



# Opportunities to Invest in Community Resilience for COVID and Climate

A report to the Barr Foundation

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*This report is dedicated to all of those who stepped up, pivoted, learned new technologies, and worked the long hours despite all of the uncertainty to support our neighbors and bridge as many gaps as they could.  
We see you and we honor your care and love.*

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# Executive Summary

The reality that COVID-19 was a pandemic became clear by mid-March 2020. Immediately, grassroots, community-led groups organized mutual aid and other COVID response efforts to bridge the gaps created by lack of preparedness as well as inadequate response on the part of the state and federal governments.

The Barr Foundation is interested in learning how these community based responses were organized, how they operated, and what the network ecology looked like in Boston, Chelsea, and Revere. The overall goal is to understand how community-focused and community-led responses like these can be built upon and reinforced to support equity-centered climate resilience.

The ability of communities to withstand and adapt to the impacts of COVID-19 is a form of resilience that also applies to climate impacts. This study examines how communities have been activating and building resilience in the pandemic and explores what would be needed to sustain these efforts in the future and to strengthen connections within and across communities and organizations to support climate resilience.

## *How we did this*

To do this, we interviewed 30 people across 18 organizations. The organizations ranged from newly formed to long established, and included informally structured community based efforts, formal non-profits of various sizes, and funders. Some of these organizations engaged strictly in COVID response, focusing on providing support for members of their community to be safe and endure this crisis. Other organizations were organized around mutual aid or mutualism. These efforts provided some forms of support but within the context of community building or by connecting community members with each other to provide direct support.

This project assumes that climate resilience is not only about infrastructure, but rather is founded upon social

connections and the capacity of people, organizations, and communities to respond and work together. Resilience, whether to pandemics or climate change impacts, is fundamentally about relationships between people and between people and the built environment and ecosystems.

## *What we found*

What is clear is that multiple strategies are needed to build resilience and what makes for good emergency response varies across space and community. Different organizations responded differently depending on their capacity and orientation. Established community organizations, newly formed grassroots efforts, government, and funders all came together in various configurations, based on pre-existing relationships and networks.

## *Racism is the root cause of vulnerability*

It was obvious to the participants interviewed that racism and other systems of oppression were the primary drivers behind COVID inequities. The same racial and economic disparities found in other social problems (e.g., health, housing, education, policing) were found in COVID impacts. The same communities most vulnerable to and most burdened by environmental injustices were also burdened by high COVID infection and death rates as well as COVID risk exposure. The communities typically free from barriers to social benefits and immune to social burdens experienced a very different pandemic than the communities served by the organizations and efforts interviewed here.

## *We are not prepared ... but we could be*

There was near universal acknowledgement amongst our interviewees that their cities and our state governments were unprepared for COVID and that we are similarly unprepared for climate change emergencies. At the same time, there was also hope that the social connections being built through these COVID response and mutual aid efforts could serve as the basis for developing and strengthening climate resilience.

### *Investing in organizations and networks is key*

To do this requires sustained investment in grassroots groups and racial justice movement organizations. What is specifically needed is investment in the capacity of the organizations themselves, including people (most importantly), back-of-house infrastructure, and technology.

Funding network building would also contribute to building climate resilience at the community level. The strongest or most impactful efforts were those that are coordinated by individuals and organizations who were part of pre-existing networks with other individuals or organizations. Such network building would need to attend to both place-based network development as well as non-place community networks (e.g., immigrant communities, women workers). Several participants described different forms of learning exchanges as one of the most

important pre-COVID activities that supported their own response as well as providing a network to collaborate with.

### *We must center people and systems of power*

Overall, participants shared that building resilience must be people focused, intersectional, institutional, and rooted in anti-racist/ anti-oppressive ideology and practice. Naming racism and other systems of supremacy and oppression as the root cause of vulnerability is key. Resilience is simply not possible without dismantling racism and other systems of oppression. It was these systems and ideologies that created the devastating inequities of COVID impacts. These disparities will be replicated in climate emergencies as well until there is a firm and focused commitment to racial justice and systems change and an investment in the organizations doing that work.

# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed extreme pressure on communities and underscored pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. Many government and private systems have proven unprepared and inadequate in meeting people's needs during the pandemic. And these systems have also been called to account in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others which shined a spotlight on the structural racism that devalues the lives of Black people as well as other communities of color. Community-based responses and mutual aid have seemingly spontaneously erupted to fill the gaps. Communities in Boston, Chelsea, and Revere have shown a fortitude and resilience to adapt and respond to these twin crises of the pandemic and racism. The Barr Foundation is interested in learning how these community based responses were organized, how they operated, and what the network ecology looked like in Boston, Chelsea, and Revere. This study examines how these communities have been activating and building resilience in the pandemic and explores what would be needed to sustain these efforts in the future and to strengthen connections within and across communities and organizations to support climate resilience.

## What do we mean by resilience?

How resilience is defined matters to how responses and solutions are shaped and who benefits (or not). Resilience is a broad concept with many definitions across various disciplines, including ecology, engineering, and psychology. Climate resilience frameworks and programs have emerged over the last decade, particularly in cities, where impacts of climate change, such as severe storms, flooding, and extreme heat, have become more frequent and affect more people. The climate field is heavily influenced by ecological systems theory, which defines resilience as the ability of an ecosystem to persist and absorb changes, as well as come to new states of equilibrium (Holling 1973). However, a study that surveyed government practitioners of resilience found that most defined resilience from a more narrow engineering approach, seeing resilience as the ability of a system to "bounce back" to a normal state (Meerow and Stutts 2016).

