



Situation

Each generation experiences defining events that disrupt the status quo, creating windows of opportunity for radical transformation. It's been said, we are all experiencing the same storm, COVID-19, but we are not all in the same boat. The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 were actualized immediately by those living the realities of inequality. Social scientists observing conditions realized this within a matter of days, institutions collecting data knew within a matter of weeks, and others that had been insulated from the proximate impact of inequality started asking questions. According to American Public Media, as of May 19th, race and ethnicity data has been collected for 88% of the COVID-19 deaths nationally. The mortality rates for African Americans is 2.4 times that of whites and 2.2 times as high as the rate for those that identify as Asian and Hispanic. It is true that the virus itself doesn't discriminate, but these figures highlight that generations of compounded systemic discrimination has resulted in disproportionate mortality rates experienced by African Americans.

The stark disparities made clear through the impacts of COVID-19 require a different type of response. A recent article in the New York Times pinpoints COVID-19 as a crossroads for foundations, highlighting that there will either be a return to the status quo, or that this moment will be used to evaluate different ways to fund groups in need. Unlike isolated crises of the past, well-intended recovery efforts through a lens of equality will not be successful at addressing the disproportionate realities made visible by the pandemic. To be genuine in fulfilling missions of service, non-profit and philanthropic organizations must be honest in acknowledging the need to holistically transform operations by institutionalizing equity and inclusion as business imperatives and creating trusting relationships with those they seek to serve.

No institution that is sincere in their desire to produce equal outcomes can afford not to make the investment. Universally, budgets are challenged and staff are over extended, but this is not the time to abandon diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Instead, it's time to double down and put DEI into practice. As a part of their equity and inclusion journey, [United Way of Washtenaw County \(UWWC\)](#) has committed to transparency in sharing learning in informal and formal ways. Through this case study it is their goal to share a path that informs how fiscal agents can leverage their roles as community citizens, funders, employers, and economic entities to create more enlightened communities, unified in the pursuit of creating more equitable outcomes for all.



Background

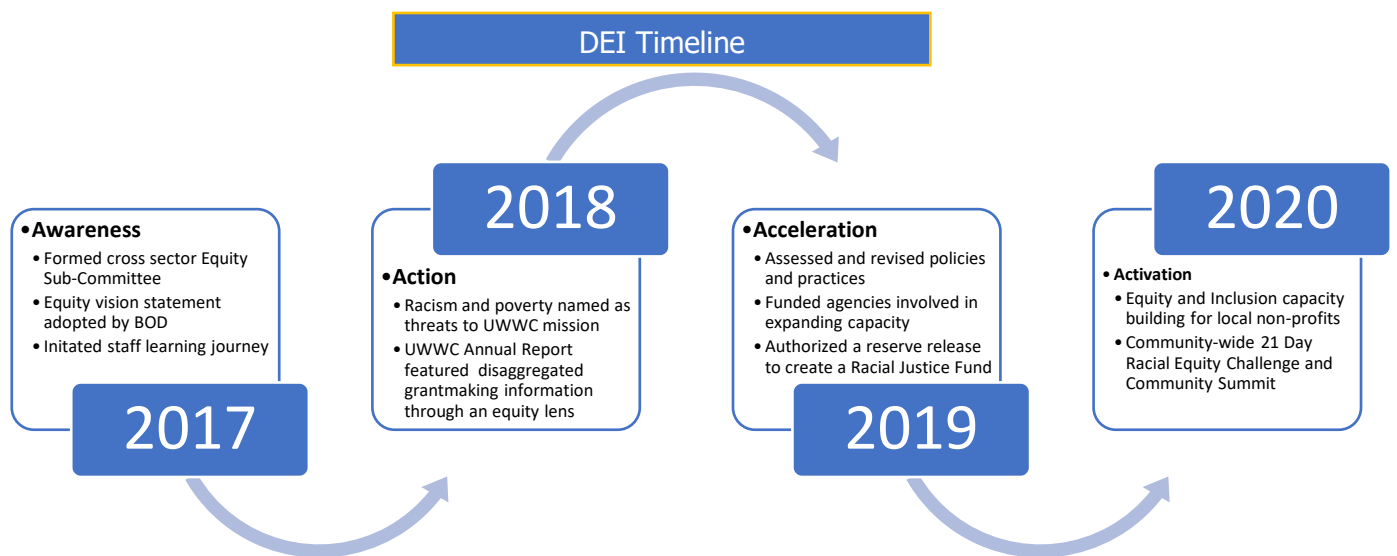
Washtenaw County is most notably known for its college towns, and being home to the University of Michigan. Less than three miles down the road from the Big House, UWWC which is the cornerstone of the broader community, serves a [county of 358,000](#) and focuses specifically on issues related to poverty and inequity, two factors that systemically marginalizes some of our neighborhoods.



