For the Community, By the Community:
How Philanthropy Can Support Culturally-Led Mental Health Programs

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Philanthropy has an important opportunity to identify, elevate, and support those culturally-led programs impacting mental health developed for and by the communities they intend to serve. Funders can do so by investing in the organization's capacity to deliver current programs, or by providing funds to bring the organization's model to similar communities.

Communities of color often have less access to or are blocked altogether from mental health community resources, treatment, and supportive services. At the same time, these communities experience disproportionately higher rates of mental health and substance use disorders compared to other groups[1] due to racism, systemic oppression, and intergenerational trauma. Additional factors such as a lack of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous providers in the workforce,[2] misdiagnosis due to unconscious bias, language barriers, inadequate insurance, and misalignment of treatment approaches with cultural considerations also disproportionately keep communities of color from receiving high quality mental health care. Alternatively, culturally-led programs help to prevent and support mental health concerns in communities by centering their unique needs, histories, and traditions to improve well-being.[3]

This guidance outlines a framework with five key considerations for funders to identify, support, and strengthen culturally-led programs, which are currently underutilized by philanthropy to support mental health and community well-being.

Defining Culturally-Led Programs

Culturally-led programs are driven by and for those they intend to serve with a deep understanding of the community's unique histories, experiences, traditions, and cultures. This is in contrast to cultural adaptations or adjustments of universal programs made to fit the needs of a specific community.

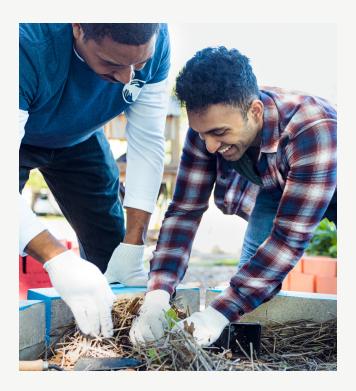# An Emphasis on Being Driven by the Community

In this guidance, we intentionally refer to the opportunity to uplift "culturally-led" programs, rather than "culturally-responsive" or "culturally-informed" programs, to reflect the need for inherent community leadership to drive these programs. The language used here reflects an evolution of our own thinking and demonstrates the importance of listening and learning from those driving these programs.

While the priority of this guidance is to equip funders with the knowledge and skills to lift up those programs grown out of the community, culturally-led programs can also be co-created by mental health experts in conjunction with community leaders and healers. This is done by meeting community members in the physical spaces, cultural settings, and historical contexts in which they currently reside to understand their needs and identify mechanisms for support, all while valuing their traditions.

We define community as those based on a shared cultural experience, driven by a common racial and/or ethnic identity. Even within this definition, we appreciate how vastly diverse these communities are. For example, each Native community is different with

specific cultural traditions and tribal histories. Latinx, Black, and Asian communities have varied origins and carry with them unique traditions and perspectives that inform their approach to mental health and well-being. Therefore, we focused this work on considerations that are common across the programs that are driven by the communities themselves.

While we acknowledge the distinct sense of community and need for support to other marginalized groups, such as youth, veterans, or LGBTQ+ individuals, the focus of this work is on historically marginalized communities that share a racial or ethnic identity. We also acknowledge that all of these identities can and do intersect, and organizations that serve these communities individually and in tandem can also be considered as culturally led.

We include not only those programs that solely support individual and community mental health, but also focus on issues that inherently impact mental health and well-being.

In this work, we also take a broad view of mental health and community well-being. We include not only those programs that solely support individual and community mental health, but also focus on issues that inherently impact mental health and well-being. This can include programs that address addiction and substance use, promote restorative practice and community healing, and address and advocate around issues that negatively impact mental health, such as the industrial prison complex. As a result, many of the culturally-led programs considered in developing this guidance do not explicitly include mental health in their mission statements or their website. However, these programs have an important impact on the mental health and well-being of the communities they come from.

Advancing Community-Driven Solutions

Communities themselves are experts in their needs and how to best address them. Culturally-led programs reflect this notion, elevating interventions and methods to address mental health, addiction, and well-being that are created by and for the communities they serve. While culturally competent mental health and well-being interventions are crucial to meeting the needs of individuals going through specialty care, culturally-led programs are an important avenue to promote healing and build resilience in a manner that resonates with the community itself.

Culturally-led programs also reinforce a community's connection to their unique culture, traditions, and historical experiences. Often place-based, they can help to build community connection and resources to prevent mental health issues, and serve as an alternative approach to caring for people in need of immediate support.

However, these programs can be hard to find and even harder to assess. They are often implemented by resource-constrained community-based organizations with limited capacity to share their work beyond the specific community or geography in which they work. They are often unable to consider expansion or scale due to the necessary

focus on understanding the needs of their community, delivering programming, achieving results, and meeting budget requirements.

