



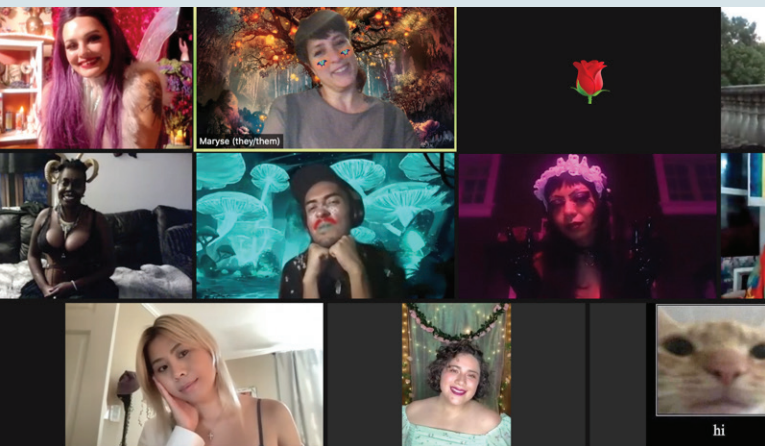
Photo Courtesy of Baltimore Safe Haven, a grantee of the Third Wave Fund



**MARCH 2022**

# RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY

FROM THE FRONTLINES: UNDERSTANDING SEX WORKER-LED MOVEMENTS



A screenshot from the Fellowship's 2021 virtual fundraiser and party with the Fellows titled "It's Giving Fantasy!"

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# A message from our Guest Editor

Dear Reader,

It is no secret that philanthropy was designed with little consideration of whether there would be space where I could find safety, community and agency.

A seat at a table where my philanthropic counterparts were not discussing their commitment to rescue some part of my identity through their giving and performative statements of solidarity. A room that has not found a reason to silence me because of its commitment to respectability, white supremacy or misogyny.

And while I have struggled to find that space that holds me in my entirety, I found refuge amongst familiar comrades: other current and former sex workers.

Sex worker-led spaces have consistently been what I have considered to be my movement homes. The frontlines across movements, from labor rights, racial justice, reproductive access, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, are being led and influenced by sex workers.

Our knowledge and experience have been vital in the work toward liberation and freedom from violence, and our presence continues to shift work in transformative ways. Despite the sector's attempts to cast sex workers into the shadows, we are in fact your program officers, development coordinators and movement engagement managers.

Unfortunately, criminalization, violence and stigma have led to philanthropy silencing sex workers, erasing our contributions to the sector and leaving sex worker-led movements under-resourced.

From 2015–2019, sex workers received less than 1% of all human rights funding. This is a result of the sector treating sex workers and those in the sex industry as something parallel to the work that foundations have committed to, something far beyond the invisible funding lines that they have drawn. In actuality, there is not a single issue or movement that does not center or intersect with the oppressions that sex workers face.

National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) is proud to feature just a few of the sex worker-led funding and movement initiatives that help move society closer to doing more for those who are marginalized, underserved and disenfranchised.

“Funder Lessons from 4 Years of Resourcing Sex worker-led Organizing and Grantmaking at the Sex Worker Giving Circle” by Christian Giraldo, program officer at Sex Worker Giving Circle at Third Wave Fund, highlights the truths and realities of “who keeps us safe.”

The Sex Worker Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA) introduces its work that references “how a lack of funding impacts sex workers is in how it displaces us from coordinating our own research into our own lives and communities.”

In “Trans and Sex Worker Justice Needs Steady Allyship,” Maddalynn Sesepasara at the Kua’ana Project demands that “the absence of funding for trans-led and sex worker-led organizations who have decriminalization advocacy in their portfolio ensures that the battle for organizational survival will have to be simultaneously waged on multiple fronts.”

“Be Fund(ed) or Die: The Precarity of Sex Worker Organizing” by Red Schulte, with contributions and considerations from The Support Ho(s)e Collective, is about the importance of “accompliceship, not charity” and names the “potential for participatory programs led by communities directly impacted to shift the discourse away from voyeuristic donor-driven charity and into accompliceship and wealth redistribution.”

We hope you hear the storytellers from the frontlines of sex worker-led initiatives and use them as a resource and guide to allocate more funds to the work they are committed to.



In Solidarity,

*Brandi Collins-Calhoun*

**NCRP MOVEMENT ENGAGEMENT MANAGER**

# Funder lessons from four years of resourcing sex worker-led organizing and grantmaking at the Sex Worker Giving Circle

by Christian Giraldo

## WHO KEEPS US SAFE?

Third Wave Fund is a national feminist and gender justice activist fund that resources the political power, well-being and self-determination of social movements led by young women of color, queer, trans, intersex and gender non-conforming youth. Third Wave Fund upholds that we will achieve deep political, economic and social change if and only if we invest in people directly impacted by systems of power to design solutions and lead the charge toward transformation.

