Elevating to Evolve

Stories of Wisdom, Excellence, and a Call for Change from Black Women Nonprofit Leaders in Howard County.

HORIZON FOUNDATION

THE WOMEN'S GIVING CIRCLE OF HOWARD COUNTY

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Horizon Foundation and the Women's Giving Circle of Howard County solicited this report in response to learnings shared by other foundations and communities. Those findings sparked a curiosity to understand the experience women leaders are having here in Howard County. Partnering together, their goal was to conduct a study to capture bright spots and challenges for women of color in leadership in the nonprofit sector of Howard County. The research would explore the full spectrum of the leadership journey, from pursuing leadership, the leadership experience, and decisions to leave or decline positions of leadership.

The Horizon Foundation

The Horizon Foundation is the largest independent health philanthropy in Maryland. We are committed to a Howard County free from systemic inequities, where all people can live abundant and healthy lives. We fight for equitable and compassionate health and mental health care, access to affordable and safe homes, a community where healthy food is accessible and affordable and where all residents are able to generate and pass down wealth. Our mission is to work side by side with community to build power, advocate for policy change and dismantle structural racism to achieve better health for everyone in Howard County and greater Maryland.

Women's Giving Circle of Howard County

The Women's Giving Circle of Howard County is building a community of philanthropists to address the needs of women and girls in Howard County, Maryland. In the 22 years since our inception, we have given over $1.2M to our nonprofit partners and have built a $1.1M endowment to support our community in perpetuity. As a giving circle, we are pooling our dollars so we can have a greater impact together than we might otherwise have alone - we are stronger together. **www.wgchowardcounty.org**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks to elevate the experiences and stories from Black women leading in the nonprofit space in Howard County. It captures the impact Black women have had – and continue to have – in the nonprofit community. It names challenges Black women face as they seek to not only lead, but to thrive in that leadership. And it comes at a time when change has never been more needed.

Research Focus

The research for this report was initially focused broadly on women of color. However, as discussed below and based on guidance from a group of advisors, the report evolved to focus specifically on Black women. It seeks to elevate the unique and nuanced experiences Black women face in navigating the nonprofit space.

Key Findings

While it is challenging to collapse the breadth of stories and recommendations shared by interviewees, several key themes emerged:

1. Black women are leading in the Howard County nonprofit sector with care, passion and dedication.

2. However, more harmonious and self-aware environments would allow them to better thrive (and not simply survive).

3. Though there are individual, relational and organizational challenges that create barriers to thriving in leadership, women lean into personal and professional supports to enable their leadership journey.

4. The Howard County ecosystem presents unique environmental challenges that women named as particularly difficult to navigate while seeking to lead.

5. The onus to change the culture should not fall to Black women. Instead, individuals, organizations, and funders must take responsibility to create a culture that supports the thriving of Black women nonprofit leaders.
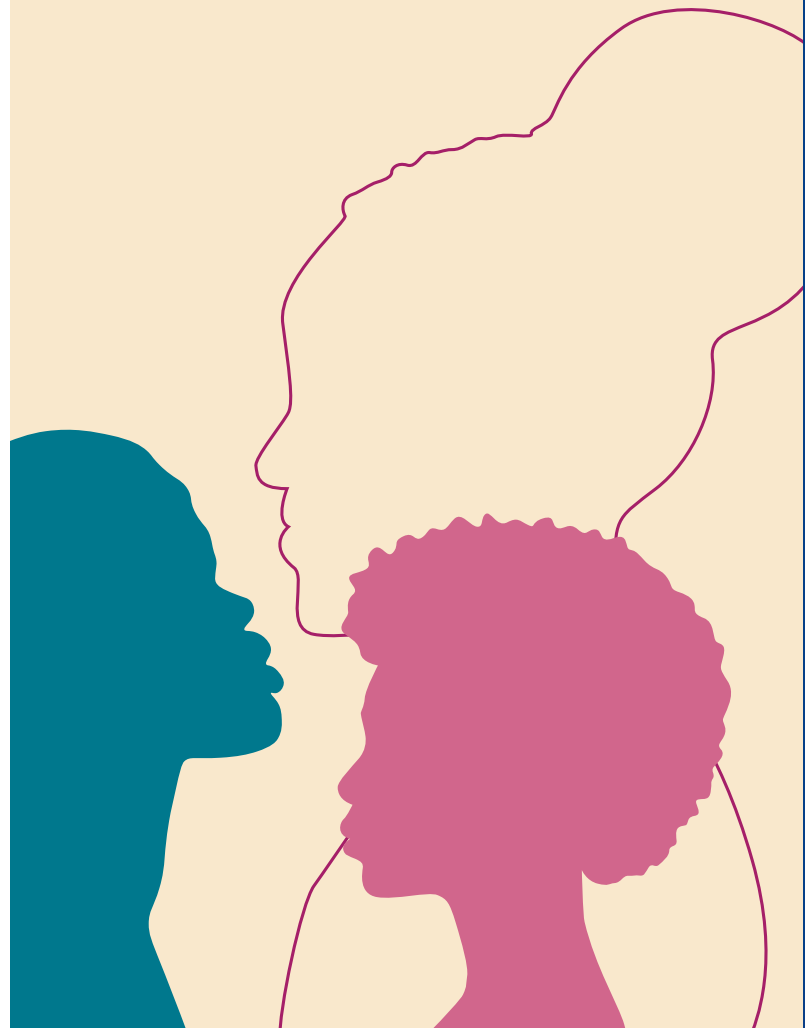
A Call to Action

This report seeks to not only elevate stories of Black women in nonprofit leadership, but to elevate these stories alongside a call to evolve. Black women are charging our community to act – to listen intently, speak out against microaggressions and inequities, and hold itself accountable to showing up differently.

There is work to be done collectively to steward a culture and community that supports and uplifts the thriving of Black women leaders. This work is critical, as we risk Black leaders seeking other positions in spaces that better promote their leadership. This report provides guidance for the community on how to support Black women in positions of leadership – and particularly offers suggestions for funders, nonprofits, boards, and community members.

Black women leaders are surviving, but not always thriving. This is a call to change the ecosystem within which our nonprofits operate. The Horizon Foundation and Women's Giving Circle are committed to this culture change work, and are calling on the community as a whole to evolve.

RESEARCH
DESIGN AND
DATA COLLECTION

Research Team

The research team was led by Tiffany Erbelding (Ignited Strategies); in partnership and with support from Rashel Taylor (RMT Solutions).

A Focus on Black Women

The research for this report was initially focused broadly on women of color. The hope was to connect with women across a diverse set of races and ethnicities to understand bright spots and challenges to leading in the nonprofit sector.

The first phase of research included connecting with a set of Advisors to better inform the approach and audience. The research team connected with six local leaders (the Advisors) who were diverse in age, race, organizational mission, and length of time in leadership roles.

