



Episode 17: Equity in Grants Administration with Latrina Kelly-James

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Intro:

Welcome to The NCJA Podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning, and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance grant program or Byrne JAG contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.

Gillian Caplan:

Hello, everyone. My name is Gillian Caplan and I'm a program manager at the National Criminal Justice Association. As part of our work at NCJA, we have started an equity in grants administration and strategic planning program through which we hope to help state administering agencies think intentionally about their allocation of both state and federal funds in ways in which they can distribute these funds more equitably.

A key contributor to that work and our guest for today's episode, is Latrina Kelly-James, Principal of Oya Strategies. Thank you so much for joining us today, Latrina. I would love if you could start by telling us a little bit more about your background and then we'll dive right into the questions.

Latrina Kelly-James:

Great. Thanks for having me, Gillian. So my name is Latrina Kelly-James. I'm Principal at Oya Strategies. We are a liberation equity centered consulting firm that works across community-based organizations and institutions to center equity, particularly from an intersectional perspective, uplifting and centering communities and those marginalized in all of our equity work.

I'm excited about that work and excited to do that work with NCJA. Over the past year, I came into this work in equity for my background in community-based work. And so, for the past 20 years, I've worked in communities, both women organizing perspective, organizing communities around social justice, criminal justice issues, all the way to beginning to build capacity of organizations. So I led a community-based organization for about six years as a co-ED and development director at some points, advocacy director, all of the hats that you wear in a community-based organization and took those skills and actually brought it to a national work around capacity building for organizations that were working with people who've been impacted by violence, particularly the victims of color, black and brown communities that are impacted by violence and not seen as victims.

And did a ton of work to help build the capacity of those organizations to receive and sustain victims of Crime Act funding between about 2015 and 2019 through group called Equal Justice USA. So we helped to move about \$4 million to community-based organizations, small shops and about 15 cities to get and sustain VOCA funds. And that my work is also included leading equity work through set of the popular



democracy, helping to build out their internal equity model for staff and to help build up and center their lens around equity and economic, and social and racial justice issues.

And I also currently work with a community-based public safety collective to help center training a technical assistance from a culture responsive lens. So making sure that the technical assistance that's being given to community-based organizations doing community violence intervention work is done by folks who look like the communities that are experiencing harm and dealing with community violence. So I come into this work from many different lenses and from many different capacities and really excited to have this conversation about the grant-making. So excited to talk to you today, Gillian.

Gillian Caplan:

Well, we are really excited to have you not only for this podcast, but also involved in our equity work. So to get started, we really want to lay the foundation here. We want to begin by defining equity to ground us for the rest of the conversation today. So when we say equity, what do we actually mean?

Latrina Kelly-James:

That's a great question. Equity is such a broad word. It's used in so many scenarios and frameworks. I think we need to make sure, first of all, that language captures the layered nature of equity. And so, as I think about equity, I always think about the language around and how we're using it, and I think we should really define it as a process of identifying and eliminating disparities, shifting of power and removing barriers that perpetuating equity. It's really the intentional practice of change to actualize fair treatment, advancement, access, and the opportunity for everyone to thrive.

Gillian Caplan:

Absolutely. So now that we have this shared language for what we mean when we say equity, for those that are listening and are just getting started at incorporating equity throughout their agency and throughout their grant making process, what are some fundamental considerations to deepen their lens?

Latrina Kelly-James:

Well, first of all, equity is iterative. So it's always changing. And I think the biggest thing is to be reflected. So much of the equity work is beginning with really checking in on yourself and making sure that you're reflective of how you show up as an individual, as an institution, as a community. Really, I would say the first thing to consider is that is what our biases are when you're coming into this work on a daily basis.

We can really start to deepen our lens when we understand our self-reflective of exactly how we perceive communities, which is critically important. And I call it perspectives over perceptions, which I think we'll talk about a little later. We have this unchecked unconscious bias no matter who we are, and



when it goes unchecked, it really hurts the trust building process between communities and government.

Another keyway to deepen our lens on equity is really understanding intersectionality. And it's a buzzword in every facet of our society right now without deep understanding of what it is sometimes. So when I think about intersectionality, what really think about is the necessary practice of understanding the intersections, particularly between criminal justice and public safety work, understanding racial and ethnic disparities, and the intersection of those identities and how they contribute to disparities in marginalization.

