

A Time of Transformation?

Remarks of William W. Ginsberg
President and CEO of The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven
at The Foundation's
Annual Meeting

New Haven, Connecticut
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Good evening, all. Thank you all for joining us here this evening for The Foundation's 2021 annual meeting. Thank you to our Chair Nick Norcott, for your leadership and for all you mean to The Foundation and to our community. And special thanks to the Music Department at Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School in New Haven for that wonderful opening, with a special shout-out to Michael Chung, a member of that band and son of The Foundation's own Stephanie Chung. All I can say is *Oye Como Va*.

To Donnell Durden and his colleagues at Aligning, I want to say a profound thank you for that powerful video. For so many, the isolation of COVID has made it an intensely personal experience. The people you interviewed, Donnell, and their stories as you captured them are certainly powerful as individual testimonies; taken together, they tell us much about our community's story this past year too.

To everyone out there this evening: thank you again for being here. Your presence means a great deal. After all we have endured this past year, this terrific attendance is a statement of our common purpose and of our connections in the face of powerful forces of separation. Community is all about connection, and we are deeply grateful for the enduring connections that we share with you.

I hope that the video you just saw and the photo loop playing before our program began captured for you as it did for me some of what has made this past year in our community so different, so tragic, so difficult in many ways, so inspirational in others, and so potentially transformational.

This last year has been a time of loss – lost health, lost jobs, lost progress, and of course lost lives...too many lost lives. Yet this last year has also been a time of remarkable resilience, generosity and courage. Health care workers, first responders, social service providers, front-line workers, family and friends of those taken ill – all putting themselves at risk to be of service

and comfort to others. And really almost everyone, in the simple act of wearing a mask, made a profound statement of community too.

This last year has been a time of disconnection – too many have been too alone. It has been a time when personal relationships - the very raw material of community - took the form of grainy images on computer screens. And yet, this has been a time when the bonds of family, friendship, work, and community were brought ever more to the center of our consciousness because we could no longer take them for granted.

This last year has been a time of deepened and inescapable inequity, with COVID's terrible costs falling so disproportionately on people of color, on women with children, on those exposed to the virus as frontline workers, and on those lacking access to the technology needed to work safely or to learn safely.

This last year has also been a time of inescapable injustice, when we were graphically confronted with the age-old demons of hatred and racist violence. The video of George Floyd's murder remains indelible. It has changed us.

Inescapable inequity and injustice have made this a time of awakening too, when we have come face-to-face with the inadequacy of what we have been doing to make a more equitable and just society. So many – in business, in government, and in the social sector – have committed to do better and to do more.

Initially, COVID created feelings of powerlessness, as we hunkered down just trying to stay out of the path of this seemingly uncontrollable force. Yet now, as vaccinations mount and restrictions are relaxed, powerlessness is giving way to a sense that we can make COVID the departure point for doing things differently and for making life better for all in our community.

This pandemic has revealed so much about what it is we need to do to make our world and our community better. This can be a transformational moment. Yet in every realm one hears the same questions: will we accept this learning? Will we move forward from here, or will the forces of reaction prevail again?

When COVID struck like a thunderclap last March, The Community Foundation like so many others pivoted swiftly. Within days, we changed our plans, processes and priorities for the year, reacting in real time to the crisis around us despite all the unknowns. The Foundation's staff adjusted wonderfully well.

Working entirely remotely, The Foundation in 2020 had perhaps its most productive year ever. By our conventional measures, while hardly the whole story, 2020 was a very strong year:

- The Foundation made \$33 million in total grants and distributions in 2020, one of our highest totals ever;

- The Foundation received more than \$22 million in gifts and transfers last year, as our donors responded with great generosity to the needs all around us; and
- After a terrible downturn in the first half of 2020, our investment performance came roaring back. By year-end, our corporate assets were up 17.6% for the year, ahead of all our benchmarks, and The Foundation's assets at year-end totaled \$778 million.

I am deeply proud of our Foundation team - the staff who made it happen despite all the personal and professional obstacles COVID threw in their way. They not only rolled with the punches, they punched back with great creativity, energy, cohesion and commitment. They showed what they can do when the chips are down, and that in turn opens up all kinds of new possibilities for the future.

In the early days of the pandemic, as the community locked down and unemployment shot up, food insecurity and other basic needs became central. So many people and families became newly vulnerable. Many new grassroots groups and organizations came forward in the hardest-hit neighborhoods, understanding that many of those needing support for the first time in their lives would turn to those they knew best, such as their neighbors or their church.

At the same time, facing reduced revenues and skyrocketing demand for services as well as large unanticipated expenses to keep their staff members and clients safe, many local nonprofits were facing existential crisis, particularly smaller organizations.