Through conversations with the six Advisors, it emerged that focusing broadly on women of color would do a disservice to the uniqueness of each community. They noted that some non-White women and women of Hispanic ethnicity do not identify as women of color. Advisors also named that experiences often shared by one community (e.g., Black women) can differ from those shared by other communities of color.

With these learnings and guidance from the Advisors, there came a consensus to focus this initial research on Black Women.

This decision was upheld by the understanding that:

1. As the Advisors intimated, the experiences of Black women tend to be linked to experiences of all women. This research provided an opportunity to prioritize the voices of Black women.

2. Advisors shared that, while there are several Black women successfully leading in the County, many have significant challenges and experiences to share as well. A report dedicated to elevating these stories would be welcomed.

3. Linking too many groups of women together (e.g., seeking to focus broadly on women of color) would likely drown out the diversity in thought and experience across several groups, including the Black diaspora. This approach would not give enough space to hear and share stories from all women of color.

"Respect her like you respect any other leader. And realize that she's probably dealing with a little more than the average leader. As Black women, we tend to take on a little more than other leaders do. We're juggling multiple programs, projects and people…The needs in our communities are greater. And we [I] try to address as many issues as I can. If I can, I help people understand that we're not slackers - we're actually overachievers."

It was agreed that this report provides a unique opportunity to elevate the needs and experiences of Black women – and that the report will serve as a catalyst for future conversations and opportunities to share stories of other communities and women of color.

Leadership

For this report, leadership focused on Black women leaders connected to Howard County nonprofits. We included those who are currently executive directors and/or serving on a board of a nonprofit. To ensure we heard the voices of those entering their leadership journey, we also included women in a board training or pipeline program and who intend to serve on a board of a Howard County based nonprofit or a nonprofit that serves the County. To capture perspectives from those who have transitioned out of past roles, we included select individuals who previously held positions of leadership in/with Howard County nonprofits.

Qualitative Study

As mentioned above, six local leaders served as our initial Advisors. These women varied in age, race, number of years in leadership, and organizational mission. They informed the research design, interviewee list, and questions and areas for exploration during the interviews themselves.

The Advisors, Women's Giving Circle and Horizon Foundation informed the initial interviewee list. We then conducted a qualitative study using virtual and in-person interviews of local Black women leaders in the Howard County nonprofit sector. We also conducted an open call process to capture any leaders we may have missed in the initial outreach. We utilized social media, organizational newsletters, and recommendations from interviewees to identify additional leaders. Four women responded to the open call, resulting in two additional interviews.

We conducted a total of 46 interviews (including the interviews with our six Advisors). Interviews averaged 45 minutes or more.

Leadership position varied among interviewees as follows:

50% board/executive committee members

30% executive directors

20% former/potential leaders

Ethical Considerations

To support and protect the women interviewed, we ensured informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for all participants' identity and experiences. By maintaining confidentiality throughout the process, we hoped to create a space that fostered greater truth telling and honest feedback without the concern of repercussion. Progress can only be made in the midst of honesty, and we sought to uphold this trust.

GROUNDING: LEARNING FROM OTHERS

This conversation and the experiences of Black women in leadership have been explored at a state and national level. Organizations like the Washington Area Women's Foundation, Building Movement Project, Association of Black Foundation Executives, and others have researched the experiences of Black leaders in the sector. Their learnings helped inform the foundation of our own research and interview process.

Trends in the Literature

Across the nation, Black women have the vision and hope to thrive, but it has often not been experienced. Barriers preventing this vision have included racist experiences, feeling overworked and underappreciated, and the lack of trust and inability to show up authentically.

Experiencing Racism and Inequity

Black women in the broader literature shared that they frequently experience racism, micro- and macroaggressions.[8] There was also a trend that, when Black women get hired into leadership roles, they were expected to essentially 'solve racism' – that, despite limited resources or accountability within the organization, there were higher expectations for success because the initiatives were being spearheaded by Black leaders.

Black women leaders also reported pay discrepancies compared to their predecessors and other leaders in the sector. Many even noted needing a second job to meet financial responsibilities, exacerbating feelings of exhaustion and diminishing the ability to thrive.

Overworked

Many Black women reported that they constantly sacrifice evenings and weekends to ensure the work of the organization gets done. The day-to-day workloads do not allow enough time to complete the work.[8] This contributes to a cycle and constant state of exhaustion.[17] Consequently – and dangerously – the realities of what Black women leaders report experiencing in leadership positions is pulling many away from even applying to these roles.[6]

"One thing Black women can do is tolerate being uncomfortable and moving forward anyhow. This isn't a professional skill; it is a life skill."

Lack of Trust

Black women leaders named feeling like work is often a battle – for respect for their expertise, ideas and decisions; and with staff, board and community.[12] But despite this lack of trust, there is also a heightened (if unspoken) expectation to succeed beyond what any predecessor or former board has been able to accomplish.[19] And any failure to perform – despite this lack of trust – can create an unfair admonishment of the leader; and not, more appropriately, of the organization and the environment.

Reflected in Howard County

As will be explored below, this national research on the challenges Black women face aligns with experiences shared by women in Howard County. However, our local research further highlighted the concept of a Howard County bubble – the ecosystem and culture within the County that impacts how Black women lead.

Many interviewees shared that working in Howard County is harder than working in many other places. Challenges were named around things like the old guard, and a culture of prioritizing perception over impact. The findings shared throughout the report will provide more context on this ecosystem, and also opportunities to call in the community to seek change.

"In Howard County, there's a lot of pockets of old guard. People sitting in certain positions - even some self - proclaimed - and been in positions for so long, they don't know what it truly means to be diverse."

READING WITH THE RIGHT LENS

Thriving in Leadership

The national research that helped ground this report also introduced the idea of thriving – not simply operating or surviving – in leadership. This research further explored what thriving would mean for Black women in our community.

"It would be crazy! The whole entire world would change! The level of productivity would increase, and you are so much more productive and effective when you can be authentic. There wouldn't be as many mental health and general health issues."

Thriving is an internal state that is impacted by external environment. Thriving environments are ones that are harmonious, operate from gratitude and abundance, and promote self-awareness, self-care, and rest. Where there is unity within an organization, it contributes to greater unity and collaboration with other community organizations and partnerships.

Organizations that support thriving are those that hold people accountable to their roles, responsibilities, and contributions to the environment. Policies and practices that do not align with – and even hinder the equity journey of – an organization can create barriers to an environment of thriving.19 The thriving of Black women leaders in the nonprofit sector depends on how others understand and operate in the nonprofit landscape.1

As will be explored below, Black women leaders shared that they need to be cared for in order to thrive in their roles, to continue to support the community, and to bring impact to the organization.

We will spend time capturing this vision for thriving, and things organizations and community can do in support.

"Wow! I feel like we would hear more of the voices of the people actually being served. I feel like you would have more compassion in policies, more flexibility, more solutions. We would be more welcomed and have a higher sense of belonging."

