

# Social Justice Funders SPOTLIGHT:

## The Hyams Foundation • Boston, Massachusetts

In 1921, a wealthy Boston metallurgist, financier and engineer named Godfrey Hyams set aside his money in a trust to ensure that it would be perpetually given away for charitable purposes. In the ensuing century, what became known as The Hyams Foundation evolved into one of the region's most generous and vocal supporters of grassroots organizing and community-based non-profit organizations. In 2022, Hyams' overarching goal is "to dismantle persistent, racialized economic disparities" in Chelsea and Boston. It is an ambitious aspiration, as Greater Boston is among the most racially segregated regions in the nation, with stubbornly persistent racialized inequalities across a host of sectors.

In 2021, Hyams welcomed a new executive director, Lisa Owens, who, after noted success as a Boston-based community organizer and movement builder, is continuing the private foundation's deeply collaborative work to increase social justice and power within Boston and Chelsea. The grassroots Boston-based organization, City Life/Vida Urbana, which Owens' had directed, is a long-time Hyams grantee. In 2021, Hyams made nearly \$7 million in grants to some 70 "core" grantees.

Members of low-income communities, Owens said, "are absolutely central in determining their own lives and futures." She adds, "Shifting power to them is part of our role that goes beyond and always shapes and determines our grant making." This is particularly true, Owens noted, for grassroots community-based organizations led by people of color. Indeed, one of Hyams' most important criteria for funding is that organizations prioritize what Owens called "base-building" that aims to change unjust systems and power arrangements through sustained engagement with constituents. Another important factor to ensure alignment is that organizations have a "systemic or structural analysis" for the underlying causes and potential cures for visible inequities. Hyams tends to fund nonprofits that "center" and who are

informed by the communities most affected by the problems and challenges that the organization seeks to address. Grantees are aligned by common values and strategies. Meanwhile, focus areas are diverse, including fair housing, wage equity, opportunities for formerly incarcerated people and immigrant justice, among others. This alignment amid variation, Owens said, reflects Hyams' understanding "that we are nurturing and trying to strengthen not individual organizations but a whole, a community, an ecosystem with interconnected parts."

Hyams collaborates with but also stands out among Boston's more traditional philanthropic organizations for its cultivation and nurturing of close relationships with people working on the ground who draw attention to unequal systems and work to change them. Nearly a decade ago, the Foundation embarked upon a strategic planning effort that built upon community-engaged philanthropy, which is still uncommon in mainstream philanthropy. Giving and strategy was informed via listening sessions, relationship building and nurturing and power sharing with grantees and their constituencies. Those practices and principles continue far beyond strategic planning sessions and now define everyday practice for the foundation and inform Hyams' grant making to community-based organizations and its field-building efforts.

In practice, this means grantees — tellingly, Owens prefers the descriptor "partners" — provide insight on new applications for funding. Grantee partners have informed Hyams' effort at what Owens called "strategic alignment," in which "our partners on the ground help us assess a funding applicant's alignment not just with our defined priorities, but with the existing ecosystem we are dedicated to strengthening." Identification of community harms and potential short- and long-term solutions is a collective effort, Owens said, between Hyams' community partners, staff and the board.



Two people are standing at an MBTA rally, one is holding a bullhorn and another is holding a protest sign. Photo: courtesy of the Hyams Foundation

"This kind of collaborative work, this centering of our partners, also includes us taking a look at our internal practices and so we are constantly asking ourselves, 'How can we make the application process, the reporting, less burdensome for our partners so that they can be freed to do the vital work that they are doing?' So as to reduce the amount of time potential applicants spend on funding appeals, Hyams developed a more expedient, community-informed assessment of a potential grantee's alignment and a streamlined application process.

Owens said she sees Hyams' growing role as a convener and "field builder" of a healthy, collaborative and powerful social and racial justice ecosystem as central to the Foundation's mission. In practice, this means that Hyams convenes its grantees, offers its grantee partners access to conferences, workshops, assistance with evaluation and communications so as to build their capacities and opportunities for collaboration. For example, new in 2022, is a Statewide Organizing School, organized by local grassroots organizations. It will bring together organization staff to learn from leading national organizers and from each other.

"We are always reflecting on whether we are being the most responsive, affirming partner we can be in this work that is so vital and so challenging," Owens said. "We know how well we are doing based on how well our organizations are doing. Partnership means owning some of those outcomes, sharing in that kind of accountability."

# Hyams Foundation GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT:

## The Chinese Progressive Association • Boston, Massachusetts

In the 1970s, a group of Chinese residents grew concerned about the lack of community control of real estate development in their Boston neighborhood, Chinatown. Around the same time, Chinese parents were feeling left out and politically powerless in discussions regarding the city's controversial school desegregation process. The informational campaigns and organizing around these issues led to the creation, in 1977, of the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA), one of the longest standing and effective advocacy, political organizing and community building organizations in the city. As it was at its founding nearly 50 years ago CPA's membership and constituency is still made up mostly of Chinese immigrants and the Chinese-speaking, workers in lower-wage industries, elderly with low incomes and young people, most of whom attend the city's public schools.

"We were never and will never be a single-issue organization. We care about what our membership cares about. So, that pretty much means everything. That's fair wages, job safety. That's concerns around gentrification and displacement and unaffordable housing, about political power, about voting access and about public education," said CPA's executive director of about five years, Karen Chen.

Like many community-based organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, Chen said, turned CPA, for a time, from "what is primarily an organizing and advocacy organization into pretty much an everything organization." Chen and her staff of 11 worked to provide education about vaccines, access to masks and to ensure the health and safety of its constituents. CPA began working more closely with small Chinese-owned businesses to ensure they received rental assistance. CPA and other organizations even fundraised \$200,000 to purchase gift certificates to area businesses and then "we just handed out those gift certificates to our communities."

At the same time, Chen and her staff worked to ensure that their policy-related work, for which CPA is well-known in the region, continued. After an historic voting rights settlement in 2005, CPA worked with both the US Department of Justice and city officials in Boston to successfully, if temporarily, secure bilingual ballots in Chinese and Vietnamese. In 2014, following organizing and advocacy by CPA and its allies, then-Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick came to Chinatown to sign a law that permanently mandated availability of Chinese

and Vietnamese ballots for all elections in Boston. CPA staff also lend important support to a continuing youth-led campaign to site a Boston Public Library branch in Chinatown. (Currently, there is a temporary library branch in the neighborhood but CPA and other advocates continue to work with city officials and others to bring a permanent branch to Chinatown). The youth-centered project grew from CPA's long-time programming with young people, which includes summer internships and fellowships that train youth in organizing and civic engagement. (Chen herself was part of the youth program in the late 1990s). In recent years, CPA was also a partner in a five-year project to study the assessment of pollution from the nearby highway on residents' health. The findings from this study are incorporated in the CPA advocacy around future development and planning.

Chen stressed that much of CPA's work is accomplished as part of a larger coalition of progressive minded organizations concerned with racial equity. Nearly all of these count the Hyams Foundation as a funder. This includes Right to the City Boston, which helps secure fair housing and fights against housing displacement, which is a challenge in all Boston neighborhoods, including the centrally located Chinatown. Working within this multi-racial coalition, Chen said, is vital for CPA to help keep its focus on combating structural racism, which is manifest, Chen said, in all the concerns that our community members have including "lack of housing access, people unable to pay their rent, to secure fair wages, to have a safe community. . . And in those fights, it is racial unity that is necessary, that is vital for us, for all of us, to achieve our goals."

*The revised version of this Spotlight was compiled by Susan Eaton, Brian Stanley and Johanna Wald. The original Spotlight was published in 2016.*

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