The "bounce back" approach to resilience is critiqued in academic and practitioner literature because it is about returning to the status quo, which ignores existing inequities and the particular needs of working class communities and communities of color, and leads to apolitical, technocratic strategies (DeBacker et al. 2015, Meerow et al. 2019). The ecological systems definition of resilience is more dynamic, allowing for a "bounce forward" to alternate states, which requires learning, adaptation, and inclusion of those who are impacted. However, many researchers find this ecological definition of resilience as still too focused on natural systems, lacking a social and political analysis and leaving unexamined uneven power relations that underlie political and economic structural inequalities (Matin et al. 2018, Meerow et al. 2019).

## Equity and social resilience

For those concerned about equity, it is impossible to separate a natural systems concept of resilience from social resilience. Equity implications go beyond concern for who is most vulnerable, to why various populations are vulnerable in the first place. The *Pathways to Resilience* report sponsored by Kresge Foundation puts forth a "people-centered approach to resilience" with three core elements: deep democracy, economic transformation, and an ecology that reimagines the relationship between humans and nature (DeBacker et al. 2015). In Meerow and Stutts' (2016) review of characteristics of resilience in the literature, they found 16 main characteristics, almost half of which are fundamentally social (diversity, inclusion, equity, feedback, iterative process, transparency, and adaptive capacity).



From a social lens, resilience must also contend with structural racism and other deeply embedded injustices. According to Bonds (2018) a natural systems approach to resilience “conceals the political and racial nature of social systems, obscuring the role of previous policies, institutions, and authorities in siphoning resources from poor neighborhoods of color in order to build resilience elsewhere.” Ranganathan and Bratman (2019) go a step further, arguing for a shift from urban resilience to “abolitionist climate justice” to decolonize climate change practice and theory. An abolitionist ecology would not only recognize the deeply embedded racialization of our political and economic systems, but go beyond white supremacist logics in conceptualizing nature, climate, and resilience (Heynen and Ybarra 2020).

## This study’s approach

The findings in this report are based on prior knowledge and networks of the authors, research of organizational websites and information available online, and interviews with 30 people across 18 organizations. The organizations ranged from newly formed to long established, and included informally structured community based efforts, formal non-profits of various sizes, and funders (public and private). Some of these organizations engaged strictly in COVID response, focusing on providing support for members of their community to be safe and endure this crisis. Other organizations were organized around mutual aid or mutualism. These efforts provided some forms of support but within the context of community building or by connecting community members with each other to provide direct support.

We chose these efforts and organizations because the communities they work in or serve are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts, they take an assets oriented approach to social resiliency, and they focus on dismantling the root causes of vulnerability, particularly racism and other forms of oppression. Specifically, they operate through the belief that marginalized communities have assets and abundances through which they can protect themselves from neglect or threats when those assets are activated. In a few cases, social movement oriented organizations were also funders of COVID response to others, including some that were interviewed here.

In our scan of the ecosystem, we draw on some of the insights of network theory and social capital. In both frameworks, there are concepts of strong and weak ties. Strong ties are direct and deep, often more visible and identifiable than weak ties. Strong ties include those between family, people who share common identities, or who otherwise interact frequently. Weak ties are as important as strong ties because they can be activated as a bridge across difference and across networks.

Organizations	General Type
Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition	Network/Coalition
Boston Resiliency Fund	Funder
City of Revere	Municipality
El Centro Cooperativo de Desarrollo y Solidaridad	NGO
Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council	NGO
Green Roots	NGO
Jericho Movement Boston	NGO
Jobs with Justice	NGO
Mass Redistribution Fund	Funder
Matahari	NGO
Mutual Aid Eastie	Network/Coalition
New England United for Justice	NGO
Revere COVID Ambassadors	Municipal program
Solidarity Supply Distro	NGO
Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network	Funder
VietAid	NGO

A full description of these organizations can be found in Appendix A.

Social capital refers to the networks and relationships of trust that can be activated to achieve collective aims. In this study, we focused on the diverse networks that represent social capital being drawn upon in COVID response. We included funders in this ecosystem because they are active players whose policies and practices can shift the behaviors and strategies of others in the community, the rest of the nonprofit sector, as well as the government. As many funders, including Barr, now recognize, they are also embedded in and perpetuate structural racism and injustice. Acknowledging and seeing funders as part of the field of action (as opposed to neutral parties simply providing funding for good works) brings attention to how funders can transform themselves and their relationships with the rest of the field in order to achieve their articulated goals, including climate resilience.

We do want to note, however, that the network map shown in Figure 1 is a snapshot based on the connections the participants described or that were discovered from review of their websites and reports. What is not shown is the informal or people-based connections between organizations and efforts, nor does it show the depth of connections. There are individuals in these organizations that are connected to other individuals in organizations shown here as well as to organizations not shown in this map. Given what we do know about those strong and weak ties as well as the social capital potential within this ecology, several organizations and efforts would likely benefit from, and be an asset to, a more robust or sustained connection to a larger network focused on building social resilience.

FIGURE 1: NETWORK ECOLOGY OF PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS



We note that there is a strong emphasis in our study on groups that see themselves as part of social movements, engaged in community organizing, advocacy, and community building. It is not a coincidence that many of these groups have been prominent in COVID response efforts. Their work over the years and decades has built both strong and weak ties, effective coalitions and looser networks that were activated during the pandemic to connect vulnerable, marginalized people with other resource providers, funders, government, and each other. Many of these groups are avowedly political and working to shift power relations and change the conditions that are creating the need for resilience in the first place. As we will describe, these are the groups that going beyond charity models of just providing for material need. They also build mutuality and interconnection, recognizing that even those in need have assets to offer.