Third Wave Fund has been funding sex worker-led organizing for more than 20 years because we know that resourcing sex worker liberation is central to our goals of gender and reproductive justice. Our grantees taught us that sex workers and people in the sex trade face high rates of violence and discrimination, not because of anything inherent to sex work, but because sex work itself is criminalized, stigmatized and interlocked with other systems of oppression, including gender-based violence, white supremacy, poverty, ableism, queerphobia<sup>1</sup> and transphobia.

We see time and again what movement leaders confirm: Sex worker-led groups have the best strategies to confront and transform the oppressive social and economic conditions of their own lives. Given this political and philanthropic insight as well as our investment in fostering leadership from the communities we fund, Third Wave Fund stepped up its commitment to sex worker-led movements with the creation of the Sex Worker Giving Circle (SWGC) in 2018.

The SWGC is a cross-class, multi-racial and intergenerational giving circle made up of people with current or former experience in the sex trade. Our approach to grantmaking is participatory, inclusive and high touch. This means Third Wave Fund is deeply engaged with sex workers living and organizing at the intersections of multiple oppressions and lived experiences. Through SWGC, current and former sex workers participate in a Fellowship program with a popular education-style curriculum that prepares members of the community to mobilize resources, strengthen their relationships, engage directly in grantmaking, and receive support to bring their voices and leadership into philanthropy and social movement organizing. The program is completely by us and for us, and all of the grantmaking decisions are made by sex worker Fellows, guided by the input of sex worker advisers, and supported by the programmatic and fundraising know-how of sex worker staff.

In 2021, the SWGC expanded the Fellowship program to meet the ongoing challenges and uncertainty caused by the pandemic, and we took advantage of our new lives working and organizing from home to launch our 4th overall and 1st fully national cohort of sex worker Fellows. Our first national Fellowship reviewed 35 applications, met with 18 prospective grantees and chose 12 grantees for funding, including 7 new organizations. In total, the SWGC has broken the \$1.55 million grantmaking mark, with a total of 36 groups awarded grants since the start of the fund.



SEX WORKER  
GIVING CIRCLE  
THIRD WAVE FUND

The SWGC logo, with artistic credit to JB Brager.

## HOW FUNDERS CAN BE ART OF THE SOLUTION: 4 KEY LESSONS

The SWGC has grown tremendously over the last 4 years, and we've learned many important lessons from sex workers doing on-the-ground work that we would like to share with the broader field of philanthropy.

First, we have learned to **provide unrestricted general operating grantmaking dollars and multi-year commitments whenever possible**. This allows groups to cover the real office, salary and overhead costs of existing as well as the tools and physical and virtual spaces to do their work. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, groups depended on general operating funds to provide life-saving

monetary mutual aid and other urgent material resources to the broader community, which kept the movement alive and healthy enough to fight another day. Sex workers found themselves in the impossible reality of needing to stretch every last penny of their shoestring budgets to feed, house and care for their comrades, most of whom had been systemically excluded from government unemployment and economic stimulus packages due to working in informal and street-based economies or lacking eligibility documentation. The never-ending task of organizing sex worker survival cost the movement community members who didn't have the resources to take in a moment of stillness and recovery and literally worked themselves to death. Sex workers have taught us that when their own economic and material realities are nourished and not under constant interrogation and attack, they are empowered to speak to funders and other resource gatekeepers with less fear and more sex worker power. More sex worker power keeps communities alive.

Second, the movement taught us to **center trauma-informed approaches to grantmaking** during these chaotic times through coordinating our program with empathy, accountability, flexibility, creativity, humility, generosity, approachability and urgency. The pandemic, economic recession, violent displays of white supremacist police brutality, alliance of ideologically paternalistic anti-sex worker forces and expansion of the for-profit carceral state have worn down sex working communities and deteriorated the physical and mental wellbeing of sex workers. Now more than ever, funders must account for the disparity in power dynamics between philanthropy and the movements we support and how these dynamics are always present, even if we're actively trying to dismantle them. We must approach conversations by radically self-critiquing our participation



Christian Giraldo

as funders in creating power differentials and understanding that our every action creates a world. Funders must always ask ourselves: What kind of world are we creating for sex workers in our grantmaking and interactions with the movement? We must also reflect on how we show up in conversations with the movement and the power that we wield – reluctantly or not – and lean into the necessary discomfort of acknowledging the many power differentials we may unwittingly contribute to and that make up sex workers' scarce material realities.

