MISSION STATEMENT:

The Black Impact Collaborative is a group of organizations formed to identify and illuminate the needs of Black people in Greater Grand Rapids in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

VISION STATEMENT:

The vision is to garner the human and financial resources necessary to maintain a thriving, safe, and whole Black Greater Grand Rapids during COVID-19 and beyond.
The backdrop and preceding narrative of Grand Rapids as a place of prosperity for families has been, on the whole, a fallacy for the Black community. The City proper has been extolled, dating back to the 1940’s and 1960’s, as an “All-American city,” one of the best places to live in the country; one of the safest places; the best place to live in Michigan; one of the cheapest places to live in; most affordable city, and high-performing, race-informed city. It is well-known that this level of “best” and quality of life is not afforded, moreover, structurally denied to Black Greater Grand Rapids (BGGR). In fact, among national rankings, Grand Rapids was named the 2nd worse for Black people economically and ranked 39th for residential segregation.

The dominant narrative of Grand Rapids persists because leaders have historically and culturally employed a masterful system of “managerial racism,” described as a “harsh system of oppression designed to allow [W]hite businesses leaders and politicians to preserve their dominance even while making modest concessions” all while behind a veneer or “mask of civility.” The accompanying narrative has been one of progressivism, espousing to care for the interests of “ordinary” people and their plight in community. However, the interests of Black people have often gone unexplored, untapped, and unrealized, resulting in the present life outcomes of Black Greater Grand Rapids.

In 2020, COVID-19 and a string of unrelenting racialized attacks and police murders against Black people thrust the national discourse, social and racial justice efforts to focus on structural racism in ways that have been unprecedented. This eruption happened just a few days after the Black Impact Collaborative released its first position paper. The conversation pushed beyond interpersonal racism that centers the hearts and minds of individuals, to one that examines the structures and the ideologies necessary to reproduce and sustain racialized phenomena at the individual and structural levels. The conditions of 2020 presented the perfect combination of anxiety, fear, terror, pain, sickness, death and opportunity that compelled Black people to act internationally, nationally and locally. Black people were fighting for their lives in masks, as they fought for their lives through demonstration and protest.

2 https://www.grandrapidsmi.gov/Government/Departments/Office-of-the-City-Manager/Strategic-Plan
3 Ibid, pg 10
4 Ibid, pg. 120
In addition to COVID-19, these conditions served as the backdrop for the establishment of the Black Impact Collective. And while Black Impact Collaborative focused on a swift and effective response to COVID-19, its leaders realized the need to both think about the very immediate needs of the Black community grappling with COVID-19, including trusting medical professionals, at the same time holding broader, more entrenched issues that were amplified by COVID-19 and racialized terrorism.

As Black Impact Collaborative’s committee structure began to solidify, themes emerged that codified the structural and insidious nature of racialization across our systems (nationally and locally), not of the brand we often imagine as we consider racism: blatant, explicit actors and actions of hate. No, here we find the contemporary, Greater Grand Rapids brand of racism, one that is steeped in quiet discontent, West Michigan nice, and concessionism. It has pride in its “progressive mystique,” that is, in effect, managerial racism. It is the kind of racism that Gillborn remarks, “supremacy [relates] to the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of [W]hite people.” It is so “everyday” and so “mundane” that it is assumed “normal.”

Racism is often described in terms of the “bad” hearts and minds of people, and more recently, about the cultural and structural aspects of racism. Both individual and structural components are necessary to maintain a system of racialized oppression but they have differing functions and purposes. And as a society, we favor the individualized form because it’s then easy to blame a person for racism, negating, all the while, the systems that maintain it. Black Impact Collaborative maintains that racism operates with purpose, and the purpose of racism is to maintain white supremacy, or more palatable, to maintain white interests in policy, practice and culture.

To help illustrate this, Black Impact Collaborative draws from two Brigham Consulting LLC frameworks (fig. 5 and fig. 6) on the function of racialization and white supremacy to consider as it reflects upon its work over the last year. It is a reflection and further explication of racism: its site of impact, purpose, function, and manifestations in day-to-day life, particularly in the greater political context where critical race theory is being weaponized to maintain racialized systems of oppression, erase the experiences of Black, Indigenous and Brown people, and further concretize the racialized hierarchy of human value. Figure 5 is simultaneously global and local; is historic and contemporary; and is structural and ideological.