Key Considerations for Identifying Culturally-Led Programs

Historical Perspective

Health Promoting Practices

Cultural Grounding

Community Leadership

Evaluation

These five considerations are intended to increase funders' understanding and confidence in identifying, assessing, and supporting culturally-led programs. Cultural grounding is the foundation for this framework and starting point for identifying culturally-led programs. When applying these considerations, you may find that programs excel in some areas,

and demonstrate a need for improvement in others. This framework allows for flexibility to demonstrate the diversity in culturally-led mental health and well-being programs, as well as potential for growth for programs as a whole. These considerations are also intended to help funders discern which programs align more closely with their own priorities and values.

Key Considerations	Description	Guiding Questions
Cultural Grounding	The community's culture and priorities surrounding mental health and well-being are intentionally woven into the program's activities or services.	What needs did the community identify that led to the development of the organization or program, and who led these efforts?
Community Leadership	Program leadership is made up of individuals and groups that represent the community and understand the diversity of the community's experience, including both strengths and challenges.	How does the organization center the leadership of those most affected by historical and structural oppression within the community, while also seeking to support leadership healing and growth?
Historical Perspective	Programming centers an understanding of deep roots of structural inequality, racial discrimination, and intergenerational trauma, as well as their impact on mental health and community well-being.	How does the organization support the program team and participants to understand the roots of structural inequality affecting the community served, and support the team to see themselves as advocates for change?
Health Promoting Practices	Uplifting the strengths of the community, the program integrates the community's cultural healing methods, traditions, and ancestral wisdom into practice.	How does the organization ensure that health promoting practices focus on existing assets and restoration of identity?
Evaluation	Community voices and experiences are collected and analyzed in a non-extractive manner, and informs programmatic approaches and strategies.	How does the organization evaluate the impact of these programs? How does the organization currently or plan to collect and incorporate feedback from the communities and participants served?

Applying Considerations

Here we provide guidance for funders on how to approach identifying and understanding culturally-led programs that promote mental health and community well-being. To gain a full understanding of how organizations are incorporating the five considerations above, funders will likely need direct engagement with organization leadership. The questions included are intended to provide a starting point for conversations with potential programs. It is important to limit the number of questions to avoid overburdening the organization, but to frame questions that help gain an understanding of each consideration which may not have been evident from their website and other public information.

For profiles of exemplar programs that embody one or more of these considerations, visit
www.mindfulphilanthropy.org/culturallyledprograms

Cultural Grounding

Cultural grounding requires that the community's culture and understanding of mental health and well-being are intrinsically and intentionally woven into the program's activities and engagement approaches.

Moreover, programs should be developed not only by a person or persons with shared culture and tradition as the community it serves, but community voices should continue to inform how the program best addresses their needs. While not all staff may be from the community served, they should demonstrate a shared understanding of the culture that informs their work and make an effort to bridge gaps stemming from potential cultural, language, or generational differences.[4] Cultural grounding may look like reaffirming cultural differences through discussing shared histories, while intentionally inviting culture into all programs. Honoring language differences by providing translation services and other language justice practices is also key.[5]

Guiding Questions for Engaging Nonprofits

What needs did the community identify that led to the development of your organization or program, and who led these efforts?

How does your organization ensure that all program team members have a shared understanding of potential cultural perspectives and languages used by the community served when speaking about mental health and well-being?

Community Leadership

Community leadership should continuously guide program development and delivery from the outset. Leaders should have a clear understanding of the prioritized community served, including the challenges, strengths, and cultures of that community.

This can be achieved by lifting up the voices or efforts community leaders are already guiding or by inviting guidance from those within the community served. This includes authentically centering, honoring, and uplifting the leadership of those most affected by historical and structural oppression.[6] Moreover, high-level decision-making processes and programmatic design should value lived experiences as much as professional experience.[7] Finally, to be truly culturally-led, staff and leadership, including board members and advisors, should demonstrate a collaborative mindset and reflect the communities served by the organization.

Guiding Questions for Engaging Nonprofits

How does your organization center the leadership of those most affected by historical and structural oppression within the community?

How does your organization provide support for leadership healing and growth?

Historical Perspective

Historical perspective ensures that programs incorporate the unique experiences of each community and activate long-held practices and traditions that connect individuals to their community, while avoiding deeper entrenchment of the systemic structures that have done harm.

Programs should integrate intergenerational wisdom around wellness practices from youth to elders, and cultivate intergenerational relationships. Organization staff and leaders should acknowledge the deep roots of structural inequality, poverty, racial discrimination, and intergenerational trauma, and their effects on individual and community mental health and well-being. This consideration may be evident in the organization's mission statement and through their initiatives.

Guiding Questions for Engaging Nonprofits

How does your organization support the program team and participants to understand the roots of structural inequality affecting the community served?

How does your organization support the team to see themselves as advocates for change?

Health Promoting Practices

Health promoting practices should include a programmatic focus on the well-being and strengths of communities served, as opposed to perceived deficits and a sole focus on issues to be solved.

For example, an organization should emphasize the community's traditional cultural healing methods into their practices. It is important to note that health promoting practices will often look different across multiple culturally-led programs or organizations, as each serves different communities. Another example of health promoting practices is a programmatic focus on the integration of art, music, restoration of identity, and celebration into conversations on mental health and well-being.