Third, as a bilingual English/Spanish program, the SWGC learned that funders must **embrace and systematize language justice as core to our values**. Spanish-speaking grantees taught us that monolingual Spanish-speaking groups face the baseline exclusions confronted by all sex working communities, coupled with systemic injustice around language barriers, racism, colorism and immigrant status. High levels of discrimination and racist policing made many Spanish-speaking and Latinx sex workers afraid of engaging with state bureaucracy on any level and deprived them of an avenue for accessing resources to meet their basic needs. Lack of language accessibility creates challenges for Spanish-speaking groups that make it harder to write

grant applications, organize fundraising campaigns, communicate with funders who are not prioritizing their inclusion, and secure legal non-profit status and bank accounts. There are fewer resources and information available in Spanish, and many philanthropic programs do not acknowledge language disparities in their processes. Some programs may provide and accept applications in Spanish, but do not have staff who can speak to grantees in Spanish, provide support, and attest to the disparity in access to resources and opportunities faced by monolingual Spanish-speaking people in the United States.

Finally, we have learned that funders who support sex workers' rights must **stop imposing unnecessary and harmful bureaucratic challenges on groups on the ground**. Ideally, funders should grant to groups without requiring fiscal sponsors, who may at times act as gatekeepers, hurt the work of grantees, and further traumatize a community that is already maligned and kept from life-saving resources. If fiscal sponsorship is required, it is crucial to allow grantees to apply for funding before obtaining sponsorship—and then support them in finding a fiscal sponsor who is a good match as a condition of grant receipt, while making funds available to cover any fiscal sponsorship fees so that groups can use the full amount of their grant. Additionally, funders should support groups that have a diversity of tax statuses, ranging from groups with no legal status at all to groups that are fiscally sponsored, as well as groups that have gained their own 501(c)(3) status. In the case of groups working toward securing 501(c)(3) status, funders should do everything in their power to support their petitions and accompany them in their journey jumping through the infinite and spiritually draining hoops of the nonprofit industrial complex.



# Funder lessons from the Sex Worker Giving Circle (cont.)

## ACCOMPLICESHIP, NOT CHARITY

We see amazing potential for participatory programs led by directly impacted communities to shift the discourse away from voyeuristic donor-driven charity and into accompliceship and wealth redistribution. To realize the dream of sex worker liberation and decriminalization, we must build mutual trust with sex workers and transform the power dynamics that paint the realities and material conditions of sex working communities.

*To realize the dream of sex worker liberation and decriminalization, we must build mutual trust with sex workers and transform the power dynamics that paint the realities and material conditions of sex working communities.*

As we move into our spring 2022 cycle, we reflect on the fact that sex workers at the intersection of interlocking systems of oppression are finally being funded to organize openly,

Artistic credit: Kae Goode



Artistic credit: Grae Rosa

unapologetically and on their own terms. This is in itself a momentous deal! It means that people who have been organizing from their phones can get a laptop for the first time, create virtual spaces for sex workers to build alliances across the country, and stay connected to members of the community incarcerated for working to survive. It means we are investing in the healing justice of movement leaders who have been tirelessly building support systems while emptying their own sex work-funded pockets to maintain their people's survival.

Directly funding the well-being, bodily autonomy and organizing of sex workers most impacted by oppression is in itself a radical vision and our biggest impact. With a little creativity and a lot of trust in the leadership and experiences of sex workers, it can be a big part of your impact too.

### NOTES

1. We define queerphobia as discrimination against and hateful behavior toward people with diverse, changing, and intersecting identities and experiences within broader LGBTQIA2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit, plus all sexual and gender identity minority groups not explicitly named) communities.

*Christian Giraldo is Program Officer for Sex Worker Giving Circle at Third Wave Fund. Third Wave Fund is NCRP's 2021 "Smashing Silos" Impact Award winner.*



Creating community is a threat to power



Illustration by Rebecca Soto



# Survival and liberation: Our struggles as a sex worker organization in Los Angeles

*By Kim Fuentes, Tiffany H., Lucy Khan and Ashley Madness*

The Sex Worker Outreach Project Los Angeles (SWOP LA) is a sex worker-led and sex worker-centered organization that provides crucial harm reduction, community support and mutual aid to current and former sex workers in LA and beyond. We do everything we can to support sex workers, including coordinating street-based outreach, cash aid, community-building events, resource referrals and advocacy. Last year, we even published a zine! Our hope is to not just provide a formal platform for sex workers helping sex workers in Los Angeles, but also to provide a forum for folks to share resources and help foster the informal networks between community members. These connections are especially valuable for those of us working in the often criminalized and highly stigmatized field of sex work.

There is no other formal organization in Los Angeles with the same scope and mission as SWOP LA, although there are many other sex workers here who do great work for the cause— both independently and with organizations. As SWOP LA, we have no shortage of dreams and plans for building safety and resources for our community. However, as a completely volunteer-run organization, we are limited by our funding to support the people power and cost of actualizing these visions.