5 Ibid, pg. 183
Racialization & White Supremacy

Relational Racial Field

US & Global History
(colonialism, enslavement, racial neoliberalism)

Racial Structure

Racist Ideology

National Racial Social Systems

Economy

State

Institutions

Discourses

Representations

Figure 5. A Framework: Racialization & White Supremacy
Often the public discourse about race and racism is simplistic and individualistic, providing multiple off ramps for those unwilling or unable (due to implicit or explicit bias) to consider the complexities and structural foundation and purpose of racism as a social phenomenon. Simplistic notions center our perspectives on bad individuals who display the foulest acts of racism. Doing so leaves the system intact to continue to work as it was designed. Individual actors may be cancelled or shamed and the victims are “rescued” from “those racists.” But the system, with its set of prescribed and reinforcing arrangements and conditions that make the ground fertile for racist behavior is left unexamined, uninterrogated, untouched, unchanged.

Structural racism has also not been explicated, beyond simplistic definitions, about the purpose of structural racism and its relationship to individual expressions of racism. Figure 5 attempts to provide a framework that is critical as Black Impact Collaborative reflects upon its work over the past year, continues to think about its ongoing work, and also as input to Greater Grand Rapids as “equity” and “racial equity” continues to appear in statements, strategic plans, master plans, and talking points of leaders, policymakers, business leaders, nonprofit organizations, and activists, and community members. If we have any chance of transforming these dynamics, we must share understanding about the system; our situatedness in it; and the strategies that we are employing that are either working to transform or sustain it.

In brief, racialization has been global, even while we are centering the U.S., and even more, the Greater Grand Rapids area. It is tied to the creation and development of the U.S. economic structure, so history is critical and cannot be discounted in understanding structural racism today. The U.S. capitalistic system, as with any capitalistic system, necessitates exploitation. It is based on a few capitalists at the top, their private ownership, ‘voluntary’ wage labor, and competition.

At the dawn of the United States, colonization and enslavement were the chosen tools to grow our democratic, capitalist economy, the vestiges and legacy of which can be tracked to present day. As such two essential components were necessary: a structure and accompanying ideology that would calcify the system and consolidate power. The structures included the already stated economy, but it also included the State (that delivered cementing and protective policies) and institutions (that acted as administrators or implementers of State policies). The structure acts as the bones for the system. So one would ask, what are the policies? Who do the policies benefit writ large? Who are the decision-makers across government, business, nonprofit sectors?

The second essential component is ideology. Ideology, that is, the discourses and narratives held about the different actors in the system and how they are represented, acts as the justification or authorizing components in support of the structure. A racist ideology, then, are the discourses, narratives and representations in support of the structures that are designed in the direction of white interests. They justify actions toward or against people in the system, based on our situatedness. They are either humanizing and made “normal” or they are dehumanizing.
Too often, when attending to racism, we tend to attend to ideology, and even so, insufficiently because we situate its two components: discourse and representation in the individual realm rather than connecting individual behaviors to structure and culture of the structure.

How are Black people thought about? What are the narratives (implicit and explicit) surrounding Black people? How are they represented in the systems making decisions on their behalf? When we examine Black people in Greater Grand Rapids, where are they situated? How are their voices captured or not? To make it plain, if one believes that the value of Black is less valuable than that of other lives, particularly White lies, the ideology surfaces to justify the policies that allow dehumanizing actions with impunity. We’ve all heard it: “Does he have insurance?” “Did she have pre-existing conditions?” “Why don’t you take care of yourself?” Those may be the right questions, but they aren’t the only questions. A few more should include: “Why isn’t health insurance considered a human right?” “If not, how do we insure affordable health care options?” “What are the systemic conditions (i.e. access to healthy food, affordable food, affordable housing, walkable communities, etc.) that get in the way of health outcomes?” The fact that we devalue and dehumanize Black lives left us with a disproportionate number of COVID-19-related deaths in the Black community, sometimes multiple deaths in the same family; a number of healthcare workers without proper protective gear and treatment, some resulting in death; and a disproportionate number of Black people without work and at increased risk of homelessness.

Think about the reports of disparity when COVID-19 hit. Black people were sicker and dying at a higher rate. There was a move to term workers at places like grocery stores as “essential.” Nothing about their pay, hours or working conditions had ever before deemed them as such. As that was happening, many of them had children who were out of school, and/or they were caring for aging parents, who were at higher risk of COVID-19 complications. While all this was going on, the microaggressions were many. Black people showed up to work where there was no consideration for what they were enduring, just an expectation that they get to work. Now that Black people are hesitant to return to work, as unemployment benefits have been filling gaps for them financially that employers were either unwilling or unable to and they many aren’t having to deal with a day filled with microaggressions, the dominant narrative is about the laziness of workers, not the pay or working conditions created by employers. If workers are considered “lazy” or “not wanting to work,” then you can justify not paying them a livable wage.