For example, knowing the deep disparities of Black and Latino men overall in the criminal justice system, we have to expand that lens to understand how being a woman within the criminal justice system might impact these barriers, or being a gender that doesn't fit within the binaries and not being given choices within the criminal justice system. The ways that economic status play into access and support and progress. Being intentional about how those intersections contribute to the barrier's communities face. I think can help us really understand how we prioritize and create grant making strategies that can be more effective to address these barriers.

Gillian Caplan:

So in a moment, we're going to discuss practical recommendations to implement trust-based grant making practices. But before we do that, I would love for you to explain a little bit more about something you call perspectives over perceptions, specifically when it comes to practicing equitable grant making. So my hope is that this concept can guide the rest of our conversation today. What do you mean when you say that phrase?

Latrina Kelly-James:

Yeah, perspectives over perceptions. I say that because particularly in grant making, grant makers tend to come into conversations with communities with their own perceptions of community-based organizations and how they believe those organizations are managed or mismanaged.

When I think about perceptions, shifting of power comes to mind, and remember we just talked about that in the definition of equity around shifting of power. And really this means not going into grant making with the perception that the community-based organizations, serving communities of people and those in the margins are risk-averse, for example. Assuming that folks don't know how to manage their own funds, don't have the experience or knowledge, and coming in with that power dynamic that you know more than that community knows.

One of the interesting things about the work I've done is that I've been on the side where I'm now driving equity in spaces, and I've been on the side as a community-based organization of staffer and executive director who's really trying to do really excellent work. And among my peers and a lot of folks that do community violence intervention work and criminal justice work, folks are doing it because they may have been harmed in some way, because they've been impacted. They may have lost a child to



violence, they may have grown up in neighborhoods with high rates of violence, they may have been a victim of crime.

And so, what's unknown when grant makers go into these spaces that some of these backgrounds may have been accountants, financial managers. There's a gamut of experience folks have that's unknown to grant makers. However, there's an assumption sometimes either rather explicit or implied that these leaders have little experience. The folks come into this work based on their trauma, based on their experiences, and sometimes that's driving the work and their healing process while they're doing the work.

So when we think about shifting power, we really think about shifting the status quo on what we believe instead of what is the real perspective. I think there's also this perception of the quote, unquote, "you need us" perception among grant makers and government and philanthropic communities. And really what this does is say that without this grant or without this institution or this entity, that community-based organization impact communities won't thrive.

Many of these communities, many Black, native, indigenous, folks of color, rural folks, economically divested communities and actually, governments are in particular stewards of the public's money, and this money doesn't belong to any government entity. That money is taxpayers' money. And so, because it's the people's money, our citizens money, we really need to think about who needs who. It's really a, "We need us." We need each other. The government and community needs to work together to understand and execute funds in a way that benefits people.

So leaving behind this perception that community needs government, needs entities, needs funding, of course they do. But in reality, and in my experience, a leading organizations, many grassroots, many community-based organizations have been doing this work for years and decades with zero funding. Just the dedication of folks who know that the work is necessary.

So when we talk about perspectives and perceptions, really having a deeper perspective on how organizations enter this work and how we change the relationship between the grant maker and the community serve is really the most important.

Gillian Caplan:

Wow, Thank you for that. So now that we are working from a common language and have a better understanding of some of the conscious and subconscious barriers that challenge our equitable practices, I would love to walk through the six different recommendations that I mentioned earlier for implementing trust-based grant making practices based on the model by trust-based philanthropy thinking. Can you walk us through these?

Latrina Kelly-James:

Absolutely. And I love the trust-based philanthropy thinking model because it really gets to the nitty-gritty around grant making and all the phases and processes. And so, the recommendation I'm talking



about are based on this and it's based on private philanthropy, but it's so pertinent to government philanthropy as well, government funding, because they're interchangeable, both are serving communities and providing funding. So it's great to talk about this model in the sense of how government can intersect, insert themselves into trust-based philanthropy.

