Southern Partners Fund

ANNUAL REPORT | 2024

Advancing
Social Change
in the Rural South

OUR MISSION

is to support grassroots community organizations in the rural South seeking racial, economic and environmental justice by providing financial resources, technical assistance and training, and access to systems of information and power.

OUR PURPOSE

is to help build the capacity of grassroots community leaders and organizations; and to foster relationships and networking that build power toward achieving a more just South.

OUR VALUES

are based on compassion and community—cornerstones of our democratic approach to philanthropy. Compassion is rooted in our inherent understanding and concern for communities lacking the political power to impact decisions that affect their lives. We came from communities that were like that until we learned to organize. Community comes out of the connections we have to one another, the glue that holds us together.

A WORD FROM THE BOARD CHAIR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we reflect on the past year, one thing is undeniably clear: 2024 has demanded much from the movement for racial, economic, and social justice, especially here in the rural South. From Georgia's Black Belt to the Mississippi Delta, from Eastern North Carolina to the Black rural towns of Alabama, our communities have once again shown what it means to be resilient, strategic, and rooted in a vision of collective liberation. Clearly, however, the terrain we navigate has grown more perilous, and is about to become even more so.

This was the year when the smoke of white supremacist ideology, fanned by fear and manufactured grievance, became an all-consuming inferno burning deeper into our courts, our schools, and our statehouses. Florida expanded its censorship laws to criminalize the teaching of African American history. Alabama defied federal mandates to redraw its racist congressional maps. And in state after Southern state, so-called "anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)" legislation continues to punish the very ideas and organizing that would deliver us a more just democracy. These are not merely political moves. These are tactics in a conservative, decades-in-the-making coordinated strategy to consolidate power by dehumanizing the very people whose labor and culture transformed this country.

Yet despite these assaults, the South has never surrendered. In fact, 2024 reminded us one of the things the rural South does best: it builds. It builds when Black women in the Black Belt register voters door by door, church by church. It builds when LGBTQ+ youth and elders form coalitions in conservative strongholds that defy erasure. It builds when immigrant farmworkers in the Carolinas organize labor rights campaigns amid looming threats of detention and deportation. And it builds when grassrooted institutions, like our Social Justice Institute, train a new generation of organizers not only to understand the origins of our oppression, but how to dismantle it.

We are not confused about what we are up against. White supremacy in the rural South has never been the exception, just the standard. It has shaped zoning laws and school board budgets, who gets arrested and who gets funded, who lives near clean water and who doesn't. That's why we doubled down on leadership development and made our biggest investment in voter rights to date this year. We also did this while continuing to support grassroots organizing in numerous initiatives focused on immigration, education, climate and criminal justice reform. And we did so not just as funders, but as partners (and often silent ones, unless help building capacity is requested), because we know that when it comes to finding solutions to community problems, the real experts are leaders from within those very communities.

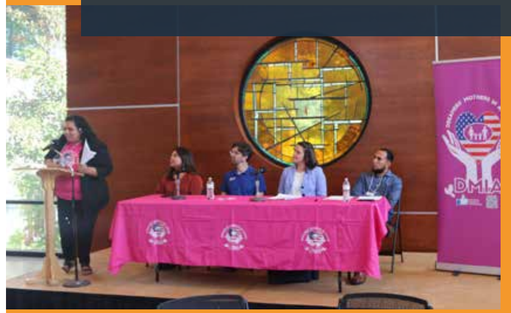
So with that, we thank you—our generous funders, tireless grantee partners, friends, and allies alike—for your steadfast belief in this work. For understanding that the fight for justice in the rural South is key to securing justice throughout the nation. And for standing with us in these unprecedented times as we continue to build the institutions, knowledge, and power necessary for a South that finally belongs to all of us.

In solidarity,

Dianna Freelon-Foster
Chair of the Board of Directors

Fernando Cuevas, Jr.
Executive Director

HELLO FROM THE RURAL SOUTH

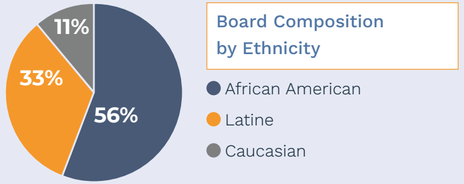


GOVERNANCE

SPF employs a two-tiered membership-based structure of governance that forms a system of checks and balances to foster a space in which democratic and participatory philanthropy can flourish. Members are selected for their regional expertise, sound judgment, management skills, and leadership potential.

SPF's membership is derived from leaders of currently or previously funded grassroots organizations. Enshrined in SPF's by-laws, at least 80% of its members must be people of color grassroots leaders (see chart below) from the rural South. They serve on committees, including grantmaking and finance, and are actively involved in the organization.

Term-limited board members are elected from within SPF's membership pool to ensure SPF remains led by those it's meant to serve. SPF's experience has indeed confirmed for us that grassroots community organizing is the strategy with the greatest potential to produce viable, progressive, and institutional change for a more economically and racially equitable South.