Building on a 99-year history, UWWC CONNECTs people, resources, and organizations TOGETHER to create a thriving community for EVERYONE. With such stark disparities, we realized that many in our community weren't thriving, and far too often those that required the most to thrive were people of color and those living in more rural zip codes. Like many legacy organizations, the path to sustainable change

takes time and starts at the top of an organization. And in our case, it started with the UWWC Board of Directors (BOD). In 2016, the BOD embraced the opportunity to lay the foundation for the organization to model diversity, equity, and inclusion, a key aspect of a Modern United Way. This commitment birthed a new strategic vision recognizing that the strength and vitality of an entire community is tied to just and equitable access to resources and opportunities. By explicitly living the values of Caring, Integrity, Volunteerism, Inclusiveness, Community, and Equity, UWWC has been successful at:

1. **Engaging** in a learning journey to better understand the community and opportunities to be responsive to their needs.
2. **Building** authentic relationships and partnerships to fund grass-root efforts, supporting those most proximate with lived experience.
3. **Uniting** the community around racial equity to address local disparities.



Through our years of work **engaging**, **building**, and **uniting** we have found that the solutions to problems of disparities lay at the intersection of actualizing the power of equity and being inclusive in co-creating strategies to address community challenges with members of the community. Our consistent investments in scaling this philosophy has catalyzed unlikely partnerships, earning us respect as individual leaders. Additionally, through brand reputation the trust of a vastly diverse set of stakeholders. We found that due to historical traumas and in some instances fear, community members seek solutions in places where they can experience culturally proficient providers that understand both their needs and their lived experiences. To be successful, it is imperative that you have strong relationships across all segments of your community extending beyond the isolated programmatic services facilitated through traditionally funded partners. We catalog our COVID-19 response in centering equity and community with the caveat that this same approach would provide more impactful outcomes in any community crisis or disaster.



UWWC Centering Equity in COVID-19 Response

When disaster hit, we did not have to engage in lengthy planning to get buy-in from stakeholders rationalizing why we needed to center equity in our COVID-19 response. At UWWC, we practice equity as a critical component of harm reduction all the time, so it was inherent during this time of crisis when blind spots could have been detrimental to those that were already struggling. We strive

to be seen as trusted partners and because of this we were able to quickly galvanize our community to maximize revenue to fuel impact for everyone in need, with hyper focus investment directed at communities most disproportionately impacted ([Complete COVID-19 Community Relief Fund Overview](#)). In early April, the high prevalence of COVID-19 cases in Michigan made national headlines along with the disproportionate impact on African Americans in Detroit. Despite its smaller size, Washtenaw County is a microcosm of larger geographies with reflective COVID-19 data:

Lab-Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in Washtenaw County by Race (as of 5/27)

Racial or Ethnic Group	% of cases	% of hospitalized	% of deaths	% of county population
Am. Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	0%	0%	0.4%
Asian	4%	4%	1%	9.7%
Black or African American	34%	41%	29%	12.3%
Native Hawaiian or Pac. Islander	<1%	<1%	2%	0.1%
White	56%	52%	68%	74.1%
Unknown	6%	3%	0%	
Hispanic or Latino (all races)	2%	2%	2%	4.8%

Source: Washtenaw County Health Department

In response to the data above, our earlier investment in institutionalizing equity had very specific outcomes as we centered the following guiding questions during our COVID-19 response:

Guiding Questions	Outcomes*	Quotes from the community
As a Community Citizen how are we being supportive partners in educating and guiding our community towards a more equitable future in response, recovery, and revitalization efforts?	As a Community Citizen we have launched a COVID-19 Edition of the Equity Challenge in May 2020 to make the connection between the virus' impact on Black and Brown communities and systemic racism.	"We appreciate the focus United Way has demonstrated towards addressing the health disparities. Their equity work has expanded their partnerships to reach deeper into community, working alongside people to build solutions. They are working towards making the zip code you live in does not determine your health outcomes by seriously evaluating their distribution of grantmaking resources and community investment. As a health department that is committed to community engagement and health equity, organizational partners like UWWC help us to address the social determinants of health through cross-sector collaboration." -Jimena Loveluck, Health Officer, Washtenaw County Health Department
As a Funder how are we being intentional about allocating resources to communities with the greatest needs and trusting those most proximate to facilitate the process?	As a Funder UWWC is prioritizing organizations providing services that are addressing disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on people of color, community groups who are not 501(c)(3)'s but are integrated in communities most significantly impacted, smaller nonprofits (those with annual revenues below \$500,000), and zip codes most impacted by COVID-19.	"We are extremely grateful that UWWC has removed barriers to the grant application and reporting process, truly demonstrating their trust in our ability to best meet the needs of the community we represent and serve: primarily Spanish-speaking immigrant youth and their families in low income, priority zip codes. This recent example of success in being able to quickly provide resources to the community is a testament to our longstanding, trusting relationship with the UWWC." - Charo Ledon, Buenos Vecinos & Rosemary Linares, Cross Movement Social Justice Consulting