Unique and Shared Experiences

Black Women are Not a Monolith

To support understanding in reading this report, we encourage you to hold this framing in mind - Black women are not a monolith.

All interviewees are unique and have their own experiences, journeys, and exposures. Many experiences did overlap, and this is where themes are elevated in the findings below. But no woman spoke for the entire Black community. Interviewees shared their own personal journeys – and their unique experiences informed their recommendations to improve the sector and better support the thriving of Black women leaders.

> "I've felt pressure to feel like I'm the Black voice. I'm at the table discussing these issues, and they would look to me to bring forth as many of the needs and concerns of my community as I could."

Common Nonprofit Experiences – Unique Environments

We also recognize that many of the stories and recommendations shared below – particularly around nonprofit organizations and funding – reflect things other communities and nonprofit leaders may also experience. However, we uplift that the stories shared from the Black women interviewed for this report must be seen through that lens; as experiences uniquely and particularly shaped by navigating the nonprofit space as a Black woman.

FINDINGS AND THEMES

1. Black Women Are Leading

It is important to begin this report by acknowledging that Black women ARE leading in Howard County – and they are doing so with care, compassion, and dedication. As we spoke with interviewees, two major themes emerged about their personal convictions in leadership – an internal drive to serve, and a passion to change communities in a way that makes a lasting impact.

Finding Purpose in Service

Drive

Interviewees overwhelmingly shared a personal passion to serve, and a call to improve their communities. This internal drive has encouraged them to pursue positions on boards and as nonprofit leaders – and to continually find ways to make change.

Passion

It has been most rewarding to see the fruits of their labor make a difference, and be able to work in an environment that supports connections, partnerships, and creativity.

Creation

There has also been joy found in the challenge and newness of leadership positions. New positions prompt continuous learning and skill development, which was fulfilling and continued to fuel the drive to make a positive impact.

> "In my community, we don't think small. We might think incrementally, but we're on this earth to make changes."
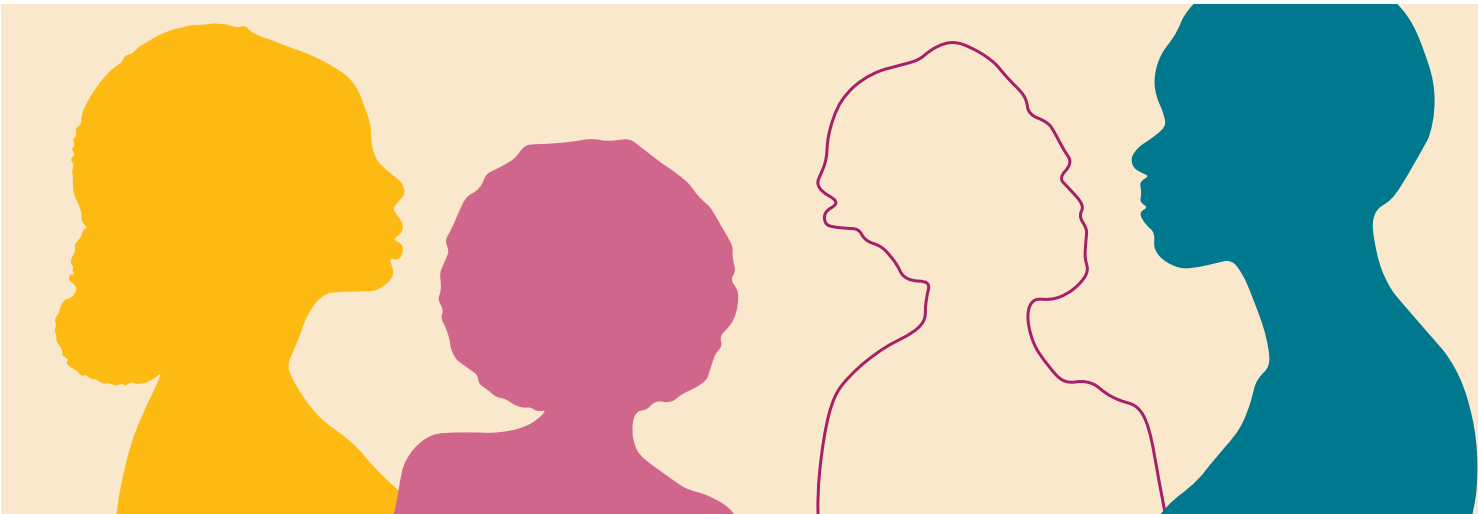
Building New Spaces: Creating Nonprofits and Programs

Intention & Innovation

Black women are building new, building up, and building bridges within the nonprofit sector. Carrying a passion to serve the community, we noted that several interviewees were inspired to start their own nonprofits and create their own programs. This was sometimes because they witnessed or experienced a problem and did not feel the nonprofit sector handled it with the care, attention, or urgency it deserved. Sometimes new organizations or programs were started because interviewees wanted to focus on approaching communities in ways that felt more aligned and respectful, with those being served at the forefront of decision making.

The newness of these programs and organizations allowed many interviewees to be creative in their approaches to meeting the community and their needs. They were also able to build new cultures, policies, and infrastructures within their organizations that created space for more authentic leadership and engagement. This space provided a stronger sense of authority to focus on more intentional partnerships with other organizations and community groups.

Leadership Enablers and Supports

Black women leaders are leaning into both personal and professional avenues of support to advance their work, lead well, and continue their success.

Personal Supports

Spending time with family and love ones to support making time for rest, fun, and disconnecting from the role.

Leaning into faith and spiritual practices, like attending church and prayer.

Relationships to support a sense of connection and relatability.

Many women also stated that they try to take time off to be present with their families, though taking time off also brings its own stressors. Though it can be overwhelming to return to the work that amasses while away, being with loved ones provides much needed refreshment and rejuvenation.

Professional Supports

Formal and informal relationships in and out of the sector. Some networking took place in formal work settings and conferences, while others were accomplished by reaching out to other leaders and building a less formal support system. Relationships support leaders feeling connected and create safer spaces for expression. When leaders get to spend time with – and talk to – others who can relate, they are able to speak more transparently about what they are experiencing. They are also able to receive the mentorship, encouragement, and wisdom of others. When connected to others, leaders know that the nuances of their experiences are also being understood.

"Definitely my own network. Here, having built a network of black female leaders. I lean on them for replenishment and rejuvenation, and a listening ear. But then also a network of black leaders, male and female, nationally."

Free, online, and easily accessible resources, including webinars, podcasts, audio books, books, and articles. Because women feel stretched and that they are already working long hours, they named that leaning into formal supports can push against their already packed schedules. Instead, free resources can seem more accessible because they can be fit in on their own time.

When it comes to professional avenues of support, many were more informal in nature. Formal supports, though seen as valuable, were time consuming, costly, and tended to not address the unique needs for Black women leaders. Informal supports were often more customizable, relatable, accessible and flexible in delivery, meeting many Black women leaders where they needed to be.