One area we have been focusing on lately, which has serious implications for funders, is monetary mutual aid. When the COVID-19 pandemic began

in the spring of 2020, we saw the “adult industry” explicitly barred from accessing government aid like the Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan. Left out of any relief during the pandemic, we, the most vulnerable sex workers, were caught in precarious situations where we were forced to choose between meeting our basic needs and protecting our health. In response, we created our own Emergency Relief Fund, which has to date distributed \$20,250 to online applicants and another \$5,300 to street-based workers. That said, the major limiting factor to expanding our services is funding.

Sex workers – like many marginalized groups that have been surviving in spite of and not due to formal social supports – know what we need to thrive as a community. Yet, sex workers and organizers so often find themselves having to shape and reword their needs to put together a project that meets the requirements for the funding they desperately need. It is very demoralizing when these proposals get rejected and the precious time that could be spent providing direct services to workers is wasted on another rejected application that won’t address the growing gap in our financial resources to support our community.

One strong and timely example we would like to highlight of how a lack of funding impacts sex workers is in how it displaces us from coordinating our own research into our own lives and communities. We

are currently working on a study with a team of academics at an R1 university to understand the effects of a recent bill that decriminalized condom possession on sex workers. This study engages with the sex worker community and has the potential to inform local policy. Community-engaged research is time consuming by nature, and the added barriers of having to adhere to university timelines, IRB protocols and bureaucratic slowdowns hinder the positive impact that the findings of this study could have for the community. Although it’s amazing that this sex worker study was even funded to begin with, it’s hard to not think about how much more efficient this process would be if we were just given the necessary training and funding to do it ourselves. The timelines that the ivory tower imposes onto community organizations like SWOP LA are not conducive to meeting community needs because their goals and ours are not the same. Academic research goals of producing knowledge for knowledge’s sake carry violence that doesn’t honor sex workers and other marginalized communities that are working to produce knowledge that will help us survive.

Academic institutions should continue to fund studies that uplift and directly involve sex workers, but this in itself will not be our main path toward liberation. If universities really want to support sex workers, they can fund us directly so we can lead the research ourselves. Limited funding also means we don’t have the resources to sustain our operations. Our



organization is led by members of the sex worker community whose efforts are supported by volunteers and allies.

Our working board consists of 5 members who receive a small monthly stipend to support the work of ensuring continued organizational viability. Some of this work is public-facing, such as organizing general meetings or community events, while other administrative tasks like bookkeeping, grant-writing and website maintenance take place behind the scenes. When all of these duties fall on such a small group of people, it forces all of us to take on many roles, contributing to burnout and limiting our capacity to take on new projects that could benefit the community.

Most non-profits are overworked and underpaid, and we – as a sex worker-led organization – are no exception. Multi-year funding for sex worker-led organizations is essential to us to maintain a sustainable future. Consistent funding creates stability and longevity for the work we do and ensures and improves our services back to the sex worker community that we serve. By having more consistent funding, we are able to see our projects through, ensure current service continuity, fine tune the process and create a system of succession within our leadership pool.

Having the time to organize is in itself a privilege that can lead to an organization being led by only those who have time to spare if people are not paid. At SWOP LA, it is foundational that our makeup is representative of the community we serve, and having the funding to pay sex workers for our contributions breaks down the systemic barriers that prevent this from happening.

By ensuring our survival, we are also able

to continually improve our programs and contribute to the well-being of sex workers local to us and across the United States. In addition, multi-year funding is an investment back into the sex worker community. We have found that the more we give to the sex worker community, the stronger we become and the more rapport we build among sex workers as an organization they can trust. By maintaining our presence as providers of services for sex workers in Los Angeles County, the larger we grow. The more sex workers and allies we involve, the more unified we stand in advocating for our safety as sex workers and against the criminalization of our bodies and the work we do.

SWOP LA is dedicated to the safety of sex workers and decriminalization of sex work. The criminalization of sex work keeps all of us down and compromises the safety of those of us working in the sex trade. Currently, our community members do not have equal access to social services, health care and resources to navigate the legal system. We cannot feel free to report violence done against us without fear of potentially being arrested ourselves, losing our housing or having our children taken away. Decriminalization gives workers choice and a voice in this world and allows us to exercise control and autonomy over our own bodies. However,



The SWOP Los Angeles logo, which is in the form of a heart with a red hand making a fist on the left side and a heart in the color black on the right. The text "SWOP LOS ANGELES" is directly under the shape of the heart.

decriminalization is a long-term goal that many in our community simply cannot afford to invest in without financial support. Urgent work like addressing mental health, rent and bail needs often supersedes the important work of advocating for political change. However, not funding decriminalization efforts is extremely short sighted. Without decriminalization, organizations like ours will continually operate in crisis management mode, only ever mitigating the harms of stigma and criminalization. The underlying problems remain unchanged.

