hooks and Xochitl Bervera. “They’re not individualistic; they’re very strategic. And they run counter to traditional barriers of organizational development and the way [foundations] think of funding institutions.”

Southern movement leaders have focused their efforts on disrupting some of the most pernicious trends in the region – entrenched poverty and structural racism, for example. And, disrupting negative trends and reimagining new possibilities are core values to understand and support across the funding community.

“Those are some of the themes that we have to hold and value and honor,” Williams said. “And within those themes is a history of pain and blood and tears that have been shed in the South. We have to acknowledge that this region built this country, and there are people/communities who are still paying the cost.”

Williams emphasized that part of repaying the toll exacted on Southern communities and Southern leaders is to invest in the valuable capacity that already exists at Southern organizations. Williams and her colleagues are learning from their Atlanta grantees about how to define capacity in a way that better reflects the reality of grassroots organizing in the region.

From Williams’ perspective, grassroots capacity shows up in a few ways:

- 1. Representation:** “Does the organization represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the communities they serve? Not only at the administrative and support level, but at the senior and director levels — at the board level?”
- 2. Relationship with community:** “How does the organization see community? Do they see them as places they have to fix? Or do they enter into place in partnership with a community in an asset-based way? What are the inclusionary practices embedded in the program design?”
- 3. Understanding organizational value proposition:** “Philanthropy has played a role in reinforcing the notion that organizations often try to overreach to serve as the end all/be all for everyone and everything. But if we want to address entrenched issues, we need to make space for organizations to understand their value and

their contribution in the broader ecosystem. We need to help organizations be clear, intentional and deliberate about where they provide value and support them to execute in that area and partner with others.”

Williams urges those in the funder space to redefine what capacity means. “As a program officer, I have to think: What is my criteria for assessing capacity? What is that magic operating budget? What is that magic board composition? So many opportunities for implicit biases are embedded in those questions and process.”

Confronting those capacity biases will not be easy. “That work requires a certain amount of embedded leadership and competency and a comfort with discomfort. It will require leadership and effort from [funders] to understand the stories behind the data and a willingness to disrupt negative trends.”

The risk of grantees failing or supporting nontraditional strategies, for example, manifests in time-consuming and sometimes onerous grant applications. Speaking about that point, Williams said she understands that many grassroots organizations do not have the time or resources needed to complete the application process, so they work in partnership with local intermediaries to make sure grantmaking dollars are getting to the right places quickly.

“We try to be intentional about opening up opportunities for funding,” Williams explained. “We fund intermediaries because we understand the value of accessibility and adaptability.”

The ideal intermediary brings community voice into the grantmaking process and decreases barriers to securing funding. “We piloted a Neighborhood Economic Justice Institute and partnered with an entity (Fund for Southern Communities) that had more flexibility and brought thought leadership in the organizing space,” Williams said. “We gave them a grant, and we brought organizers and neighborhood residents together to design a request for proposals (RFP). That advisory team, which included the organizers and residents, scored the RFP, and the grants were awarded based on their decisions.”

Casey has also worked closely with their grantees, including the intermediaries, to ensure racial equity is at

the heart of their work. After releasing *Changing the Odds: The Race for Results in Atlanta*², Casey launched cohorts so partners could learn and apply new strategies to address economic and educational inequities in Atlanta.

“We continue to provide partners with technical assistance to strengthen the racial equity lens they bring to the work. It’s to the point now where our letters of agreement with those grantees also embed a racial equity lens,” Williams said. “It’s not just serving X number of people of color, but really thinking about ‘How does my work advance racial equity. How does racial equity reflect in my strategic plan? What does it mean in my advocacy agenda?’”

Additionally, Williams explained the value of fostering authentic partnerships amongst grantees. “We ask our grantees to meet, to share their success and pain points, and we explore how we can help support new realities.”

Initially, this was admittedly awkward, but in time, trust was fostered and grantees began to adopt shared performance measures. They embrace the opportunity to collaborate instead of competing.

Casey has also expanded and reinforced partnerships with other funders to also be more strategically aligned to address deeper structural issues. For instance, the Casey Foundation and The Kendeda Fund partnered to launch a collaborative to strengthen business ownership among African Americans in Atlanta. By supporting entities to intentionally learn and apply new strategies together, the collaborative has developed an agenda to increase Black business owners’ access to resources and advance community wealth.

“There is a mainstream narrative of an absence of capacity in the South and a lack of leadership in the South, when actually we know it is the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. We know the most-traveled airport in the world is in the South; we know the density of the Fortune 500 companies that are migrating to the South.”

Despite the national narrative about the South, “Really everything points us in an absolute different direction of who the South is,” Williams said. “There is value, there is hope, there is our shared future in the South. Supporting community-led, groundbreaking strategies and intentional partnerships helps to reimagine new possibilities for our region.”

2. Janelle Williams and Sarah Torian, “Changing the Odds: The Race for Results in Atlanta,” Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015, <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-ChangingTheOddsWeb-2015.pdf>

THE BOTTOM LINE

“They don’t see a place for themselves in this city,” one interview respondent said of multi-generational Atlantans faced by a rising tide of gentrification and criminalization.