Many women also noted that the formal support available to them focused on getting them into leadership positions.

But the interviewees are in leadership positions – they are already leading in the County. Given their more mid- to late- career roles, formal supports did not address things that were relevant for them in these capacities. They called for less information and training about getting to seats of leadership, and more information on how to really manage and sustain a business – for example, finances, building partnerships, grant writing and managing grants, board development, building social campaigns, and boosting visibility.

> "You need to be able to pick up the phone, talk to somebody, and get support. Period. Networking is king."

Many of our Black women leaders have been able to achieve amazing things in the nonprofit sector. Some have designed and brought to fruition their own programs and organizations. Some have saved other nonprofits from financial collapse. Others have moved new initiatives forward, and have been able to make space for more diverse hires and recruits, especially more Black women hires and board members.

Black women leaders also remain resourceful, creatively building their own avenues of support while bringing their passion to serve, drive for positive change, individuality, creativity, and authenticity forward in the Howard County nonprofit sector. They continue to make impactful changes for the community and those they serve. Yet they often do so while surviving the barriers and ism's that come with being a Black woman leader.

> "Even though I've been in this space for 20 years, still couldn't say I'm thriving."

2. BUT ARE WE THRIVING?

The short answer – not really. Black women leaders are creating impact, but often in environments with limitations. Cultures, organizations, and systems may not be designed for their thriving, but instead can perpetuate harm, hardship, and a lack of impact. Operating within these systems causes Black women leaders frustration and tension. It is also leading many to question if they even want to remain in the nonprofit sector in Howard County.

Internal Tensions

Individual and Relational Challenges

Interviewees shared that there are both internal tensions they face while seeking to lead, as well as organizational characteristics that can hinder leadership.

> "Don't let them see you sweat. When you are upset, keep it under wraps. Whether in the board room or 1:1 – got to take it someplace else. Have to always show strength. I don't mean just crying, but, raising your voice or any of that to show you're angry. I guess they call it your poker face - always keep it calm."

Individual Challenges

a.   As shared above, Black women leaders felt a personal call to service and community. They want to see lasting impact and are working daily to drive change.

b.   But interviewees named a constant tension having to live out this calling in often White-led organizations. This drives an internal frustration with wanting to lead and feeling called to lead but not always being free to lead. Specifically, interviews named elements of these cultures (similar to those named in White supremacy cultures [21]) as:

- **Only one right way to do work**
- **Paternalism**
- **Perfectionism**
- **An either/or binary**

- **Fear of conflict**
- **Progress equating to bigger/more**
- **Sense of urgency**

c.   Some women who were not originally looking for leadership roles felt compelled to step in when their organization found themselves without a leader. They felt an internal obligation to ensure the organization's work would be able to progress steadily without major disruption. Not taking these roles, even if unwanted, felt like doing a disservice to the community.

Relational Challenges

Though not the focal point of any interview, some leaders noted that the same relational barriers and challenges experienced in the White-dominant nonprofit sector are also found within the Black community. This often showed up as a scarcity mentality, and a need to compete for funding and position.

a.   Funding for nonprofits already feels limited. And with that, many Black leaders within the sector feel forced to partner with each other, or be seen as competing with each other for funding. There is an undercurrent within the community that there is not enough funding to go around, but especially not enough to go around to Black-led and Black-focused organizations. This scarcity mentality has created tensions between Black leaders, and it has also impeded opportunities for genuine partnership.

b.   This dynamic was most prevalent with legacy members of the Black community – those who have been working in the community for decades and are seen as former leaders. Many new Black leaders in the County mentioned that, when they got into their leadership roles, they looked for older and former Black leaders to reach out to and learn from. The hope was that previous lessons learned might be passed down so new leaders might not have to experience the same hardships and roadblocks. But that support and handoff was not always offered, and was sometimes even withheld. This relational tension also presents a barrier to Black women now leading in the County.

"Some of the connections I have tried to make are very segmented and guarded, and if you don't follow this thing you aren't let in. It is very cliquish. The mentors I have are from outside of Howard County. I feel like I have support - is it what I would like it to be, no it's not. It gets lonely at the top. No one wants to talk about what they are actually dealing with."

Organizational Challenges

Beyond individual frustrations and cultural challenges, many dynamics within organizations create additional challenges to Black women thriving in leadership. As discussed above, some of these characteristics are often experienced by nonprofits in general. They are shared here because they were elevated by interviewees, who face challenges common to nonprofits alongside cultural and systemic challenges unique to Black women leaders.

Optics Versus Accountability

a. A theme emerged that named a disconnect some organizations have between their optics and their accountability. Especially in recent years, many organizations have elevated DEI values and made DEI a strategic pillar or a more prominent part of their work.

Yet when it comes to accountability, this named DEI-focus comes without adequate funding to support the initiative, or a commitment to giving the work the time and attention it requires. There is also a question of accountability – how is the organization holding itself to meeting its DEI goals? Are there metrics or targets? Is there a commitment to funding the work through the duration of this (and future) strategic plans? Interviewees called for accountability structures within organizations to underpin the named focus on DEI and anti-racism.

b. There was also a stated culture of showmanship and perception. Interviewees noted that they often find themselves invited to numerous press conferences and called on for media engagements – but at the same time feel they have to fight for the sustainability of the work. We (the County) celebrate the work's intention, but there may not be the same attention given to supporting long-lasting impact – and taking the time to hear from communities being served to understand what work remains to be done.

"There is a disconnect between what's communicated as a priority and how it's operationalized (or isn't)."

Change Management and Transitions

a. Change management, or the lack there of, presents another organizational barrier. Many Black women leaders found themselves in leadership roles where they were expected to launch new programs and initiatives and breathe new life into the organization. But they often ended up pushing for this progress within an organizational climate resistant to change. This looks like staff members who are unwilling to pursue new and different ways of being, or board members not offering the time and resources to support long-term change.

b. Interviewees also noted lacking (or sometimes absent) transition planning. Onboarding for many was incomplete, and there were gaps in information about the true state of the organization's history, infrastructure and capacity. Some women even noted that, had they been fully aware of what they were walking into, they likely would not have joined the organization.

Selective Trust in Black Leaders

Black women leaders named that there were many occasions when they did not feel fully trusted to lead. Trust is often selective, which then makes decision-making, progress, and clarity very difficult to accomplish.

Lack of Trust

"It felt very situational. There was situational trust in my competence."

a. Black women leaders felt least trusted to lead in areas related to finance (excepting Black women leaders working in the finance field). Women reported that financial conversations were frequently met with questions, scrutiny on budget items, and closer monitoring by board and community members. They were also met with concern over the sustainability of their fundraising and revenue generating efforts. Leaders found that when it came to funding conversations (e.g., meeting potential donors), board members would want to participate in the meetings. This read to leaders as a lack of trust in their ability to manage conversations independently.

b. There were many experiences where women recalled sharing an idea that was received with doubt or the need for proof of concept. But to have this same idea, when shared by counterparts, receive full support and trust. Interviewees felt that others are freer to raise ideas and have visionary conversations, and are given trust and latitude to implement these ideas.

c. This lack of trust was also reflected in the conversation around pay equity. Many interviewees elevated pay equity as an ongoing struggle, and the scrutiny and opposition faced when advocating for a raise (or presenting a raise in their organization's budget).