Sex workers are integral to this world, and we all have a right to survive and thrive in our community. Through our participation in coalition efforts that resulted in legislative victories like SB233, we have proven to be part of a large and powerful effort to push for the decriminalization of sex work. However, in order to build upon this momentum, we are in a constant state of searching and applying for funding to keep us afloat. This takes away precious time from doing the work itself.

When we reflect with other sex worker organizers, there is a commonly felt sense of the urgency to fight for the laws and policies that bring us closer to liberation. Working toward sex worker liberation is not just a thought experiment we are interested in, it is vital to our survival and the survival of our community. This is not just another side hustle organizing gig for us, it's our lives and the lives of the people we love at stake.

*Kim Fuentes, Tiffany H., Lucy Khan and Ashley Madness are Members of the SWOP LA Board of Directors, Lucy Khan, Co-Director Tiffany Hwang, Co-Director, Kim Fuentes, Services and Outreach, and Ashley Madness, Secretary and Fundraiser.*

# Trans and sex worker justice needs steady allyship

By Maddalynn Seseapasara

The Kua'ana Project is a trans and sex worker-led program serving the trans and sex worker community of Honolulu, Hawai'i. I am a Samoan trans woman and a former sex worker tasked with leading it. The Kua'ana Project first began when several trans women working for Hawai'i's oldest and largest AIDS services organization, Life Foundation, came together to support the health and social needs of our trans community. It has now been over a decade since our program began serving the trans and sex worker community of Honolulu.

When the program was first created, trans women were facing a host of challenges that remain omnipresent in our communities and require many to engage in sex work out of necessity. Some of our women have chronic medical conditions, including HIV, viral hepatitis, diabetes and heart problems. Others struggle with intimate partner violence or chaotic families and have histories of sexual, physical and psychological abuse. Even those who are working live well below the poverty line, and some have documented histories in the criminal legal system that impair our ability to find safe and stable housing, adequate nutrition and employment.

Pasifika trans women are prevalent in Hawai'i's trans community, and what binds us together is our lived experience as trans women. In contrast to normative notions of gender and sexuality that center cisgender and heterosexual majorities, Pasifika cultures made space for gender fluidity before the imposition of Western colonial attitudes and mores. Pasifika culture's acceptance of gender fluidity gave us the word Kua'ana, which is the Hawaiian word for "older sibling." It's been the model of our project to empower trans women with lived experience to mentor other trans women along their life's path. Native Hawaiian and Pasifika trans women embody resilience and compassion



Maddalynn Seseapasara

in the face of a social, economic and legal landscape that still treats us as less than equal.

Thankfully we've made legal progress. With gender identity now a protected category in our state's nondiscrimination laws, trans women in Hawai'i are no longer in a position to be arrested and jailed simply for using a public bathroom.

There is a lot of unfinished business, and we are still fighting for increased access to gender-affirming care and mental health resources and the decriminalization of sex work and substance use. Trans- and sex worker-led organizations, like the under-resourced trans and sex worker communities they represent, require sustained investment to support the work. Funding is essential to the pursuit of social and economic justice and to reduce structural barriers in systems that stigmatize queer and trans people and that criminalize sex workers and people with behavioral health problems.

A shift toward more just, equitable and affirming policies for trans people and sex workers simply cannot happen without the steady support of allies. Without funding support, organizations like Kua'ana Project would wither on the nonprofit vine before disappearing entirely, leaving already under-resourced communities fighting for

survival and some semblance of dignity in a callous political and social landscape.

The absence of funding for trans and sex worker-led organizations that have decriminalization advocacy in their portfolio ensures that the battle for organizational survival will have to be simultaneously waged on multiple fronts. It's hard to make meaningful progress over time for a community that is criminalized and castigated. It's hard to empower trans women with marginalized lived experiences to feel confident enough to engage in the public square, even though they should be at the forefront of discussions around their specific needs. For trans sex workers who are struggling to meet their basic needs, advocacy is all but likely out of the question.

Secured multi-year funding helps us sustain a baseline of support to help our work. Over the 2 most recent fiscal years, Kua'ana Project was able to maintain staffing and services to reach 100s of trans women across Hawai'i with programmatic assistance with a six-figure grant from a private donor. These services included name changes, procurement of identity documents, and connection with medical insurance, behavioral health services, housing opportunities and available government support. Funding allowed us to provide peer support, beauty consultations, resume writing and career assistance.

Yet the needs of our trans and sex worker population are often urgent and outside of the realm of dedicated program funding. Unrestricted funding that enables our program to meet these basic needs is critical to keeping our most vulnerable members safe and healthy. Unrestricted grant funding since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed us to assist with medical co-payments, personal hygiene supplies, food, clothes for job interviews, rideshare transportation assistance for medical appointments and





Ka Aha Mahu, trans leaders across the Hawaiian Islands, meet to share and discuss topics that affect trans people on their islands.

tents and supplies for our unsheltered homeless participants.