Barr Foundation already embeds racial equity into its view of climate resilience. Becoming a true anti-racist organization, however, requires breaking out of the traditional siloed approaches to climate resilience, such as an over-emphasis on infrastructure and hazards. It requires shifting from defining resilience as a climate issue to a broader view of resilience as a way communities respond to and transform conditions of vulnerability and inequity, whether related to climate, racism, or other causes. The people and power-centered approach found in the organizations and efforts interviewed here provides a path to making the commitment to racial equity in climate resilience real.

# The stories of mutual aid and COVID response

## March 2020

Community based and grassroots organizations had been focused on preparing to do 2020 Census outreach as well as civic engagement work. While some had been paying attention to the news that a new flu-like infection seemed to be growing globally, it was generally not a major focus for most grassroots organizations until mid-March 2020 when Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency and Boston Mayor Marty Walsh closed the schools. By the end of March, Massachusetts was in lockdown. While some protections were put in place to prevent evictions, utility shutoffs, and extend unemployment insurance to previously ineligible workers, little else was done to financially support vulnerable communities. The federal \$1,200 per person advance payment on 2020 taxes was woefully insufficient in a high cost of living region like greater Boston; it was also unavailable to undocumented persons and those in mixed-status families. Ensuring the safety and well-being of socially vulnerable community members was relegated to community based organizations, themselves with various levels of capacity and resources.

*So our role, as mutual aid, is to make sure that no one's getting left behind, advocate for them not to get left behind.*

*– Mutual Aid Eastie, Neighbors United  
for a Better East Boston*

Community groups understood the potential impacts and began mobilizing immediately. Chelsea Greenroots worked with partners to convene a call of key stakeholders to plan for a potential quarantine on March 11, which started a stretch of 65 days of daily COVID response calls. Massachusetts Jobs with Justice in collaboration with Matahari, two movement based organizations, lost no time in setting up a fund for undocumented residents and workers. Building off of the learning from a national coalition of labor rights organizations, Mass UndocuFund was created in late March 2020 and began accepting applications in early April, before any other fund was operating.

## Spring 2020

Most grassroots or community based organizations found themselves having to pivot from regular or planned work to COVID response or mutual aid.

*We had already hired a civic team for our census work. They had just started two weeks in, and then it was like – POW – we're going to be working from home, y'all.*

*– New England United for Justice*

The most common activity that community based COVID response efforts pivoted to was providing food and grocery support for households who became food insecure and providing wellness kits with masks, gloves, and cleaning supplies. Social service organizations and community gardens became a food distribution site. Labor organizing groups delivered both meals and shelf-stable food boxes to those who were unable to leave their

homes either because of high risk status or the need to quarantine. Neighborhood civic associations matched community members who needed groceries to neighbors who could afford to purchase it for them.

By the end of April, several redistribution funds began to provide direct financial support prioritizing households that would not receive the \$1,200 advance payment of federal tax refunds. This included the Mass Redistribution Fund managed by the Center for Economic Democracy, the Boston Resiliency Fund managed by the City of Boston, and the One Chelsea Fund managed by GreenRoots in collaboration with several community based organizations and the United Way. These subsidized cash disbursements were in addition to other community response activities like meal and grocery distribution; the purchase and distribution of masks, gloves, and cleaning supplies; wellness check-ins; taxi rides; laundry cards; and pet food.

Many informal or grassroots organizations described having to figure out how to do all of these without having planned for it and in some cases without having any previous capacity for it.

*[W]ho thought at the beginning of this year that we had to do an emergency fund, and how to establish an emergency fund? We didn't have any idea of that. So even just establishing an emergency fund, learning how to do it, how legally we need to be responsible, having an advisory committee to actually approve the donations. All the structure that it was needed to actually be able to do this, it was capacity that we gain[ed] internally that we didn't have before. And we had to learn in doing it.*

*- El Centro Cooperativo de Desarrollo y Solidaridad*

Social service agencies also found themselves emphasizing more and different social services than they had done in the past. Several organizations pivoted towards assisting community residents with applying for unemployment insurance, rental assistance, or low income energy assistance, as well as supporting individuals through the inevitable appeals processes or in understanding how to use services they were granted. These supports were critically needed for the many individuals who had never needed such services before.

*There are some folks in our communities that have never known what it is to go visit a food pantry. Or they don't know what it feels like to reach out, to apply for food stamps or SNAP benefits or housing support.*

*– New England United for Justice*

Many of these organizations had not provided these services prior to the pandemic and were often supported by newly developed partnerships or enhanced relationships within existing coalitions.

Part of what made this possible was the flexibility that funders provided to existing grantees. Several participants described that their current funders waived reporting requirements or surprised them with additional monies. Others reported getting funding from foundations they were never able to access in the past. This sudden

flexibility allowed organizations to respond to their community needs in a more organic, flexible, and comprehensive manner than they would have been able to otherwise.

*That was one of the really great things about COVID: funders allowed flexibility. They said, "Do what you got to do with your community and we'll talk to y'all later." That was amazing. And that was how we were able to pivot.*

*– GreenRoots*

*Some funds were flexible enough for us to, for example, buy what people need for the pupusas or for the pizzas. In return, they give [the food] for free to people in the community in need and the rest they sell so they can actually have something for their family.*

*- El Centro Cooperativo de Desarrollo y Solidaridad*

Several participants observed that the smallest organizations with the least capacity were carrying more than their fair share of emergency response. Mutual Aid Eastie was delivering 5,000 meals each week in May and June. The Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS) distributed over \$20,000 to families in their network. Matahari trained 20 multilingual volunteers to assist individuals with applying for assistance. New England United for Justice, Viet Aid, and Dorchester Not 4 Sale, delivered culturally complete meals to thousands of people in Dorchester and Mattapan. The Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition brought out 1,200 people to get tested in the first weekend of mass testing in Nubian Square. And like other grassroots efforts, they often structured their COVID response to align with their other organizing work.