In this way, the structure and ideology act in concert and become a bit of chicken and egg over time. Figure 6 illustrates the interconnectedness of both and the necessity of considering both simultaneously when conceptualizing racism, its manifestations and mitigation strategies.

This frame becomes critically important as Black Impact Collaborative reflects on its work over the course of the last year. Black Impact Collaborative has accomplished much in service of Black Greater Grand Rapids and, in the process, learned about the structural limitations of Black Impact Collaborative and barriers given current power dynamics and structures in Grand Rapids. Even still, as is the general Black experience in the United States, BIC proudly proclaims its accomplishments over the last year.
While COVID-19 dealt harshly with the Black community across the country, disproportionality was and continues to be evident in Greater Grand Rapids, with Black people accounting for nearly 20% of reported cases in Kent County (May 2021). Since March of 2020, COVID rates have peaked and valleyed, with an oversized negative impact on the Black community across the country, state and Kent County. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, Kent County's greatest of 3 peaks in cases occurred between November 2020 and January 2021, with corresponding peaks in cases of death occurring during the same time period. 

Figure 1. Cases in Kent Co.-Mar 2020 thru June 6, 2021
Figure 2. Deaths in Kent Co.-Mar 2020 thru June 6, 2021
Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the stark disportionality of COVID cases and deaths in the Black community. While COVID-19 cases are higher in raw numbers in the White community, case rates in the Black community are overwhelmingly higher, with Black people representing the greatest population impacted by cases of COVID-19 (73,922 cases per million), followed by Whites (63,927), and then American Indian/Alaska Natives (51,685).
Similar findings are evident in the number of deaths in the Black community due to COVID-19. Again, we find that raw data illustrates a greater number of deaths in the White community due to COVID-19. However, the rate of death in the Black Greater Grand Rapids community (1,220 per million), due to COVID-19, significantly out proportions those in the White community (938 per million).
The manifestations of structural racism were and continue to be apparent in Grand Rapids and have only been illuminated and magnified since the onset of COVID-19. This has been true of the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths and engagement with the healthcare system, but it has also been true that structural pre-existing conditions have situated the Black community in the most precarious and vulnerable position to be able to respond effectively to COVID-19. The Black Impact Collaborative (Black Impact Collaborative) bore witness to these negative conditions across multiple issue areas, including, immediate need for safety, health and wellbeing, basic needs, education, economic security and jobs, information gathering and sharing, safety and protection of elders, and the protection and support of incarcerated persons. Black Impact Collaborative grappled with data related to these issues as they determined where to focus their energies.

Well before the onset of COVID-19, “The Ward with Grand Rapids’ highest concentration of [B]lack residents ha[d] the lowest amount of investment [by the City].” Data from 2017 also illustrated that:

- 73% of Black Grand Rapidians could not afford to meet their basic needs for food, water, shelter, utilities and clothing, with 5% unable to afford them at all.
- 73% of Black families earned less than $30,000/year, less than any other group.
- 39% of Black people in Grand Rapids had a high school diploma or less.
- 63% disagreed or strongly disagreed with having access to enough fruits and vegetables.
- 22% of Black people felt “somewhat to very” unsafe in their neighborhoods.
- 43% of all Kent Co. incarcerated persons were Black.  

The Black experience in Greater Grand Rapids has been wrought with disenfranchisement, divestment, and marginalization from opportunity that has kept life outcomes for Black Greater Grand Rapids pretty static since the 1940’s. If there is a silver lining to note of COVID-19, it is the illumination of all these racialized social dynamics simultaneously such that they can no longer be ignored or denied. COVID-19 forced a rock-bottom moment.
While Black people represent about 10.5% of Kent County's population, they accounted for 18.9% of COVID-19 cases according to the Kent County Dashboard in Apr/May 2020\textsuperscript{11}, and likely more given unreported statistics and how Kent County defines/captures/disaggregates race/ethnicity data.

Data collected by organizational leaders serving the Black community found, from a sample of 244 respondent, that:

- 60.2% Black people named rent as their greatest need
- 53.7% of Black people named utilities as their second greatest need
- 42% named food as their third-ranking need
- 29.5% named cleaning and hygiene supplies as their fourth ranking need
- 75% of families needing shelter were so-called “people of color,” with the majority being Black\textsuperscript{12}

Of the forty-percent of respondents that provided their zip codes, those in most need reported living in 49507, 49508 and 49503 zip codes respectively, from Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming.