In partnership with United Way of Greater New Haven, The Foundation immediately created a new COVID-19 Community Fund. The COVID Fund has raised and distributed more than \$4.4 million since last March. Almost 25% of the COVID Fund grants in 2020 went to grassroots organizations never before supported by The Foundation.

In the midst of that first COVID surge last spring, donors across our community contributed more than \$3.6 million to almost 400 nonprofits through the Great Give, virtually doubling the previous record set in 2019. This remarkable outpouring of support was exactly what was needed at a true low point in the community's battle against COVID.

The same generous response is needed this year. As I hope you know – we work hard so that everyone knows - the 2021 Great Give starts tomorrow morning at 8:00am. You will hear more about that in a few minutes.

Altogether, with our COVID Fund, the expansion and acceleration of The Foundation's planned 2020 grantmaking, the response of our donor advisors, and the Great Give, The Foundation's immediate pandemic response resulted in more than \$10 million in discretionary grants and gifts into our community within 90 days last spring.

As we did this work, it immediately became clear that responding to COVID also meant responding to the deep-rooted systemic inequities in our society. People of color and those living in poverty have paid a hugely disproportionate price in terms of the impacts – health,

economic and educational – of COVID. Women, particularly women of color, have been forced out of the workforce in such numbers this past year that COVID’s economic impact has been called a “shecession.”

And just as COVID dropped its sledgehammer, the brutal murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others vividly put human faces to the hard statistical evidence of inequity.

So mid-2020 marked a clear turning point, a reckoning with systemic racism that starts with the realization that the old ways of advancing racial progress have been inadequate. New ideas, new leaders, new energy and new commitments emerged to address racial inequity in new ways, both here and elsewhere. A movement was unleashed, extending from corporate boardrooms to voter registration drives to grass roots organizing.

Philanthropy too is facing a reckoning. Foundations across the country are responding, even as the sector grapples with its duality as both a powerful force for progress and a reflection of a society in which wealth and privilege are overwhelmingly white.

Against this backdrop, your community foundation decided last summer and fall that this unique historic moment – so painful and tragic yet so full of the promise of real change too – demands more of us.

Stepping Forward is The Foundation’s \$26 million plan to address the impacts of COVID and to advance racial equity. It will provide The Foundation with about \$15 million in incremental discretionary monies to be spent over the next three years, an increase of more than 50% from what would otherwise be our annual discretionary spending. *Stepping Forward* will also provide about \$11 million for three newly-established endowment funds. This \$26 million is coming from both an unprecedented supplemental extraction from our endowments and from donor support.

Never before in our 93-year history has The Foundation ramped up current spending like this. Taking these additional amounts from our discretionary endowments as a COVID response is not only unprecedented for us; it is highly unusual if not unique among community foundations nationally.

That we are stepping forward now is a tribute to our Board of Directors. As one, they have urged boldness. Their message has been clear: do more, don’t hesitate to break the mold; honor donor intent, of course, and preserve capacity to respond to future needs too, but now is the time. While Khalilah Brown-Dean, our Chair last year, and Nick Norcott, our current Chair, have set this tone from the head of the table, our eleven extraordinary directors, each a long-time leader in her or his own right, needed no convincing. At this critical moment, our Board has shown what leadership really looks like.

That we can increase spending in this way to meet the moment is possible because our donors have over many decades created discretionary unrestricted and preference funds. The value of a discretionary endowment is showing itself as never before.

At the same time, our non-discretionary funds are making a huge difference too. Informed by a series of ten donor briefings last year, The Foundation's donor advised grantmaking increased significantly in 2020 too, totaling \$5.6 million including transfers to our COVID Fund.

As part of *Stepping Forward*, we have established three new endowments to address racial equity and COVID impacts: a new Racial Equity Fund, a new Basic Needs Fund and a new Civic Awareness and Engagement Fund. Our goal is to raise \$11 million for these funds over the next several years. I am very pleased to say that thanks to the extraordinary generosity of our donors as well as internal transfers authorized by our Board, the balance in these funds today is approximately \$7.7 million.

Stepping Forward is both building on and transforming our core philanthropic practices.

- Under *Stepping Forward*, even as we continue to build the community's charitable endowment in traditional ways, our development work is changing. We are more focused now on raising current use funding to meet community needs, working with committees of community volunteers to build the three funds I just mentioned, and diversifying our donor base.
- Secondly, *Stepping Forward* is greatly expanding our core grantmaking programs and accelerating our core grantmaking processes.
- Thirdly, *Stepping Forward* includes dedicated funds for racial and ethnic justice grantmaking, a first for us. We anticipate that these monies will be used to support change makers tackling racist systems and structures through advocacy, organizing and civic engagement.
- And fourthly, *Stepping Forward* is funding two new grant programs at the leading edge of turning more of our grant decision-making over to those closest to the issues being addressed. In one, we are working with the Arts Council to support artists and arts organizations whose work advances racial equity and healing through the arts. In the other, we are working with the University of Connecticut to provide leadership and nonprofit management training for people of color working for local nonprofits.

