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GPA Announces 2021 Grantmaker Of The Year Award Recipients

The 2021 Grantmaker of the Year private funder award recipient is the POISE Foundation located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, nominated by Tammy Tilzey from Foundant Technologies.

The 2021 Grantmaker of the Year public funder award recipient is the Community Mental Health Fund located in Kansas City, Missouri, nominated by Shelley Loethen from Encore Institute for Social Impact.

Congratulations to both award recipient organizations on this prestigious award! Please read below to learn about the Poise Foundation and the Community Mental Health Fund.

The GPA Grantmaker of the Year Award recognizes public funders (federal, state, and local agencies) and private funders (family, community, and corporate foundations) that have improved the way grant professionals do their work and acknowledges outstanding contributions to the field of grantsmanship. The awards process includes a review of nominations, scoring of nominations, and interviews with finalists. This year, six finalists were interviewed by members of the awards committee to determine this year’s awardees. The awards will be presented in-person and virtually during the GPA Annual Conference on November 4, 2021.

The POISE Foundation
POISE is a Black led, Black serving community foundation with a passion for transforming the Pittsburgh region into an area where all members of the Black community are empowered and self-sufficient. They are accomplishing this by assisting the Black community to achieve self-sustaining practices, through strategic leadership, collective giving, grantmaking, and advocacy. POISE receives funds from a variety of donors which are used to support their grantmaking strategy, or donor-directed for specific charitable purposes. Over the past 40 years, POISE Foundation has grown from an initial capitalization of $164K to a present value in excess of $11M. During this same period, POISE has returned to the community that nurtured it more than $15.5M in grants and scholarships to deserving organizations and families in the Pittsburgh area and throughout the United States. Historically, grants have been provided to organizations fostering improved conditions in the areas of: Aging, Arts and Culture, Children and Youth, Education, Health and Human Services, and Urban Affairs/Economic Development. In 2012, the Foundation shifted its focus on two primary goals, convening an effort to build a sustainable Black community in the Pittsburgh Region and Strengthening Black Families. The Foundation now focuses its unrestricted grant making to support organizations that do their work through a family lens where the whole family is strengthened and provided opportunities to develop more positive family interactions. “We also advocate for the family to be reinserted as a core institution within our community.” Their goal is to continue to build POISE as an institution that can be a significant financial as well as strategic resource focused on promoting equity within the Pittsburgh Region and throughout the nation.
POISE does not follow the traditional path of most community foundations. Their vision to make philanthropy accessible to the Black community has been clear since they were founded by Bernard H. Jones Sr. 40 years ago. They are accomplishing this through grantmaking focused on supporting small to medium sized, Black-led organizations with budgets of less than $600K where the majority of the staff are unpaid volunteers. Many of their grantees have never received or written a grant before. These are smaller nonprofits that have a passion for serving their communities and are already investing their own funds to accomplish this. Because of their close relationship and connections with this community, POISE brings new grantees to the funding table and provides funding to organizations that may not be considered by more traditional funding organizations. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, POISE recognized immediately how smaller Black led organizations and Black community members were being disproportionately adversely impacted. This realization led them to re-evaluate their grantmaking criteria. They started this process with internal discussions which quickly expanded to community conversations including surveys, 1:1 interviews, focus groups, and conversations with past funders and grantees. Their goal in all of these discussions was to identify ways they could alleviate the burden for grantees and speed up the time it takes to get resources into the hands of those organizations serving on the front lines. After just 3 weeks, they began achieving this goal through their newly created Critical Community Needs Fund. As of April 2021, POISE has raised over $1.3M in funds and distributed $1.1M of these funds directly into the hands of 103 Black led organizations serving the needs of over 322,000 Black community members in Allegheny and Beaver counties. These organizations may be small in size and number but their impact was mighty. Through their community connections, POISE uncovered various unmet needs including providing transportation to food banks and unique challenges faced by the Black immigrant community including language barriers and faith based dietary restrictions. POISE determined that over 87% of the organizations they funded did not receive any CAREs ACT funding. Just imagine what would have happened in this community without the extraordinary efforts of POISE.

During a recent Foundant webinar Traci Johnson, Program Officer at POISE shared with other funders how their organization creatively transformed their grantmaking process to quickly get resources in the hands of the smaller nonprofits providing frontline support for the Black led organizations and Black community members most adversely impacted by the multiple pandemics of 2020. A few examples of how POISE quickly pivoted their grantmaking process include:

- shortening their grant applications and process
- removing LOI requirements, interviews, and other steps to speed up turnaround time
- replacing narratives with simple click and check the box questions
- removing budget, financials, and p&l upload requirements and replacing with a brief description of how the funds would be used
- Making their grant funding unrestricted to provide grantees flexibility to use funds where they were most needed

The changes in the grantmaking process POISE initiated freed up these organizations to do what they do best, which is to meet the urgent needs of Black community members. “The grantmaking staff at POISE are extremely focused on how their internal decisions impact their grantees. They are constantly considering how to get the information they need to make funding decisions while removing barriers and bringing more nonprofits to the funding table.” Dana Berggren, Foundant Client Success Manager. POISE goes beyond removing barriers to funding for these grassroot organizations. They support these organizations by spotlighting their work in the local press and raising awareness of these nonprofits among other funders. [www.poisefoundation.org](http://www.poisefoundation.org)

