

PRESS RELEASE

50 Valley Street, Providence, RI 02909-2459
(401) 444.0600 | fax (401) 444.0635
www.LIVEUNITEDri.org



Contact: Michael J. Cerio | Michael@CerioCommunications.com | (401) 743-8269

United Way Awards \$4.5 Million in Community Impact Fund Grants

Aligning with its new 5-year Strategic Plan to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders, investments target dismantling systemic barriers and reversing racial inequities

Providence, R.I. (April 28, 2021) Three months after unveiling its [LIVE UNITED 2025](#) strategic plan, [United Way of Rhode Island](#) is putting \$4.5 million in grants to work in the community to create transformational change in the Ocean State. The funding, the first in a two-year grant cycle, was awarded to 72 organizations in support of programs targeting the root causes of the racial inequities that have held back Rhode Island's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities for generations.

The grants are part of United Way's commitment to invest \$100 million over the next 5 years to build racial equity in Rhode Island and the create justice and opportunities for all.

"There is a lot that must be done if we're to dismantle the systemic, institutional and historical barriers that prevent too many of our neighbors and families from realizing the quality of life they deserve," said Paola Fernandez, chair of United Way's Community Investment Committee, and VP, community development officer at Centreville Bank. "But, as evident from the grant proposals we received, there is no question our community is ready for this work and ready for change."

Grants were made available to Rhode Island nonprofits for both programmatic and operational support, and to support the priority pillars of [LIVE UNITED 2025](#). The specific focus areas include advancing early childhood literacy and expanding out-of-school time learning programs for BIPOC youth, making housing safe and affordable for all, improving access to workforce development and adult education opportunities, and altering policies that perpetuate inequities for people of color.

Funding is for a two-year period (April 2021—March 2023), and is supported by United Way's donor-driven Community Impact Fund its commitment to trust-based philanthropy. In December 2020, philanthropist MacKenzie Scott made a \$10 million donation to the Community Impact Fund, joining tens of thousands of local donors entrusting United Way to use their gifts to create the most impact. Of Scott's gift, \$2.5 million is hitting Rhode Island communities this month.

"At its core, trust-based philanthropy breaks down the traditional funding dynamic – systemically and organizationally – to foster a more collaborative and equitable nonprofit sector," said Larry Warner, MPH, United Way's chief impact and equity officer. "We're putting funding in the hands of organizations on the front lines committed to going deep, rather than wide, to drive real change."

Among the grantees is SISTA Fire, which received unrestricted funding to support its mission and advocacy efforts. Founded in 2017, the organization focuses on the social, economic, and political transformation of women of color by nurturing their civic leadership skills. The grant will help SISTA Fire advance its long-term vision of building a statewide network of women and non-binary people of color with the collective power to transform their communities.

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“In Rhode Island, women and non-binary people of color are the backbones of our families and our communities. As caregivers, frontline workers, educators and visionaries within our neighborhoods, we see what is possible and fight for justice,” said Alexa Barriga, organizing coordinator for SISTA Fire. “But despite the strength and vision we hold for our communities, we face the compounding challenges of structural racism and gender violence. At SISTA Fire, one of the areas we’re fighting to change birth outcomes for Black women, women of color, and their children through a community accountability process.”

Another organization to receive funding is Central Falls-based Fuerza Laboral. A preeminent workers’ rights center, the organization’s mission is to shift the balance of power in the economy in favor of workers by educating, training, and organizing individuals to become community leaders and improve workplace conditions. Over the past year, Fuerza Laboral has doubled-down on its Cooperative Academy and Worker-Owned Cooperative Incubator to grow the field of minority, worker-owned co-ops in the state.

“We need businesses in our community to have more human capital, civic engagement, and stronger social ties and principles – Workers’ Cooperative does exactly that,” said Heiny Maldonado, Fuerza Laboral’s executive director. “This award from United Way will help us to continue our path of success and creating meaningful economic and social impact that allows workers to control their own destiny.”

Added Cortney Nicolato, United Way’s president and CEO, “As inspired as we are by the tremendous potential of the programs receiving grants, never do we forget that these investments are only possible thanks to the generosity of our donors and partners. Only by working together and confronting inequities head-on will we truly influence the change our state so desperately needs in order to thrive.”

In total, United Way received 163 grant applications representing \$10.4 million per year in funding requests. Applications were reviewed by a team consisting of United Way staff, and members of the organization’s Community Investment Committee and Community Advisory Board.

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United Way of Rhode Island is uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders. A member of the world’s largest nonprofit network, we bring together individuals, business, nonprofit, community leaders and government to tackle the root causes of inequity and achieve specific, measurable goals. Our programs include 211, the statewide front door connecting Rhode Islanders with social services, resources, and vital programs. Both directly and through grants to nonprofits, we are investing to build economic opportunity, advance childhood learning, expand philanthropy, and to drive policy and participation. To learn more, visit unitedwayri.org, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#).