"Some of the most emotional people I have ever worked with have been White men. They have the ability to yell, [or] pound on the table. I have found that I can't be too much of anything, even be quiet. I want to not have to hyperthink about what I am saying and expressing myself, in the way my colleagues could. It would be a game changer if we got to move the way we needed to."

"Pay parity! Let's stop with the nonsense."

Where Trust is Shown

a. Leaders found they were most trusted in outreach and connecting with community – more specifically, the Black community. But even in this space, interviewees noted challenges. Outreach to community is often seen as the sole responsibility of Black leaders – rather than a shared responsibility and priority of the organization.

Environmental Challenges: The Howard County Ecosystem

These internal, cultural, and organizational challenges are experienced nationally, but are also reflected in our local culture. Interviewees overwhelmingly spoke of the Howard County 'bubble' – dynamics within the county that emphasize historical ways of being and elevate optics often at the expense of substance.

Old Guard Mentality

a. This concept was reflected as traditional leaders – in both White and Black spaces – being resistant to changes in process and changes in leadership. Rather than make space for the new, many stay in leadership roles and uphold traditional dynamics and values. This has made it particularly challenging for Black women leaders to enter into – and thrive in – positions of leadership.

"People are so connected and married to this past, almost dinosaur mentality about how business and community is done – there is low tolerance for anything other than what has always been."

b. There was also a perceived entitlement to comfort in the County. A sense that the comfort of the past should be preserved, and that any forward movement must fit within those guardrails. Leaders noted that this can make leading particularly challenging because of the seemingly unreasonable barriers and roadblocks presented in service of the old. Leaders note becoming frustrated and feeling energy is wasted, exacerbating feelings of exhaustion and burn out.

"[With national groups] I don't have to do that defense or code switching, which is almost necessary in Howard County… but in Howard County, I need to make myself more palatable to you – you don't adjust or see my perspective. But this isn't how I would normally operate."

Meaning Well

a. The concept of meaning well was echoed in many interviews. Essentially, the idea that people in the County intend to do good – but this can perpetuate denial and defensiveness in response to observations that the County is not as equitable as it means to be.

"I don't like when organizations say they 'mean well'…do you need to mean to breathe? Mean to walk? I don't like the phrase 'mean well.'"

b. This belief in good intention can actually lead to perpetuating harm, because it reinforces that those intending to do good (often White counterparts) know more than those they seek to support. This, ironically, perpetuates the anti-racist practices that Black leaders are calling out, and can undermine the Black perspective.

"This [Howard County] is like Alabama trying to act like it's not. It's not just that people are acting with no regard, but they are faking like they do have regard. It's inauthentic, making nice."

Bait and Switch, and its Potential Long-Term Consequences

a. Many interviewees – especially those newer to leadership – felt like they had one understanding of the County before taking on their leadership position, but that operating in leadership in the space is very different. Expressed values around equity, inclusivity and progress drew leaders in. Organizations with recent DEI focuses in their strategic priorities appealed to many, and seemingly indicated opportunities to drive real change in communities. Yet, as noted in the organizational and ecosystem challenges above, leadership has looked very different and been more difficult than anticipated. It also leans into the internal tension and frustration of feeling called to change community but having to do so amongst opposition.

"The veil of care. There is a facade of caring covering up the true lack of care, that makes it hard to get what you need and do real business that will make pathways and breakthroughs."

b. This idea of the bait and switch was also reflected in the work expected by the organization. Some leaders noted being presented with a set of job responsibilities before accepting a position but, once on staff, having much higher workloads and expectations demanded of them.

c. Several leaders also named that this frustration is reaching a boiling point. Many shared that, if things do not change within the Howard County culture and ecosystem, they would rather not stay in their leadership roles. And if they had truly understood the county and its dynamics ahead of time, they would have never initially taken their roles. A truth that must be heeded, especially here in a County that seeks to value and honor diversity.

"The complete story was not shared with me. I was given a very selective preview of what the environment actually was."

Frustration was a common theme among interviewees. For example, going to photo ops for awarded grants, knowing they had to sacrifice portions of the program to receive funding; or, standing next to their teams and board members to celebrate an initiative, knowing how much they had to fight for the initiative and to be trusted to lead it; or, being expected to give a speech in support of the work, when feeling they are untrusted and underpaid and yet expected to completely transform an organization without sufficient resources or support. These sentiments were shared by several interviewees and underscore some of the challenges they named as nonprofit leaders.

The Power (and Misperception) of Allyship

True Allyship

"[Allies should] be authentic, and not expecting to be considered a savior and given accolades because you're helping."

Interviewees spoke often of allies – both of those they felt truly supported them, and of others who believed themselves to be allies. Allies in support used their social and professional capital to engage, encourage and advance Black leaders. They invested (authentically) in building a relationship – and took the time required to listen and learn intentionally.

Allyship is not a light-touch position. Reading a Black history book or inviting a Black leader to present at an all-staff meeting is not allyship. It is far more intentional and involves a willingness to pause and self-reflect; and to, in some sense, be willing to risk acting for – and speaking out on behalf of – Black leaders.

Misdirected Energy

Leaders lamented what they essentially saw as misdirected time and energy having to manage relationships of surface-level allies. A scenario was presented by several participants – a colleague (typically named as a White woman) might say or do something that the Black leader found offensive or misguided. In speaking up and sharing their perspective, the colleague would become contrite and tearful – to the point where the conversation then became about comforting the colleague instead of addressing the wrongdoing and microaggression experienced by the Black leader.

"White women can get that pass. They might be the person who is causing trouble, but, as soon as they have a tearful response, it gets brushed under the rug. I bring up issues and, as soon as there are tears, I become the aggressor… It's exhausting, on top of all of the challenges leading our organizations."

There is an extra load that Black women leaders carry as they navigate the nonprofit sector, particularly in Howard County. The burden and weight of misguided allies only adds to this load – and can put the onus back on Black women leaders to navigate.

"One of the core criteria of being a true ally is that you are working in partnerships with the communities and individuals you are in allyship with. You are not leading them – you are purposefully stepping aside so they can guide you. And I have not seen a lot of allyship that looks like that."

3. A VISION TO THRIVE: HOPE FOR MORE

What is needed to bring this visionary world into fruition? The main recommendation from these Black women leaders was to really listen. Listen to them. Listen to them with the intention to truly act on what they are saying, and how they are saying to act. What is needed is a responsibility that falls to everyone. A call in look at yourselves, teams and organizations, and a call out for genuine change.