\textsuperscript{11} https://www.accesskent.com/Health/covid-19-data.htm
Data captured by leaders was supported by ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Data for Michigan\(^{13}\), that acknowledges the inextricable connection between poverty and racism; the history of enslavement with its ongoing legacy of systemic and institutional force since inception of our country; and the ways in which federal statistics often fail to capture the connectedness of these issues. And we would offer, there is not only a failure to connect poverty and racism historically, but also a failure to rightfully attribute these dynamics to systems of oppression, solely blaming individuals for their poverty.

ALICE found that while Michiganders have a significant gap between the actual cost of living and wages, and that 40% of all households do not earn enough money for basic expenses, including housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a basic smartphone plan, that gap is much higher amongst Black households. At 63%, the level of hardship for Black households is three times the Federal Poverty Level rate of hardship for Black people, and twice the rate of hardship for White households. Almost two-thirds of Black Michigan households were consequentially, in raw numbers and percentages, below the ALICE threshold of economic security.\(^{14}\)

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13 Financial Hardship in Black Households: Alice Data For Michigan (August 2020)
14 Ibid
Because Black Impact Collaborative recognized earlier on the adage that “when America gets a cold, Black America gets the flu” (and in this case, when the world get a pandemic, Black America gets something that is absolutely otherworldly), they mobilized quickly, strategized effectively, and galvanized the moment and community leaders within the Black community, as well as across, to minimize as much pain and death as possible. Black Impact Collaborative organized a committee structure across seven impact areas to influence policymakers, nonprofits, businesses, philanthropic institutions and others to mitigate against pre-COVID-19 conditions, respond to the immediate needs of COVID-19, and increase positive outcomes for Black people in Greater Grand Rapids. The issue areas spanned across: rapid response fund for direct relief, communications, health & well-being, economic security, education, incarcerated persons, and elders. They are:

**1. COVID-19 Response Fund**

The establishment of a COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund for Black Greater Grand Rapids was essential in supporting relief efforts for Black people dealing with COVID-19. With so much distrust in the Black community surrounding the pandemic, Black Impact Collaborative felt it important to establish an organization of trusted individuals, with community credibility, to act as a beacon of hope and in the interests of Black people.

The COVID-19 Response Fund focused on food assistance; rent and utility support; personal and protective equipment and supplies; support to Black businesses; support for recently released persons from incarceration; and support to grieving families.
As such, the following was accomplished:

- Raised $330,050 from Grand Rapids Community Foundation, Heart of West Michigan United Way, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for Black Impact Collaborative’s overall set of strategies
- Developed a web-based application and protocols to support families directly
- 500 families received rental/utility assistance
- 250 families received funeral assistance
- Personal protective equipment kits were provided to Black-led community organizations for distribution
- 50 Black businesses received assistance

2 A responsive communications platform

Earlier on, even as reports were surfacing nationally about the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on the Black community, there appeared to be a lack of existing data of the Black experience in Black Greater Grand Rapids and how organizations were responding to Black need. As such, Black Impact Collaborative thought it was critical to develop a robust communications platform that would act as a two-way communication hub for us to gather information, while also sharing important knowledge for the well-being of Black Greater Grand Rapids and how organizations were responding to Black need. As such, Black Impact Collaborative moved feverishly to increase testing sites, education through public service announcements, increase the use and attainment of personal protective equipment, increase contact tracing, and address the behavioral health concerns that were emerging in Black Greater Grand Rapids as a result of COVID-19.

Consistent with our commitment to be a trusted point of contact for Black Greater Grand Rapids, Black Impact Collaborative garnered a contractual relationship with Kent County Health Department, hiring over 30 employees, from the Black community, to serve as contact tracers for nearly a year. Black Impact Collaborative also:

- Conducted a food drive in partnership with National Pan-Hellenic Council, Feeding America and other community partners
- Parlayed MLK Day of Service into a focus on COVID-19 in the Black community, where in partnership with the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Black Impact Collaborative provided personal protective equipment to youth and worked to fill a food pantry in the community
- Held a public forum on COVID-19 vaccination, in partnership with Cherry Health

