

Organizing for Black Lives and Funding COVID-19 Relief: Community Responses to Systemic Racism and Imagining Public Health 4.0

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Structural racism is a root cause of poor health in the United States and underlies COVID-19–related disparities for Black and Latinx populations. We describe how one community-based organization responded to structural racism and COVID-19 in Florida. Informed by the literature on how public health practice changed from emphasizing prevention (Public Health 1.0) to collaboration between governmental and public health agencies (Public Health 2.0) and examining social determinants of health (Public Health 3.0), we call for a politically engaged Public Health 4.0. (*Am J Public Health*. 2021;111(S3):S201–S203. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306408>)

Black and Latinx populations are approximately twice as likely to die of COVID-19 as their White counterparts.¹ Social inequalities underlie this mortality disparity,² and such inequalities are rooted in structural racism:³ a normalization and legitimization of advantage for White populations.⁴ Furthermore, Black and Latinx individuals who are also sexual and gender minorities, such as those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and otherwise queer identifying (LGBTQ+), may experience heightened COVID-19–related vulnerability because of intersecting social marginalization.⁵ We describe how a community-based organization that focused on racial, sexual, and gender justice in Central Florida responded to the systemic racism that undergirds COVID-19 disparities.

INTERVENTION

To combat the systemic racism that structures COVID-19 inequality, a

community-based organization in Central Florida, the Contigo Fund (hereafter “Contigo”), created two initiatives: the LGBTQ+ Relief Fund and the All Black Lives Fund (ABLF). The objective of the LGBTQ+ Relief Fund was to meet individual needs during the pandemic, and the objective of the ABLF was to invest in longer-term racial justice through funding Black-led LGBTQ+ organizations. The goal of both programs was to address structural racism through economic and political interventions.

PLACE AND TIME

Both programs responded to LGBTQ+ people of color in the Orlando, Florida, area. The LGBTQ+ Relief Fund began in March 2020, and the ABLF started in June 2020 alongside renewed national attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. These funds were particularly needed in Florida because the

state’s economy contracted owing to the pandemic, resulting in increased unemployment. Florida’s unemployment assistance program failed to meet applicants’ needs, resulting in delayed and insufficient financial assistance to the state’s population.⁶ Community organization leaders speculated that delays for Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ individuals would exacerbate existing economic and social precarity.

PERSON

The LGBTQ+ Relief Fund raised more than \$78 458 between April 2, 2020, and March 31, 2021, through philanthropic fundraising and securing grants from private foundations. Applicants were permitted to apply for small grants of up to \$500 to meet basic economic needs. Applications were available to individuals regardless of citizenship or immigration status. To be eligible for funding, applicants must have lived or worked in

the four counties that comprise the Orlando area, identify as LGBTQ+, and have lost income because of COVID-19. For the ABLF, Contigo secured a total of \$100 000 through fundraising and grant-writing efforts between an academic researcher and organization leaders. Eligibility for ABLF funding required that organizations serve Black LGBTQ+ individuals and be committed to advancing racial and gender justice.

PURPOSE

The overall purpose of the LGBTQ+ Relief Fund and the ABLF was to advance racial equity and combat systemic racism during and after the pandemic. Understanding that systemic racism is perpetuated in part by lack of economic investment in Black-led organizations, the motivation for this work was to invest in the lives of LGBTQ+ people of color and Black-led LGBTQ+ organizations to begin reversing structural racism. Accordingly, one goal of the ABLF was to create a leadership pipeline to support LGBTQ+ Black leaders and their visions for new social justice programs designed to combat the social, economic, and political disenfranchisement of Black Central Floridians.

