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A New Mission for Victoria Foundation

This is a pivotal moment for Victoria Foundation. Since the late 1960s, the mission of our 98-year-old foundation has been to “improve the lives of children and families in Newark.” The Foundation has moved about \$300 million to organizations serving Newark since that time and is proud to have supported so many important local groups consistently over the years. At the same time, we have been asking ourselves if this was enough. While many individuals have benefited from programs we fund, the dynamics producing poverty and inequality in Newark persist, creating never ending needs for programs and services. Could we do more with our resources to try to address these dynamics, to support work that goes “further upstream” in order to disrupt them and create more equitable systems? As our local partners know, we have been on a two-year journey to consider these questions, reflect on past practices, and to take a fresh perspective on our values, vision and mission. During this time of learning and strategic planning, which began in January 2020, Victoria continued to provide annual grants to our docket of over 120 grantees—converting most into general operating support.

Last fall, our board adopted a new mission statement for Victoria Foundation. Recognizing that we work in a proud majority Black and Brown city dealing with the legacy and ongoing impact of structural racism, our new mission reads:

Victoria Foundation partners with Black and Brown residents and other marginalized communities in Newark and nonprofit organizations to champion bold strategies that strengthen community power, foster economic justice, promote youth self-determination, and respond to pressing needs.

This new language gives us a unified rather than a bifurcated mission (previously we focused on both Newark and on statewide land conservation efforts). And it reflects key lessons learned during our planning process, chiefly: the importance of naming and facing racism as a primary root cause of poverty and inequality, and the value of leaning into trust-based practices that recognize communities are the “experts” of their own experience and must drive decision-making about how to address community challenges.

Our hope is that [our new strategic framework](#) positions us to support and uplift the power of organized community members to make the changes they know they need in ways that will benefit not just them, but all of us. As one of our board members put it during a group visioning exercise: “*Maybe our wildest dream is that Newark residents are able to achieve the vision they have for the city of Newark and feel support from the institutions and structures in place, like Victoria, to be able to do that.*”

We believe that our new strategic framework will allow the Foundation to support work that has the potential to improve conditions on the ground in Newark and build power in communities for generations to come. However, we are conscious that making such a significant shift will also create serious challenges for our nonprofit partners. In October, we held a [series of webinars](#) to share our current thinking with our nonprofit partners and we are holding individual calls with each grantee organization to transition with care and transparency. To create some stability during this period, our board unanimously approved three-year transition grants for all current nonprofit partners. While we do not know which organizations we will be funding following this period, we are committed to remaining in transparent communication with our grantee partners as we move through this transition.

We want to be clear about why there is uncertainty about what lies ahead. We are intentionally calling this a strategic “framework” and not a “plan” because we want to develop our new funding priorities in partnership with people most proximate to the issues we hope to address. We know we cannot reach our goals by working internally to come up with ideas and then telling external partners to operate in a certain way. We aspire to co-create our new funding strategies in collaboration with our nonprofit partners and Newark community stakeholders. Based on this process, we will determine new funding strategies and grant partners.

Structuring our organization to support this work

A change like this requires a shift in the way we do business. This new framework focuses us on relationships and strategy, rather than due diligence and transactions. We are re-organizing our board committees and staffing structure to reflect this new approach.

We are thrilled to share that we are [welcoming Sharnita C. Johnson as Vice President of Strategy, Impact and Communications](#), adding her leadership and community-based partnership experience to our work. This is the first time Victoria Foundation has had this role, and Sharnita’s level of expertise and intentionality will be crucial to helping us realize the potential of our new framework.

Additionally, we are [shifting the roles and titles of our program staff](#) from “program officers” to “strategy officers,” to name that this work is deeper than and different from managing internally-defined programs. The strategy team will be focused on learning with partners and will engage in co-creation and deep consultation to develop funding strategies. Our goal is that with these changing practices, interconnected strategies that support community self-determination will emerge.

Part of the new strategic vision is to use the voice and relationships of the Foundation itself to support our partners. A new committee of the board—Advocacy & Partnerships Committee—has been established to take full advantage of trustees’ social capital and networks to amplify local policy agendas. We will be bringing on a communications specialist for the first time as well, to lift up community voices and support local advocacy efforts, as well as to strengthen ongoing communications and transparency with all of our partners.

These shifts and many others that are in process are intended to re-shape the structure of our Foundation to meet the call for justice, for community-centered work, and power building.

As leaders who know and deeply love Newark, who are in a position of power and with resources, we take the shift we are making very seriously. This is a big opportunity and responsibility. While we have strong language to guide us, we know that the real work is ahead. We don't have the playbook for how to successfully take on this new work, but we are committed to stepping into the unknown with conviction and courage. We look forward to listening, learning, and continuing to evolve in service of, and in community with Newark residents and community-based organizations.

In gratitude,



Irene Cooper-Basch
Co-Executive Officer



Craig Drinkard
Co-Executive Officer



Frank Alvarez
Board President