Committing to unrestricted funding gives transled and sex worker-led organizations the means to help re-shape the conversation around the continued criminalization of sex work and behavioral health issues. Funding that is not project specific gives programs like ours the latitude be responsive to meet the immediate direct needs of trans women in their communities while also advocating for systemic change.

Kua’ana Project is housed in Hawai’i Health and Harm Reduction Center (HHHRC), whose mission is to reduce harm, promote health, create wellness and fight stigma. The organization carries forward the work of Life Foundation in providing medical case management services to people living with HIV on Oahu. They also coordinate homeless outreach, housing navigation services and syringe access services, including nasal naloxone and overdose prevention training. HHHRC works at the intersection of many social determinants of health among under-resourced populations and has committed its resources to supporting Kua’ana Project, including the provision of office space and equipment as well as grant writing and accounting services.

With much of HHHRC’s funding coming from government service contracts, the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and predicted state budget shortfalls placed a significant portion of the agency’s resources at risk. Thankfully the

Kua’ana Project had secured the six-figure grant, albeit a program one, to ensure the delivery of services to trans and sex worker communities. The pandemic hit trans and sex worker communities especially hard, with heavy job losses in the service sector and no opportunity to engage in sex work due to gathering restrictions. Additional unrestricted funding would have afforded us greater ability to meet immediate needs and further strengthen networks of support among our resilient yet under-resourced community.

Policy change is not a cookie-cutter exercise, and every state, city and county will have its own roadmap to the decriminalization of sex work. Unrestricted funding allows trans- and sex worker-led organizations to meet their larger community, including its structures of political and economic power, in a manner where progress can be measured in terms of benefit to our communities. This can include the engagement of those currently ready for advocacy and others who could one day be powerful advocates with support and guidance. We’ve seen this firsthand at Kua’ana Project.

Honolulu’s current prosecutor ended prostitution raids and is not interested in prosecuting misdemeanor prostitution cases. This is a welcome development, but it is simply not the kind of systemic change that will center the needs of trans sex workers. As with the larger trans community’s struggle for visibility and increased legal equality, advocates must call

for lasting policy changes that take trans sex workers out of the destructive realm of the criminal legal system. Instead, we should at once prioritize the well-being of our most vulnerable members and call for policy changes toward that end.

Perhaps American society can one day get to a point where the foremost public response to a trans woman engaged in sex work is the offer of services with compassion and respect for her agency and autonomy, wherever she may be at that point in time. Those of us who have made long and difficult journeys toward self-acceptance are uniquely positioned to provide support and guidance to those who are struggling today with a range of issues. I am proud that my lived experience as a trans woman and former sex worker can help others in the pursuit of their own well-being, wherever they may be on their journey.

Kua’ana Project is grateful for the support that we’ve received from private and public sources in recent years. We look forward to continued dialogue with trans and sex worker-led organizations and those who support them as we envision a more just society that no longer arrests and incarcerates as a matter of course.

*Maddalyn “Maddie Ashton” Sesepasara is the Project Coordinator at the Kua’ana Project, and a longtime member of The Hawai’i Health & Harm Reduction Center that serves Hawai’i communities.*

# Be fund(ed) or die: The precarity of sex worker organizing

By Red Schulte, with contributions and considerations from The Support Ho(s)e Collective

The violence sex workers from all sectors of the trades already face can be difficult for those who have never traded or sold sex (acts) to fully comprehend. Being asked to recount these acts of violence for the *privilege* of receiving lifesaving and lifechanging funds to do the work we are already struggling to do to improve our lives, working conditions and world is one of the most intolerable harms. There exists very few funders and grant-making organizations that do not require sex-working organizers to regularly engage in this sort of reliving and retelling of trauma to prove we too deserve the ability to care for ourselves and our extended communities. Even so-called ally grantors can fall into the roles of judging the most deserving based upon how we perform poverty, trauma and survivorship for their consumption. Direct funds, financial literacy, budget-making resources, low-barrier interviews and creative application processes that embrace disabilities and acknowledge exhaustion, systemic oppression and unfettered access to decision making regarding funds allows survivors and sex working people to not to have to do this hellish reliving while undertaking the grant-seeking process.

I will detail positive and negative experiences with regards to funding throughout this piece.

I want to share an anecdote, vague enough to not jeopardize my safety or the safety of my fellow organizers. A small and intensely committed collective of sex workers and survivors of violence that I co-organize recently received a grant from one of the largest funders in the realm of sex worker grant giving. At every stage, our questions were met with disregard and our direct asks, when finally acknowledged, were not acted upon, which resulted in our grant being sent at the wrong time to the wrong fiscal sponsor. We had to snap into action to solve

this incredibly destabilizing issue ourselves while the funder has yet to apologize or act with accountability or care in any way. This all took place over the week of December 17, International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. Make no mistake, jeopardizing sex worker organizers' funding, which pays for mental health-care, rent and childcare as well as directly resources our organizing labor, is an act of violence. I believe this is a direct result of the paternalistic, strings-attached funding practices that necessitate emotional, care-informed distance from grantees and personify red tape.

