

New Community Foundation Aims to Combat Islamophobia

By Rebecca Koenig

Capitalizing on charitable giving associated with the holy month of Ramadan, a young fundraiser is launching a new community foundation designed to attract American Muslims to donor-advised funds.

Muhi Khwaja, 32, a California major-gift fundraiser at the American Red Cross, is starting the American Muslim Fund, in part to help "showcase the philanthropic power of the American Muslim community," he says. "With all of the Islamophobic rhetoric that has been taking place, we hope that we can change the narrative of what Islam means to people in the U.S."

Unlike traditional community foundations that serve specific geographic regions, the American Muslim Fund is designed to reach Muslims of all ethnic backgrounds — and anyone else who supports its mission — across the country. The minimum required to create a fund is \$2,500, a figure Mr. Khwaja selected because it's the average amount American households gave to charity in 2015, according to the 2016 U.S. Trust Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy.

So far, 13 families have given a total of more than \$160,000 to open donor-advised funds and supported nonprofits including Human Rights Campaign, Islamic Relief USA, and the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

The foundation will use its endowment funds to make grants in seven areas, some directly tied to Muslims: interfaith dialogue, education, Muslim art, mosques, incarcerated Muslims, converts to Islam, and general civic engagement. Secular nonprofits that aid or work with Muslims will be welcome to apply for grants.

Mr. Khwaja hopes to raise \$50,000 for operating costs by the end of Ramadan, on June 24, through a campaign on the Muslim crowdfunding platform LaunchGood and \$150,000 by the end of 2017, with an ultimate goal of raising \$5 million for the endowment by the end of 2020.

Muslim Pride

Charities divide their donor lists by characteristics like gender and race, but they don't often keep track of which donors are Muslim, Mr. Khwaja says. So if a Muslim family makes a donation to a local food bank or domestic-violence shelter, their gift won't likely register as "Muslim philanthropy" internally or in the broader community.

He's betting that Muslim donors will appreciate the chance to tie their faith to their charitable giving. After all, a gift to a food bank from the American Muslim Fund makes a statement, he says.

Mr. Khwaja recruited his first donors through people he knew from his work raising money for organizations including Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and a social-service group called Ta'leef Collective. He conducted several focus groups with donors, asking them about their giving habits, what causes they felt were most in need of support, and whether they'd be interested in giving through a donor-advised fund.

Among the first donors were Amer Haider, co-founder of digital health company Doctella, and his wife, Munira Shamim, who give to causes such as civil liberties, science, education, and people with disabilities.

"When I support organizations, I would love for them to know me as a contributing Muslim American," Ms. Shamim says. "I like to give under the umbrella of my faith, because it's a religious duty, and at the same time, I think there's a lot of bridge building and interfaith work that can take place, given our current political and social times."

Mr. Khwaja also hopes the community foundation appeals to non-Muslim donors who want to help Muslims.

"If you are looking for opportunities to ally or show solidarity with the Muslim community, the American Muslim Fund is an organization that can help allocate your donation to great causes," he says.

Giving Circles

To encourage collective giving, Mr. Khwaja also hopes to organize giving circles in cities across the United States through which donors to the community foundation can decide how and where to direct their pooled charity.

Jewish donors have used giving circles for many years to magnify the effects of their dollars, build community bonds, and practice their religious requirements to give back, according to Joelle Asaro Berman, executive director of Amplifier, an umbrella group for giving circles.

"Giving circles represent a way for people of a marginalized community to divert wealth back in to their community that may not receive philanthropy otherwise," she says. "I've heard people say that giving circles are a way for us to build power."

Ms. Berman, who has recently had conversations with Muslim leaders interested in starting giving circles, thinks it has the potential to be an effective way for Muslims to demonstrate their values.

"If that group is coming together and makes a decision to contribute their funds to something that betters a broader group of people, that's making a statement about their commitment to civic engagement," she says.

The extent to which giving circles take root in different cities is one way Mr. Khwaja will measure the success of the American Muslim Fund.

"We want to be seen as an all-encompassing Muslim organization," he says. "We're doing our best to connect with communities across the U.S. for that."

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