*Then it was the creating opportunities for folks to not just be in survival mode. So we partnered with several folks to do the Nubian Summer Drive-In. It was at the open lot that's about to be developed. We were able to get a ginormous drive-in movie screen and the audio set up so that folks could come and tune into the right radio station and hear the movie, or whatever we were showing. At first, it was movies and then the presidential debates, and then the vice presidential debates.*

*- Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Next Leadership Development Corporation*

The sudden flexibility from many funders enabled much of the community based mutual aid and COVID response. In some cases, funders simply gave existing recipients extra money with no strings attached. Other funders simplified both application and reporting requirements. Most mature or formally structured organizations reported better-than-expected experiences with funding.

### **ISOLATED EFFORTS CAUSED BY LACK OF NON-PROFITS.**

The City of Revere has fewer mature, place-based non-profits that were able or willing to pivot to COVID response compared to surrounding cities. This meant that there were fewer organizations to receive resources available from funds like the Boston Foundation's COVID-19 Response Fund. Indeed, there were only two Revere focused organizations who received monies from this fund. As a consequence, Revere's COVID response was organized by the city to a much greater extent than was seen in either Boston or Chelsea.

Less formally organized, smaller, or fiscally sponsored efforts experienced challenges receiving or managing funding due to lack of capacity. The Center for Economic Democracy expected this and put in place supports for organizations that had little to no experience with managing large volumes of donations or administering relief funds to maintain compliance with IRS guidelines. They also provided funding for some organizations to help them bring in much needed staff to handle the additional workload. One of those organizations was able to hire people who had been receiving direct aid or were program participants to support the new workload and continue to organize.

*And we did get [a PPP loan] to help us to keep on our staff, to help [them] actually increase their staff, and to help us bring on some temporary staff to deal with these huge demands that administering a hundreds of thousand dollars fund and all the work that [they] took on.*

*– Mass Redistribution Fund  
Center for Economic Development*

Regardless of how much financial support was received, many of the organizations and efforts interviewed described two interrelated challenges: communications and technology.

Community building and movement based organizations typically rely on face-to-face communications which were no longer safe to do. Organizations and their constituencies faced learning how to use technology for communications without necessarily having the technology or internet access to do this well.

*... the digital divide became a huge threat to people because folks were stuck in their house. And a lot of people don't have access to technology and don't have access to internet. And then they could no longer go into the City Life office and have those weekly meetings where they could access legal aid. And so if they couldn't get on a computer and figure out how to connect to the internet and get on to Zoom, then they couldn't access legal aid to protect their housing and their rights and their health.*

*– Mass Redistribution Fund  
Center for Economic Development*

### **MUTUAL AID IN ACTION**

An 18-wheeler pulled up, without notice, in front of Eastie Farm one summer day. A farm in Western Massachusetts that had connected with Eastie Farm once heard about Mutual Aid Eastie and decided to send a truckload of Brussels sprouts. Getting the pallets of Brussels sprouts off the truck was not a small operation. The Piers Park Sailing Center lent the staff of Eastie Farm their truck so that they could borrow a forklift from the Grain Wood Shop in the Eastie Shipyard to get the pallets off the truck.

"By the time we showed up with the forklift, there were many people who had heard the call that [was] put on Mutual Aid's WhatsApp group and showed up to help."

An understanding Boston police officer kindly accommodated the double-parked truck full of Brussels sprouts being unloaded by a community of people who had received food support from Mutual Aid Eastie. Very quickly, and in less time than expected, the truck was emptied and could make its way back to Western Massachusetts. [This was] made possible because of the network and this ability to put out a call and people saying, "I'll come and help." And that's where we saw some people acting like they're not just the taker, but also the giver of their time. They can come and help. That started to happen more and more.

The strongest or most impactful efforts were those that were coordinated by individuals or organizations that were part of pre-existing networks with other individuals or organizations. People who had worked together before, or who had known about the efforts of other people or organizations, were more likely to coordinate in their COVID response, largely because there was a pre-existing well of trust to draw upon. As a result of some network connections, different organizations were able to collaborate as well as provide material support. For example, one of the CCDS co-ops provided several thousand hand-sewn masks for a Boston citywide effort that included nine other community groups to provide wellness kits to families with a COVID-positive member.

*[They] and I have worked together for a long time. So it was like pretty natural for us. We could provide physical space [so they could do food distribution].*

*– VietAid*



## RECIPROCITY IS HARD TO CREATE

Many organizations tried to operate under the values of mutualism. However, some communities found people getting in line for food boxes hours earlier than the advertised start time. Some people attempted to hoard or to return to a food site and pretend to be someone else. At the same time, others had to be compelled to accept help. These behaviors are a common response to charity and government aid, which are typically uni-directional and frequently pit recipients in competition with one another. For at least one participant, the term “mutual aid,” which connotes charity (because of the term “aid”) rather than interconnectedness, may be part of the problem.

### Summer and Fall 2020

Regardless of size or formality, all participants described being overwhelmed with the needs they were faced with. Almost all participants from grassroots or community based organizations shared disappointment and anger over being forced to fill in the gaps that should be the responsibility of government. The sheer scale of problems created by the inadequate response at both the federal and state levels led to burnout among both staff and volunteers and a loss of capacity by mid-summer.

