



**POISE**  
FOUNDATION

Strengthening  
Black  
Families

A CASE FOR  
Philanthropic  
Investment

# “What approach will ultimately transform the socioeconomic trajectory of Black individuals, families, and communities?”

The POISE Foundation is an African American led community foundation whose mission is to assist the Pittsburgh Region’s Black community in achieving self-sustaining practices. It carries out this mission through strategic leadership, collective giving, grantmaking, and advocacy. Over the years, POISE has provided a broad range of grants to area nonprofits in support of its mission.

However, while the Foundation has seen returns on its investments, its broad, short-term, small-scale approach to grantmaking has not been able to make significant headway against the structural, political, and economic barriers that bind Pittsburgh’s Black community.

Thus, in 2010, POISE commissioned an environmental scan to inform the development of a new grantmaking strategy. ABFE, a membership-based organization that advocates for responsive and transformative investments in Black communities, conducted national and local research to garner information from a wide range of stakeholders. Special emphasis was placed on developing a deeper understanding of the most pressing conditions and issues impacting Pittsburgh’s Black families.

Compelling data<sup>1</sup> pointed to the need to shift the Foundation's focus from the alleviation of symptomatic problems to the building of strong families and community sustainability. More specifically, ABFE recommended that POISE:

- **Develop a broad framework and theory of change to strengthen Black families in Pittsburgh.** The wellbeing of Black families in Pittsburgh can be improved by strengthening family connections to 1) economic opportunities that address the extreme rates of poverty; 2) social networks that build trust and neighborliness; and 3) a broad array of supportive services (social, cultural, and respite) that help parents raise and protect their children.
- **Encourage the public, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors, together with Black families, to assess policies and programs in order to ensure that they are accessible, are free of bias, and help build positive Black identity.** POISE may use some of its resources to support analyses of state, county, and/or privately funded programs to determine how—and if—they can better support Black families.
- **Support opportunities for positive family interactions, as well as parent respite; consider the large number of non-custodial fathers in this regard, and encourage recreational and cultural activities that involve them.** Families want and need time to have fun together and enjoy each other—yet these opportunities are not available to all.
- **Invest in strategies for building social networks that strengthen families.** There seem to be few intentional strategies for building connectedness and trust among and between families—the kind of trust that develops authentic “helping networks” in neighborhoods. Family connections and a

greater sense of neighborhood trust may also help to address issues of violence and the resulting trauma. In addition, social networks are a means for transferring information that confers culture, identity, and normative behaviors among Black families.

Against this backdrop, POISE instituted its Strengthening Black Families (SBF) program strategy in 2012. The Foundation realized the importance of new and transformative approaches in supporting community change, and believed that strengthening the family was one such approach. It began to see strong families as essential in elevating and sustaining a higher quality of life.

Thus, POISE now intentionally seeks to lift up and support the family as a core institution around which Pittsburgh's Black community may redevelop.

