

LEVI STRAUSS FOUNDATION

HIV/AIDS SUMMARY REPORT

.....
Four Decades of Learning





HIV/AIDS SUMMARY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

After 40 years and tens of millions in investments, the Levi Strauss Foundation (LSF) announced in March 2023 that it will wind down its HIV/AIDS grantmaking program in 2023. Given the significant increase in HIV/AIDS funding environment over the years, the foundation believes that investing in other critical issue areas can have a greater impact. However, years of engagement in the HIV/AIDS field have had a lasting effect on how LSF does its work and provided a blueprint for how philanthropy can propel meaningful change—by supporting pioneering leaders on the ground, doubling down on policy advocacy and lifting up the voices of people and communities most impacted.

What follows is our attempt to share our experience and capture our learnings, both for posterity and with the hope that it may prove informative to other corporate foundations looking to drive issue-specific impact through their philanthropic efforts.

AN ISSUE THAT RESONATED

The HIV/AIDS crisis traces its beginnings back to 1981 when reports began to surface of an enigmatic and alarmingly aggressive immune deficiency disorder that primarily affected gay men. Little was known about the disease, but there was clearly reason for alarm: By the end of that first year, nearly half of the patients diagnosed with the disease were already dead.¹

In response, some in the medical community worked furiously to develop a better understanding of the origins of the disease, how it was transmitted and how to treat it. The public response was marked by fear and misinformation that hardened quickly to prejudice and discrimination. The growing stigma compounded the challenges of both collecting and disseminating accurate information to help stop the spread of the disease.

San Francisco, home to a large and vibrant LGBTQ+ population, quickly emerged as an epicenter of the

burgeoning epidemic. As a San Francisco-based company, staff and leadership at Levi Strauss & Co. (LS&Co.) and the Levi Strauss Foundation saw the crisis unfold around them in real-time.

In 1982, LS&Co.'s then-COO and soon-to-be-CEO Bob Haas and other company leaders joined with concerned employees to pass out leaflets at company headquarters to raise awareness and educate employees about the disease. This response was in keeping with the company's long history of supporting employees in times of crisis and upheaval.² The following year, LSF made what is believed to be the first corporate donation to the fast-growing crisis, providing funding for the Kaposi's Sarcoma Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital.

“

“Those early years were marked by fear. No one talked openly about HIV/AIDS – especially in corporate America. However, we understood that keeping quiet about AIDS was part of the problem. In response, we began to break the silence in the hope of bringing others along and making it ‘safe’ for other corporations to join in the fight to end the epidemic.” — **Bob Haas.**³

This early response, which centered the people and communities directly impacted by the crisis, laid the groundwork for the foundation’s approach to HIV/AIDS in the ensuing decades. The epidemic hit close to home, not just because of the company’s deep roots in San Francisco but also because confronting discrimination and injustice has long been a core value for Levi Strauss. While funders – particularly corporate- hesitated to meaningfully engage with the issue, the foundation embraced its pioneering spirit to demonstrate the impact of corporate support through philanthropy and HR policies on crisis-stricken communities.

Over time, LSF’s approach evolved based on the understanding that HIV/AIDS is far more than a medical condition—it sits at the intersection of a wide range of stigmas and biases, including homophobia, transphobia, racism, gender inequality and poverty.

 **FORTY YEARS OF FUNDING CHANGE AND CHANGEMAKERS**

Since 1983, LSF and LS&Co. have together invested more than \$85 million into organizations addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis across the United States and in more than 40 countries around the world (with the vast majority through LSF).

Initial grantmaking focused on the critical need for healthcare and outreach to vulnerable communities, but by the early 2000s, the foundation’s approach had shifted toward advocacy and empowering the people and communities most affected by the epidemic.