*We are honored to award POISE the 2021 Grantmaker of the Year Award in the Private Category!*
**Community Mental Health Fund (CMHF)**
The Community Mental Health Fund (CMHF) was established in 1981. The organization is funded by a county-wide mental health levy, generating about $12 million each year, and uses a competitive grant process to distribute these funds to providers throughout the county. CMHF’s mission is to support a network of quality mental health services for persons with mental illness that are equitably accessible and responsive to the varied and unique needs of Jackson County residents. Organizations that receive funding from CMHF must meet standards of care set by the board of trustees and the state of Missouri. With a focus on the county’s most vulnerable individuals living with chronic mental illness, CMHF is a payer of last resort, helping their grantees do even more with the funding they receive from other sources. Over the past five years, CMHF has provided more than $63 million to key mental health care providers in Jackson County, Missouri. Statistics from the official website of Jackson County indicate that more than 30,000 people in the county are affected by mental health challenges. In 2019, CMHF funding reached 18,000 people from preschoolers to senior adults.

CMHF is committed to best practices and innovation in mental health services. It is one of few funders, public or private, offering grants specifically for innovation in addition to support for ongoing services. A CMHF grantee noted that innovation funding has been particularly important through the pandemic disruption. With innovation funds they have been able to offer mental health support for their staff who dealt with personal effects of COVID-19 while also supporting patients with serious and chronic mental illness exacerbated by the pandemic. In line with their commitment to innovation, CMHF implemented a value-based payment system (VBPS) in 2020. They are one of the first funders (public or private) in the country to implement a system in behavioral health that allows grantees to earn incentive payments in addition to their traditional grant award. While much mental health funding is volume or service-unit based, this is a value-based system that rewards grantees for demonstrating increased access to care and achievement of results. This system effectively shifts the emphasis from outputs to outcomes. Incentive payments have fewer requirements than their grants, allowing recipient agencies to implement innovative projects and services that would likely be impossible to fund through traditional grants. One agency used their incentive payment to convert a sterile and unwelcoming “safe room” for children into a calming room. They painted murals on the walls, clouds on the ceiling, replaced traditional furniture with bean bag chairs, and headphones for listening to music. These changes have transformed the room from one where children were expected to simply calm down into one where they can learn to regulate their own behavior. While the project cost was very reasonable, most traditional funding would not have covered it and other unrestricted funds are usually budgeted for items with more tangible results or clearly apparent needs. The organization has noted that this simple project has made a tremendous difference for the children, many of whom lives are adversely impacted by trauma. Organizations participating in the VBPS receive support from a consultant, provided by CMHF, who helps the organization design and measure their key performance indicators (KPI).

In addition to using the value-based payment system to reward grantees for delivering results, CHMHF will use data collected from grantees to inform the organization’s own goals and outcome measures. Data gathered from grantees will be aggregated into an interactive dashboard that will use a baseline measure for access to care with the ability to perform analysis on a variety of demographic characteristics. This will provide a statistical, up-to-date look at access to mental health care in the community and help CMHF make informed investments to organizations serving people who might otherwise be overlooked. CMHF is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts within the organization and in supporting mental health care providers in their own efforts. Their Star Rating System “guides mental health agencies to self-assess culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services.” This assessment is designed
to help organizations make decisions and implement strategies that improve equitable access to high quality mental health services. Currently in testing with two providers, these organizations have noted that the system is comprehensive, easy to use, and has had tremendous benefit in helping facilitate definitions of various DEI concepts. These organizations have also found that there are areas in DEI efforts where they believed their organization was performing well, but the assessment showed that they did not have data to substantiate their belief. The opposite has been true as well. The Star Rating System is unique in that it has created quantitative measures for DEI efforts that are often discussed in terms of very qualitative, unmeasurable factors. The system provides clarity for evaluation and strategic decision making. At full implementation, the system will be available to any mental health provider, not just the CMHF's grantees. [https://jacksoncountycares.org/](https://jacksoncountycares.org/)

*We are honored to award the Community Mental Health Fund the 2021 Grantmaker of the Year Award in the Public Category!*

The four organizations who are receiving honorable mentions this year are: Baptist Health, Greater Worcester Community Foundation, Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and Newman’s Own Foundation.

The Grant Professionals Association (GPA) is an international membership association for everyone in the grants industry. GPA and its affiliates work to advance the profession, certify professionals, and fund professionalism. GPA offers continuing professional development through local chapter meetings, regular webinars, the GPA Journal, and an annual conference. The Grant Professionals Certification Institute oversees the GPC credential based on a body of knowledge for the profession. The Grant Professionals Foundation provides scholarships to individuals to advance their career. Find out more at [www.GrantProfessionals.org](http://www.GrantProfessionals.org).

To find out more information about this award, including how to apply and information about previous winners, please visit [www.grantprofessionals.org/grantmakeraward](http://www.grantprofessionals.org/grantmakeraward). You may also contact GPA Headquarters at [kelli@grantprofessionals.org](mailto:kelli@grantprofessionals.org) or by calling Kelli Romero at (913) 788-3000.