Decriminalization, and bold police/prison abolitionist-informed decrim at that, exists as the greatest harm reduction we can fight for at present. Truly, this effort will protect sex working people and the communities from which we most regularly hail and those with which we interact—those who have major affective disorders and/or are disabled, neurodivergent, using drugs, queer, trans, youth of color, (im)migrants of all (un) documented statuses, criminalized survivors, cash poor rural white and Black folks. The work of promoting and fighting for decrim is not one reserved for policy-making circles alone. It emerges from our neighborhoods—when we block walk, clean up streets and educate our neighbors on why we should not call the cops on each other when we beautify the spaces in which we live, those where our city governments have abandoned us. This work in all sectors is costly, and it is work that needs to be fully resourced or we will never see measurable change. Organizers must be able to feed themselves and clothe their children while doing this work. Our comrades holding down policy meetings must have physical space, access to technologies to support these efforts, and the ability to pay people for their insights, time and labor. Our messaging and political education efforts must

have money to commission infographics, art and easily dispersible materials that can reach the masses.

Some of the most exciting and uplifting community work I have seen with a decrim campaign was used during the early days of forming of Decrim NY and consisted of commissioning beautiful, radical art by queer, trans and artists of color to create engaging, educational and unapologetically sex work-forward pieces that could be used in community wheat pasting, door knocking/block walking and events. This community artwork was largely organized by Leila Raven—who helped hold down coordinating groups of supporters to wheat paste and engage in neighborhood conversations. Other sex worker organizations like Hacking// Hustling stepped up to fund this community artwork to support sex working artists and our efforts toward decrim. As incredibly supportive as the other sex working collectives were, they should not have had to use their own budget funds to support a fellow group while engaged in their own organizing efforts. Where were the robust philanthropic donors for decrim?

This is expensive work, and it is necessary work. To not fund this work means nothing short of the death and continued exploitation of sex working and trading people. To not fund work toward decrim means you have chosen the side of the carceral state and the morally corrupt who believe some people's lives are worth disposing of. "Disposability" as a subject position is railed against by many funders, while "sustainability" and "accountability" are championed. However, what does this look like in practice? How are funders showing up for protecting the lives of sex-working people?

Being seen or treated as disposable often looks like not having a self to defend (see Mariame





This beautiful piece was created by Amira Lin and commissioned as a gift to our collective by M. Sabal, Alisha's pen pal and comrade. It is a brightly colored digital illustration of our core collective members set in an abstract under the sea scene. Each of our members is shown in portrait from the torso or shoulders up in stylized seashell or coral vignettes. Beautiful sea grasses and kelps swirl around the whole drawing.

Kaba's work discussing Black women and femmes in particular not having a self to defend and being criminalized for acts of survival in our white supremacist society) or being interpreted and ignored as being messy, dramatic, "not worth the effort or cost," and ultimately not worth listening to, directly resourcing, respecting or protecting. This then translates into silencing, erasing, caging, deporting, and killing. These are not buzz words, these are life-and-death scenarios for folks in the sex trades.

But we cannot stop at the word "funded." There is a difference between project and campaign-based or "contingent" funding and unrestricted funding as a designation. I am here to advocate for unrestricted funding, unapologetically. This method works. Unrestricted funds allow sex worker organizers – who know best how to get this work done – to support themselves and the waves and layers of our community who might not otherwise become engaged due to the lack of support and resources. Being creative with funding enables us to better respond to and meet the needs of those most impacted by state violence every day. Unrestricted funds recognize the violence of banking institutions, the discrimination of online platforms, and the racism and class antagonism inherent in the sanctioned economy. Unrestricted funds give sex workers the capacity to realize our goals outside of the paternalism of the non-profit industrial complex and recognizes sex worker organizers' autonomy, responsibility and intelligence.

To further this, multi-year funding may directly ensure lifesaving and affirming work. Being able to rely on income is something that

few sex workers have the ability to do.

With unrestricted, multi-year funds, our organizations and collective networks can project future budgets and realize our effort's potential. As we all have felt, a year in crisis can fly by. Knowing that as soon as you obtain a grant you **do not** have to immediately begin looking again is an enormous relief. It allows organizers who are navigating criminalization and stigma to focus on their well-being and work as opposed to panic-grant applying.