*This is crazy. We can't sustain this. So many phone calls. So many text messages. So many people in need. So much to do. Everybody was all hands on deck all the time. It was insanity. I've never worked that hard in my entire life. It was just nonstop. And we weren't alone. It was the whole city. The whole city.*

*- GreenRoots*

Most of the organizations interviewed were also challenged to balance their COVID response with mission-driven civic engagement commitments. Plans developed the year before did not anticipate the Black Lives Matter uprisings in May and June or having to continue Census outreach work into the fall election season. Some organizations were able to weave their COVID response into their organizing efforts while others had to make tradeoffs.

*As we got closer to that August-September timeline when the elections really got closer to us, we stopped wellness work to focus in on the elections and census push. We're now picking back up the wellness work but wanting to be smarter about what that means.*  
*– New England United for Justice*

### WHO FELL THROUGH THE CRACKS?

There is universal acknowledgement that no matter how well organized and managed the response, there were people left behind. The two most commonly cited populations of concern were socially isolated individuals, especially seniors, limited English speakers, or anyone not part of any pre-existing network of support or advice. Business owners who were not part of a pre-existing network, like Main Streets or a local small business association, or who did not have trusted advisors to support them in applying for state or federal loans, were also likely to have fallen through the cracks. Several participants also stated they were concerned about people living with pre-existing or newly developed mental health challenges as well as people held in prisons and jails. Community based and grassroots response efforts could not catch everyone made vulnerable by pre-existing isolation, the necessity for physical separation, and the lack of digital skills.

Several organizations took the time between late summer and the winter holidays to slow down and take stock of their capacity. Some shared that they were proud of their ability to capitalize on the opportunity to build capacity and continue with community building. Many others expressed worry about what the inadequacy in the response means for future crises.

*There's so much money that has been spent for nine months at the federal, state, and city levels. It's astounding. ... But with all that has been spent, it just exposed the fact that a lot of the systems people were depending upon were actually, truly broken to begin with.*

*– Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council*

*When the risks and the harms and the burdens are no longer existential and broadly felt, ... will the community care? Will our government care?*

*– Anonymous Participant*

When reflecting on what this experience means for the climate emergencies expected in the future, there was nearly universal agreement that neither the local nor state governments are prepared. Everyone expressed concern that what they experienced with COVID would be repeated in a climate related emergency.

*We will very likely have more crises like COVID. ... We can't exactly say how these crises are going to unfold. We learned that we're not prepared. We're not ready to handle it. The city isn't. The state isn't. And people just had to somehow scramble and get their act together.*

*- Mutual Aid Eastie  
Eastie Farm*

*I feel like we are probably not very prepared. I think that it's a good idea to have some kind of plan that is setup for these kind of situations.*

*– Revere COVID Ambassador*

Several participants expressed some confidence that their mutual aid and COVID response efforts have created a foundation for climate resilience. Many pointed to new community connections and communication skills that they could draw upon in a future emergency.

*The first thing that I learned from my experience working as an ambassador and [being] a Revere resident is that we have to build the trust between us and our neighbor. ... Then we decided to have a WhatsApp group. So we can communicate. If something happened, like a hurricane, we can reach each other, check in on each other.*

*– Revere COVID Ambassador*

# Lessons learned for funders

The community based COVID responses studied here provide a window into what resilience can look like for climate impacts and what would be needed to foster it. What is clear is that an entirely different approach to systemic change is needed among climate funders if they are serious about supporting climate resilience among the most vulnerable communities. A systems approach that does not center people – the effects decisions have on *people, who* makes decisions, the *people* organized to change systems – will not create climate resiliency.

*We do not think about our work in terms of the climate or the environment. We think about in terms of people*  
– Solidarity Supply Distro

It is certainly possible to create climate change ready infrastructure and buildings. But society-wide resilience cannot exist without **racial justice and social equity** in housing, the environment, food access, transportation access, and in the economy. Resilience will only be created by **investing** in the organizations and efforts focused on building community, challenging systemic injustice, and advocating for change. One effective way to support this is by **supporting network building** to create the relationships and coalitions needed to push for systemic change. Funding resilience also requires greater **courage** to name racism and support the political action needed to dismantle systems of supremacy and oppression that create vulnerability. Finally, resilience is not static and will require **constant refinement and ground-truthing** of what we think communities need and to account for new structures of oppression as well as new information on climate change impacts.

## Understanding racial justice and social equity is the foundation of resilience

Vulnerability to climate change impacts is rooted in racism and other systems of supremacy and oppression. Building sustainable climate resilience, therefore, must be people focused, intersectional, institutional, and rooted in anti-racist ideology and practice. Job insecurity, housing insecurity, health insecurity, the destruction of the social safety net, and mass incarceration are some of the many systemic and racist systems that weaken or destroy resilience.

*[Funders need] to be more sophisticated in their analysis so that any investment that happens on social resilience aligns with the complexity of the social challenges that are impacting our social resilience.*

– Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Next Leadership Development Corporation

*So I would wish that funders would have a deeper understanding,  
desire to support the public good as an umbrella.*

*– UU Mass Action*

Given the complex roots of vulnerability, the focus of climate funders or resilience funding generally should not be on reaching out to community based, grassroots groups and getting them involved in climate resilience programs and advocacy. Rather, climate funders should support grassroots, community based, movement building organizations that are working on the array of social justice issues that affect vulnerability and are in fact creating the foundation for climate resilience.