By 2016, LSF had further honed its understanding of HIV/AIDS as a social justice issue, following the lead of its grantees, which were no longer identifying as single-issue organizations focused solely on HIV, but instead were looking holistically at the overlapping systems of privilege and inequality that surrounded and exacerbated the disease. This led to efforts that addressed the issues from new and different directions,

Milestones in LSF’s HIV/AIDS Engagement

- 1982** LSF provides the first corporate donation to the Kaposi Sarcoma Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital, the first AIDS clinic in the world.
- 1983** LSF funds employee-led AIDS support groups at San Francisco headquarters.
- 1985** CEO Bob Haas urges others in the Business Leadership Task Force to join LS&Co. in developing corporate HIV/AIDS strategies.
- 1994** LS&Co. joins the Global AIDS Task Force to explore impact of HIV/AIDS on international business communities.
- 2004** LSF becomes the first corporate foundation to support the Syringe Access Fund.
- 2007** LSF begins support for ALAFA (Apparel Lesotho Alliance to Fight AIDS) a first-of-its-kind NGO model to address HIV/AIDS in factory settings.
- 2013** LS&Co. represents the private sector in U.S. Conference on AIDS Symposium on HIV/AIDS and Employment.
- 2015** LS&Co. HIV/AIDS partnerships support community organizations in more than 40 countries.
- 2015** Bob Haas receives the National Leadership Recognition award for AIDS Memorial Grove’s World AIDS Day observance for his leadership in the HIV/AIDS movement.
- 2020** LSF plays a vital role in providing support for vanguard organizations that meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including those living with HIV/AIDS.
- 2023** LSF announces that it will sunset HIV/AIDS as a grantmaking priority.

“

“In our programs, policies and campaigns, we have sought to be pioneering, bold and honest. We have sometimes raised a few eyebrows along the way, but...if you’re not rabble-raising and raising eyebrows, you’re probably not on the right track.” — **Daniel Lee⁵, former LSF executive director**

including grantees like The Counter Narrative Project, which focused on shifting harmful narratives about Black gay men in the South, and the Transgender Law Center (TLC), which created an initiative to support leadership development for trans women living with HIV.

A unique role to play: Throughout the years, LSF made an outsized impact in this space by leveraging the deep relationships it built as an early and enduring funder alongside its willingness to make the first move in support of new ideas and solutions.

As a corporate foundation, LSF’s early involvement with HIV/AIDS laid the groundwork for how others in the business sector could engage. In 1998, for example, LSF funded an educational video about HIV/AIDS in association with UNAIDS that drew on materials developed for LS&Co. employees and the company’s experiences on the Business Leadership Task Force on HIV/AIDS. The video was made available to other companies and community organizations globally—and in fact, as UNAIDS grew its engagement with the business sector, it often cited LS&Co. and the foundation as a model⁴. Actions like this paved the way for other corporate entities to invest in initiatives to raise awareness, encourage employee education and volunteerism, and devote resources to community support.

With the company’s steadfast support, LSF was able to direct funding to experimental and sometimes controversial models that others were wary of supporting, effectively demonstrating that the space was safe for others to engage in.

The Syringe Access Fund was a compelling case in point—the foundation provided seed funding in 2004 to support access to clean syringes to slow the spread of HIV. The solution was controversial, but proven to be effective at preventing infection by blood-borne diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C. That initial grant proved pivotal in bringing attention and additional funding to the group, and as model gained acceptance more broadly, the number of new HIV diagnoses

among people who inject drugs in the U.S. decreased dramatically in subsequent years.

Other grantees, including Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina (AMMAR) and Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) in India tackled the controversial topic of supporting sex workers in those countries as a mechanism for reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Sex workers are at a higher risk of contracting HIV and are more vulnerable to the impacts of the disease because the stigmatization and criminalization of their work means they often have limited access to health care services. Their clients can also serve as a bridge population for HIV transmission, bringing the disease into their families and the general population. AMMAR helped draft laws that regulate sex work, and created a sex worker advocacy committee that pushes for legislative protections, while SANGRAM established a capacity-building institute to help sex workers more effectively advocate for policy change at the local, state and national levels.

CARRYING FORWARD THE LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons that LSF learned through its engagement in the HIV/AIDS space had a lasting impact on how the foundation does its work today. LSF took its cues from the evolving needs and tactics of its grantees, and now applies many of these learnings in its general approach to grantmaking, regardless of the issue.

Centering impacted communities: One of the most significant takeaways from LSF’s experiences with HIV/AIDS funding has been the value of prioritizing organizations that are both led by and focused on the people who are most impacted by the issues they are working on. Initially that was gay men, but the focus shifted as the course of the disease evolved to include groups such as Black women, drug users and sex workers.