So I think the first one is around multi-year flexible, unrestricted funding, making commitments for more than a year. Trust that nonprofits know how best spend their grant money, really start to examine who receives multi-year flexible support. A lot of times, particularly with federal and state and sometimes local funding, you have grantees that have multi-year funding year, after year, after year, and really beginning to interrogate who receives that multi-year support and making it flexible for grantees or potential grantees who've never received support at all.

I know this can be a point of contention, particularly with federal and state funding because they're not always in control of how funding's allocated. But long-term flexible funding allows organizations to allocate resources where they're most needed, like room for innovation, emergence impacts, make commitments for more than one year. And so, when we talk about flexible funding and the restrictions, it's really thinking about how institutions can be creative and agencies can be creative and maybe use state dollars to help offset the flexible funding and multi-year funding or looking at the federal guides and see where their spaces or gaps, where they can actually fill to help make multi-year flexible funding more accessible for grantees and examining who receives that multi-year unrestricted support. I can't stress that more because it's like, who doesn't? And what's the blind spots and biases in our processes? Do all of our unrestricted and flexible grantees look the same? Why or why not? And so, part of that is like this deep interrogation.

The second is do the homework. Do the work. Many times, you hear from federal state, and local agencies that nobody's applying, but you've done your due diligence to understand the landscape of issues and challenges as public servants either in the local county, state, or federal level. It is the responsibility for you to get to know issues and organizations across the landscape. Saving nonprofits time in the early stages of the vetting process. Some things others can do is use available public records to understand a perspective grantees purpose, their programs, their leadership, their financial standing.

Look beyond your usual circles to identify organizations that are aligned with priorities and values and vision that may be overlooked due to bias. Think about prioritizing high need areas and figuring out where those high need areas are before you get into that grant making process.

And part of the homework is getting out there into communities and talking in groups. Work with some groups in the city, set up a time for an SAA to just sit and listen to groups, discuss their mission, their everyday work. Realizing that this work was rooted in victim services and advocacy and trauma and healing, and make sure that they have access to the funding for some of those services that are critically needed.

The third is simplifying and streamlining paperwork and the point of contention, particularly for grantees and communities, because federal funding, state funding, local funding tends to have a ton of paperwork. And nonprofits in particular spend up an ordinate amount of time on reports and



applications. A relational approach saves time and helps funders gain a deeper understanding of the work. Consider taking a conversational approach to learning about your grantee's potential work and what's barriers for them in paperwork, via phone calls, video calls, in-person meetings, webinars, give opportunities for folks to share their work so that you can begin to think about, "Okay, now we have feedback from groups that we've funded or maybe you haven't funded around our paperwork. How can we simplify what's easier for folks?" And that actually helps to build out and streamline some of that.

Being transparent and responsive. This is critical. Modeling transparency, power awareness, and vulnerability. It really, really helps to build relationships that are rooted in trust and mutual accountability. And some of the ways that grant makers could think about that is just to be clear upfront about what you do and do not fund and letting potential grantees know if a meeting is a good use of their time, for example, give grantees ample notice when you're making changes that might affect their funding and incorporate support that helps them manage those things.

So marginalized communities are often left out and left hanging without any knowledge about why. Being open and honest about your own institutional struggles, being really transparent about struggles, questions, and thought processes that you as a grant maker has. That transparency helps to build relationship.

Invite grantees to share their own challenges without judgment. There's always going to be challenges on both sides. When you invite transparency and responsiveness, it really helps to build trust in your grant making. And be responsive to grantees emails and calls. And I think being particularly mindful of how you may be perpetuating trauma, particularly for impacted communities, Black and indigenous people, color leaders, youth and others who might feel disregarded or overlooked by funders in the past or in the present.

And I really want to stress this point about being responsive when folks reach out to you because it builds trust to know that this person's listening to me, they want to know how I'm feeling, what my challenges are, they're being responsive, they're getting back to me in a timely manner because a lot of times that trauma being disregarded as a community organization or as an individual who's been impacted, it shows up when a funder, a grant maker is not responsive.

And that's soliciting and acting on feedback. I always say you have to be more than just the dollars that you hand out. Be responsive. Be adaptive, so the non-monetary support that you can provide can help also leadership capacity and organizational health of your grantee.