*I think a principle or value is really holding the most affected people, undocumented people, women, black people, etc., at the forefront of the work that we're doing and knowing that when we build resilience and agency and power at work, that translates to a mother advocating for her child's bilingual program, or that translates to fighting a biomass plant in Springfield. ... And we can't do that just by focusing on climate justice. We do that because we are people facing climate injustice.*

*- Jobs with Justice*

## Don't fund – Invest

Supporting grassroots, community based organizations who are building movements for social change requires long term, sustained, and meaningful investments in the organizations doing that work. True investors are champions for the success of the *organization* itself and its *people*; they are not just funding a specific program or product. True investment begins with supporting the organizations that are the building blocks of the ecosystem, but does not stop there. It also includes investments in the field to support leadership development, regardless of which organizations leaders are currently in, as well as building the alliances that increase the effectiveness of the field overall.

Also, investors see themselves as having a stake, both in the gains as well as the risks. Even within the capitalist framework, investors are not just funding a specific piece of machinery or a specific member of the staff. They are investing in the possibility of success of the organization and entrepreneurs. They are tied to and accountable to the outcomes.

*[Community focused and grassroots groups] need resources and capacity building. ... [but] what usually happens is folks will say, 'Oh well, they're not ready' or 'They don't have the infrastructure' or 'They don't have this. They don't have that.' Well, there's a reason they don't. Because funders have not invested in those things. Funders only invest in programmatic, operational stuff. And so, of course, they don't have the infrastructure and the systems and the processes and all the stuff because that's not what gets funded.*

*– Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Next Leadership Development Corporation*

To invest in the success of an organization means long term, unrestricted commitments in larger dollar amounts. While every \$40,000 grant will get used, it is not enough to pay a living wage for even one full-time staff person. Building up or upon existing capacities also requires a longer term commitment than funders have typically done. The habit of changing priorities every few years is destabilizing for the organizations doing the long term work of building community resilience. Funders also need to accept that long term investing in organizational capacity (i.e. general operations) is not sexy. Creating systems does not produce pretty pictures to post on websites. The hours people spend making phone calls or in Zoom meetings are hard to show in annual reports. Longer term commitments of larger dollar amounts is what is needed to truly support community based resilience.

*I'm hoping that funders can just be loyal and build their analysis to see this longer scope and not be so – what's it called – so flighty.*

*– Anonymous Participant*

Investments are also an expression of trust in the face of potential risks. One of the most remarkable lessons from this experience is how unnecessary standard application and reporting requirements are when there is trust in organizations to do the work they are funded to do. Moving forward, funders should review the extent to which their standard processes hinder their ability to support the development of equitable resilience.

Another element of this trust is the need to support experimentation and focus on what was learned or could be built upon without retreating from organizations or efforts doing difficult community building and resilience creation work. Organizations need the freedom to build power, coalitions, and community capacity in an ever-changing political and social environment. This requires trust-based grantmaking, or perhaps extending the same trust to equity centered organizations that is typically provided to mainstream or White-led non-profits.

Finally, equitable investing would incorporate grantees into the granting process to a greater extent than is currently experienced. Including grantees would better incorporate the needs, concerns, and priorities of resiliency building organizations into grantmaking priorities. The definition of success metrics, as well as what is reported and how, would also be led by community based organizations in a trust-based equity-centered process. This is key because the most important outcome of resilience building efforts may not be an outcome per se, but the process that a community went through to build their resilience.



*Sometimes the win is not us actually winning on an issue. The win is how we build up our communities, or the win could be how we're building stronger networks or coordinated efforts in a neighborhood. I think we need to be honest that the process we take our community [through] in planning and thinking and building a strategy is also part of building our movement. Sometimes, we [don't] need to have the answers right away. Sometimes, we just need funders to support the process that we need to take to land on what the community wants. And I think that, for me, is a part of how the funding community can support the resilience of our neighborhoods*  
– New England United for Justice

## Courage

Investing in the success of an organization or effort requires the courage to take risks. Not all investments create desired outcomes. The community-based, grassroots, and movement building organizations and efforts interviewed here pointed to four other courageous actions that funders could take to support building resilience.

***Trust the organizations doing the work, be willing to be led by them, and act in trustworthy ways.*** Funders need to trust that the people who are in marginalized positions and neglected spaces know what will create resilience. People living closest to the problem are in the best position to know what they need. Trust-based grantmaking requires courage and is key to supporting organizations doing community resiliency building work.

At the same time, funders need to build, and in some cases rebuild, trust themselves. This requires funders to act in a trustworthy way. Sometimes this means focusing on relationship building, listening, and not dominating a space that is not yours. Sometimes this means reflecting on what spaces you do not yet belong in.

*There's a lot that needs to be done system-wide to fix that broken trust, but I think we recognize that [the lack of trust] exists*  
– Anonymous Funder

*I was cautious about not stepping into a space that we weren't set up to step into.*  
– Mass Redistribution Fund  
Center for Economic Democracy

***Acknowledge that building resilience is a political act.*** Vulnerability to climate change impacts is rooted in marginalization, persists through systems of supremacy, and are upheld by uneven power relations. As a consequence, resilience can only be built through shifting power to enact significant and deep structural and institutional changes. This requires more actively supporting and embracing social movement work and advocacy.

*Groups who are doing democratic organizing or building community leadership development, we are in essence building capacity for people to survive climate change ...*  
– Matahari

***Take an intersectional approach to building resilience, including using leverage to move government practice as well as public policy.***

Funders committed to resilience need to see how climate resilience is intersectionally connected to other issues they may assume is outside the scope of climate change impacts. For example, greater access to the out-of-doors will be needed as part of resilience. However, being in public also increases the possibility of unwanted interactions with law enforcement for over-policed communities and groups. We simply will not be able to create resilience if people are effectively unable to go outside without the risk of police-based harassment. Funders can support initiatives by community and movement groups, as well as leverage their own positionality, to influence public policy and government agencies on all these related issues.