Atlanta’s explosive growth has kicked off a process of cascading displacement of low- and moderate-income communities. Its roaring commercial sector has turned a blind eye to state crackdowns on immigrant communities, Black communities and LGBTQ communities while it touts a reputation as a city that defies the South’s reputation for regressive politics.

Metro Atlanta’s transition along with that taking place in cities across the South poses a few thorny questions: Who gets to take up space in Atlanta? Who gets a place – at the decision-making table, on a sidewalk, in a home of their own? How can the economy of space in booming Southern cities be made more just?

The South encounters these challenges around spatial economy, displacement and criminalization at a time when they are beginning to become more prominent challenges for the nation. In many ways, Atlanta’s physical and political environment will be the harbinger of things to come for other Southern communities, and then for the nation beyond the South.

In order for Atlanta to “be what it says it is,” as Nathaniel Smith said, grassroots coalitions that build the leadership and voice of marginalized communities need resources quickly. Intermediaries will be part of the resource mechanism for those coalitions, but ultimately foundations within Metro Atlanta and beyond must be willing to commit long-term funding for the messy, forward-and-back work of community organizing.

Metro Atlanta and other cities like it across the South are home to deeply intersectional grassroots power – building movements that have racked up significant policy change achievements by articulating a uniquely Southern vision for what it means to be a “sanctuary.”

As Mary Hooks put it, “we’re not just trying to win stuff for LGBTQ people. We want to win stuff for our aunts and our cousins and our neighbors.”

The successes of Georgia Not One More and SNaPCo have come despite the historic dearth of foundation grantmaking for structural change work in Atlanta and in the region. But foundations can no longer use the “make-do” attitude of Southern organizers – and the success that comes with it – as justification for this continued lack of investment.

Because building the power of marginalized Southern communities within nominally progressive (or at least liberal) cities will never be enough to affect the regional, structural change necessary to liberate the South and in doing so liberate the nation. Foundation grantmaking to build the statewide and regional reach of grassroots nonprofits will be crucial to that liberation.

Southern cities are indeed “learning labs” for philanthropy and the nonprofits they fund to learn how to act courageously in what can be a hostile environment, as Nathaniel Smith put it. As Southern cities attract new residents, sprawl into once-rural areas and begin exploring new definitions of what it means to be welcoming, forward-looking places, they will produce important lessons for cities across the country who have experienced decades of disinvestment and displacement.

Atlanta’s identity as “the city too busy to hate” and the “Black Mecca” are mutually reinforcing articulations of the same self-image. The Atlanta Way – as we heard from Janelle Williams, Nathaniel Smith, Xochitl Bervera and others – has been a robust center of political and economic power in the region for decades and an enthusiastic booster for that self-image. But why should progress in Metro Atlanta require the displacement and criminalization of Black, Brown and queer Southerners?

The Atlanta Way and the complicated, “glossy” image it projects is not isolated to Atlanta. Southern powerbrokers across the region in the civic, business and political spaces have found ways to market the South’s cultural and

human resources to sources of capital outside the South for a long time. And that marketing push has obscured the reality of a persistent racial wealth gap; rampant criminalization of Black, Brown and queer communities; and suppression of grassroots political power. In the context of structural change work, these marketing ploys focus Southern communal life on individual behavior instead of assigning responsibility for inequity where it often belongs – on decisions being made at the institutional level.

Any funder interested in building the wealth, power and resilience of Southern communities must invest deeply in the region’s cities and metropolitan areas. But they ought to approach the rhetoric of civic leadership with healthy criticism, and ask themselves and trusted community leaders: Who is left out of that narrative? Who benefits from that elision?

The opportunities for foundation investment in Atlanta and other Southern cities are exciting, and with patience, trust and deep relationships with grassroots partners, they have the potential to bear fruit for the broader region.





GETTING STARTED

Are you ready to get started investing in Southern grassroots leadership? Here are a few recommendations to guide the way:

HOW TO START

1. Don't accept that a highly productive economy and robust social service sector are enough for people to have what they need to thrive. Make sure data that inform your priorities and strategies are disaggregated by race, gender, income, sexual identity, etc.
2. Recognize how much work it takes to organize marginalized communities against Atlanta's and other Southern cities' dominant political culture and invest in the evolution of policy and culture in a way that is defined by people who don't see themselves in the glossy marketing materials for a bustling city.
3. Be prepared to make long-term investments in grassroots organizations to build their base and build formal and informal relationships with allies – that means patient, risk-tolerant capital – and coalition on your grantees' terms, not yours.
4. Give general support grants to your Southern grantees – invest in infrastructure organizations to exist – not just to complete projects.
5. Understand who your philanthropic partners are and who they aren't, wrestling with history, context, power and priorities.

WHO CAN HELP

- Project South
- Southern Partners Fund
- Highlander Research and Education Center
- Black Women's Roundtable
- Atlanta Jobs with Justice
- National Domestic Workers Alliance
- Georgia Coalition Against Hunger
- SPARK, Housing Justice League
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Atlanta
- SisterSong
- Women Engaged
- Peace by Piece
- ProGeorgia
- The Kendeda Fund
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The Sapelo Foundation
- Latino Community Fund Georgia

WHAT'S NEXT?