3 Ensure the health & well-being of Black Greater Grand Rapids

A focus on health and well-being was central to the work of Black Impact Collaborative, as COVID-19 was our entrypoint for formation. Lacking sound data, at the time, on death rates for Great Black Grand Rapids due to COVID-19, Black Impact Collaborative was driven by the data coming out in Detroit and nationally about Black death. As such, Black Impact Collaborative moved feverishly to increase testing sites, education through public service announcements, increase the use and attainment of personal protective equipment, increase contact tracing, and address the behavioral health concerns that were emerging in Black Greater Grand Rapids as a result of COVID-19.
Developed public service announcements targeting the diversity of audiences across the Black community

Held testing days with the Kent Co. Health Department, including LINC Up, and Grand Rapids Community College

Worked in partnership with Communications to advance awareness to COVID related initiatives through Black Impact Collaborative’s social media platforms

Developed an initiative in partnership with the Kent Co. Health Dept to hire Black contact tracers to ensure culturally relevant engagement

Ensure economic security for Black Greater Grand Rapids

Over the last year, Black Impact Collaborative was intent on stabilizing the financial well-being of Black families in Greater Grand Rapids; ensuring Black workers were protected from COVID-19 risks at work; protecting Black people from exploitation; and prioritizing Black businesses. Black Impact Collaborative accomplished the following:

- In line with two-way trust process valued by Black Impact Collaborative, Black Impact Collaborative developed a guidance and release process to ensure payments went directly to clients
- Utilized Black businesses as vendors whenever possible
- Patronized Black businesses through food distribution, funeral payments, and other Black organizations
- Regularly met with Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce to share advocacy interests in property tax deferment
- Participated in reviewing applications for the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce grants program
- Successfully advocated for one bank to waive fees for cashing stimulus checks for the unbanked
- In partnership with Kent Co., distributed over 1000 personal protective equipment items across the community, to businesses, individuals, and organizations.

Well before COVID-19, the economic security of Black Greater Grand Rapids was precarious. Black workers have persistently and significantly had higher unemployment, especially in tight labor markets (even as many Black workers find themselves as “essential,” but that has been truly the case with COVID-19. Additionally, employment for Black women has seen the sharpest drop amongst all populations. But for those who are able to return, there is Black reluctance to return to work due to economic disparities, health risks, and racist work environments. This economic picture has had significant impacts on the quality of life for Black people, including in the areas of housing and Black businesses.

Ensure positive educational outcomes for Black children & youth of Black Greater Grand Rapids

Since Reconstruction, education has been touted as the great equalizer for Black people, particularly those who descended from those who were enslaved in this country. It is believed to be the key for our continued growth and well-being. At the onset of COVID-19, over 50% of our Black parents were concerned about their child’s educational achievement.

Black Impact Collaborative responded to the very immediate educational needs of Black students by advocating for a survey to educational leaders to garner how they were thinking about Black students and addressing their needs in this critical period, including how they were engaging with parents. Black Impact Collaborative centered their energies on three areas: technology, parent engagement; and robust academics. Over the last year, Black Impact Collaborative has engaged in the following:

- Advocacy efforts of Black students to ensure increased access to wifi and technology
- Advocacy to ensure teachers delivered consistent education across the Kent Intermediate School District
- Supported Black parents in voicing their thoughts and concerns across districts through county-wide survey participation and dissemination at the height of decision-making regarding return to school
- Voiced need for equitable outcomes across schools and systems
- Launched the Home Stretch 1:1 educational program to support the academics needs of K-8th grade students in Kent County, serving 16 students across 12 schools and several school districts. One-hundred percent of respondents reported improvements in grades. On a five-point scale, the program received a 4.875% satisfaction rating, and 100% of respondents said they would refer the program to others.
Ensure that Black Greater Grand Rapids’ persons who are incarcerated are protected & have the support for reintegration

Few would intelligibly argue against the fact that the US prison industrial complex is a derivative of the system of enslavement in the United States. The 13th Amendment guarantees liberation, and in effect, is its own loophole to that very freedom, stating, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” And that loophole has been grossly exploited, leaving the United States as a display of exponential incarceration, disproportionately of Black people, especially Black men.

As we came to understand COVID-19 as a virus drawn to densely-populated settings and it swept through nursing homes, jails and prisons like wildfire, Black Impact Collaborative was sensitive to the needs of this population, particularly given the focus on racial injustice in the criminal justice system as both COVID-19 and racism in the system were also colliding. As such, Black Impact Collaborative focused our energies on: removing prisoners from unsafe prison and jail sites; protecting incarcerated individuals from contracting COVID-19; eliminating the costs for phone calls between incarcerated peoples and their families to promote information-sharing and communal support amidst pandemic conditions; and eliminating practices of criminalization and victimization which leads to over-incarceration of Black people. Advocacy efforts and recommendations were reported to leaders at the county and state levels.

