In the midst of layered and intersecting crises, we are facing a watershed moment. As a nation and here in Orange County, we must respond to a novel pandemic as it wreaks havoc on our economic and health systems—hitting nonprofits and the vulnerable populations they serve especially hard—while confronting the long-term effects of systemic racism, injustice and inequality.

In this unique moment of both challenge and opportunity, philanthropy can not only rise to the occasion, but take the lead. We’ve already seen philanthropy mount a groundbreaking response over the last four months, dramatically increasing contributions to support vulnerable populations. Worldwide, charitable gifts from corporations, foundations, faith-based organizations and individuals hit a record $10 billion through the end of April, with two-thirds originating in the United States.

Across the country, community foundations such as the Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF) saw grantmaking surge by 57% in March and April compared to the same period last year—mobilizing more than $1 billion to support on-the-ground efforts by nonprofits meeting challenges created by the pandemic. OCCF’s generous donors granted a staggering $34 million over the past four months alone.

We’re proud to see this call to action being answered in inspiring ways by the Orange County community as new models of collective response, the creativity of our business sector and the passions of philanthropic individuals and families are being mobilized to help all our residents to thrive.

Collective Action

In the first weeks of the pandemic, OCCF joined forces with Charitable Ventures, Orange County Grantmakers, St. Joseph Community Partnership Fund and other regional funders to launch the OC Community Resilience Fund.

It’s an acceleration of private philanthropy to address the most immediate needs of local nonprofit organizations and our most vulnerable neighbors. In a few short weeks, the Fund awarded nearly $4.2 million to 162 OC nonprofits providing medical services through community clinics, access to food and child care, as well as support for the home- less, elderly and other at-risk populations. This unprecedented philanthropic response is testament to the compassion of our community, but also serves as a case study in collective impact.

In a moment of great need—and openness to innovative partners—the Fund coordinated a philanthropic effort between regional funding partners, foundations of major corporations and banks, individual donors and private foundations to focus resources, share infrastructure, streamline efforts and maximize impact. With the initial granting effort complete, the Fund will reallocate funds, share infrastructure, streamline efforts and maximize impact.

At OCCF, we have made a public commitment to answer this call! We recently launched a Racial Justice and Equity working group of our board to develop a plan for both immediate action and a long-term commitment to build a more just, civil and equitable Orange County. One of our initial tools will be the African American Alliance Fund, founded in June to raise awareness about systemic racism and support programs for African Americans in Orange County and surrounding areas. This is the first of a comprehensive plan and lasting commitment to invest in the promise and potential of diverse communities throughout Orange County.

We are a county that is stronger together—and in this moment especially, philanthropy can lead the way in building a brighter future for all who call Orange County home.

Looking Forward

By Shelley Hoss

These examples of collective action, creative problem-solving and strategic philanthropy are critically important as we look ahead. We must use what we’ve learned in addressing the global health pandemic to candidly and thoughtfully examine issues of equity in our communities. We must remain agile, aligned and ready to adapt as we move to address some of the most entrenched and complex issues in our country and our local communities.

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