

# Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

## The Headwaters Foundation • Minneapolis, Minnesota

by Sandra Dias

**Since its founding in 1984, the Headwaters Foundation for Justice has been committed to putting power in the hands of the communities it serves.**

"We focused on funding grassroots efforts," said David Nicholson, executive director of Headwaters. "And we concentrated on communities that were often overlooked at that time - people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ community."

Early on, Headwaters supported programs to combat domestic violence and address the emerging AIDS epidemic at a time "when it was really quite radical," Nicholson said. "We've been following through with that mission and funding formula ever since."

The foundation makes grants and provides a variety of engaging opportunities designed to foster what its leaders call "just and sustainable communities" that "embrace social, racial, economic, and environmental equity." The foundation has awarded more than \$11 million to organizations led by and for communities of color, LGBTQ people, people who earn low incomes, immigrants and refugees. A community foundation with a small endowment, it also receives support from larger foundations and individual donors.

Headwaters has often stepped in to fund potentially controversial—but critically necessary—social justice initiatives that other foundations often shy away from. In December 2015,

for example, Headwaters launched the Emergency Fund for Black Lives after local police shot and killed Jamar Clark, an unarmed 24-year-old black man. Headwaters raised more than \$104,000 from 102 donors, and made grants to **Black Lives Matter Minneapolis** and a grassroots social justice advocacy organization, Neighborhoods Organizing for Change.



Photo: Anna Min, Min Enerprise Photography

Headwaters also follows an uncommon democratic giving model that engages grant recipients and community members in the grant-making process. Headwaters' staff identifies community leaders in local social justice movements. Those leaders then evaluate grant proposals, go on site visits and ultimately make funding recommendations to the board.

Headwaters also provides leadership development, networking opportunities, and training seminars to emerging leaders from the social justice organizations it funds so community leaders can, in Nicholson's words, "look across the issues we are all working on and to see what other people are doing."

In 2015, Headwaters launched another innovative model for raising

money and making grants. "The Giving Project" engages members of communities hurt the most by economic, social and racial injustice. A cohort of donors—half of whom are people of color—spend six months learning fundraising skills, aim to collectively raise \$100,000 and make grants within their communities.

The first cohort—including many Millennials—raised money from 149 people and made seven grants.

"The idea is each individual goes 10-deep in his or her network; they can then often leverage a gift five or six times over," Nicholson said. "The process we take people through is powerful, helps people think about their own privilege and to see their communities as wealthy,"

### Headwaters Foundation for Justice

**Funding Areas:** Communities of color, LGBTQ people, low-income people, and immigrants and refugees

**Mission:** To amplify the power of community to advance equity and justice.

**Executive director:** David Nicholson

**Website:** [headwatersfoundation.org](http://headwatersfoundation.org)

### Sandra Dias

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# Headwaters Foundation GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT:

## The Council on American Islamic Relations (Minnesota Chapter)

**Observing religious practices during the workday** has not only been challenging for Muslims living in Minneapolis. It's even gotten some Muslims fired.

The Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-MN), a grant recipient of the Headwaters Foundation for Justice, protects the civil rights of Muslims in workplaces, schools and other institutions. CAIR also educates people about the Muslim community's customs and contributions in order to combat bias and promote understanding.

"Practicing Muslims pray five times a day," said Nausheena Hussain, former deputy director of CAIR-MN, who is now involved with the organization through committee work. Muslims working in manufacturing plants, for example, "can...find it difficult to walk off the plant floor for prayer breaks."

After seeing Muslims fired for observing their religion, CAIR stepped in to educate employers about Muslim religious practices, and when necessary, took legal action to get Muslims back on the job. CAIR has also helped get some manufacturing plants to provide accommodations so Muslim women may wear the hijab and still meet the company dress code. (CAIR is the largest Islamic civil liberties group in the United States, with 35 chapters here and in Canada.)

According to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, less than 1 percent of adults in the Minneapolis region identify as Muslim. However, a growing number of Minnesota communities, including suburbs and rural areas, have significant shares of residents who are Muslim, many of them people of Somali descent. Government officials estimate that about 25,000 people of Somali descent live in the state of Minnesota, part of an international diaspora following a brutal civil war in 1991.

After receiving a grant from Headwaters, Hussain joined Headwaters' social change committee, reviewing grant proposals and collaboratively awarding grants to other non profits. This afforded her a clear view of the social justice landscape, seeing how CAIR could best fill gaps and make alliances. CAIR was able to make a particularly important connection with the executive director of OutFront Minnesota, the state's leading LGBTQ advocacy organization. The connection was critical after the Orlando, Florida, shooting, where 49 people at a gay nightclub were murdered by a shooter who identified as Muslim.

"Two marginalized communities were able to stand together in solidarity at a time when there was great need for unification," Hussain said. Also, Members of CAIR-

MN and local LGBTQ community advocates recently marched together in the Minneapolis Pride parade and members from both groups attended a Ramadan breakfast.

By including members of social justice nonprofits as part of the grant-making process, Hussain says, Headwaters "provides

us with opportunities for relationship building and the resources to create systemic change."



Photo: courtesy of CAIR-MN

### the Sillerman Center

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The Sillerman Center, based at Brandeis University, informs and advances social justice philanthropy in the United States. We engage the philanthropic community through convenings and presentations, publications, educational courses, fellowships and scholarships, competitive grant contests and through collaborative partnerships with grant-makers and social justice organizations.