Black Impact Collaborative began its efforts by focusing on data collection, which proved more difficult than envisioned. Part of the struggle that Black Impact Collaborative had in this area was grounded in the fact that for all other areas, Black Impact Collaborative had inroads into those industries; were part of those networks; and had relationships with systems leaders in those areas. While requests were made of respective institutions about what was happening in Kent Co. Correctional Facility, those requests were not honored or were slow coming. Without the armament of data about the conditions and state of Black incarcerated peoples, little movement could be made.

Additionally, Black Impact Collaborative found no programs within the Black community that were focused solely on Black incarcerated peoples. There were, however, ancillary services, like substance abuse, that were operating as part of church-based programming.

Last, somewhat of a philosophical nuance was evident in how people within the Black community think about incarcerated people. It’s not without incongruence, in that many ascribe to the national discourse about the value of Black lives; however, there appears to be a conservative view and reaction to those who find themselves involved with the law. This is said to be especially true in the Black church, that hesitate to set up programming to support this population unless there is a personal relationship with congregants or ministerial leadership and an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated person.

16 The United State Constitution
Ensure the Black elders of Black Greater Grand Rapids are cared for, safe & protected

Clear and concise data on Black elders in Kent County was difficult to locate; however, if that statistics follow suit, and it is true that elders make up about 14% of the Kent County population writ large, and Black people make up about 10.5% of Kent County, then we can surmise that there are just under 10,000 Black elders in Grand Rapids. And if national data pre- and during COVID-19 are an indication of the health and well-being of Black elders in Greater Grand Rapids, then we know that Black elders are disproportionately impacted by pre-existing conditions like hypertension, diabetes, asthma, and other diseases.

What we also know about Black elders is that many are isolated and live alone, a number of Black elders have a difficult time navigating this technology-reliant society and many experience transportation challenges.

As such, Black Impact Collaborative focused on examining existing services available to Black elders, and ensuring they are culturally relevant; closing the gap in terms of COVID-specific prevention and needs; bridging between elders and their family; recruiting volunteers to minimize isolation; and providing personal protective equipment to elders.

Over the course of the year, Black Impact Collaborative was able to garner a team of paid contractors that provided fall clean-up, snow removal and spring clean-up for elders. Additionally, we surveyed these elders to see what other needs they had, and provided additional services, such as installation of accessible ramps, transportation to COVID testing and vaccination appointments. Of the Black elders that Black Impact Collaborative engaged over the course of the year, four died from complications from pre-existing conditions, and one died from COVID. All of them presented a considerable number of challenges that needed to be addressed.
The last year and a half has been a period for the record books of history, particularly in the Black community across the United States. COVID-19 illuminated the deadly nature and daily atrocities of structural, cultural and interpersonal racism targeting Black people in our country. In fact, racism exists as the precondition that has exacerbated the negative impacts of COVID-19, and a myriad of other structurally racialized social ills for which Black people are made victims. No inoculation exists for Greater Grand Rapids in how these issues play out in the Black community, and the founders of the Black Impact Collaborative (Black Impact Collaborative) understood this at the onset of COVID-19 in Spring of 2020. As a result, and with the organizational support of the Institute of Ubuntu, together with cross-sectoral leaders in the Black community, the Black Impact Collaborative was established to focus on the wave of numerous entrenched and emerging issues across the social determinants of health, with COVID-19 as the entrypoint.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in the Black community met almost daily to share what they were hearing from the community and were determined to move in solidarity, with the goal of minimizing the cost of death and quality of life in the Black community. They assessed their capacity to respond to the immediate needs of keeping Black residents alive and safe; thought deeply about the root causes of what they were witnessing; and strategized for short-, intermediate- and long-term solutions. From the onset, what was to become the Black Impact Collaborative realized that any efforts they took on needed to take a holistic and longview, as many of the concerns were generational and structural in nature.

Collective Learnings: The Catalyzing Force of COVID-19
Black Impact Collaborative identified a series of learnings over the course of the last year, some of which are re-learnings worthy of illuminating again, and others that have been nuanced from the work of Black Impact Collaborative:

- **Centering Blackness:** It is necessary to continue to center the needs of the Black community, in its diverse set of circumstances, in ways that cannot and will not happen for Black people without intention. Black centering as a concept is critical for the healthy development and growth of Black people, and is often in conflict with a culture of concessionism. It is often stated, “You can be what you can’t see.” It is also difficult to be if you are without space to dream, explore, and just be.

