

# Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

## Headwaters Foundation for Justice • Minneapolis, Minnesota

Since its founding in 1984, the Headwaters Foundation for Justice has been committed to putting power in the hands of the communities it serves. It achieves this both through the grants it makes and its democratic grantmaking model that shifts power to community members.

and white supremacy. In the Fund's second phase, in 2021, Headwaters provided \$75,000 in general operating support over three years to 22 organizations and coalitions led by and for Black, indigenous and people of color.

Headwaters' staff identifies community leaders in local social justice movements. Those leaders then evaluate grant proposals, go on site visits and ultimately make funding final decisions, which are ratified by the board annually. Headwaters also provides leadership development, networking opportunities, and training seminars to emerging leaders from the social justice organizations it funds.

In 2015, Headwaters launched its first Giving Project. Each cohort brings together a cross-class, multi-racial group of community members. Under the model, the cohort spends six months learning fundraising skills, developing a shared understanding of race, class and systemic inequality and aims to collectively raise at least \$100,000 and then make grants to local organizations led by Black, Indigenous and/or people of color. As of 2021, Giving Project participants raised about \$1.2 million for grants to local organizations. Headwaters is part of the national Giving Project Network.

Headwaters' practice is informed by close relationships with community members and grantee partners. In response to community comments, Headwaters has made its funding applications less onerous and made more grants in support of longer-term general operating support as opposed to supporting shorter term projects that require more frequent applications. Going forward, Rudnick said that community members have also asked that Headwaters staff "really leverage the privilege that we have of being in foundation spaces and philanthropic spaces," to "organize our peers...to be making bolder investments move towards (general operating) support, organizing, and systems change. And I think that was really helpful to us to get that push."



In recent years Headwaters has sharpened their lens, as Director of Program and Grantmaking Melissa Rudnick describes it, from "racial justice broadly" to a commitment to advancing collective liberation, including centering "black liberation and native sovereignty." Not to the exclusion of other communities and issues, Rudnick notes, but as an important lens and aspiration for their work.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and following Floyd's murder, Rudnick and her Headwaters colleagues noticed that many of the organizers they funded "were really being called on by their own communities to hold the organizing work, but also shift into a great deal of community care work." This led to a shift for Headwaters too, as Rudnick and her colleagues supported these "pivots" that saw advocates now putting together culturally-rich food baskets for community elders and translating documents from the Minnesota Department of Health into Southeast Asian languages in addition to on-the-ground organizing.

With a small endowment, Headwaters is a true community foundation, receiving support from larger foundations and individual donors. Headwaters' deeply democratic giving model engages grant recipients and community members in all of its grant-making processes.

In its early years, Headwaters Foundation for Justice, based in Minneapolis, supported organizations combating domestic violence and addressing the emerging AIDS epidemic at a time when other foundations steered clear of those challenges. Decades later, in December 2015, after local police shot and killed Jamar Clark, an unarmed 24-year-old black man, Headwaters was again an early supporter of social justice work as it launched the Emergency Fund for Black Lives. Headwaters made grants to Black Lives Matter Minneapolis and grassroots advocates, Neighborhoods Organizing for Change. Then, in response to the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, Headwaters created three new funds. One of these, the Transformation Fund, raised more than \$2 million, which was granted in two phases. In the first phase, Headwaters distributed money quickly, mainly for frontline organizations fighting against institutional violence

# Headerwaters Foundation GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT:

## The Council on American Islamic Relations (Minnesota Chapter)

It is difficult to keep track of the violence perpetrated against Minnesota's Muslim communities in recent years. In September 2022, two mosques were vandalized just days apart, incurring tens of thousands of dollars in damage. That was the fifth time that year that places of worship for Muslims had been attacked. That summer, a man had assaulted a Muslim customer with his car at a mall parking garage and also threatened other Muslim customers with violence while shouting anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant slurs.

"We have a trifecta here in Minnesota of our community members being Muslim, most of them black and also poor. So, we have a lot of animosity, a lot of that violence, aimed at us," said Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations' Minnesota chapter (CAIR-MN). "We do see fear on the rise as these incidents increase across the state and at the same time, we have long standing needs and challenges that are particular to our population of Muslims that as an organization we always have to address. So, we are reacting, responding to events in the short term, adapting and evolving according to needs all the time."

According to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, less than 1 percent of adults in the Minnesota identify as Muslim. However, a growing number of Minnesota communities, including suburbs and rural areas, have significant shares of residents who are Muslim, many of them people of Somali descent. Since around 1993, Somalis have come to Minnesota as refugees after a brutal civil war that followed the 1992 government collapse in the east African nation. According to the International Institute of Minnesota, between 40,000 and 150,000 Somalis live in Minnesota, with the vast majority living in Minneapolis.

The Minnesota chapter of the CAIR, a grant recipient of the Headerwaters Foundation, protects the civil rights of Muslims in workplaces, schools and other institutions. In response to the recent violence against Muslims, Hussein and his staff speak regularly with the media and public safety officials and provide comfort to terrified community members. After the recent incidents, CAIR also helped mosques apply for federal funds to increase security.

CAIR also educates people about the Muslim community's customs and contributions to promote understanding. It offers workshops about Muslim religious practices and culture, coupled with recommendations. For example, Hussein said, large employers, such as Amazon have responded by allowing for breaks for prayer. Following workshops, some employers outfitted bathrooms with ablution rooms so Muslim employees can accomplish washing rituals before prayer. More than 7,000 employers, educators, social workers and health care providers have taken part in such workshops.



Three people wearing colorful hijabs are smiling for a photo. Photo: courtesy of CAIR-MN

"We've suggested that employers not hold meetings on Fridays, after noon, during Friday prayer. We know that some employers might excuse an employee for an absence during that time, but decisions are still getting made in that meeting and Muslim employees at prayer will not be a part of that," Hussein said.

CAIR also helps resolve individual discrimination complaints either through negotiation or by working with network of civil rights attorneys. In recent years, the organization has evolved to develop policy and practice solutions to reduce disparities in educational achievement and to address police accountability. It organized peaceful protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CAIR pivoted to become a pass-through funder, moving hundreds of thousands of dollars to mosques in the state so that they could provide food, community information and protective supplies like masks to their community members.

In 2021, CAIR hosted its 4th annual "Challenging Islamophobia" conference,

advertised as the nation's largest conference related to Islamophobia in the nation. It brought together more than 400 religious leaders, activists, ordinary community members, national and international experts, elected officials and journalists.

Visible, dramatic hate crimes, such as assaults, vandalism and robberies might understandably receive the most public attention, but Hussein emphasizes that "embedded discrimination" against black Muslims, in particular, occurs in less dramatic but equally harmful ways in all life sectors

including, but not limited to housing and home ownership, education and public safety. For example, CAIR staff had long observed that many Somali children have found success and a strong sense of belonging in the supplemental Sunday schools organized and operated in local Somali communities. However, the same students were typically not finding similar success in the public schools. CAIR is working closely with lawmakers to secure funding to hire more educators to more closely monitor the achievement of students and connect parents to resources more quickly. CAIR staff also advocate for creating homework

help centers in community based centers where children have strong ties and a sense of belonging.

"Part of our work is identifying all those strengths in our community, lifting those up, building on those," Hussein said. "Our role is being there when the hard things happen, responding to challenges we see and also celebrating our strengths."

*The revised version of this spotlight was compiled by Sandra Dias, Susan Eaton and Brian Stanley. The original version was published in 2016.*

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