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Green Grantmaking Program Offers Alternative Paths for Getting Funding to the Grassroots — Inside Philanthropy

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A couple years ago, Kim Moore Bailey embarked on a series of conversations with the heads of the small, grassroots environmental groups that her organization, [Justice Outside](#), supports. The leaders, who were all Black, Indigenous or people of color, kept telling her similar stories about their experiences with philanthropy.

“They were being asked to be something they weren’t. Expand what they were doing. Serve a population or a community they didn’t want to work with,” said Moore Bailey, who is Justice Outside’s CEO. “It was this moment for me to say, so how can we do this better?”

The result was a new grantmaking program, [Liberated Paths](#), that works to build close and trusting relationships with grantees that allow them to pursue their own visions, while also reimagining or jettisoning many long-standing philanthropic requirements—from written applications to 501(c)(3) status—that those leaders had told her were barriers.

With grants anticipated to reach \$1 million this year, and a steadily growing list of funders, the program is one of several efforts that are [working to correct historic disparities](#) in funding between BIPOC- and white-led groups—a gap [research](#) has [repeatedly](#) found, including Moore Bailey’s focus groups—and build a more just and equitable outdoor and environmental movement.

As major new funding flows into the environmental space, most prominently from multibillion-dollar climate pledges from mega-philanthropists like Jeff Bezos and [Laurene Powell Jobs](#), Liberated Paths also demonstrates another route via which such givers can reach frontline organizers and communities of color without having to identify individual groups or cut dozens of small checks.

It is a path seeded by some of the nation’s biggest green funders. The program got off the ground thanks to multi-year grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (\$1 million), David and Lucile Packard Foundation (\$250,000) and The North Face (\$100,000).

And that support continues. Hewlett has since renewed its commitment, and Packard increased its funding to \$750,000. New funders have also come on board, including the outdoor retailer [evo](#) (\$250,000), National Philanthropic Trust (\$250,000), Meyer Memorial Trust (\$185,000), Chrysalis Fund (\$50,000) and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation (\$25,000). Additional general support backs Justice Outside’s recent work.

How Liberated Paths makes grants

Justice Outside’s unusual approach to grantmaking was apparent in its first step upon starting Liberated Paths. “We launched, for the lack of a better word, a book club,” Moore Bailey said.

As reading, they chose a piece on trust-based philanthropy. As hosts, they picked trusted allies in the states where they would be granting—Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. And in a [series of webinars](#), they spoke with potential grantees about the explicit role of race in Liberated Path, the racial funding gap and racial bias in philanthropy.

“We used the article to start to build relationships,” she said. “We started to have that dialogue without it being, ‘Can we get the grant? Can we not get the grant? Can my application get accepted or not?’”

Applications were also different. Many leaders had told Moore Bailey they “didn’t have or couldn’t afford a grant writer, but did have an iPhone,” she told me. So Liberated Paths accepts video submissions. It is a popular option: Of the 40 applications they received in their first year, half were videos.

Those early conversations with leaders have guided their offerings. “Many of the individuals we spoke with said, ‘You know, funding is great, but the idea of also receiving some capacity building and organizational training was actually more exciting,’” said

Moore Bailey. Thus, beyond funding, the program trains recipients on topics like nonprofit administration and operations, communication via storytelling, and fund development.

They also follow many oft-advocated equitable grantmaking practices: Organization size is not a factor. Nor is 501(c)(3) status. Grants are for general operating support and are multi-year. And Justice Outside compensates the allies who connected them with local organizations for their time.

One seed funder's perspective

For many years, the Packard Foundation has supported groups working to make the environmental movement more welcoming and representative of all voices. It has funded organizations like Azul, which works with Latinx communities on marine conservation, and Green 2.0, which works to track diversity and inclusion in the sector and hold organizations accountable. Those efforts accelerated in 2020, when the foundation pledged \$100 million over five years to support justice and equity for Black people and people of color in the U.S.

“One of the pieces we’ve realized is really critical to the conservation efforts that we’re supporting in the U.S. ... is really having a broad and diverse set of advocates,” said [Heather Ludemann](#), a program officer at Packard and the head of the U.S. Marine Strategy team.

After meeting with Moore Bailey a couple years ago, Ludemann saw an opportunity to reach beyond her team’s existing grantees, which she said represent only “a slice” of the communities that care about oceans and marine life. She said it fit with a concerted effort by Packard in recent years to put more support behind organizations led by and working in communities of color.

“We recognize as a funder, we’re limited by our existing networks,” said Ludemann. “Kim and [Justice] Outside would be bringing a broader network that we didn’t necessarily have access to. And would be bringing capacity that we don’t have, particularly in working with smaller organizations, some of which don’t necessarily have a 501(c)(3)” and need hands-on support.

Packard operates with a small staff for a grantmaker of its size. The U.S. Marine Strategy team, for instance, consists of two people: Ludemann and one colleague. Working with intermediaries like Justice Outside makes it possible to get funding into the hands of smaller, grassroots organizations toward which granting individually would be too onerous. It’s a method they have used before, such as with their [support for the Colorado Plateau Foundation](#) or the Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice.

What's next?

Over the past few years, some of the world’s biggest green philanthropies and mega-givers have begun backing a diverse array of environmental justice funding intermediaries. Bezos, notably, [gave \\$43 million each](#) to three such funds, some of which had already

benefited from votes of confidence—and checks—from the field’s biggest environmental foundations. The shift is part of an overdue recognition that movement leaders outside the largely white-led big greens, long dominant in the space, require more funding.

With that recognition comes a whole new set of questions about these intermediaries themselves, including who created them and why, and how accountable they are to the communities they serve. All intermediaries, in other words, are not created equal.

Justice Outside is an interesting addition to this growing list. Founded nearly a decade ago with a \$10.7 million gift from [Stewardship Council](#), 70% of which they were required to regrant, the organization has always been a regrantor. Yet its identity is not solely that of an intermediary. It runs a pretty substantial [list of programs](#)—and has come a long way since its start. Formed as Youth Outside, with a mission to support organizations connecting “urban youth” to the outdoors, it [updated](#) its name this year to better reflect the full scope of the work it does—and its broad sense of its role in the journey toward justice.

With this latest infusion of funding, Justice Outside is continuing its grantmaking, albeit on a small scale. For now, Liberated Paths grants range from \$5,000 to \$20,000. The program also only operates in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. And funding in each region has [restrictions](#).

Liberated Paths recently [closed](#) its second round of applications. Moore Bailey would like the program to grow, both to expand nationally and to provide more funding to those who need it. The arduous process of raising money to make that possible puts her in the shoes of those would-be grantees. It’s a perspective almost inherent in being an intermediary fund—and it helps guide her.

“Our success really hinges on someone else making decisions, whether or not we’re worthy of funding, and how humbling that is, and how hard that is,” she told me. “When we have a chance to be a grantor, that’s where we’re coming from.”