Guiding Questions for Engaging Nonprofits

How does your organization ensure that health promoting practices focus on existing assets and strengths of the community?

How does your organization's programs reinforce or restore a sense of identity and connection to community?

Evaluation

Evaluation must be thoughtfully incorporated into every aspect of the organization, by collecting data through methods that emphasize the voice and experience of the community.
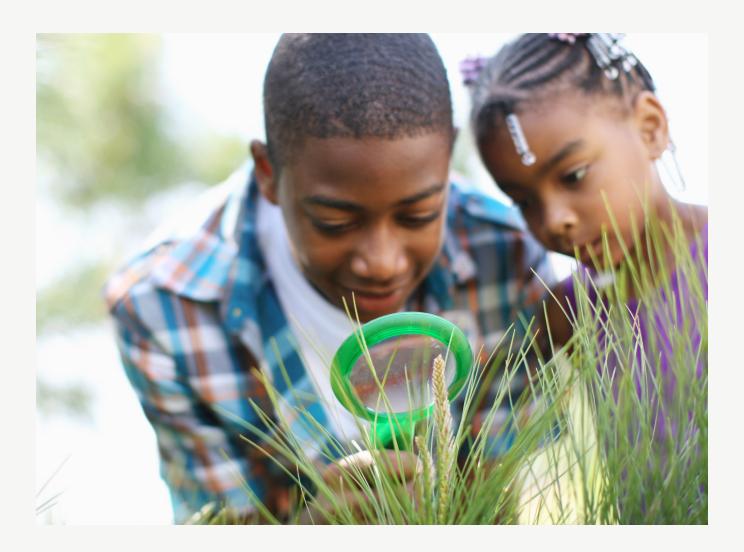
Examples include participatory data collection, paid compensation, and focus groups and surveys, all while taking the utmost care in communicating the intentions of each approach. Participants in the evaluation process should also understand the importance of their role as active agents of change within their own communities. Finally, the needs, desires, and feedback of the community served should continually inform the intention, approach, and implementation of the organization's programs. Many ancient, traditional treatments are not considered evidence-based practices due to the cultural bias and oppression that has driven what research is funded or considered legitimate, making community driven and defined evaluation approaches essential to understanding their impact.

Guiding Questions for
Engaging Nonprofits

How does your organization define their own success and evaluate the impact of these programs?

How does your organization currently or plan to collect and incorporate feedback from the community?

This framework is intended to guide philanthropic funders in how to identify, support, and promote culturally-led programs. It is important to note that the considerations outlined here are not a one-size-fits-all against which we can score organizations who are doing important work in the field.

Rather, they are aptly named considerations. In many cases they are a part of a larger whole. We hope that this guidance will serve as a tool for funders and nonprofit organizations alike to consider how they can best center the communities they intend to serve in their funding portfolio or programs.

For profiles of exemplar programs that embody one or more of these considerations, visit:
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Implications for the Field

Philanthropy has a distinct role to play in lifting up effective programs that communities themselves are using to support mental health. Improving mental health in communities of color requires more than just cultural competency and increasing the number of diverse providers. Culturally-led programs, which are trusted by their communities, promote well-being by reinforcing culture, tradition, and identity.

However, too often, these programs do not meet the threshold of evidence necessary to access significant capital, do not align with the categories and parameters that grantmakers use to guide funding decisions, or simply go under the radar due to their size and focus. As a result, those organizations deeply committed to promoting the well-being of their communities through culturally-led approaches are sorely underfunded, relying on insufficient amounts of highly localized and community-based funding that prevent them from meeting the full needs of their community.

Philanthropy must boldly support culturally-led approaches to support mental health and well-being through significant, unrestricted funding that is not dependent solely on demonstrated impact, but rather on the commitment to learn and improve. This is the prime example of an area where philanthropy can and should deploy funding as risk capital. Funders can invest in early stage and small scale programs to build organizational capacity, develop programmatic proof points, and evaluate impact beyond outputs over time in a way

that aligns with the values of the community served. With such investments, philanthropy also has an opportunity and responsibility to support the scaling of impactful programs and elevate these models as examples for other funders and communities seeking to promote culturally-led approaches to mental health. Through partnerships built on listening and trust, funders can follow the community's lead in advancing their own well-being.

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Methods and Application

In our analysis of the mental health landscape, we found not only a dearth of opportunities, but also the distinct need for more philanthropic attention to programs and organizations that were driven by and for communities of color. As a result, we dug deeper into the answers driven by the communities themselves, and further refined them in consultation with academics, mental health practitioners, and community leaders with experience guiding culturally-led mental health programming. Through an iterative process, we created the preliminary screening criteria to identify culturally-led programs to inform this guidance.

1. Programs are for a specific underserved/marginalized community;
2. Programmatic approaches are rooted in a cultural, racial, or ethnic identity; and
3. Programming impacts individual and/or community mental health and well-being.

Acknowledgements

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info@mindfulphilanthropy.org