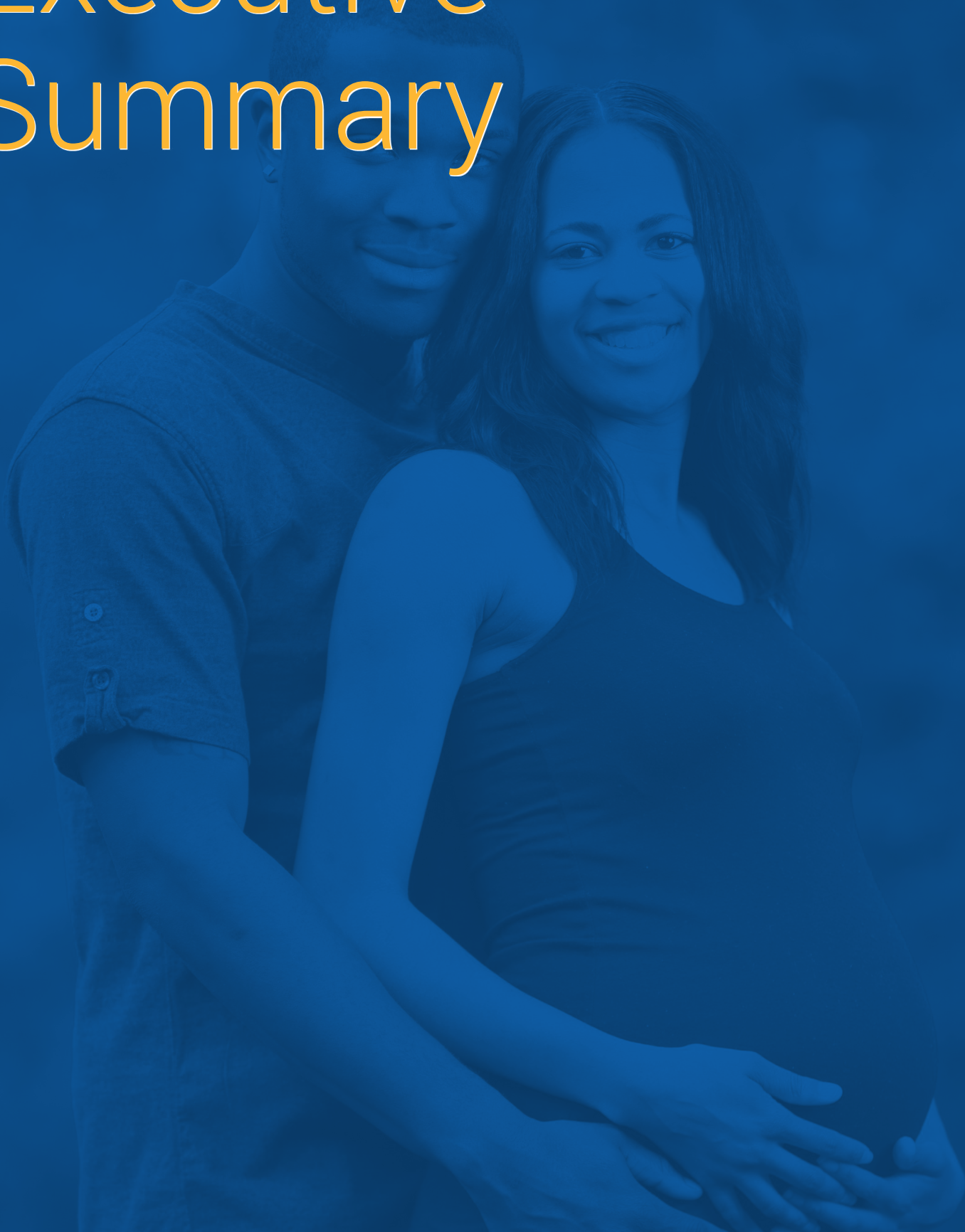
This position paper provides a rationale for the POISE Foundation's shift to a family-centered approach. It introduces POISE's new Strengthening Black Families (SBF) program strategy as a promising case example. It also considers how other funders might employ such a lens in their work—and make investments toward similar goals.

This is a unique time in the history of the United States. The inequality between mainstream Americans and those living in marginalized communities continues to grow at an alarming rate. Meanwhile, stakeholders from diverse sectors, including philanthropy, search for new and effective approaches and solutions.

It is POISE's hope that this paper will create the impetus for a new dialogue—and a new direction—within the philanthropic community. We encourage funders to see how investments in strengthening families can address the most critical issues facing America—and, in particular, its Black communities.



# Executive Summary







Over the past five decades, social services and programs have placed ever more emphasis on institutional supports rather than on kinship and mutual aid networks. As a result, the roles and responsibilities that, for generations, were inherent functions of the Black family have been:

- **outsourced** to other domains of public life—e.g., social welfare programs;
- **weakened** in the face of systemic barriers (e.g., limited economic and educational opportunity) and community adversity (e.g., violence, mass incarceration, and limited support outside of social welfare programs); and/or
- **silenced** by (or only faintly heard under) the deafening cries for solutions that focus on either individuals or systems—solutions that fail to seriously consider the intricate and interdependent relationship among individuals, families, and community.

Meanwhile, Blacks in America continue to experience a wide range of harmful socioeconomic outcomes. Inequitable practices still plague many social, economic, political, and educational institutions. Funders and other key stakeholders continue to wonder: What strategies or approaches can ultimately improve the socioeconomic trajectory of Black individuals, families, and communities? After years of investment with limited returns, some funders wonder whether the current range of solutions can create long-term positive, sustainable change.