We are only four months into our three-year *Stepping Forward* plan, so its ultimate shape is far from determined. *Stepping Forward* will respond in real time to how forces large and small are shaping our community in this time of change. We will listen to the community from as many perspectives as possible. And we will watch closely as the big questions are gradually answered:

what will be the focus and impact of the vast amounts of Federal money coming to Connecticut and to our local communities? And will other local institutions step forward too?

However The Foundation's work might change in the next several years, it will continue to be anchored in our core strategic objectives of opportunity and equity.

Even though our five-year strategic plan, entitled *Opportunity and Equity*, was put in place in 2019, all the events of the last year have served to underscore rather than alter our focus on opportunity and equity as the twin pillars of The Foundation's work.

For too long, our community and our State have been places of too little opportunity and too much inequity. To change that, we need growth that is inclusive and we all – public and private, city and suburb, Black and White - need to embrace equity as a core community goal. Equity and opportunity are inextricably tied: greater opportunity without greater equity is a recipe for greater division. Greater equity without greater opportunity is a false promise.

Equity is now the connective tissue that ties together The Foundation's work. It is no longer one commitment of The Foundation's among many; it is now a defining element of all we do. Our grant programs, capacity building programs, development strategies and mission investing are all tied now to our larger vision of building a more equitable community.

At one end of the funnel, the community will see our commitment to equity in how we deploy our resources and in what voices we include in making those decisions. At the other end, you will see it too in the ways in which we are broadening our reach and deepening our relationships; you will see it in who we are connected with, how we connect with them, and how we listen to what they have to say.

How fortunate we are at The Foundation to have Board members who are and who have been the doers, the leaders and the trailblazers for equity in our community and beyond, in some cases for decades. In their lives, and in their extraordinary careers, our Board members personify accomplishment and commitment to equity. I hear it and feel it in every conversation.

Our equity work is from the inside out. It is shaping our staff learning through the books we read and discuss together and through our ongoing engagement with the Racial Equity Institute. It is shaping our staff hiring, as we are filling several new positions related to *Stepping Forward*. And it is shaping our plans to examine our own Foundation history as a reflection of race relations in Greater New Haven over the last century.

Externally, our two largest grant commitments are New Haven Promise and ConnCAT, both powerful engines of equitable opportunity in our community. We are deeply proud of our role

in founding and sustaining these organizations over the last decade, and we have reiterated our long-term commitment to each of them over the last two years.

As part of our work to promote equitable opportunity through inclusive growth in our region, The Foundation has refocused our mission investments on early stage women-owned and minority-owned businesses. This involves both direct investments and the building of what we call an equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Greater New Haven. A diverse 13-member council of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial supporters established this past year guides this ecosystem building work. Our partners include the New Haven Innovation Collaborative and Collab.

Our largest mission investments, made in partnership with a local family foundation, are in ConnCORP's redevelopment of Dixwell Plaza and in NXTHVN on Henry Street. The transformative potential of these two projects for Dixwell and Newhallville is enormous.

In talking about opportunity and equity, I also want to mention the work we are doing with our community foundation counterparts in the Hartford and Fairfield County areas. Together, we have created the new Connecticut Urban Opportunity Collaborative. We are hiring our first-ever joint staff person and are working together on policy issues at the State level. We are excited at what could come of the three largest community foundations in the state speaking and acting together to advance the interests and needs of the residents of New Haven, Bridgeport, Hartford and other urban areas.

By way of conclusion, I want to repeat something I said a few minutes ago: this pandemic has revealed much of what we need to do to make our world and our community better. We can make this time a transformational one. For The Foundation, this has led us to step forward in new ways – transformative ways – to utilize the trust and the resources we have built over 93 years to advance greater equity and opportunity in our community. Many others in our community are also stepping forward, and they too will help to make this unique moment in our history a transformative one.

The Great Give tomorrow and Wednesday are an important way to step forward. Please give generously to the organizations you care most about, please consider supporting organizations you've never supported before and please urge your friends and neighbors to support our community too. The people on the front lines are better able than I am to tell you how important that is, so I will turn now to them and to Jackie Downing, our Director of Grantmaking and Nonprofit Support.

Thank you again for joining us this evening.