The Positive Women’s Network, an organization founded and run by a diverse group of women living



“I began my career in social justice working in the Filipino American and Filipino immigrant youth communities impacted by HIV/AIDS, and I have long admired the Levi Strauss Foundation’s courage and willingness to be among the first funders—especially corporate—to invest in the issue. To have a globally recognized brand like Levi’s stand up and support communities most impacted by the epidemic made it safe for other funders to follow.” — **Fatima Angeles, current LSF executive director**

with HIV, is one of those grantees. The group applies a gender lens to their policy and advocacy work in recognition of the fact that women make up nearly a quarter of Americans living with HIV today, and women of color and Black women specifically are disproportionately represented in those numbers.

The Sero Project, another grantee led by HIV-positive organizers, works to dismantle the outdated and unjustly applied laws that exist in 30 states⁶ to punish the transmission of HIV, potential or perceived exposure to HIV, and even non-disclosure of HIV status.

This has meant funding grantees that are headquartered in the countries where they operate, and led by people from the communities they serve, rather than global funds that work across multiple countries. This community-centered approach has provided critical funding to both national organizations and smaller grassroots groups that are leading the way with locally relevant solutions. In Mexico, for example, LSF is supporting Letra S, an organization that combats misinformation and bias around HIV.

Today, LSF continues to draw on those lessons to inform its work, including its expanding focus on funding reproductive justice work in the United States, where it prioritizes groups led by and serving Black women in states where abortion rights are being eroded. In addition, having seen first-hand how the most marginalized populations were most deeply impacted by the HIV/AIDS crisis, the foundation today makes it a priority to identify and support those populations whenever it engages with crisis response—for example, LSF’s COVID-19 response included funding organizations like AAPI Hate (addressing COVID-related stigma) and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (supporting communities that didn’t have a safety net).

Funding advocacy and systems change: LSF’s grantmaking evolved from an early focus on immediate medical interventions into broader support for leadership development, capacity building and policy and systems change. The foundation came to recognize a need for investment in the ecosystem of people and organizations working on the full spectrum of interconnected medical and social issues that shaped the HIV/AIDS crisis.

That meant honoring the expertise of organizations that were doing good work with multi-year general operating grants that demonstrated trust in those on the frontlines to utilize the funds in the best ways to grow their capacity and impact. It meant investing in a pipeline of leaders who are living with HIV and imbuing their work with unique insight into the ways that race, class and gender inform how the epidemic plays out in their communities.

Perhaps most importantly, the foundation saw the importance of funding advocacy and policy work that drives substantive change on an issue. That level of engagement requires long-term commitment to an issue, and LSF has been one of the few funders to stay involved long enough to effectively implement an explicit focus on the kind of policy advocacy that can create systems change.

In 2015, for example, in response to high rates of HIV/AIDS and poor health outcomes in the trans community, the foundation was one of the first funders of the Transgender Law Center’s Positively Trans program. The resulting research project gathered data about the real-life experiences and needs of transgender people living with HIV, which were ultimately presented to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) along with a demand for more meaningful involvement of trans voices in the CDC’s HIV/AIDS strategy. The CDC and other

government health agencies have since taken steps toward improvement, such as updating the language used in forms and guidelines and the data categories in reports for more accurate representation.

In 2021, the Positive Women’s Network galvanized its communities to fight regressive policies by supporting women living with HIV to plan and lead civic engagement efforts in Colorado and Pennsylvania. As a result of this endeavor, both states invested in housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness, a factor closely linked to higher rates of HIV infection and lower health outcomes.

LSF witnessed how these grantees and others in the HIV/AIDS space were able to leverage their voices and experiences to move the needle on a systems level and put that lesson to good use across its grantmaking portfolios. When the foundation moved into funding worker rights, for example, it put an explicit emphasis on funding groups working to strengthen labor laws in the countries where LS&Co. sources.

Taking risks and supporting innovation: LSF’s grantmaking is most impactful when it concentrates its relatively modest resources on unlocking innovation and creative solutions. Whether it’s funding needle exchanges or sex worker rights, the foundation has accomplished this by taking risks in support of groundbreaking programs and organizations—risks that governments and many other funders weren’t ready to take on. In this, as well, LSF draws inspiration from the grantees who have been unafraid to lend their voices and lived experiences to the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS, even in the face of discrimination and intolerance.