This position paper sees an opportunity for

greater return on our philanthropic investments in the Black community through more indigenous approaches—in particular, through intentionally lifting up and supporting the Black family as a core social institution.

The Black family, like other families, contributes to the wellbeing of its members and of society. It is individuals' first teacher and first responder. It is the first—and often the primary—provider of emotional, social, and financial support. As we will see, the Black family is thus ideally poised to be an agent of community redevelopment and transformation.

## Shifting the Paradigm

Policymakers, philanthropists, social service workers, and others who are committed to working in (or on behalf of) the Black community do not always uplift and support the institution of the Black family. Yet the Black family can be a viable and valuable resource for improving the lives of individuals and communities. Professionals can (and should) leverage the natural supports, relationships, and resources that are already active in families' everyday lives.

Funders can support such efforts by investing in initiatives that:

- Re-engage the family unit around roles and responsibilities that are natural to family functioning—and that have contributed to family and community resilience over the centuries;
- Strengthen and build capacity (e.g., resilience and mutual support) in aspects of the family that have been weakened by situational factors;
- Counter or buffer against policies and practices that harm the Black family as a core institution; and
- Lift up the importance of the Black family in supporting the health, wellbeing, and success of individuals and communities.

The POISE Foundation's Strengthening Black Families program strategy offers a set of such approaches. SBF is organized into four categories of work: **community engagement; grantmaking; research and policy; and thought leadership**. SBF seeks to:

- Promote community learning and dialogues on the Black family, with an emphasis on strengthening, supporting, and uplifting the institution of family;
- Invest in culturally and contextually responsive projects that promote family wellness and positive family interactions—e.g., improved family communication, more and higher-quality family time (family dinners, outings, etc.), greater family civic engagement, and greater family resilience;
- Encourage other private and public investments that focus specifically on the development of strong Black families;
- Understand which current policies and programs negatively impact Pittsburgh's Black families, and in what ways; and
- Shift the mindsets of philanthropic leaders to encourage their support of the Black family, and to promote thought leadership that leads to family-centered changes in theory, research, policy, practice, and paradigms.

# Beyond POISE: Family-Centered Approaches in Philanthropy

POISE recognizes that it cannot do this work alone. Thus, the Foundation values the opportunity it has to lead and encourage other foundations to:

- Engage Black families around what is needed to strengthen family units.
- Examine and realign their grantmaking portfolios around a family-centered approach. This includes asking questions such as:
  - » Are our current investments strengthening or weakening the institution of the Black family?
  - » Do they support strong relationships among family members?
  - » Do they help families care for and encourage all their members?
  - » Do they encourage greater connection and contribution among all family members?
- Consider how they might use a family lens to help them fulfill their missions, achieve their visions, address core issues, and/or fund their core activities. A focus on the family at the expense of other key institutions or domains would of course not be useful. However, a family lens can be used to design initiatives that impact multiple quality-of-life domains. For example, a foundation might fund family-based financial literacy programs, or invest in efforts that promote school as a learning community for the entire family.
- Invest in efforts that 1) strengthen and support the family in its role as a core institution; 2) leverage the value and power of the indigenous characteristics of the Black family; and 3) help families develop the capacity to be change agents in community revitalization.
- Invest in research into family-centered approaches, particularly those that engage Black families as key stakeholders and unique experts.
- Build a knowledge base among key stakeholders—including both formal and informal family experts—on the topic of strengthening Black families. This includes convening groups of stakeholders to discuss issues and approaches, and to teach and learn from one another. It is important for the philanthropic community to develop a body of knowledge about what works (and what doesn't) in and for Black families and communities.
- Learn more about, and adopt, approaches that are culturally and contextually driven. Every family is part of a culture, a community, and a social context. Strengthening Black families does not occur in a vacuum; it goes hand in hand with strengthening institutions, building community, increasing network connections, and challenging pernicious systems, policies, and practices.

POISE Foundation hopes this paper will be the catalyst for a new dialogue in the philanthropic community. Perhaps it can also ignite a collective movement of funders who see that investing in Black families is the key to creating stronger communities and a higher quality of life.





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