- **Education Continues to be Key:** However, Black children in Greater Grand Rapids are not thought of, on the whole, as being capable or worthy of quality learning experiences and opportunities. This was on full display when Black children were found at a disadvantage technologically and leaders did not feel the need to engage Black parents about their academic and health care needs for their children.

  During the summer 2020, the BIC advocated across schools within the Kent Intermediate School District (KISD) to survey students and families to determine their needs and desires for the 2020-21 school year. Through that advocacy, the KISD created and disseminated surveys and used the results to build programs desired by families within their respective districts. The Grand Rapids Public Schools, the large school district in West Michigan, followed their survey results and entered into a full virtual educational model during the Fall.

- **Structural Transformation:** It became apparent, due to the lack of structures that center the interests of Black people (explicitly and intentionally), that the Black Impact Collaborative’s desire for structural change would be limited. It will be critical for the growth, development, and transformation from these entrenched issues, for Black led structures to be established and maintained. Structural transformation would include policies, organizations, and programs that center not only the needs, but also the aspirations of Black people. Structural transformation would also mean space for Black leadership in the development and establishment of the kinds of policies, organizations and programs that center Black people. Centering Blackness would not only account for and attend to the pain foisted upon Black people by racialized systems, but as importantly, would also ensure space for the aspirations, joy and humanity of Black people.

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- **Bridge Building:** Black Impact Collaborative played a critical role, within the structures, to bridge institutions, organizations and programs with Black residents, grassroots leaders, professionals, civic organizations, and faith-based organizations with organization, positively impacting resource distribution, engagement, and COVID-19 outcomes.

- **Vigilance is Critical:** As with most oppressive structures, divide and conquer strategies are often used to sow discord and discontent. As such, Black Impact Collaborative needs to be fervent in its efforts to anticipate and mitigate, and have reconciliatory strategies ready to employ, as necessary.

- **Wealth Building:** Housing is critical from the standpoint that Black Greater Grand Rapids is the most housing insecure, but housing is also key as a wealth building tool. Black Impact Collaborative needs to strategize around both simultaneously. This is moving from a stop-gap strategy only to a transformational one.

- **Coalition Building:** Not only did Black Impact Collaborative learn of the isolation of Black elders and many youth, but there is also afoot related to different parts of the criminal justice system, including ignored calls from the community regarding police brutality; youth being leaned on to be informants under the threat of harsher sentences; people being left lingering on the rolls of surveillance because probation and parole officers have the power to do so. Black Impact Collaborative learned that Kent County Jail changed its name to Kent County Correctional Facility and there is an indication that this took place to give judges more liberty to dole out longer sentences than could occur under the organizational structure of a jail. Stronger coalitions across these areas need to be developed.

- **Healing from Internalized Harms:** There seems to be a lack of sensitivity or passion for addressing the needs of incarcerated people. This could be because of conservatism within the Black community, or it could be an illustration of internalized managerial racism that is made manifest in the minimization of connectedness to that national racial justice movement within the sphere of criminal justice.
Beyond COVID

Black Impact Collaborative founders knew that the work of the Black Impact Collaborative would continue well-beyond COVID-19. The Collaborative made huge strides over the last year in advancing focus areas and strategies outlined in *Black Greater GR COVID-19 Position Paper*, but those are still in play as BIC looks ahead. As we are beginning to see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel of this global pandemic, there are a few additional elements that Black Impact Collaborative wants to keep at the forefront to: *identify and illuminate the needs of Black people in Greater Grand Rapids in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.*

- **Vaccinations:** After White Republicans\(^\text{17}\), Black people are less likely to be vaccinated. It is estimated that 35% of Black people do not intend to ever receive the vaccination.\(^\text{18}\) Much of this is due to a valid lack of trust and doubts about the safety of the vaccine, grounded in the egregious history of medicinal experimentation in the Black community.\(^\text{19}\) Access (including not only place, but also registration, appointment times, sitting, gating, and literacy and numeracy) to the vaccine is also cited as a major factor in the low vaccination rates in the Black community.\(^\text{20}\) As such, Black Impact Collaborative must continue education and engagement efforts to increase vaccinations in Greater Black Grand Rapids.

