

# Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

## The Hyams Foundation • Boston, Massachusetts

by Johanna Wald

**In 1921, a wealthy, unassuming Boston metallurgist and entrepreneur named Godfrey Hyams set aside his money in a trust to ensure that it would be perpetually given away for charitable purposes.** In the ensuing century, what became known as The Hyams Foundation evolved into one of the region's most vocal and most generous supporters of grassroots organizing in the cities of Boston and Chelsea.

In 2016, Hyams welcomed a new executive director, Jocelyn Sargent, who will lead the organization in implementing a new strategic plan that emphasizes racial justice. The Foundation also began shaking up traditional ideas about the relationship between funders and grantees.

Hyams has always prided itself on cultivating and nurturing close relationships with people working on the ground so as to respond effectively and quickly to emerging community priorities. Several years ago, the Foundation embarked upon a strategic planning effort that consisted primarily of community-engaged philanthropy. Giving and strategy was informed via listening sessions and relationship building with grantees and their constituencies. According to Sargent, who previously worked at the WK Kellogg Foundation, three concerns rose to the surface during conversations with grantees and others in Boston and Chelsea. These discussions led Hyams to organize giving under three broad areas: Expanding Fair Wages and Improving Conditions for Low-Income Workers, Ensuring Equitable Housing Access for low-income families and Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

The strategic planning effort also changed the Foundation's grant-making approach in two ways. The first, according to Sargent, was a decision to concentrate more funding for organizations advocating for systems change to achieve racial justice and equitable outcomes rather than direct services. In

making this shift, Sargent says the Foundation aims to strengthen the ability of organizations that serve immigrants and communities of color. This approach will engage marginalized communities in shaping and influencing major policy debates and decisions affecting their lives in both the short and long term.

The focus on systems change is consistent with the Foundation's other major strategic decision to apply a racial justice lens to all three priorities. Greater Boston is among the most racially segregated regions in the nation, with stubbornly persistent racial inequalities across a host of sectors. Hyams works closely with grantees to both understand and address the specific factors and conditions that have created such large racial disparities in housing, education and income in the region. The Foundation's focus on race coincided with, but was distinct from, the broader racial justice movements across the country such as Black Lives Matter.

Hyams is also intent upon modeling a non-traditional participatory form of philanthropy. "Unlike other foundations, we are focused on the very direct engagement of grantees, and on their having constant conversations with the Board and with program officers," she explains. This requires that she, other staff and board members meet regularly with grantees and members of the communities they serve. This level of grantee involvement, she adds, "is not typically done by foundations or in philanthropy." For example, Hyams staff and board are currently consulting closely with grantees to devise new ways to measure impact.

"We need to be smart about what progress looks like" Sargent says, noting that grantees often feel pressure to claim success in order to receive more funding, but that doing so does not always help these organizations become stronger and more effective. She spoke of the need to offer grantees



"reflection space" so they can regroup and "restrategize" when necessary.

"Setbacks are not always setbacks, they are complex and can sometimes be indicative of progress," Sargent says, citing one advocate whose campaign did not result in a legislative win, but did significantly raise public awareness about important issues and developed new allies within state government.

Less than three months into her tenure, Sargent says she is enthusiastic about Hyams' new direction. She plans to reach out to other grant makers regionally and nationally to develop a "more coordinated" agenda for building the resources and capacities of community based organizing and advocacy in Boston and Chelsea. She also hopes that the Foundation's example will encourage other funders to experiment with more inclusive grant-making models.

### The Hyams Foundation

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## The Right to the City Alliance • Boston, Massachusetts

**The Right to the City Alliance is a national coalition formed in 2007 to combat urban displacement and gentrification. Its title comes from a central tenet of the group's urban justice framework: People pushed out of their urban neighborhoods have a right not just to live in their city, but to shape the policies that affect them.** By 2016, the Alliance had member organizations working in 23 cities across the country on a range of challenges related to housing, environment, education, police accountability, criminal justice reform, and community development.

The Boston chapter of The Right to the City Alliance has pushed this mission even further by forming an official alliance of six groups— Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), Boston Workers Alliance (BWA), Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU), New England United for Justice (NEU4) and Neighbors United for a Better East Boston (NUBE). According to Executive Director Darnell Johnson, these groups came together to act as a city-wide voice for “stabilizing and building the power of low-income and working-class communities.” Each brings to the Alliance a specific area of focus and expertise— race and community control, criminal justice reform and access, cultural and economic stabilization, tenant rights and protection, voter engagement, police reform, economic justice, housing and immigration. Johnson believes that by presenting a united front, “we could tackle the broader issue of gentrification and displacement in a more coordinated and powerful fashion.” He is particularly proud of the fact that all six groups are led by individuals of color, and all but one by women. This reflects, according to Johnson, the shifting dynamics of power and control in the city, and the opportunity to shape policies from what he calls an “urban human rights” perspective.

The Hyams Foundation provides support to many of the six core groups individually, as well as to The Right to

the City chapter as a whole. Johnson credits Hyams with being “really strategic in helping us to figure out how to partner with foundations and in servicing a broad base of intersecting issues—race, class, gender and oppression.

Hyams caught on to the leadership coming from my alliance members of this vision of intersecting the work and communities...to fight the same problems and lack of opportunities for communities of color.”



Photo: courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

Johnson praises Hyams for engaging the Alliance and other groups in conversations about the impact of changing demographics in the city, neighborhood configurations, the persistence of racial segregation and the skyrocketing cost of rentals. With the Foundation's help and support, Johnson explains, “we've been in conversation and held workshops around the type of city we are and around collectively creating a big overarching picture of where we all want the city to go....That's a process that most funders don't do with grantees.” Hyams, he says, has even convened grantees and other foundations for “visioning and dreaming.”

“That's something we've never experienced before with funders,” Johnson says, adding that other foundations seem to be taking notice. “They are starting to speak Hyams' language about shifting and engaging differently with community groups and neighborhoods.”

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