<p>As an Employer how are we putting people before process, giving grace, and balancing expectations?</p>	<p>As an Employer we are upholding a culture of inclusion by training on self-care, coaching leaders on handling difficult conversations, increasing alternate work arrangements, providing PPE supplies for those that need it in their homes, continuing our practice of an equity moment to begin each staff meeting, sending handwritten notes, and playing games with gift card prizes.</p>	<p>"Our team members are our greatest asset. Prioritizing and practicing a culture of inclusiveness with staff has been extremely important to me. We have taken action to boost staff morale during the pandemic by conducting regular check ins and sending out a confidential survey to address their concerns about safely returning to the office. To be our best for the community we needed to first care for our staff, understanding we each have our own story and need to be seen." - Pam Smith, President & CEO, UWWC</p>
<p>As an Economic Entity how are we mobilizing our community to invest resources that support those most disproportionately impacted?</p>	<p>As an Economic Entity, in two months UWWC raised over 1 million dollars for our COVID-19 Community Relief Fund. Of those funds, 43% were awarded within the first week of distribution. The process included evaluation criteria around target population, geography, priority areas and needs. This process was facilitated by centering the importance of supporting organizations led by people of color and those providing solutions to members of communities disproportionately impacted.</p>	<p>"UWWC has been focused with their funding and programming. Raising money is not easy, especially in a smaller community like Washtenaw County. However, they have been successful at mobilizing our residents and businesses during the crisis. They also provide free services for those who suffer from the "poor tax." For example, the VITA Tax Program provides dollars back in the pockets tax payers in the form of tax refunds they were not getting before utilizing VITA. UWWC quietly proves over and over that they are invested in digging deep to support our community and economic development growth via investment and services." Rich Chang, CEO, NewFoundry Chair, Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Regional Chamber of Commerce</p>

**all outcomes identified are solely based on COVID-19 response, not inclusive of year-round giving and procedures*



Recommendations

UWWC strives to build leadership capacity and gain external recognition for equitable practices and community outcomes. This case study is shared to highlight our journey towards institutionalizing equity. In order to enhance effectiveness in fulfillment of the mission, it is critical that equity become integrated into every facet of the organization and holistically embraced. It is also noteworthy to highlight that we do not have a fulltime staff position dedicated to advancing our DEI work. This has been a collective effort that has heavily relied upon dedicated volunteers and consultants that helped to shape our vision and path for integrating equity and inclusion. As staff we practice individual and shared accountability to uphold the expectation that we center equity in all of our work; we hold all volunteers to the same standards. These recommendations offer guidance on opportunity areas, and progress is defined when the following are achieved and reflected:

- ✓ **Board Membership & Employment** - Board, committees and staff are reflective and inclusive of community demographics. Examples areas include: Board Governance Practices and Human Resources
- ✓ **Programming & Community Investment** - Create and implement programs that recognize cultural differences and treat all clients with dignity. Commit to using an equity lens to clarify objectives, shape strategies, and invest resources to end the historical, social and systemic

inequities that persist in the community. Example areas include: Grant Making, Non-Profit Capacity Building, Advocacy and Community Engagement

- ✓ **Policies and Procedures** - The fair and equitable application of our organizational policies and procedures, as part of our strategic plan, and within our organizational goals. Examples areas include: Operations and Supplier Diversity
- ✓ **Stakeholder Engagement** - Share commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values and guiding practices. Encourage stakeholders to explore and embrace these values. Examples areas include: Communications/ Marketing and Donor Engagement

References:

<https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/your-money/philanthropy-race.html>

<https://www.uwwashtenaw.org/ALICE>

<https://www.washtenaw.org/3108/Cases>

<https://www.uwwashtenaw.org/sites/uwwashtenaw.org/files/UWWC%20Annual%20Report%202019.pdf>

Appendix:

INVESTMENTS IN NONPROFIT CAPACITY

	2017	2018	2019
Grants to address socioeconomic equity	87%	91%	93%
Grants intended to address racial inequity	71%	75%	85%
Capacity building to support leaders of color	64%	89%	88%
Grants to 48197/98- geographies that have the most to gain	52%	63%	78%

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