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19 The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present by Harriet Washington  
20 https://researchblog.duke.edu/2021/04/08/black-americans-vaccine-hesitancy-is-grounded-by-more-than-mistrust/
Least Likely to Get Vaccinated

- **White Republicans**: 56%
- **Black**: 31%
- **Hispanic/Latino**: 30%
- **White Democrats**: 7%
• **Structural Transformation Strategies:** Black Impact Collaborative will begin to think about structural, in addition to programmatic strategies necessary to create and sustain opportunities for Black Greater Grand Rapids, but also to center and improve the quality of life for the Black community across all the social determinants of health (including physical, behavioral, educational, and economic health).

  Important to this focus will be acknowledging where there will likely be incremental change, and where transformational shifts need to occur.

• **Intergenerational Relationships:** Black Impact Collaborative will be intentional in its engagement efforts to ensure intergenerationality, grassroots voices, youth, and elders. All Black voices are necessary to address current realities of the Black experience, but also to ensure the passing on of cultural wisdom, including values and wealth. It is important to create the circle of wisdom that includes the youngers, middlers, and elders of the Black community. This traditional wisdom has been severed and is in need of intention and repair.

• **Engagement:** Continue to build credibility within the Black community, and beyond, for the work of Black Impact Collaborative; offer inlets for feedback; and outlets for relationship- and trust-building.

• **Black Joy:** More efforts to provide space for Black joy. Being Black is more than services, programs, injustices, and healing. There needs to be space for Black people, particularly to have outlets for creativity, on their terms, forms and function.

• **Navigation:** More intentional is necessary to connect many isolated parts of Black Greater Grand Rapids with programs and services that they are unaware of to improve their quality of life.

• **Accountability:** Increased accountability is necessary for organizations that often receive dollars using statistics to get public, private and grant dollars for programs, yet do not effectively engage the Black community.

• **Healing Strategies:** How do we bring compassion and sensitivity to the plight of all people in the Black community (i.e. incarcerated persons, etc.)? Where are the spaces for Black people to intentionally heal from internalized racism? Black Impact Collaborative should give some intention to partnerships for the development of healing strategies.

• **Advocacy:** Look within Black Greater Grand Rapids to develop advocacy platforms for Black churches, sororities/fraternities, etc. to develop coordinated, strategic ways to address issues taxing Black people.
While 2020-21 will go down in history as the year of a lifetime, with unprecedented death and destruction caused from a global pandemic; record numbers of people who found themselves unemployed and waiting in food lines; historic fires and snow storms; unparalleled protests and demonstration in response to racist attacks on Black, Latinx and Asian people; and a reawakening of white supremacy displayed in forms not seen in a generation. It will also be recognized as a time where people innovated, adjusted, created, and flexed in extraordinary ways. Black Impact Collaborative was born amidst these conditions. And rather than righteously cowering under the weight of racism, even the Midwest nice form of racism; delay until more favorable conditions presented themselves; or pause to mourn the losses (family members, jobs, hopes, etc.) suffered over the past year, members of Black Greater Grand Rapids joined the Black community across the world, to be steadfast, to push past “back-to-normal” towards the vision of a new normal.

Over the course of the last year, Black Impact Collaborative accomplished all of the aforementioned activities, joining the ranks of Black people who, during this time, ingeniously made ends meet, ensured their children were educated, created care circles for the elders and youth, fashioned new positions for themselves, healed from the harms of systems of oppression, and launched businesses.

There is an acknowledgement that an oppressive system can cause a population to turn on itself and engage in untoward activities. That system then is used as evidence for the need for differential treatment of that population without recognizing that we’re talking about one system. The same system that puts the knee on the neck [of George Floyd], locks Black people out [of opportunity], locks Black people in [geographic or opportunity boundaries, etc.], and locks Black people up [in CJ system]. And so, Black people can then begin to engage in activities that are self-destructive and community-destructive.

But even as this acknowledgement is real and true, Black Impact Collaborative acknowledged and demonstrated what it means to act as a collective, in solidarity; what it means to push past the pain; and what it means to have a better future for our community. And while the work is far from being complete, Black Impact Collaborative is well on its way, now having officially become a 501c3 organization, to being part of structural change for Greater Grand Rapids. They remain a committed group of leaders moving in solidarity to support the aspirations and meet the needs of Black Greater Grand Rapids.

To stay connected to the work of the Black Impact Collective by emailing us at admin@bicgr.com or by following us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter using @411gr.
Black Impact Collaborative commissioned Brigham Consulting LLC to glean learnings and impacts of Black Impact Collaborative’s Black Greater Grand Rapids COVID-19 & Beyond efforts over the past year.