"Many of us don't often feel the level of safety and comfort to show up in an authentic way. I have experienced glimmers of authenticity throughout my career - but in many cases I'm showing up as that corporate, professionally packaged, poised version of me. Wouldn't it be nice to channel a little more humor? Direct, concise real talk without being perceived as an angry Black woman? Organizations are missing out on so much because we don't consistently have spaces for Black women to be themselves. When you do that, you can see the true benefit and value of what we bring."

As shared above, thriving looks like environments that are:

Harmonious

Operate from gratitude and abundance

Promote self-awareness, self-care, and rest

Greater unity within an organization contributes to unity, collaboration and impact with other community organizations and partnerships.

Heard in the voices of our interviewees,
this is the vision for thriving in Howard County:

"It would be honestly much more inclusive than what it is now. You would see things getting done in a more courageous fashion. There would be more risk–taking, and there would be a more realistic speaking of truth to power."

"As I am reflecting, I can't think of a role where I haven't had to do that. Black women thriving means black women receiving the benefit of the doubt, that when I say something or suggest something, I did research it, I did go to school for it, I have the data for it. Give me the benefit of the doubt that I have considered a variety of the things before I presented it to you, that this is the best solution forward."

"Our tenacity to innovate to create and make something out of nothing is just world changing and exciting, in any sector."

Oh my goodness! There would be so much time, energy, and focus on what they are actually supposed to be doing. If I didn't have to spend 60 –70 % of my time dealing with the mess, you could be more effective in your leadership, in impact, and whatever your organizational charge is. Communities would be better for it. There is no demographic that nurtures and leads in the way we do. We are not given the credit or support for the things we do. Black women take care of everyone in a way that no one else does. And when we are allowed to do that, everyone benefits.

"A lot of problems that we face would find solutions if we weren't required to uphold a certain form of leadership. It would allow for more creativity, new ways of thinking of new solutions that we never allowed ourselves to dream about. The solution is not Black woman alone, though that would be a beautiful world. Black women have a way of making magic of very little. If we were left alone to get done the things we are trying to get done we would find a lot of creative solutions to the problems."

"It would be so fun! There would be a levity. There would be trust, there would be work that is done, that doesn't include any bargaining. You get to just do the work. It would be awesome to see that happen so maybe some of these paradigms would shift a bit and Black women would be respected for what they bring to the table. For other young people of color to see themselves in leadership with a new fun, innovative, and inspiring lens. The landscape would be more honest,empowering, transformative."

"There would be a phenomenal impact. There are so many black women I know who would truly support one another if we had more financial resources, access to support, got great marketing, exposure, connections, and threw a wonderful gala that raises a ton of money. We would unapologetically serve the individuals we know we need to serve. And we would have the energy to do it because it would be fun and creative, and we would all get a chance to really help each other out."

"I think there would be more value put on people and relationships. There would be more care and value and nurture. We just do it differently. When you are a woman of color there is a space we create for grace, because we get it. The work would be people focused."

4. A CALLING TO ACTION

Conversations with interviewees have elevated several challenges and areas of opportunity. Though Black women are leading in Howard County, there are cultural and organizational barriers that limit their ability to thrive. To achieve this vision of an ecosystem that supports the thriving of Black women in nonprofit leadership, there are opportunities for individuals, organizations and funders to act.

Individuals

Speak Up

Supportive neutrality is indeed a misperception. Failing to elevate and name mistreatment, microaggressions, a lack of trust and unsupportive leadership of Black women perpetuates the culture that allows this treatment to continue. For example, when others witness a Black woman share an idea, get ignored, and then hear someone else receive credit for the same idea, they should speak up. Use your voice and presence to make the voice of Black women more recognized and heard. Staying silent is actually choosing to not be a support, and allows the harmful behaviors to continue with no consequence or accountability.

Be an Ally and Sponsor

While mentorship was a welcome professional development resource for some interviewees, many noted that they were further along in their careers and were not looking for mentorship to support their leadership journey. Instead, what they sought was sponsorship – allies willing to use their own capital to advance the interviewees' careers. People to open doors, help expand their networks, advocate for pay equity – things to support advancement, particularly for mid-career leaders.

"Sponsorship means how are you spending some of your social or professional capital to ensure the promotion, compensation, and fair treatment of specifically Black people within your organization. If you are not spending any social or professional capital, to ensure that a Black person is being properly paid, properly titled and thriving in their role, then you are not an ally."

Do Your Own Work

There was a weariness of repetition expressed by Black women leaders. A sense that they have, many times, shared what things are needed to better support them in leadership and help them thrive. And yet there is a feeling of being constantly called on to weigh in on the Black experience, or contribute to a new exploratory study. Even this research project required a true commitment to action, assuring interviewees this would not be one more report highlighting the problems without investing in solutions.

Interviewees named that, most of the time, Black women leaders have shared exactly what they need and what they feel needs to be done by others as allies and fellow leaders. Everyone must own their part in this process, and individuals can take steps to listen deeply and act instead of calling on Black women leaders to lead the solution.

Organizations, Boards, and Nonprofits

This work goes beyond individual behaviors and attitudes. It also speaks to the greater responsibility of organizations (boards and nonprofits) to evolve how they operate to better show up for Black women leaders and how they lead.

Accountability

a. One of the strongest commitments an organization can make is to not only name equity and inclusivity as a strategic priority, but to commit infrastructure and resources to the work. Organizations can ensure that any statements around DEI commitment involve measures to determine if/how that commitment has been met; mechanisms to capture input from staff and community on progress toward the goal; and, resources and time to pursue the intended change. This structural commitment moves the organization, as interviewees named above, from optics to accountability.

Intentional Board Development

a. Developing the board, ensuring they are trained, having clear change management in place, and embracing authenticity are key and critical actions organizations can take to call into action.

b. This moves beyond board training on DEI topics. This includes reviewing and revising onboarding practices to ensure future leaders (especially if you seek to recruit women of color into leadership) have the supports needed to succeed.

c. There was also a call to better prepare future board members. As organizations seek to diversify boards and incorporate community voice, many are leaving room for newer, perhaps less experienced, board members but are not significantly investing in their transition or development onto the board. This can lead to community members feeling exploited as token participants.

d. To ensure all board members have a baseline understanding of what it means to be in their role, organizations should invest in board training. This will help board members learn about their responsibilities, and understand how to operate and what to focus on. This would also provide space to analyze how they are operating as a team, if they are in line with their values, and what adjustments they will make to ensure the board experience and impact of the organization is a positive one.

"What can boards do? Stop thinking that you're ok. Stop thinking that making one change and making a few Black and Brown faces is you doing something. The work is never done. The knowledge seeking is never going to stop. The changes that you need energy to make and the challenges you need to bring to yourself are nonstop. Stop thinking that you're ok."