IMPLEMENTATION

The LGBTQ+ Relief Fund was led by four LGBTQ+-focused organizations that received input from leaders of more than 40 organizations that are members of a local LGBTQ+ coalition. Because these organizations are in direct contact with the individuals they serve, they are well positioned to understand and respond to local needs. Coalition members reported high rates of economic insecurity among LGBTQ+ people of

color, including undocumented LGBTQ+ immigrants, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, Contigo created the LGBTQ+ Relief Fund specifically to address individuals' economic insecurity. The application was made available online and in person at organizations that served the target populations and was made intentionally low barrier and brief in the languages that are most commonly spoken in Central Florida (i.e., English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Vietnamese). Contigo members worked with partner organizations and the City of Orlando's LGBTQ+ community liaison to disperse information about the fund through social media and e-mail. Fifteen multilingual volunteers from community organizations reviewed the applications.

The ABLF was implemented through the formation of a community advisory board comprising leaders of Black LGBTQ+ social justice organizations. The board managed the fund, and the expected outcomes of this work are greater investment in leadership development and services for Black LGBTQ+ people in Central Florida. As of July 22, 2021, the fund had \$100 000 secured through philanthropic grant making and grassroots fundraising.

EVALUATION

The LGBTQ+ Relief Fund dispersed \$67 100 in financial assistance to 671 LGBTQ+ Floridians. Funds covered personal needs such as utility and telephone bills, rent, medication, and food. A formal evaluation of the program has not been conducted, but one organization leader explained clients' appreciation for the funds: "Folks are saying, 'My community was here for me before my government was'" (oral personal

communication, March 11, 2021). Such expressions underscore how the LGBTQ+ Relief Fund filled a gap in Florida's public health infrastructure by providing economic aid.

The ABLF dispersed \$30 000 each to three Black-led organizations that serve Black LGBTQ+ individuals. These organizations include Bros in Convo, a social support group focused on Black same gender-loving men; Divas in Dialogue, an organization focused on Black transgender women and improving Black transgender sex workers' lives; and the Gender Advancement Project, an organization focused on leadership development for transgender women of color. These organizations had historically been unfunded and saw substantial community needs during the pandemic. With the funds, the organizations provided support groups, HIV prevention services, career transition guidance, and unemployment application assistance to Black LGBTQ+ individuals during the pandemic. Additionally, \$10 000 of the ABLF was reserved for rapid and emergency grants as community needs continue during the pandemic.

ADVERSE EFFECTS

Given the ongoing needs community members face and the challenges of the state in responding to those needs, grants larger than \$500 may be needed for individual applicants. This complicates efforts to balance the number of applicants served and the need for larger grants.

SUSTAINABILITY

The LGBTQ+ Relief Fund was designed to be a limited effort, but the ABLF is a commitment for Contigo and has

become the focus of new fundraising and grant-making efforts. Given this commitment, we foresee ongoing support for the ABLF. Robust program evaluation will be needed, as will continued collaboration with local government officials.

PUBLIC HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE

Addressing COVID-19–related health inequality requires responding to structural racism. Contigo's efforts exemplify how public health as a field can respond to structural racism and indicate future directions for research and practice. Public health has moved through phases with different foci, including Public Health 1.0 (emphasizing prevention), Public Health 2.0 (emphasizing core functions of governmental and public health agencies), and Public Health 3.0 (examining social determinants of health and prioritizing cross-sector collaborations).⁷ We argue that there is a need for Public Health 4.0: politically engaged research and practice with community-based organizations that responds to root causes of poor health, such as structural racism. In envisioning Public Health 4.0, we assert that researchers, public health practitioners, and community-based organization leaders can collaboratively advance efforts to address social inequalities that inform poor health. Public Health 4.0 includes racial justice as a necessary component to advance health equity and situates researchers, practitioners, and community members in collaborative relationships to advance this vision. *AJPH*

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CONTRIBUTORS

N. Kline led the drafting of this article. M. A. Quiroga led the organization and dissemination of the All Black Lives Fund activities. Both authors conceptualized the content of the article.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

Work related to this study was approved by the institutional review board at Rollins College.

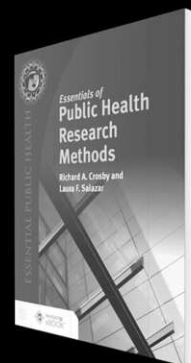
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