

Inside Philanthropy

The Power of the Hive: New Climate Fund Centers Southern Women of Color

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AN EMERGENCY SHELTER IN HOUSTON AFTER HURRICANE HARVEY. MICHELMOND/SHUTTERSTOCK

The new Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice seeks to catalyze a deeply rooted climate response in the South by centering the leadership of black, Indigenous and other women of color. Southern women of color have a long track record of advancing social justice. They also play a pivotal role in grassroots environmental movements in the U.S. (and Global) South, leading groups that are often overlooked by grantmakers in favor of larger, more institutional, white- and male-led nonprofits.

The South faces high levels of pollution and unprecedented climate threats to its coastlines, which greatly affect poor people and those of color. And it's long been a hotbed for social and racial equity issues and movements. The new fund sees climate, gender and social justice as intertwined and underfunded in this diverse and somewhat beleaguered region of the U.S. Its first round of grants will deliver \$3 million in general operating support to 13 groups over three years.

The collaborative's current funders include the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, McKnight Foundation, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Women Donors Network, and Wend Collective. While the new fund is unusually explicit in its gender-climate-justice-focus, most of these grantmakers have previously supported groups that work in frontline environmental justice. (Hive is the first climate/environmental justice grantee for the [Wend](#) social impact fund, though it has other, similar grantmaking in the works).

The Hive Fund's mission to follow the leadership of diverse women is embodied in its team; the members of its participatory decision-making working group and advisory board are all women, and many are women of color activists and nonprofit leaders.

The fund also has affiliate partners making aligned grants, including the WE LEAD Fund at the Tides Foundation and Mertz Gilmore Foundation. The first aligned grants total \$500,000 over one year. The Windward Fund is the fiscal sponsor.

The Hive Fund isn't the first significant funding effort to tie justice movements and climate change responses together—the Climate Justice Resilience Fund, Climate Justice Alliance, Grassroots Climate Solutions Fund, and the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund are a few other examples. We recently [checked in](#) with the Kresge Foundation's Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity (CRUO) initiative, a \$29 million effort that prioritized work by frontline communities. And in 2019, the Solutions Project, which calls for 100% clean energy, [committed](#) to investing 95% of its resources in frontline leadership by people of color, with at least 80% for women-led groups.

Between 2011 and 2015, only [about 3%](#) of giving from top climate funders went to climate justice, so there's plenty of room for growth. And the Hive Fund's weaving of the U.S. South into its multilayered strategy seems especially well-aligned to multiple loci of power and need.

In general, southern grantmaking is on the rise, according to a 2017 [report](#) from the Southeastern Council of Foundations and MDC. But while support for movement building and structural reform in the South is gaining traction, these strategies remain underfunded. A research series called “[As the South Grows](#)” found that from 2011 to 2015, foundations provided about 11 cents per person for structural change work in the South for every dollar per person nationally.

Why the South May Need a Hive

The Southern U.S. is a fertile and troubled landscape, ecologically and socially. The [Hive Fund](#) points out that the nation’s civic and democratic identity continues to be forged in this region, such as in Georgia’s 2018 [gubernatorial race](#), when voting rights were undermined, especially for people of color. Georgia is one of two states the fund focused on in its first round of grants—the other is Texas, a state with a strong cohort of young activists.

More than half of the Texas population is under age 35, “and these young people are engaged,” Erin Rogers, a Hive Fund co-director, said. In the last election cycle, Texas youth early voting was up [500%](#). These states’ (and the entire South’s) pivotal role in the country’s evolving political identity is one reason they were selected by the fund.

Another reason is that the biodiverse lands and waters of the South are a major hub for extractive industries, producing and experiencing a disproportionate amount of U.S. climate pollution. Texas produces more than double the global warming pollution of any other state. Meanwhile, Georgia is home to Plant Scherer, the most carbon-polluting power plant in the country.

Not surprisingly, the South is [expected to suffer](#) some of the worst economic impacts of climate change in the U.S. As we’ve [covered](#), overlooked, marginalized and poor communities in this region are often

prone to flooding, subjected to more pollution, and, as communities with significant black, Native and Hispanic populations, they experience institutionalized racism and poverty.