Speaking personally, I have been organizing in an on-and-off funded capacity for almost 6 years now but organizing for 17 years total. In these past 6 years, I have felt most supported as a sex working organizer in the Support Ho(s)e Collective (SxHx) by the Sex Worker Giving Circle (SWGC) – a formation that has embodied real listening, directives and active learning from sex working/trading community. SxHx has been able to directly resource currently and formerly incarcerated sex working people and criminalized survivor organizers – focusing on their immediate needs while inside and offering robust material support upon their return home. Before receiving grants from the SWGC, we relied entirely on our own grassroots fundraising efforts and paid for any organizing needs out of pocket. This remains typical for the majority of queer, trans and undocumented sex working-organizers in the United States.

To me, the SWGC draws upon deeply connected and reflective community resourcing – steeped in true feminism, womanism and communalism. The SWGC does this by forming a giving circle with

former and current sex worker advocates and championing flexibility with report backs (audio recordings, interviews via video conferencing and/or written responses). Additionally, the SWGC has multi-lingual application processes, which are not redundant, but succinct, brief, and still allow for a comprehensive look at the work, and gives unrestricted funds, which is empowering, respectful and far too rare!

I can imagine a very near future in which large donors and grantmaking institutions commit to principles of real accountability, respect and unwavering support to those they purport to serve. This means turning more funding toward the efforts to decriminalize the sex trades, and by extension decriminalizing all survival, giving in an unrestricted capacity and ensuring funds are granted across multiple fiscal years. This future may be closer than even I can imagine. In truth, I hope and pray it is. This future, where our movements are championed, fully funded, and can sustain not just our labors toward another world, but our lives in the here and now – this future is dependent upon trauma-informed and radically self-critical action from funders. The future my comrades and I are dreaming of requires accomplices and co-conspirators, not just check writers. Be in this work with sex workers – be invested in our futures alongside us. A future like this one could see such transformation and revolutionary potential – dream and act toward this (w)horizon.

*Red Schulte is a community organizer currently based in New York and is a member of the Support Ho(s)e Collective.*

## New and Renewing Members and Supporters

<i>Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice</i>	<i>Marguerite Casey Foundation</i>
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<i>Blue Shield of California Foundation</i>	<i>Meyer Memorial Trust</i>
<i>Bush Foundation</i>	<i>Moore Impact</i>
<i>Butler Family Fund</i>	<i>Nellie Mae Education Foundation</i>
<i>California Wellness Foundation</i>	<i>Norman Foundation</i>
<i>Carnegie Corp</i>	<i>North Star Fund</i>
<i>Chicago Beyond</i>	<i>Northwest Area Foundation</i>
<i>Chorus Foundation</i>	<i>Park Foundation</i>
<i>Christensen Fund</i>	<i>Polk Brothers Foundation</i>
<i>Compton Foundation</i>	<i>Proteus Fund</i>
<i>Daphne Foundation</i>	<i>Public Welfare Foundation</i>
<i>David Rockefeller Fund</i>	<i>Rona and Jeffrey Abramson Foundation</i>
<i>Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center</i>	<i>Rosenberg Foundation</i>
<i>Field Foundation</i>	<i>San Francisco Foundation</i>
<i>Florida Access Network</i>	<i>Schott Foundation</i>
<i>Foundation for Child Development</i>	<i>SisterReach</i>
<i>George Gund Foundation</i>	<i>Sunlight Giving</i>
<i>Heinz Endowments</i>	<i>Tarbell Foundation</i>
<i>Heising Simons Foundation</i>	<i>Texas Center for Justice and Equity</i>
<i>Hill-Snowdon Foundation</i>	<i>Weingart Foundation</i>
<i>Hyams Foundation</i>	<i>Welcoming America</i>
<i>Libra Fund</i>	<i>Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation</i>
<i>Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants (LORI)</i>	<i>Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation</i>

## Select Publications

*UNPACKING PHILANTHROPY  
Episode 1: Can Philanthropy Help  
Save Democracy? (TRANSCRIPT)  
January 2022*

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Over the past 15 years while I've been lucky enough to lead the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, I've written scores of opinion pieces that have been published in various sector and mainstream press outlets. I know that many of you have resonated with some of those pieces and perhaps have been infuriated by others.

Well, now it's time to see if this old dog can learn some new tricks.

We're launching this video series, Unpacking Philanthropy, to communicate with NCRP's members, followers, allies – and adversaries – in new ways.

*Pink House Foundation Details  
How to Systematically Shift Power  
February 2022*

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The staff at the Pink House Foundation (PHF) have really done their colleagues an invaluable service by detailing their racial justice efforts on the editorial pages of *Inside Philanthropy*. [...]

Theories and related models of change often stay on the pages of proposals and in the minds of experts and academics if they can't find a way from people's imaginations to the real world. People may aspire to do good, but unless they see it in action, even the most passionate of leaders will find themselves thinking that a better world is beyond their reach.

**visit: [www.ncrp.org/publications](http://www.ncrp.org/publications)**



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