

A Year Like No Other: The Impact of the Pandemic

In March 2020, everything changed. Our day-to-day work lives, our ability to travel to meet with grantees and to network with colleagues, and our understanding of our own sense of safety and risk were upended. Yet in some ways, events unfolded in a predictable manner: those most pushed to the margins were at greater risk for illness and death and for continued mistreatment by officials under the guise of “safeguarding public health and safety.” Protective equipment and access to quality health care remained out of reach of those to whom these protections have always been out of reach. These disparities persist to this day as the rollout of vaccines across the globe has yet to reach great numbers of people living in the Global South.

The pandemic greatly impacted the ongoing work of Arcus grantees, forcing many to pivot to new ways of working and supporting their communities. Because in-person fundraising was now impossible, the Social Justice Program developed our Grantee Technical Assistance Initiative to help build online fundraising capacity.

International Regions

In all of the Social Justice Program’s international regions, the dire subsistence needs of LGBTQ people necessitated our grantees’ engagement in humanitarian direct-service delivery programs, often without proper training or funding. A report from our colleagues at the Global Philanthropy Project¹ found that, amid an overwhelming commitment of global humanitarian resources to COVID-19 relief, essentially none were targeted to LGBTQ people as a population in need of support. Therefore, the burden fell on existing LGBTQ organizations to provide food, shelter, and other basic needs, requiring the diversion of critically needed funds used to advance human rights. In light of this diversion, the Social Justice Program’s international team allowed grantees more flexibility in the expenditure of their Arcus grant dollars, although it did not award emergency response dollars.

Additional research conducted by OutRight Action International² found that in 38 countries where interviews

were conducted with LGBTQ people, the following challenges were brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic: 1) job loss leading to food and shelter insecurity, 2) disruptions in accessing health care, especially ongoing HIV medications and gender-affirming care, 3) elevated risk of domestic and family violence, 4) social isolation, and 5) scapegoating, discrimination, and the abuse of state power. In addition, the LGBTQ organizations that serve these communities were undergoing crises of sustainability as a result of funding cuts, lockdowns, and increased demand for service delivery.

In addition, lockdowns in Arcus focal countries resulted in stalled progress on key decriminalization litigation cases—all involving efforts by Arcus grantees—in Kenya, Botswana, and the eastern Caribbean as courts struggled to function. In addition, an antidiscrimination bill scheduled to be introduced in the Honduran Congress was delayed.

Grantee Responses to the Pandemic

GOAL 1 Increased Safety

- **Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO)** joined the National NGO COVID-19 Technical Working Group to monitor the government’s response to COVID-19 and ensure inclusion of marginalized groups.
- In Uganda, the **Human Rights Awareness and Protection Forum** filed successful litigation to win the release of 20 LGBTQ people arrested for violating COVID-19 social distancing mandates. All of the detained individuals were subjected to harassment and some to violence while in detention, and lockdowns delayed legal proceedings.
- The **Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya** organized a tele-counseling program to address the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ people in the context of the pandemic.
- In Mexico, muxe communities supported by grantee **Mexfam** distributed packages of food from the local government (of Juchitan) to more than 130 muxe (Indigenous gender variant and trans women).
- In the Caribbean, the **Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality (ECADE)** raised \$5,700 through crowdsourcing and distributed it for COVID-19-related support.

¹ “Where Are the Global Covid-19 Resources for LGBTQ Communities?” <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2020/09/01/covidreport-sept2020/>

² “Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ People” <https://outrightinternational.org/content/vulnerability-amplified-impact-covid-19-pandemic-LGBTQq-people>

GOAL 2 Increased Protections

- The **U.N. independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity** drafted the ASPIRE guidelines on “COVID-19 response free from violence and discrimination” based on SOGI.
- In the Caribbean, **Parliamentarians for Global Action** organized a regional online consultation with members of Parliament in partnership with an MP in St. Lucia and the U.N. Development Program regarding COVID-19 disparities relative to LGBTQ communities, offering concrete recommendations.
- **OutRight Action International** launched an LGBT-specific emergency assistance fund and related fundraising campaign, resulting in 125 small grants totaling \$1 million to organizations in 63 countries (as of May 2021).

U.S. Southern Tier

As with international grantees, U.S.-based grantees shifted their focus to community survival, developing mutual-aid programs and moving their organizing and community-building activities online. These efforts were tied to an analysis of structural inequities and a commitment to strengthen community support networks and power. Although Arcus did not award emergency response funding, U.S. grantees, many of which already receive multiyear general operating support, were provided flexibility to use funds to respond to emerging needs. Some grantees—the Campaign for Southern Equality, Astraea, Third Wave, and Borealis—did create their own emergency grantmaking funds.

Grantee Responses to the Pandemic

GOAL 1 Increased Safety

- The **Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement** developed a mutual-aid response within its existing organizing activities and long-term vision to grow “people power.” The group raised \$20,000 to assist members of its base to pay rent, utilities, groceries, transportation, and other expenses.
- **Equality Arizona** connected more than 10,000 Arizonans to a statewide mutual-aid network to meet needs during the pandemic and provided personal protective equipment to three southern Arizona hospitals during the first wave of the virus.

- The **Contigo Fund** took a lead role in the formation of the Central Florida LGBTQ+ Mutual Aid Network and Relief Fund in March 2020, capitalizing on Contigo’s network of key stakeholders and coalition of grantees. This network raised more than \$66,000 in grassroots donations, distributed to more than 600 LGBTQ+ individuals.
- The **Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative** (SNaPCo) raised over \$20,000 in donations to support sex workers and other Black trans and queer folks in Atlanta during the pandemic.
- The **Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico** moved all of its support groups to a virtual format, and while some of its participants lost access to the groups because of this shift, other members (such as those living in rural areas of New Mexico) gained increased access to the organization’s programs and resources.

GOAL 2 Increased Protections

- **Southerners on New Ground (SONG)** supported rural southern LGBTQ organizing in areas hard hit by COVID-19. In Columbus, Georgia, SONG connected members through statewide calls to center the pandemic and mutual-aid efforts within a larger framework of Black liberation and power building.
- **Forward Together** shifted its voter engagement and Census outreach to phone, digital, and texting platforms to reach communities safely.
- The **National LGBTQ Task Force** moved its national Queer the Census program fully online. The program was so successful that its director was tapped by the incoming Biden administration to run outreach efforts at the Census Bureau.

The success of **Equality Florida** in quickly pivoting its fundraising activities online led the Arcus Social Justice Program to develop our own online fundraising capacity-building initiative. Equality Florida implemented new sustainable fundraising strategies aimed at smaller dollar donors. The organization brought on a digital strategist and hired a direct-mail firm to begin aggressively cultivating small donors and monthly donors through email, social media, digital advertising, and direct mail. These investments increased its digital fundraising by 400% in 2020.

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