Anonymously, survey your grantees about your practices. Some things you can do is before making major changes or updates, glean that feedback from your grantees to inform those changes. Inform grantees on how their input was used to inform or not inform your decision, right? Because you're not always going to make the decision that is necessarily popular but give the why behind it. Solicit the feedback and act on it. Compensate grantees for their time when you ask for their feedback requests. It does require significant amount of time outside of their usual work. And so, what are the ways that you can compensate your grantee?



And a big thing is solicit feedback from those you haven't funded. You might be surprised to learn some of the challenges and experiences faced within your grant processes that prevented that organization or entity from being funded.

And then the last recommendation is really to support beyond the check, which is simply understanding that federal governments are stewards. Federal state governments, state governments, local governments are stewards. There is a deep responsibility to cultivating and maintaining your relationship that strengthens your grantee's experience and set them up for success and not failure. And so, something to think about as you're thinking about how do we support beyond what we give, right? The monetary dollars we give culturally and responsive training and technical assistance, making sure that if you're providing TTA, that it reflects the various communities that are served by your grantees. So making sure that TTA providers look like and have some background experience of some of those impacted communities.

Capacity building, offering capacity building to help the grantees maintain their funds. It is very difficult at times for new grantees in particularly to manage all the pieces that go into federal state and local grants. Listen to your grantee partners for needs and challenges and opportunities.

And one big thing that some grant makers don't think about is introducing your grantee to other like-minded organizations. This can have an outsized impact on the smaller, younger stage. Sometimes BIPOC led organizations that don't have larger networks.

And the other is highlight your grantees working communications. Make this offer of support clear, equitable and option. Because even if you build like a solid and long-term relationship, grantees may still feel obligated to accept your support or highlights. So making sure that they have the option to say yes or no. And the ways grant makers can contribute to building your grantee, I think that creates the deeper trust in community and what builds that trust making process.

Gillian Caplan:

Great. Thank you so much. As we wrap up this conversation, what would you say is the biggest takeaway as agencies start to move into this space and begin to make their practices more equitable?

Latrina Kelly-James:

Yeah, I think there's many takeaways, but some of the biggest takeaways are consistency and transparency. And it continues to be a barrier to equity work, not just now that equity is more prominent in the center, but in our daily work overall and over time. Equity work in general can tend to be stagnant with starts and stops, internally for grant makers and out within the work.

And for communities that have had racial ethnic disparities that have been marginalized, a lot of those disparities are based on empty promises, lack of follow-through and lack of deep investment in these communities. And so if anything, equity requires being very transparent and consistent and



communicative with your grantees, your organizations, your CBOs impacted communities, which will support them in being more transparent with the impacted folks that they're serving.

So being transparent about how you're settling equity and in which spaces, many times, impacted communities experience constant gathering of information. You may hear from grantees like, "We're constantly being surveyed from grant makers and other institutions." As grant makers, being in relationship and consistently implementing what you're learning and your practices across grant making from developing priorities and strategic planning around grant making, making sure that you're transparent with your grantees who weren't awarded about how you're interested in awarding funds and being transparent with communities about what the process looks like, how their information's being used, how it's being used in communication and getting feedback from those communities and sharing back how you've used that information. So that surveying and gathering of information has impact and folks could actually see, and it's tangible how their feedback was used.

I think being consistent with that practice of transparency, consistency, and communication in all phases of your grant process and make sure you're implementing that transparency to continue to build trust over and over again.

Consistency builds equity and being able to shift equity is not stagnant. Being able to shift and be nimble based on what you've heard from community, based on your experiences as a grant maker is an absolute necessity. And so, I think it's a really big roundabout way of me saying that being in the practice of equity and the takeaways being intentional, having deep intentionality, open to change, trust building and reflection. Constantly being reflective and being ready to shift.

I think keeping those four things, intentionality, change, trust building, and reflection at the center of your practices around equity and grant making is really how we begin to move into this space and continue to grow in this continued practice of building equity.

Gillian Caplan:

Okay, so intentionality, change, trust building, and reflection. I think that's a beautiful way to end this conversation. Thank you so much for your time today, Latrina. I for one, know that I have learned a lot during this conversation and very eager to continue this moving forward. So, thank you for such an enriching discussion.