

MULTIPLE CITIES

Equity Capacity Building Fund

Support at Every Scale

The American Cities Climate Challenge was launched with a focus on supporting cities to meet the United States' commitments to the Paris Climate Accords locally. But as projects tied to the Climate Challenge progressed, and with a strong push from its equity codirectors, Maria Stamas and Eloisa Portillo-Morales, that focus widened and the Climate Challenge began to more explicitly and deliberately incorporate equity throughout its climate work. As the theme of the Climate Challenge widened, so too did interest in scale.

The Climate Challenge and the funding associated with it have concentrated on crafting and launching large climate initiatives. But what about community efforts that are already ongoing, which might be most interested in receiving help on a single step of a project? How could highly targeted, short-term funding best be used to benefit those efforts? Those were questions encountered by Desirée Williams-Rajee, founder of Kapwa Consulting (a Climate Challenge advisory organization focused on implementing equity), while working with Climate Challenge cities. The Kapwa team and the equity codirectors were interested in establishing an [Equity Capacity Building Fund \(ECBF\)](#) that could offer an extra hand to organizations engaged in equity and coalition-building. With support, participatory projects would get a step closer to their goals, and relationships between involved cities and stakeholders would be strengthened.

In January 2021, as the Climate Challenge received a six-month extension, Bloomberg Philanthropies contributed the money necessary to establish the proposed fund. Ultimately it would support 11 different ongoing projects, providing each with a maximum of \$25,000 to hire an independent contractor to help with a particular project step. "These weren't huge contracts," says Williams-Rajee. They were not



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designed to carry an effort from beginning to end, but “from point A to B—or really point M to N.” Another crucial distinction between the ECBF and other Climate Challenge initiatives is that the funds were awarded as contracts, not grants. For some cities, that requirement engendered working relationships that might not have otherwise formed, such as in Pittsburgh, where the Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation designed a tool kit based on its Green Zones program to assist the city in its public engagement approaches.

Cities jumped at the opportunity to access the ECBF, and Eloisa Portillo-Morales suspects that it wasn't just the premise of free money that piqued interest. Because the ECBF was designed to be used for specific needs or niche projects, it attracted proposals for efforts that typically go unfunded by cities and organizations. “If your city has no public funding for testing and learning community engagement strategies, your leadership is less likely to feel comfortable testing something like compensating the community” for their insights from lived experience, she says. “Part of why cities jumped at this opportunity is because they want to test and prove new concepts of authentically working with the community and the value it brings to centering equity in climate work.” In other words, the funding tended to go toward new engagement strategies that cities haven't come around to paying for.

Parameters to qualify for support were broad. Applications simply had to propose a city–community collaboration on a climate project. As a result, proposals were wide-ranging. Cities sought to engage local community organizations as contractors to support data analysis, community engagement, foundational equity training, and more.

After a successful Phase 1 of the ECBF (April to August 2021) in which 11 projects received a total of \$240,000, Kapwa launched Phase 2 (September 2021 to August 2022) in which 8 projects are currently supported by \$200,000 in contracts.

Wide Variety of Supported Projects

As of December 2021, the ECBF had allocated money across 19 different projects. Here is an overview of some of them:

- **In late 2021 in Seattle**, Rule Seven, a local community engagement firm, worked with the city to directly engage Black, Indigenous, and people of color in exploring equitable road pricing policies, which put a price on using roadway space for people who can afford to pay. Specifically, the city wanted to investigate how such policies could improve mobility, advance equity, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and distribute the revenue to those most burdened by the current transportation system (namely, BIPOC and low-income residents and workers). Using ECBF investments, Rule Seven and the city paid members of the community to participate in a series of workshops that were held online over the space of four months. These workshops focused on identifying outcomes for pricing that did not push costs onto already burdened low-income families and communities of color. The city's Office of Sustainability and Environment and its Department of Transportation will compile the data and community input into a joint report that will be shared with city leadership, the participating city advisory groups, and Seattle's new Green New Deal Oversight Board.
- **In 2019 the city of Denver** established an Office of Climate Action, Sustainability and Resiliency (CASR) to lead its climate and sustainability work. To ensure that community perspectives would factor into CASR's decision making, a Sustainability Advisory Council (SAC) was also established, its membership consisting of 120 stakeholders from across Denver's various communities and interests. With equity fund support, SAC members and city officials underwent racial equity training, which provided a mutual baseline of understanding around themes of equity and social justice and how they play into decision making and policymaking. With a calibrated sense of those subjects, SAC and CASR is better prepared to approach climate work with mindfulness and efficiency.

- **The Washington, D.C.**, Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) used ECBF funding to produce an equity narrative and accompanying training materials with dual purposes: to acknowledge the historical context of inequities in the District, and to articulate the agency's charge for institutionalizing and operationalizing racial equity and environmental justice. The content is central to DOEE's efforts to introduce the first agency-wide [Equity Framework](#) and racial equity tools.
- **In Cincinnati**, residents and community organizations used funding to team up to build out a community engagement process. Findings from the process were used to co-create a city [Climate Equity Indicators Report](#), which highlights key climate risks and the geographic, social, and economic factors that should be considered in assessing vulnerability. This analysis will help the city and community partners develop equity strategies to be included in the forthcoming Green Cincinnati Plan.

Looking Ahead

After launching Phase 2 of the ECBF, Kapwa Consulting, with Bloomberg Philanthropies support, worked with the Movement Strategy Center, the Emerald Cities Collaborative, and City Scale to launch the [J40 Capacity Building Fund \(J40 Fund\)](#) in January 2022. While the J40 Fund is heavily modeled after the ECBF, its goal is to help community-based organizations engage and partner with their local government to advance community-led projects that align with the Justice40 Initiative. This initiative aims to deliver to disadvantaged communities 40 percent of the overall benefits of federal investment in areas such as clean energy and climate preparedness. The J40 Fund intends to provide communities the support to scope, plan, and pursue partnership strategies in order to more effectively work with local government partners to achieve these shared goals. One major difference between the ECBF and the J40 Fund is that the latter is open to projects across the United States rather than limited to Climate Challenge cities. This will extend the opportunity for learning and sharing of new ideas even more broadly across communities.