Around the world, poor women and those of color who already face marginalization are [more likely](#) to be impacted and displaced by climate change—a trend that can be seen playing out in the U.S. South. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that [83%](#) of low-income, single mothers did not return to their New Orleans homes after Katrina.

Women remain under-supported by philanthropy across the board, especially those of color. In 2012, 5.4% of southern foundation funding went to programs focused on women and girls, and less than 1% to programs focused on black women and girls, according to the [Unequal Lives](#) report.

About [half of climate funding](#) currently goes to about 20 national organizations, which are overwhelmingly led by white men. Grassroots southern groups led by women of color already have experience fighting for equity and adapting to a changing climate, yet are still sidestepped by mainstream philanthropy. The Hive Fund seeks to shift this paradigm.

Building a Powerful Hive From the Ground up

In 2017, Rogers managed the U.S. climate change portfolio at the Hewlett Foundation. She said she, Jane Breyer of the Energy Foundation, and Jess Houssian of Women Moving Millions discussed their “shared personal commitments [to climate] and gender justice [and] shared frustration with philanthropic issue silos.”

Over the next two years, their conversations widened to include more members of the funding and nonprofit sectors. A vision for a 10-year climate and gender justice fund emerged. The principals formed an advisory board, and it hired Rogers and Melanie Allen, who previously

launched the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation's Energy Equity portfolio, as co-directors.

The Hive's board includes reps from the Equity Fund, Energy Foundation, Women Moving Millions, Women Donors Network, the Partnership for Southern Equity, the Land Memory Bank and Seed Exchange, and the NAACP, along with a co-founder of Black Lives Matter Phoenix Metro, and a founder and former president of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice. Its participatory decision-making working group draws from some of the same groups, as well as the NDN Collective, Louisiana Ratepayer Advocacy Organization, SolNation, Neo Philanthropy, the North Carolina Justice Network and Air Alliance Houston.

The working group helped the fund design its grantmaking values and strategy, while additional stakeholders (activists, organizers, etc.) from Georgia and Texas co-authored the strategy and recommended potential grantees. The first grantees were drawn from among these stakeholder groups. "Erin and I spent time on the ground in Texas and Georgia," Allen said. "We broke bread with leaders doing this work and visited communities." The co-directors made the final grantee and funding decisions.

A full list of Georgia and Texas grantees is [here](#). They carry out citizen science, policy research and advocacy, civic engagement, youth organizing, and other approaches to address air pollution, environmental health and racial justice, women's working conditions, voting rights, food access, conservation, and more. And about 30% of the grantees this round are regional and national—many work with creative expression, culture change, media campaigns and young people's activism.

One of the Hive Fund's stated grantmaking practices is to "move away from extractive philanthropic practices toward more transformative and regenerative approaches." This language obviously mirrors that used to describe a just transition away from fossil fuels.

As an example of an extractive practice, Rogers cites short-term support geared toward a specific result, but which doesn't fund "all the things that are necessary for the organization to exist and have the capability to deliver that result." Funders requiring extensive report writing on metrics that are often not directly relevant or helpful to grantees is another. Expecting grantees to educate and host funders without compensation is also a practice the Hive Fund wants to avoid. We have seen many funders step away from these "extractive" methods in response to the pandemic.

"For many of our grantee-partners, [these] are the first multiyear grants they've ever received. Several [mentioned] the psychological impact of secure funding, in addition to the decreased fundraising workload," Allen said.

While the rapid escalation of climate change and the ongoing related political resistance and polarization in the U.S. are major challenges to their mission, Allen and Rogers are passionate and optimistic at this juncture. They say COVID-19, along with further exacerbating racial disparity in the U.S., among other harms, is also "creating a broader recognition that big things must and can shift, and that trillions of dollars can move quickly," as Rogers puts it.

And during the pandemic, Allen said, "[Women], and especially women of color, are weaving tapestries of mutual aid and care while demanding more of governments, institutions and leaders at all levels." She also said, "Like the work of bees in nature, few people see the work of local community leaders, but we all benefit from the beauty of the blossoms and the products of the hive."