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Equity, affinity funds are growing in Boston philanthropy



Natanja Craig Oquendo is executive director at the Boston Women's Fund.

GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Charitable giving is on the rise and a new kind of fund is growing quickly as a result.

Equity funds, part of a group of philanthropic funds known as identity or affinity funds, are a relatively new and growing type of philanthropic finance vehicle. They're funds that exist to serve the needs of specific groups of people that have historically received a disproportionately small amount of philanthropic giving and attention. And they're currently seeing a surge in donations.

[Natanja Craig-Oquendo](#) has been running the 36-year-old Boston Women's Fund for about 10 months. But the fund noticed an uptick in donations beginning about two years ago.

“Our political climate has a lot to do with it,” she said. “I actually think that when we think about some of the policies that our government was putting in place, whether it was around our trans, brothers and sisters not being able to join the forces, whether it was around, undocumented communities and the way they were treated.”

Over the past 34 years, BWF has granted more than \$6.3 million to over 335 grassroots organizations. Craig-Oquendo said awarding the grants isn't complicated.

“You know it’s not rocket science,” she said. “It really is about investing in leadership. We all know when we see a great leader. We know when we see a young person who is already leading. Sometimes we just need to invest and get out of the way, and watch what happens.”

The Latino Equity Fund is the first Latino-focused fund in Greater Boston. Founded in 2013, the fund was formerly called the Latino Legacy Fund supports organizations that help Latinos reach their full potential with grants that typically range from \$10,000 to \$25,000. The fund’s co-founder and co-chair, [Aixa Beauchamp](#), said the majority of the roughly \$700,000 the organization has given away to date has come from board members and their companies, but that is changing.

“Our committee members are mostly Latino leaders in the business sector in the health sector and the entrepreneur sector,” she said. “They’ve given the bulk of the monies for the creation and the disbursement of funding. It’s really important that we look at how our donors are primarily of community leaders of leaders of color.”

Beauchamp attributes the recent uptick in charitable donations to the racial reckoning happening across the United States. Historically, she said only about 1 percent of charitable giving has gone to Latino-led organizations.

“When you’re talking about a \$50 billion industry, you can see we have equity issues,” she said. “This is our moment in time. We have a real opportunity to correct these things – let’s not blow it. When we have the media really focusing on this issues, it drives momentum.”

Paul Lee, founding member of the Asian Community Fund, said Asian philanthropic organizations receive significantly less philanthropic support primarily because of the myth that they are the model minority: quiet, hard-working, strong family values and are “well-behaved.” It’s a myth, he reiterates, because for starters 30 percent of the community is living in poverty.

“We saw other communities with funds getting philanthropic attention,” he said. “We wanted to form this fund so that we could hopefully help the traditional funders understand the needs of our community better. “If there’s no fund for the Asian community, then they’re simply left out of the discussion.”

Since March, when eight people (mostly Asian-American women) were murdered in an Atlanta Spa, the fund has seen a noticeable increase in donations.

“We have had a number of statements of support for our community, issued by nonprofit groups and corporations and they have listed Asian charities to contribute to if you want to help, so that that has attracted some funding,” he said. “It doesn’t seem like it’s been as much as we’d we’d hoped for, but it’s more than it has been, and we appreciate that.”

Since the fund was created in 2019, it’s raised nearly \$2 million in donations and pledges. This year they will begin making grants.

In 2012, Catherine D’Amato co-founded The Equality Fund which grants to organizations that serve the needs of the LGBTQ community. The president and CEO of the Greater Boston Food Bank and the fund’s co-founder, lawyer [Scott Squillace](#), initially set out to build only a substantial endowment. But speaking with advocates in the community early on, they learned more about the immediacy of the needs.

“One of the things we learned from the community was they needed help now,” she said. “We were not in this to set up an annual fundraising plan. But we made the commitment and thought it made sense and we built it.”

They're building the Equity Fund endowment through bequests and through annual fundraising, give about \$180,000 in grants each year. D'Amato, a nonprofit CEO herself, is involved in other philanthropic organizations and she said she sees charitable giving on the rise across the board.

“In general, when Americans see that people are hurting, you're going to see that kind of response,” she said. “Now, relative to the LGBTQ community, there's greater awareness about what the needs are, especially around trans youth. Parents are actively engaged and involved in helping, not just their children, but in helping their children be in the world and be accepted and be a part of society. And so I think that it's an overall positive move forward.”

The Asian Community Fund, The Equity Fund and the Latino Equity Fund are all under the umbrella of The Boston Foundation.

The Equality Fund (established 2012)

- 2019 donations: \$181,000
- 2019 grants made: \$175,000
- 2020 donations: \$132,000
- 2020 grants made: \$167,000

The Latino Equity Fund (established 2013)

- 2019 donations: \$86,000
- 2019 grants made: \$86,000
- 2020 donations: \$297,000
- 2020 grants made: \$264,000

The Asian Community Fund (established 2019)

- 2019 donations: \$471,000
- 2020 donations: \$739,000

Note: This fund will begin a grantmaking program in 2021.

The Boston Women's Fund (established 1984)

- Fiscal 2020-2021 grants: \$395,000

SOURCE: THE BOSTON FOUNDATION, BOSTON WOMEN'S FUND

<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2021/04/28/equity-affinity-funds-are-growing-in-boston-phila.html>

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