A DIFFICULT DECISION TO LEAVE

HIV/AIDS remains a serious challenge today. There are still nearly 38 million people living with HIV/AIDS around the world⁷ and it continues to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations. But the context has changed dramatically over the last 40 years.

While there is no cure, health outcomes are substantially different today. Thanks to antiretroviral therapies that allow many to stay healthy while living with HIV and highly effective medicines that help prevent the spread, AIDS-related deaths have been reduced by 68% since the peak in 2004 and by 52% since 2010.⁸

At the same time, HIV/AIDS-related philanthropy has grown exponentially from an estimated \$59 million in 1996, at the height of the epidemic, to more than \$700 million in 2020, half of which came from corporate funders.⁹

When making the difficult decision to wind down its funding commitment in this space, the LSF staff and board acknowledged that the funding environment has changed dramatically from the early days when LSF was one of the few entities from the corporate sector willing to engage. In the intervening years, a number of funders with greater resources have followed LSF’s lead into the space and shown increasing willingness to support innovation, risk and creativity. In 2020, for example, the top two funders of HIV/AIDS-related work were The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which gave \$211 million that year, and Gilead Sciences, which gave \$270 million that year.¹⁰

While LSF is shifting focus to other funding areas where it can follow the same pioneering path that it did with HIV/AIDS, it is committed to honoring the trust and strong relationships it has built over the years by providing transitional support to current grantees. In keeping with the employee-driven beginnings of LSF’s engagement with the issue, the foundation will also continue to match employee donations to HIV/AIDS-related organizations, which has generated more than \$500,000 over the years.

And finally, the foundation will continue its unwavering commitment to LGBTQ+ equality through support for the community where it intersects with the foundation’s core funding areas: immigrant rights, reproductive justice, democracy, and apparel worker rights and wellbeing in LS&Co.’s sourcing countries.



HIV/AIDS SUMMARY REPORT

CONCLUSION

After four decades of grantmaking in the HIV/AIDS space, LSF is proud to have invested in courageous leaders and organizations in more than 40 countries standing up for both health and human rights, fighting the stigma and discrimination faced by people living with HIV/AIDS.

The foundation recognizes that HIV/AIDS continues to be a pressing issue, but both the crisis itself and the funding landscape around it have evolved. Today, there are other funders who are carrying this work forward, many of whom have greater resources to dedicate to the effort. With these changes in mind, LSF believes it can best fulfill its mission by playing a similar role with other issues—showing the way forward and inspiring others to follow.

LSF will take its experiences and learnings from the HIV/AIDS crisis and use them to shape new and existing efforts to advance social justice. With this experience serving as proof of concept for the unique potential that philanthropic and corporate funders have to catalyze change around even the most sensitive issues, LSF will continue to champion courageous voices, invest in ecosystems that drive systemic change, and embrace its pioneering roots as it looks to future funding.

ENDNOTES

- 1 [Timeline of The HIV and AIDS Epidemic.](https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline/#year-1981) (n.d). HIV.gov. <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline/#year-1981>
- 2 Other examples include reducing workweeks during the Great Depression rather than laying employees off, opening racially integrated factories long before civil rights laws mandated and extending health benefits to same-sex couples.
- 3 [World AIDS Day: Bob Haas Reflects on LS&Co. Efforts.](#) Levi Strauss & Co. blog, Nov. 2021
- 4 The Business Response to HIV/AIDS: Impact and Lessons Learned, The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum, and The Global Business Council on HIV&AIDS, 2000
- 5 [Reigniting the Fight: Levi Strauss & Co. and the Levi Strauss Foundation.](#) Funders Concerned About AIDS blog, May 2017.
- 6 [HIV Criminalization in the United States.](#) The Center for HIV Law & Policy, June 2022
- 7 [UNAIDS Fact Sheet 2022](#)
- 8 [UNAIDS Fact Sheet 2022](#)
- 9 [Illusion of Steadiness Belies Worrisome Fluctuations in HIV-related Philanthropy.](#) Funders Concerned About AIDS, May 2022
- 10 [Philanthropic Support to Address HIV and AIDS in 2020.](#) Funders Concerned About AIDS, 2022