

CASE STUDY: STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP THROUGH COMMUNITY-ROOTED FUNDING IN THE U.S. SOUTH: SOUTHERN AIDS COALITION AND CONTIGO FUND

Underinvestment in community-rooted funders and organizations based in the U.S. South, particularly those representing and serving communities that are disproportionately impacted by HIV, racism and other forms of structural inequality, is a well-documented but still chronically unaddressed problem. The Southern AIDS Coalition and Contigo Fund are two community-rooted funders whose grantmaking, advocacy and leadership development efforts are demonstrating the impact of community-centered, place-based work: it can build leadership among community members who traditionally are left out of decision-making processes, as well as address ongoing manifestations of white supremacy within mainstream philanthropy.^e

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Established in the aftermath of the 2016 Pulse nightclub tragedy, Orlando-based Contigo Fund’s mission is to fund, strengthen and empower existing and emerging agencies working to improve the lives of LGBTQI and Latinx individuals, immigrants, and people of color in Central Florida.^f All of Contigo’s grantmaking, including its recently established All Black Lives Fund, is guided by community members themselves. According to Contigo Program Director Marco Antonio Quiroga, it is critical to “always bring people to the table with you, share power and create space for conversations. We consider it a key part of our role to build leadership. We have a dual focus of connecting people to a broader social justice movement and providing the critical services they need.” Supported by a group of values-aligned private donors, Contigo has become the largest LGBTQI funder in the U.S. South in the five years since its establishment — demonstrating that the “model works,” Quiroga noted.

^e The Southern AIDS Coalition and Contigo Fund are intermediary grantmakers through the Gilead COMPASS Initiative (www.gileadcompass.com).

^f Contigo mission statement can be found at <https://contigofund.org/>.

The Southern AIDS Coalition (SAC)^g was founded 20 years ago by HIV advocates, leaders of community-based organizations and state health departments who recognized that the South was not getting an equitable share of federal resources to fight HIV/AIDS. Initially focused on policy and advocacy, SAC has expanded its work in recent years to include grantmaking to community-based organizations, as well as leadership development training and capacity building. Executive Director Dafina Ward emphasized that the Southern AIDS Coalition “is an organization that is very proud to represent communities most impacted by HIV in our staff. I’m the first black woman to lead SAC. We have many staff members who are living with HIV, who’ve had very personal experiences with HIV from black and brown and rural communities. We really want to model for other organizations what the goal should be around inclusion and leadership development and providing opportunities to people from the communities that are closest to HIV and the disparities that we’re working against in the South.”

Ward and Quiroga noted the critical role that their main donors have played in supporting their growth — providing flexible, longer-term support and the space to make decisions that reflect their community members’ needs and priorities. But they also highlighted the ongoing challenge in building a philanthropic culture that centers and supports Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC)^h and LGBTQI communities in the South (as elsewhere). Quiroga reminded us, “Mainstream philanthropy was set up to preserve wealth for the wealthy, with a charity lens versus creating power. Funders need a lot of intentionality and work to unpack that, and people with lived experience to guide the process.” Ward also noted that “place matters. Having intermediary grantmakers who are in these communities and have first-hand understanding of their needs is critical. It’s more than just writing checks for programmatic support, it’s building and sustaining organizations in a region that has been historically underserved and marginalized. I encourage funders to fund intermediary grantmakers in the South.”

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^g The Southern AIDS Coalition mission statement can be found at www.southernaidscoalition.org.

^h FCAA’s research methodology defines BIPOC communities as African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Indigenous/American Indians and Alaska Natives.