Proactive Change Management

a. Organizations should invest in proactively considering how their teams and board will manage change. There must be a willingness and dedication from the organization to adapt as new members and leaders join. Thinking ahead to challenges or tensions that may arise around change will allow for a more willing and successful posture around embracing change.

Funders

As funders, this is a pivotal moment to reinvest in the Black community and to help other organizations invest in their Black employees and board members with thoughtfulness, relevance, care, and intentionality. As noted above, Black leaders called on the community to look at its culture and ecosystem and for individuals to look inward to spark change. Aligned with this call, there are several opportunities for funders to support that organizational and culture work.

Invest in Organizations

a. Funders can invest in organizations to make the above changes in accountability, board development and change management. This would answer the call from Black women leaders for organizations to do the work to change their cultures – and would allow funders to step into that space to support broader change.

b. Resources/supports could include things like board training and development, continuity or transition plan development, coaching or consultation in change management, retreats and training in equitable facilitation practices.

c. Organizations can also invest in training and coaching for current leaders. That might advance awareness and education of individuals leading organizations that collaborate or partner with Black-led organizations. Training or coaching might help leaders reflect on ways they could better speak up and offer allyship and sponsorship.

"Getting rejected from funding. Specifically capacity building and infrastructure funding opportunities. Just competing and not getting funded for that and getting those rejection letters are bummer days. The programmatic funding is easier to get."

Sustained, Coordinated, Operational Funding for Nonprofits

a. Nonprofit leaders noted that successful grant applications usually require revisions to their existing programs. But, once funding is received, there are still challenges to implementing these redesigned programs. And additional funding might depend on further refining an existing program, resulting in another break in services. Nonprofits can find themselves in this continuous cycle of retooling and building new programs to secure funding.

Leaders called for more operational funds and access to capital and networks to support long-term success. Nonprofits would see more long-term sustainability with funds available to cover general operations, and gap fill programmatic changes required for many shorter-term grants.

b. Several interviewees also observed a disconnect, or apparent lack of vision, in how funds are awarded. There were stories of some nonprofits being awarded funding to launch a service that they do not offer, while other nonprofits that already offered the service and have the infrastructure in place to execute the work were not approached.

Trainings for the Broader Community

a. This is a critical opportunity for funders to underpin the call of Black women leaders to put the responsibility on community to relearn and educate themselves. Funders can offer trainings, invest in narrative change, and challenge individuals to reflect.

Creating Spaces for Black Women to Connect

"I can't seem to find the Black women in leadership that are doing what I am doing. I am surprised if you all can get to those numbers for your interviews. Because where are they?"

a. A recurring comment throughout the interviews was that most could not think of 40+ other Black women leaders who would meet the research criteria – and there was an eagerness to connect. Funders can provide a space for Black women to gather, connect and build relationships. This space does not need to be formal, overly planned, or even facilitated by the funding organizations. But funders can provide the room and resources.

b. Some interviewees were also looking for opportunities to partner with other nonprofits led by Black women. They noted that collaborations where funders require organizations to partner can feel forced and are unwelcome. These situations can feel like partnerships based simply on both organizations being Black-led. But there are leaders looking to find authentic opportunities to partner with other organizations, and funders can create opportunities – and funding – to enable organizations to connect.

It is also important for funders to provide sufficient resources for these partnerships – and not require organizations to split awarded funds, leaving neither able to execute the work. It can even damage collaboration if organizations begin partnership dynamics arguing about how to split limited resources.

c. Black women leaders want the space, time, and platform to get to know each other, learn from one another, and connect in ways that foster genuine and authentic partnerships. Funders can better enable these spaces and create opportunities for Black women to care for themselves and one another.

Supporting Professional Development for Black Women

a.   **Mentorship Programs**: Some Black women leaders, especially those newer to leadership, would welcome funded mentorship programs to connect emerging leaders to established leaders. This would help them learn how to navigate this new leadership experience and find a network that could support them along the journey. Funders can also cover the cost for both participants, making it easier to participate. Opportunities should also be considered for formal and informal mentorship.

b.   **Supplement Costs to Join Boards:** Funders may consider supplementing costs for community members interested in joining boards. Joining a board can require a financial contribution, and that typically looks like a board member submitting a personal donation or raising funds to cover the costs. Though minimum donation amounts vary organization to organization, these financial obligations can deter some leaders from communities of color – including Black women – from participating. Removing this barrier would allow for more community members to sit on boards with confidence, knowing they can meet their financial responsibilities and contribute with value to the team and its goals.

c.   **Leadership Coaching and CEO Circles:** Instead of mentorship, more seasoned leaders are looking to leadership coaching and CEO circles for support. This type of support focuses more on having more staff, broader responsibility and larger budgets. Interviewees shared that CEO circles are necessary because the work can be lonely, and being able to have a cohort that can share from their lived and learned experiences would help them make stronger decisions for their organization.

From funding and covering costs to be in leadership positions, to supporting the earlier stages of leadership development through mentorship, to sharpening the iron through coaching and CEO circles, funders have an opportunity to fund and support the thriving of Black women leaders across all stages of leadership.

"I shouldn't have to work this hard to do good things for people in the community"

Revisioning Nonprofit Culture

This report calls us to a moment – a moment to evolve the culture of the nonprofit sector and Howard County, and create an environment that supports the thriving of Black women leaders.

Howard County uplifts the good taking place in the community – and there is a lot of good. We often elevate and showcase the diversity of our leadership, including Black women leading in the nonprofit space. But many of the interviewees of this research noted that their experiences diverge from this perception. And that, while they are leading in the County and making change in their organizations, much can be done to support their thriving.

The current ecosystem can make it difficult to be as intentional and impactful as many leaders hope to be. Resistance to change, a lack of trust and an affinity for tradition is making the County less appealing to new leaders – and it is making it more difficult for those in the community to want to stay and continue to lead.

"We often make one step forward, and then, scared of losing power, we drop back."

If things don't change – and quickly – we risk losing our Black women leaders. While there is a personal passion drawing them to lead and to push their work forward, these leaders are desperate for a culture in which there is confidence and support in their ability to thrive. And there is an opportunity for us all to step up, step in and act.

SUMMARY OF LEARNINGS

1. Black Women Are Leading

Finding Purpose in Service

Drive: An internal drive to serve
Passion: Passion to change and serve community
Creation: Building new spaces when seeing gaps in how services are designed and delivered

Building New Spaces: Creating Nonprofits and Programs

Intention and Innovation: Women starting own organizations and programs, allowing to address problems with intention and creativity

Leadership Enablers and Supports

Personal Supports

- Spending time with family and loved ones
- Leaning into faith and spiritual practices
- Relationships

Professional Supports

- Informal and Formal Networking
- Informal Mentorship
- Free, online, and easily accessible resources

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2. But Are We Thriving?