*With COVID, there are parties out on Cape Cod where a lot of White people get together without masks and they call it a health crisis. In the inner city, a lot of Black people get together during COVID and they call the police. And that's the problem. We have a heatwave, people go out at night. If it's Black people in the city, now you got the police. There's a flood and people can't go in their apartments. There's a lot of Black people with nowhere to go and they call the police.*

– Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Black Economic Justice Institute

A key shift for funders is to understand that building resilience requires centering people and the systems that affect people. Current climate funding approaches center hazards and infrastructure. While these are important, they are insufficient to building equitable resilience. As mentioned earlier, the root cause of vulnerability is racism and other forms of oppression. Aligning funding and leveraging relationships with government actors, as well as other funders, to advance racial equity is one powerful way to support resilience building efforts. It would also be a signal of trustworthiness.

*"I'd like to see the climate funders also get more politically involved and start voicing their opinions, not just funding groups. ... I think they need to start calling some folks out."*

– GreenRoots

**Name racism as the root cause of vulnerability.** Endemic racism, along with related systems of supremacy and oppression, resulted in communities carrying the burden of exposure to, infection with, and death from COVID. Indeed, the damage wrought to the social safety net since the 1970s is strongly tied to racism and other forms of oppression. Racism is also abundantly evident in the structure of the vaccine rollout. Until climate funders focus on dismantling racism – which means transforming institutionalized power structures that maintain White entitlement, advantages, benefits, and immunities – equitable resilience will remain unachievable.

*... from a social resilience perspective, racism is deteriorating the resilience, that collective resilience we have. And [it is] especially impacting BIPOC people and communities in an exponential way.*

*– Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Next Leadership Development Corporation*

## Support network building

The strongest or most impactful efforts were those that were coordinated by individuals and organizations that were part of pre-existing networks. People who have worked together before, or who share connections, were more likely to coordinate in their COVID response. Resilience would be enhanced by creating or supporting the structures for relationship building and trust building between community-based, grassroots, and social movement organizations. And, these efforts should be funded in addition to, and not at the expense of, core support to the frontline organizations. Funders need to be cautious, too, about not inducing people and organizations to connect simply due to availability of funding. Rather, funders can support more organic network building by funding existing convening efforts within the ecosystem or supporting opportunities to connect without a pre-existing agenda.

An interesting aspect of the coalitions that were included in this study is that they frequently included individuals who had historically avoided working together, usually due to past conflicts. It appears that the pandemic provided a window of opportunity for individuals to set aside their differences in order to protect their communities. This raises the possibility that future collaborations are possible.

*I think they resolved a lot offline with each other, and it doesn't show in the group about their misunderstandings that might be happening. Conflict is part of any kind of growth in any kind of organization. But it doesn't show with the whole group and I think that's really important. They stand to gather, the steering committee, always.*

*– Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition  
Black Economic Justice Institute*

There is no guarantee, however that people with a history of conflict will be able to work together in times of less existential threat. This potential problem may be addressed by supporting networks that are large enough to create buffers between people who do not trust each other. Increasing the number of people connected to each other through different kinds of networks would also address the issue of capacity, as everyone noted the need for more people to be involved in resilience efforts. Addressing the potential problems of bringing people with histories of conflict together may also be addressed by creating spaces for healing where that is wanted.

*I think there is a need for organizations to do some healing amongst each other in order to build a stronger network. ... [W]e've talked about doing some circles in Chelsea of people and organizations that just have some stuff to work through. I'm not sure that that will ever happen. But I do think it's a great idea and would lead to a strong network of people and organizations who will be able to respond to the next crisis in a better way.*

*- GreenRoots*

***There are two types of network building that funders could support: place based and non-place community based.*** Placed based networks are geography focused even if they are targeting specific groups. Examples of place based networks described in these interviews include the Crossroads Coalition in Fields Corner (Dorchester, Boston) and the Anti-Displacement Roundtable in the City of Chelsea. Both were convened over concerns about gentrification driven displacement and involve several community based organizations, health centers, other local non-profits, and local government (in Chelsea's case). Participants in this study described drawing upon connections made or enhanced through these coalitions in their own COVID response. Crossroads is particularly interesting because it was described as a funder driven effort but was still seen as contributing to strengthening connections in the neighborhood.

Non-place based networks would be affinity or identity group focused without regard to geography. Examples of non-place community based networks include labor movement organizations like Jobs with Justice and Matahari, as well as race focused efforts like the Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition. Similar to place based networks, the support found within affinity groups was important in supporting grassroots based COVID response and mutual aid.

***Learning exchanges are valuable for network building.*** Ideally, there are opportunities for people to connect with each other in a place based way and across place through various affinity groups. One common network building activity described in these interviews which might accomplish this are learning exchanges. A learning exchange supports building a sustainable network that facilitates coordination across space and group by creating opportunities for individuals to learn with and through each other.

There are two kinds of learning that funders should consider supporting. One is focused on sharing and problem solving around concrete, material challenges. For example, GreenRoots reported that the One Chelsea Fund was developed out of an effort they learned about from the Climate Justice Alliance, a national coalition of environmental justice organizations.

Several organizations and efforts interviewed had innovative approaches, or were able to take advantage of specific opportunities, in their COVID response that other less connected efforts could have benefitted from. For example, the Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council had obtained funding to support taxi services for some of its community members through the Massachusetts Convention Center. Other organizations may have benefitted from simply knowing that was an option to seek.

