Background

In the midst of COVID-19, we have had to transform our ways of working to ensure the safety and well-being of all. This is not business as usual for individuals and it cannot be for philanthropy either. We acknowledge that not everyone is situated to be able to do so, but philanthropy is privileged and positioned as a sector to make the necessary adjustments that center humanity. African Americans in Michigan and across the country have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. That is also true for African Americans in philanthropy. As such, philanthropy has an opportunity even now to respond to the inequities that have been illuminated. Philanthropy must understand that our internal and external philanthropic response to this pandemic is personal to staff, particularly African American staff. The two aren’t separate and the response and intention must carefully take that into account. There are tangible actions that philanthropy can take to mitigate these inequities, and support African Americans in philanthropy who have dedicated time and energy to your institutions, while also thoughtfully executing a racially equitable strategy to serve communities across the state, nation and world.

Best Practices

☐ **Ask How People Are Doing**

Engaging with our humanity during this time requires that we check-in with one another. Gone are the days of compartmentalization and the rote “How are you?” and “I’m fine.” Philanthropy’s literal definition is the “love of humankind.” Now is the time to center that love and check-in with those around us. Practices from across the network:

⇒ Coffee Breaks
⇒ Happy Hour
⇒ Chat & Chew Check-Ins
⇒ Send staff plants with special, encouraging messages

☐ **Create a Flexible Work Schedule**

In an environment where parents have become teachers full-time, in addition to their full-time work responsibilities; where some have become the caregivers to their loved ones; and where all have been traumatized by this current crisis, it is unrealistic and oppressive to expect staff to work a traditional schedule and to do so effectively. This is not business as usual. We must acknowledge that staff are not working from home; they are home working, and there is a difference. Now is the time to lean into trusting our colleagues to prioritize the important components of their lives, including their life’s work. Create an environment that allows staff to put their family first. Practices from across the network:

⇒ “Work-When-Its-Convenient-For-You” Policies
⇒ Half-day Fridays for the remainder of the year
⇒ No non-essential calls/meetings after 1 p.m.
⇒ Block-out time on calendars for reflection
⇒ Be mindful of positionality when stay-at-home order is lifted

☐ **Offer/Encourage Robust Wellness Programs**

Encouraging active participation in those activities that tend to the mind, body and spirit during this time is critical. The stress that this crisis is causing cannot be understated. Therefore, promoting mental, physical and spiritual health wellness is a MUST. These are activities or accommodations can be established by the philanthropic institution and then encouraged for leaders to develop within teams, or encouraged for staff to participate in outside of work. Practices from across the network:

⇒ Host virtual yoga, exercise and breathing sessions
⇒ Providing 5 extra PTO days
⇒ Host virtual wellness sessions where staff shares best practices they are employing
⇒ Encourage virtual faith-based and meditation participation
⇒ Encourage mental health wellness checks

☐ **Modify Practices, Programs & Structures to Support Accessibility**

It doesn’t do any good to develop programs that aren’t supported by structures to make them accessible for all, particularly those who are situated furthest from opportunity or position. As innovative ideas are being floated, consider and take action to ensure maximum participation. These efforts must be advanced and supported from the highest levels of leadership. And leaders must ensure structural changes to ensure that all can participate. Practices from across the network:

⇒ Provide financial support to create a suitable and comfortable workspace at home
⇒ Ensure staff schedules and workload are realistic to ensure participation in wellness activities
⇒ Expanded opportunity for staff to increase retirement contributions
⇒ Amend professional development dollars and policies to be used more creatively (i.e. professional virtual workout sessions, workspaces, etc.)
⇒ Put a hold on internal staff performance measurements

☐ **Establish New Work Norms**

We are in a new season and a new phase of society that has not been witnessed in our lifetimes. We are being forced into a new normal with each coming day as a society but also in our communities and in our families. The same has to be true for work norms. Work schedules, the foci of our work, and even the way we “team” to do our work is all on the table. For instance, uplifting the voices of African Americans within your organization and their lived experiences can serve as a resource for philanthropic strategies to support community. And while that has always been the case, this is an opportunity to act upon that in a more powerful way. Practices from across the network:

⇒ Limit work communications to the work day, exclude evenings and weekends
⇒ Eliminate non-critical meetings; essential meetings only
⇒ Put wellness parameters on the number of and length of virtual meetings staff attend in a day
⇒ Reconsider workloads so that staff are both focused on mission-critical and responsive work, while also balancing the new realities of their staff
⇒ Implement permanent telecommuting policies in service of people, planet and profits
⇒ Leverage the lived experiences of African American staff in strategy development and execution
While we don’t know when, we do know that we will make it through this crisis. Until then, and even after this crisis is over, philanthropy should remember and embed these key practices as ways of being, particularly for and in service of African Americans and people of color within philanthropy. If philanthropy does not take swift, strategic, and intentional actions in these directions, staff will be harmed. It behooves philanthropy to live into its meaning: to extend and demonstrate love to humankind.