Internal Tensions

Individual and Relational Challenges

Individual Challenges

- Personal call to service and tensions of living out in oppositional environments

Relational Challenges

- Tensions within Black community (e.g., around a scarcity mentality)
- Feeling forced to compete with other Black-led organizations for funding

Organizational Challenges

Optics vs. accountability – including DEI in strategic work, without accountability mechanisms to track progress
Change management and transitions – proactively preparing for change and transition for incoming leaders

Selective Trust

Lack of Trust: A lack of trust in Black woman leaders to lead in certain spaces (e.g., financial responsibilities)
Where Trust is Shown: Spaces where trust is selectively extended

Environmental Challenges – The Howard County Ecosystem

Old guard mentality: Old guard mentality, and a resistance to change and new leadership
Veil of Liberalism: A veiled liberalism anchored in good intentions but that can push back against observations of racism and inequity in the County
Bait and Switch: Experiencing a 'bait and switch' when taking leadership positions, and perhaps not knowing the full truth about the County's progressiveness and openness to equity advancement

The Power and Misconception of Allyship

True Allyship: True allyship is sponsorship, relationship building and authenticity
Misdirected Energy: Challenges with misdirected energy having to manage surface-level allies

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3. A Vision to Thrive: Hope for More

"It would be honestly much more inclusive than what it is now.
You would see things getting done in a more courageous fashion. There would be more risk-taking, and there would be a more realistic speaking of truth to power."

"As I am reflecting, I can't think of a role where I haven't had to do that. Black women thriving means black women receiving the benefit of the doubt, that when I say something or suggest something, I did research it, I did go to school for it, I have the data for it. Give me the benefit of the doubt that I have considered a variety of the things before I presented it to you, that this is the best solution forward."

"Our tenacity to innovate to create and make something out of nothing is just world changing and exciting, in any sector."

"I think there would be more value put on people and relationships. There would be more care and value and nurture. We just do it differently. When you are a woman of color there is a space we create for grace, because we get it. The work would be people focused."

"It would be so fun! There would be a levity. There would be trust, there would be work that is done, that doesn't include any bargaining. You get to just do the work. It would be awesome to see that happen so maybe some of these paradigms would shift a bit and Black women would be respected for what they bring to the table. For other young people of color to see themselves in leadership with a new fun, innovative, and inspiring lens. The landscape would be more honest,empowering, transformative."

4. A Call In To Action – Individuals, Organizations, Funders

A Defining Moment

Individuals
- Speak up - there is no such thing as neutrality
- Be an ally and a sponsor
- Do your own work – Black women leaders have shared what things would be supportive; so, support them

Organizations, Boards, and Nonprofits
- Accountability – name equity and inclusion as priorities, and invest the resources and infrastructure to track progress
- Intentionally develop and train boards
- Prepare proactively for change management - onboarding, continuity, retention, and transitions

Funders
- Invest in the named organizational changes
- Offer sustained, coordinated, operational funding for nonprofits
- Provide trainings for the broader community
- Create spaces for Black women to connect
- Support professional development for Black women

5. A Call Out for Change – A Vision to Thrive

Revisioning Nonprofit Culture

If things don't change – and quickly – we risk losing our Black women leaders. While there is a personal passion drawing them to lead and to push their work forward, these leaders are desperate for a culture in which there is confidence and support in their ability to thrive.

And there is opportunity for us all to step up, step in and act.

APPENDIX A

List of External Resources

1. [10 microaggressions Black women experience at work – and how HR can put a stop to them](#)

2. [ABFE – Key Facts about Nonprofits with Majority Black Leadership](#)

3. [Black Dream Escape](#)

4. [Black Women & Gender Expansive Leadership Project](#)

5. [BLK ED Network (Baltimore)](#)

6. [Building Movement Project](#)

7. Dear Mama: A Black Maternal Health Art Exhibition

8. [Exit Plan: How Racialized and Gendered Organizations Lead Black Women to Entrepreneurship](#)

9. [Faye McCray Rest and Reclaim Retreats for Women of Color](#)

10. [Horizon Foundation's 2024 – 2028 Strategic Plan](#)

11. Jim Rendon, [Why Women Don't Get Ahead at Nonprofits, January 12, 2021](#)

12. [NPQ Spring 2024 Magazine:](#) A Critical Report on the State of Black Women Leadership

13. [Opinion: Leveraging Philanthropy to Help Cultivate a Pipeline of Women Leaders of Color](#)

14. [Philanos Webinar: Investing in Leadership Wellbeing](#)

15. [Race to Lead: THE PUSH AND PULL DECLINING INTEREST IN NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP](#)

16. [Respite for Black Women: A New Opportunity Fund Initiative](#)

17. Sayu Bhojwani, [Women Leaders of Color Are Exhausted. Philanthropy Needs to Step Up, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, February 27, 2024](#)

18. [THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A WOMAN LEADER OF COLOR](#)

19. [Thrive as They Lead: Advancing the Infrastructure to Support Black Women Leaders in the D.C. Metro Area Nonprofit Sector,](#) 2023 – Washington Area Women's Foundation

20. [Trust Based Philanthropy](#)

21. [White Supremacy Culture](#)

22. [Women's Giving Circle: State of Women and Girls in Howard County](#)

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Overview

Thank you for making time for us to connect about this topic. An overview of the process before we get started:

- We have scheduled 45 minutes for each of our interviews
- I will be taking notes throughout our conversation, so, don't mind me looking off to the side at times
- Don't feel that you need to answer every question – feel free to respond to any questions that stand out to you, and I'll ask follow up questions throughout
- Your responses are 100% confidential
- The report will be completed and released sometime in November/December

Interview Questions

Core Question: What measures must be taken by local funders, nonprofits, and nonprofit boards to ensure Black women leading in the Howard County nonprofit sector thrive as they lead?

Experience/Journey Exploration
- What has been your most rewarding experience as a nonprofit leader? Most frustrating experience?
- Do you feel like you get to authentically lead your team? Why/why not?
- Do you feel trusted as a leader? By your team? Board? By other organizations?
    - Are there any responsibilities or domains related to your role where you feel most trusted, or do not feel trusted?

Supports
- What supports have you utilized to sustain and strengthen your leadership?
- Have you come across potential supports that you're interested in?
    - Is there anything keeping you from accessing that support? E.g., time or financial limitations?
- What is keeping you at your role?

Challenges
- What do you know now that you wish you knew when you started in your role?
    - If someone could have told you a hard truth about this role, what do you think they would have told you?
- Have you turned down a leadership role before? What caused you to do so?
- Is there anything else you need to thrive in your role?

Guidance and Recommendations
- What would the nonprofit landscape look like if all Black women leaders got to lead in a way where they are authentic, and thriving?
- What do you wish boards and nonprofits knew as they embark on working with a Black leader?
- If tomorrow funders were going to make up a new grant [or program] focused on supporting Black women in leadership, what would you hope the grant [or program] would be about? How much money would feel impactful to you? For how long?
- What advice do you have for those who consider themselves allies in the nonprofit space?