The other kind is learning *from* equity centered organizations and efforts. As mentioned earlier, climate funders need to shift their understanding of climate resilience to center racial justice and social equity. Climate funders' definitions of resilience are not aligned with how resilience is viewed by community based, grassroots, social movement organizations.

The groups and efforts interviewed here do not fragment their work into climate justice, housing justice, economic justice, or education justice. All of these forms of injustice are connected to racial injustice and other systems of supremacy and oppression. They see the interconnection even when they focus on specific issues.

*People are talking about structural change - the needs for structural change demands an intersectional approach. We need a healthy movement that reflects all the various facets of people's lives and core beliefs and not just one piece, one narrow piece of it.*

*– Jericho Boston*

*Sometimes we're just too siloed and we need to break through from that. If there's one lesson that COVID taught me ... we need to create an agenda for the community that looks at all of the issues across the board because they are all connected. We can't talk about saving people's housing if people don't have a job, if we can't connect it to childcare needs. I mean, it's all one story when we really look at it ...*

*– New England United for Justice*

Learning exchanges where funders are learning *from* such groups would greatly enhance their capacity to support community led resilience building. Current climate funding is too siloed to build the level of community based resilience needed for our most vulnerable communities. Understanding those connections in a less abstract way is best done from the people who live with that experience and who have been working to dismantle the systems that create that vulnerability.

Three learning exchanges described in these interviews are worth exploring in future efforts. These include:

- Learning Exchange Series organized for Mass Redistribution grantees by the Center For Economic Democracy
- Learning circles regularly hosted by the Solidarity Economy Initiative
- Learning circles created supported by Matahari Women's Workers' Center

## More work will need to be done

There is no doubt that the community based responses to COVID are building resilience in vulnerable communities that can respond to climate and other impacts. At the same time, the lessons learned today will need continued refinement and will need to be repeatedly ground-truthed over time. These interviews were done in the mid to late Fall of 2020. As of this writing, the COVID pandemic is still far from over. New or different lessons are yet to be learned as the COVID pandemic and the social and political context continue to evolve. Funders should regularly engage with community based organizations and grassroots efforts as part of a continuous process of learning and growing.

## Conclusion

There is increasing recognition from within philanthropy that the recommendations described above are also best practices in racial justice grantmaking. In the report *Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens*, Sen and Villarosa (2019) urge funders to provide more general operating grants and multi-year funding. They urge funders to prioritize building power, which also entails redefining impacts and outcome measures. And because “racial injustice is generated by multiple institutions, layers of laws and regulations, cultural as well as political actions, and deep histories of conflict between communities,” they encourage funders to support movement ecosystems.

While this is just a first step in a longer term learning process, what can be said with confidence is that community based, grassroots, and social movement efforts that center people and the systems of power that make them vulnerable do in fact build resilience for climate as well as other impacts. Investing in community building, racial justice, and social equity would yield the largest gains in building resilience. This requires longer term trust-based grantmaking to strengthen the base of organizations doing this work and financial support to build the network ecology working on racial equity and social resilience.



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## Appendix A: Full list of participants

Organization/ Interviewee	General Type	Geography or Community served	General description of organizations	
Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition participants:				
Next Leadership Development Corporation (NLDC)	Non-Profit NGO	Black/ African American community in Boston	Community leadership development	Community building
Black Economic Justice Institute (BEJI)	Non-Profit NGO	Black/ African American community in Boston	Economic self-sufficiency	Community building
Boston Resiliency Fund (City of Boston)	Funder	City of Boston	Local Government	
City of Revere	Municipality	City of Revere	Local Government	
El Centro Cooperativo de Desarrollo y Solidaridad (CCDS)	Non-Profit	East Boston	Economic self-sufficiency	Immigrant focused
	NGO	Immigrants		Neighborhood focused
Greater Mattapan Neighborhood Council (GMNC)	Non-Profit NGO	Neighborhood of Mattapan in Boston	Place based neighborhood association	Umbrella of neighborhood civic associations
GreenRoots	Non-Profit	City of Chelsea and neighborhood of East Boston in Boston	Activist/ Organizing	Environmental justice
	NGO			Social justice
Jericho Movement - Boston	Non-Profit NGO	Boston	Activist/ Organizing	Local chapter of national network
Jobs with Justice	Non-Profit NGO	Workers in Massachusetts	Activist/ Organizing	Local chapter of national network of labor organizers

Organization/ Interviewee	General Type	Geography or Community served	General description of organizations	
<b>Mass Redistribution Fund (Center for Economic Development)</b>	Funder	Massachusetts	Activist/ Organizing	Economic Justice
<b>Matahari</b>	Non-Profit NGO	BIPOC and immigrant women workers in Massachusetts	Activist/ Organizing	
<b>Mutual Aid Eastie participants:</b>				
<b>Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE)</b>	Unincorporated NGO	Latinx community in East Boston in Boston	Activist/ Organizing	Community building Neighborhood focused
<b>Eastie Farm</b>	Non-Profit NGO	East Boston in Boston	Food security	Community building Environmental resilience
<b>New England United for Justice (NEU4J)</b>	NGO	Primarily Dorchester and Mattapan; expanded to Roxbury and Hyde Park in COVID response	Activist/ Organizing	Community building
<b>Revere COVID Ambassadors</b>	Municipal program	City of Revere	Mutual Aid	Community building
<b>Solidarity Supply Distro (SSD)</b>	NGO	Boston	Mutual Aid	Activist/ Organizing
<b>Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network</b>	Funder	Massachusetts	Faith based	Activist/ Organizing
<b>VietAid</b>	NGO	Vietnamese community  Primarily but not exclusively focused on Fields Corner area of Dorchester in Boston	Social Service	Community development