

THE BOLD WAY: SEEDING CHANGE, BUILDING POWER

YEAR 1 EVALUATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, APRIL 2026

This Year 1 Evaluation Executive Summary highlights early findings from the Racial Justice and Equity Fund (RJEF), a participatory, trust-based philanthropic initiative advancing an intersectional approach to child and family well-being. It shares early signals of impact, learning, and opportunities for funders to engage.

Daniela Rodriguez, Executive Director of Migrant Equity Southeast (MESE), one of RJEF's first cohort grantee partners, describes their growth as the result of years of persistence and sacrifice in a challenging funding environment. “For every yes, we got 10 nos,” she shares. Despite limited financial resources, MESE has grown into a nationally recognized organization advocating for migrant and refugee children and their families in South Georgia. “I can’t believe it myself... we went from a nonprofit with zero dollars, volunteer run, to now having a budget of over \$1 million this year.”

RJEF’s investment builds on work already underway, providing flexible funding and, more importantly, trust. As Rodriguez notes, “Many foundations are not willing to fund organizations that are less than \$1 million.” Prior to RJEF, MESE’s largest grant was \$75,000. With this support, MESE has been able to expand its work, deepen its stability, and build credibility in a funding environment where smaller organizations often face barriers to accessing sustained resources.

The Moment We Are In

In 2025, children and families did not simply face challenges, they faced coordinated assaults. Federal safety net programs like Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were targeted for deep cuts, while strained systems left families without access to basic supports like housing, food assistance and health-care. At the same time, immigration enforcement intensified leaving families navigating fear, separation and economic insecurity. In this challenging year, the organizations funded by the Racial Justice and Equity Fund (RJEF) did not scale back, shrink or close their doors. They expanded, organized and showed up for children and families where the systems could not.

How Are We Doing Things Differently?

From Framework to the Field

In this context, RJEF’s model reflects a different way of doing philanthropy—one designed to meet this moment.

Traditional philanthropy often defines early childhood well-being through a narrow lens, focusing on individ-

ual outcomes such as school readiness, cognitive development, and access to childcare. While those categories are critical, these measures only address part of the picture.

RJEF is advancing a philanthropic model that centers flexible funding, community leadership, and trust-based relationships as key drivers of stronger organizations, healthier communities, and more equitable outcomes for children and families.

Our story is about addressing children's needs from an intersectional lens and building a groundswell of solutions by supporting grantee partners that are experts in the field. This Year 1 evaluation tells the story from setting up our framework, to impact stories from the field. Holding ourselves accountable to our original intent and measuring the impact we are making. It also examines how RJEF is implementing its participatory community-centered grantmaking model and what early changes are emerging for grantees, the broader field, and the fund itself. The findings are organized around grantee-level impacts, foundation-level learning, and cross-cutting lessons about evaluation and the Social Determinants of Child and Family Well-Being (SDCFWB) framework.

Key Findings

1. Flexible, unrestricted funding is strengthening grantee capacity.

RJEF's support is helping grantees build the capacity needed for organizational stability, strategic growth, and long-term planning. The low-burden structure reduces administrative demands, allowing organizations to focus more fully to their community work. Flexibility in funding also means organizations can decide where to invest their time, whether in organizing or in policy advocacy, ultimately contributing to systems change.

2. Participatory grantmaking grounded in trust-based principles is RJEF's defining strength.

RJEF's model centers community leadership in funding decisions, with grants committee members describing an intentionally participatory process in which funders do not hold disproportionate influence. Grantees consistently described RJEF as relational, flexible, and low-burden, especially compared with traditional funders that require extensive documentation and compliance heavy reporting. Trust emerged as a central component of the fund's value. Grantees felt recognized as credible leaders and could focus on the work rather than proving themselves.

3. RJEF has made meaningful early progress in funding sustainability.

RJEF has met important early fundraising milestones and sustained funding by aligning funders around the SDCFWB framework. At the same time, the report notes that new funding has come in more slowly than hoped, reflecting the challenges of fundraising in the current political climate and the uncertainty of funders' evolving directions.

4. RJEF's SDCFWB framework resonates with grantees' holistic work but requires more consistent orientation to ensure shared understanding among partners and funders.

Most grantees already understand and resonate with the core idea of the SDCFWB framework and implement it in their work, though familiarity with the term itself varies. This shared foundation creates an opportunity to build a larger, intersectional, inclusive tent. However, shared understanding across funders and partners remains uneven, with some still interpreting it through narrower early childhood lenses. This points to a need for more consistent education around the framework to shift thinking and bring it to life.

5. Evaluation is shifting from compliance to learning.

Year 1 evaluation is described as an evolving learning system, not a traditional compliance process. The approach emphasizes ongoing learning-oriented conversations grounded in transparency and accountability, without returning to extractive reporting structures. This reflects a broader shift toward evaluation as relationship-based learning rather than formal documentation alone.

Grantee Successes by the Numbers

- 2 organizations surpassed \$1,000,000 annual budget since the start of RJEF's grant
- \$425,000 in additional funding secured by grantees
- 9 organizations added or improved programs for community
- 9 organizations increased policy advocacy capacity
- 2 Executive Directors brought on as full-time employees
- 1 organization increased the number of people served by 40%, reaching over 30,000 individuals
- 1 organization received their 501(c)3 status

Recommendations

Conversations with grantees, grant committee members, and RJEF staff revealed the following recommendations:

- Create a more intentional structure for grantee connection with RJEF and with one another through convenings, cohort spaces, and practical peer-learning opportunities.
- Increase grantee visibility and direct pathways to funders through showcases, briefings, communications, and public storytelling.
- Expand practical capacity-building support in areas such as fundraising, proposal development, operations, and evaluation.
- Preserve the low-burden, trust-based design as RJEF grows, additional support should remain optional, useful, and aligned with the fund's relational approach.
- Make networking more targeted and strategic by matching connections to mission, geography, growth stage, or practical needs.

For a deeper look at RJEF's work and findings:

- Full Evaluation Report: ecfunders.org/rjef
- Grantee Highlights: ecfunders.org/rjef

For funders interested in learning more, aligning resources, or exploring co-investment opportunities, please contact RJEF Director Leng Leng Chancey at lengleng.chancey@ecfunders.org.

An Invitation to Do Philanthropy Differently

What this first year reveals is something worth naming clearly: **RJEF is not simply funding organizations. It is betting on a different vision of what philanthropy can be.**

That vision is grounded in a fundamental belief that flexible funding, community leadership, and relationships built on trust are not just good practices, they are the essential conditions from which stronger organizations, stronger communities, and more just outcomes for children and families can grow and thrive.

When families struggle, their needs don't arrive in neat, fundable categories. Economic hardship is tangled up with housing instability. Health is shaped by safety. Safety is shaped by whether a community has power. RJEF's grantees have always understood this. Through multi-year, unrestricted support, RJEF is finally resourcing organizations in a way that honors that reality and allows them to meet urgent needs today while building the capacity and conditions for lasting change tomorrow.

The findings point clearly to this: the approach works. RJEF is not only validating a broader, intersectional framework for child and family well-being, it is also making that framework actionable, one relationship, one organization, and one community at a time, and helping resource solutions from the ground up.

This report is not just a documentation of what ten organizations accomplished in a difficult year. It is also an invitation to funders on the fence, and to those still defining early childhood in more traditional terms, to join this work. Boldly. Visibly. With the urgency that children and families have always deserved.

And Year 1 is only the beginning, as there is more to the story.*

** At the time of this report, an additional ten grantee partners have been added.*

