Are Louisville’s nonprofits doing enough to reach out to Black communities?

Daryle Unseld didn’t think he’d see the day.

For years, he had pushed for conversations about racial equity among Louisville’s nonprofits, only to receive little response in the white-led sector.

He’d watched qualified people of color be passed over for positions and heard agency leaders stigmatize those they proclaimed to help instead of uplifting them.

But in 2020, Unseld noticed an unprecedented shift.

The COVID-19 pandemic and protests over police killings of Black people, including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, had made racial inequities impossible to ignore.

In Louisville, nonprofits small and large began hiring diversity consultants to assess their operations and acknowledging the ways they’d contributed to systemic disparities.

Some went a step further by making anti-racist commitments, promising to ensure their programs are equitable for everyone they serve.

And when a wave of prominent white leaders stepped down from their positions, several organizations took the opportunity to appoint Black executives, including Unseld as president and CEO at the Boys & Girls Club of Kentuckiana.

To Unseld and others, the actions signal a change in culture that could improve the lives of people in marginalized communities — as long as the sector doesn’t treat equity as a fad.

“My concern has always been that I feel like too many organizations focus on equity work for show. It feels like the issue of today for them,” said Ashley Parrott, vice chair of the board for the Center for Nonprofit Excellence, an agency that offers resources and training to organizations citywide.

“I want organizations to do this work because it’s the right thing to do, not because of the times and because they think it’s popular, but because it impacts people’s lives daily.”
What it means to be anti-racist

Nonprofits nationwide have long been led by predominantly white boards and staff. And while more boards have members of color today than in years past, they still often do not reflect the populations they support.

According to a Centers on Nonprofits and Philanthropy report, about 30% of nonprofit boards had no members of color in 2020.

Meanwhile, 16% of nonprofits that primarily served people of color had all-white boards.

Boards are responsible for shaping how their organizations are governed, and without diverse representation, they risk doing more harm than good, people in the sector say.

“By not being inclusive, you’re missing valued experiences, valued input,” Parrott said. “That disengages organizations from the reality of what’s going on with the people they serve.”

But just having a diverse staff and board is not enough to correct decades of racial inequities within nonprofits and the communities they’re in.

Institutions also need to become anti-racist — a process that involves learning how racism is embedded in societal systems and taking actions to undo it, Parrot and others said.

“Diversity is a good thing. Equity is a good thing. But they are dramatically insufficient,” said Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, founder and CEO of the Racial Healing Project, a consulting firm that has worked with several nonprofits. “They get at the surface of what is a much deeper, more pervasive problem, which is white supremacy.”

Confronting the ways whiteness has shaped society is difficult and takes times, Abdur-Rahman said.

But organizations who step up to the challenge will “be in a better place than you were before,” he said. “The question is, are you committed to the messiness of it? Not everybody is.”

One of the first local nonprofits to make an anti-racist commitment was the Center for Nonprofit Excellence, or CNPE, which hired the Racial Healing Project to train its board members and analyze its operations.

CNPE provides resources to 500 nonprofit members, and it hopes to establish best practices that can be spread across the city.
The ultimate vision would be we’re all operating from this equitable, anti-racist paradigm where it’s just who we are, not something we have to have plans around,” said Ann Coffey, CEO of CNPE. “We want to create a different culture in our sector that ripples out into our community.”

Pam Darnall, CEO of Family & Children’s Place, co-chairs CNPE’s diversity, equity and inclusion team, and said as a white person, she feels responsible to help undo wrongs of the past.

“I think what our times require of white people is we have to own being the solution,” Darnall said. “… We have to own the historical relevance of how people who are Black have been treated, and it is our job to be accountable to make it better.”

New programs increase access, knowledge

CNPE’s anti-racist commitment has already changed the way the organization interacts with its members and the community, including through several programs focused on increasing access for Black-led nonprofits and improving cultural understanding among white executives.

One such program is a School for Fundraising and Engagement, which teaches classes through an equity lens.

Unseld of the Boys & Girls Club is one of the school’s instructors, and his course focuses on raising funds without stigmatizing marginalized communities.

“It has been a traditional practice in fundraising that tells the denigration story or the at-risk story or the need story of, you know, people of color, communities of color, participating in the oppression Olympics,” he said.

“I think we have an opportunity to kind of flip that narrative. All people deserve the opportunity to have their story told in a manner that dignifies them. My course is about leaning into the assets and contributions that folks make, before noting any challenges.”

Another new program is Nonprofit Leaders Advancing Racial Equity, which invites white executives to discuss how they can address systemic racism within their organizations.

Paul Robinson, president and CEO at Home of the Innocents, participated in the program and said he appreciated having the space to be vulnerable and ask questions.

As a nonprofit with a large percentage of Black clients, “I think we have an obligation to better understand their lived-inexperience and how we can be more informed and thereby provide better quality care to them,” he said. “… The way we provide incredible care is to understand all the ways that they come to us traumatized, and racism is trauma.”
Nonprofits have power to change the community

More than any other sector, nonprofits are distinctly suited to address societal ills that often disproportionately affect communities of color, several who spoke with The Courier Journal said.

“Nonprofits have the liberty and a freedom that government and the private sector don’t,” said Mason Rummel, president and CEO of the James Graham Brown Foundation, who has also served on CNPE’s board. “... They can be flexible, they can be nimble, they can be creative, they can take risks. The power of nonprofits is so underestimated.”

But nonprofits have not always used their power to its full advantage, said Abdur-Rahman of the Racial Healing Project.

Nonprofits often receive funding from wealthy donors and foundations that must make charitable donations for tax deductions, he said. Instead of simply accepting the money, organizations could press donors to support a political agenda, such as raising the minimum wage statewide.

Nonprofits “have a role to play in advocating at those levels for more than another grant but for changes in conditions that are creating the problems,” Abdur-Rahman said.

Coffey of CNPE said her organization stayed out of the political arena in the past. But it recently dipped its toes in by holding a mayoral forum and leading discussions around gun violence.

In the future, it hopes to improve relationships with Metro Council members and push for policies that could improve outcomes for Black residents.

“Supporting these marginalized communities impacts the greater good of the community,” Parrott said. “It’s a ripple effect that will uplift the entire city.”

Reach reporter Bailey Loosemore at bloosemore@courier-journal.com, 502-582-4646 or on Twitter @bloosemore.