Among the “learning lab” Southern cities Nathaniel Smith lifted up as opportunities for national organizations to learn about “courageous action,” Atlanta is often listed first. The Capital of the South has long been at the center of a national narrative around a “new South” – a South where growing cities provide oases of political and economic progress in a region perceived by many to be backward and stagnant.

This story – told often in conference exhibition halls and in the pages of reports like this one – explains away entrenched rural poverty and regressive politics in the rural South as fading relics of the past, soon to be supplanted by a bright urban future, a future that looks like Atlanta.

This narrative is false at its core – not least because it creates a dichotomy between urban and rural regions that does not really exist, but it helps explain why Atlanta civic and business leaders have devoted time and marketing resources to promoting a “glossy” self-image. And it helps explain why the city’s identity is such an electrically charged political issue.

But it is false in a deeper way, in a way that is at the root of the philanthropic sector’s lack of investment in the region despite its reputation for nation-changing movement-building. The contradictions in Atlanta’s identity and in the identity of the broader South can be roughly summarized as a dichotomy between secession and survival.

How do these identities live on in the minds of Southerners and non-Southerners alike? And how have they reinforced the structural, systemic philanthropic neglect of the nation’s largest region – the region where national movements are born? How can Southern and national philanthropists overcome that structural bias that denigrates Southern leadership and perpetuates a cycle of disinvestment and exploitation? Where are there paths forward for philanthropy in the South?

NCRP and GSP will explore these questions and try to offer some concrete action steps for philanthropy to invest in a growing South in the final installment of the *As the South Grows* series.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

NCRP and GSP's goal in this research was to collect and elevate the voices of nonprofit and community leaders across the South who represent great potential for positive, progressive change in their communities but who have to date been passed over by most philanthropists. To that end, we embarked on a wide-sweeping interview process with grantmakers, grantees and community leaders that generated rich, nuanced qualitative data that we will synthesize and present in context in the reports to follow.

Because of finite capacity and time, we chose to focus on eight “sub-regions” within the South that we believed would produce representative, diverse, relevant, timely, compelling stories about the challenges of working for equity across the South with limited philanthropic resources. Our advisory committee members guided the choice of sub-regions. The sub-regions include some that have historically seen very little philanthropic investment, some that have – for various reasons – lately seen a marked increase in philanthropic investment, and some that reflect the geographic and demographic diversity that exists in the South. Together they represent coastal wetlands, fertile farmland, rugged mountains, small towns, and big cities. Among them are areas with some of the highest concentrations of African Americans in the country, some that are almost all white, and some that have recently welcomed surging immigrant populations. Many of them represent large clusters of what the USDA labels “persistently poor” counties, but they also include wealthy enclaves of Atlanta and Charleston.

We began the outreach process by studying Foundation Center grantmaking data in each sub-region that benefited marginalized communities and systemic change strategies (see list below). These grants lists – generated with Foundation Maps – are not mutually exclusive, and together they comprise a large chunk of the total grantmaking in any given region.

- *African Americans*
- *Youth*
- *Economically Disadvantaged People*
- *Immigrants*
- *LGBTQ People*
- *Women and Girls*
- *Capacity-building*
- *Community Economic Development*
- *Policy, Advocacy and Systems Reform*
- *Community Organizing*

By adapting these grants lists into grantmaking landscape maps, we were able to begin identifying “hubs”, both grantmakers and grantees, that were central to each sub-region’s philanthropic ecosystem. These hubs became the first in a snowballing outreach and interview process in each sub-region. Hub interviews led us naturally to other key actors in each sub-region’s ecosystem – especially to those organizations and community leaders working in and for underserved communities and systemic change outcomes. Our outreach and interview process generated at least five, and as many as 13, interviews in each sub-region; including at least two each from funders and grantees working in that sub-region. All told, our interview process captured:

- *9 corporate foundations*
- *8 national foundations*
- *15 Southern independent foundations*
- *16 Southern community foundations*
- *48 grantees*

The interviews themselves were intentionally conversational in order to encourage participants to tell stories and to speak about issues most pressing for them, not issues the interviewer thought were most pressing.

Each interview covered – in broad terms – these subjects: equity, capacity, challenges, grantee-funder relationships, funding opportunities and vision. All interview transcripts were coded for common themes, analyzed for cross-region similarities and differences, and ultimately synthesized into a cohesive framework of recommendations for national and Southern funders to better engage in equity work in the South.

CONNECT WITH US



1900 L ST NW, SUITE 825
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036
(202) 387-9177 • INFO@NCRP.ORG
WWW.NCRP.ORG



@NCRP



/NCRPCOMMUNITY

GRANTMAKERS —
FOR SOUTHERN
— PROGRESS

(404) 919-6477
LGLENN@MRBF.ORG
NWILLIAMS@HILLSNOWDON.ORG



@SOUTHERNGRANTS



/SOUTHERNGRANTS