2024 **BOARD**

Dianna Freelon-Foster
(Board-Chair)
E.D., Activists With a Purpose
Grenada, MS

Tirso Moreno
(Board- Vice Chair)
Farmworkers Consultant
Apopka, FL

Erin Dale-McClellan
(2023 Board-Treasurer)
E.D., The Partnership Funds
Raleigh, NC

Margarita Romo
(Board-Secretary)
E.D., Farmworkers Self-Help
Dade City, FL

Brett Bursey
(Board-Member At-Large)
E.D., South Carolina Progressive Network
Columbia, SC

Shaq Cossé
(Board)
Louisiana Bucket Brigade
New Orleans, LA

John Littles
(Board)
E.D., McIntosh SEED
Brunswick, GA

Karen Watson
(Board)
E.D., Positive Action Committee
Sylvania, GA

Gardenia White
(Board)
Retired Community Organizer
South Carolina/New York

MEMBERSHIP | 2024

Vivian Anderson
South Carolina

Brett Bursey
South Carolina

Andre Cheek Castleberry
Georgia

Nadeska Concha
Florida

Shaq Cosse
Louisiana

Marcos Crisanto
Florida

Carolyn Ford
Florida

Omari Fox
South Carolina

Dianna Freelon-Foster
Mississippi

Marilyn Hunter
Florida

April Jarocki
Tennessee

Leroy Johnson
Mississippi

Rose Johnson
Georgia

Kattie Vinson-Kendrick
Georgia

John Littles
Georgia

Erin Dale McClellan
North Carolina

Tirso Moreno
Florida

Bryan Perlmutter
North Carolina

Larverne Robinson
Georgia

Margarita Roma
Florida

Darla Saunders
Florida

Kameisha Smith
Mississippi

Corry Stevenson
South Carolina

Erendira Vasquez
Arkansas

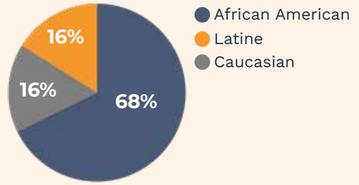
Karen Watson
Georgia

Gardenia White
South Carolina

Karen Woodall
Florida

John Zippert
Alabama

Membership Composition by Ethnicity



Becoming a member of SPF has helped me grow as an organizer for social justice in rural Georgia. The additional tools, alongside the increased funding opportunities membership has presented, have in turn helped advance the mission of the nonprofit I lead.

Having a network of like-minded grassroots organizers for support has been truly invaluable, indeed!

- Kattie Vinson-Kendrick,
Executive Director,
Peach Concerned Citizens

GRANTMAKING

SPF serves as a model of democratic philanthropy, demonstrating that grantmaking decisions that reflect the experience of people living in the communities served are effective and powerful. In 2024, SPF made 149 grants to 95 rural grassroots organizations throughout the 12 Southeastern states the foundation funds, with the average grant size now $20k. Total grantmaking, including SPF's Hubert E. Sapp Regular Grant Cycle (RGC), the Justice Fund for Disaster Relief and Renewal, special initiative funding, and the discretionary fund, was a single-year SPF record of just over $3m.

Still adhering to our Southern Organizing Strategy (SOS), SPF allocates approximately 60% of RGC funds to now four primary focus areas: voter rights and engagement, immigration rights, education reform, and since this year, environmental justice in response to the climate change-induced challenges facing the communities we serve. The remaining 40% of grantmaking is allocated amongst the other focus areas listed in the chart below.

Grantmaking by Focus Area (SOS)

2024

PRIMARY FOCUS AREAS

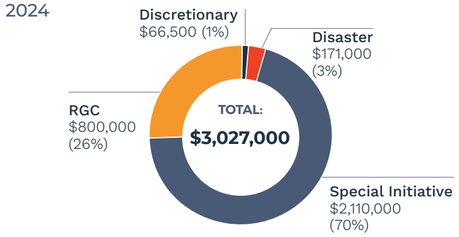
- Voter Rights & Engagement - 24%
- Education Reform - 15%
- Environmental Justice - 11%
- Immigration Rights - 9%

OTHER FOCUS AREAS

- Economic Justice - 15%
- Youth Leadership - 7%
- Women & Girls' Leadership - 7%
- Incarceration Reform - 4%
- LGBTQ+ Rights - 3%
- Healthcare Reform - 2%
- Housing Reform - 2%
- Disability Rights - 1%

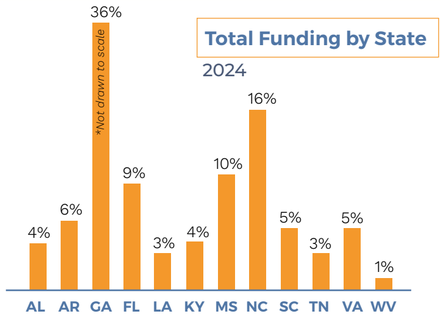
Total Grantmaking by Fund

2024



Total Funding by State

2024



IMPACT

GRANTEE PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Get Loud Arkansas

Get Loud Arkansas (GLA) was founded in 2021 by retired state senator Joyce Elliott to fight voter suppression, register new voters, and mobilize communities to take back their power. In recent years, Arkansas has witnessed its democracy threatened by increasing voter suppression efforts, casting a shadow over the electoral process and silencing eligible voters. In this challenging terrain, GLA focuses on the forgotten parts of our state, galvanized by our commitment to ensure every voice is heard, every vote counts, and every Arkansan has the power to build a better future. The journey so far has been marked by significant achievements and widespread community support.

Earlier in 2024, GLA also partnered with Vote.org in a federal lawsuit defending the right to modern, accessible voter registration. Arkansas is one of eight states that do not have online voter registration. In response, GLA developed a legally compliant online tool that allowed Arkansans to fill out their voter registration form and sign it online, then have it printed and submitted by GLA. After a news article highlighted GLA's success registering high school seniors to vote, Secretary of State John Thurston reversed his support for the platform and directed the State Board of Election Commissioners to draft a rule banning electronic signatures.

At the core of GLA's mission is the mobilization of historically silenced communities—the overlooked corners of our electoral landscape, such as people of color, young adults, and the unregistered. Through innovative local civic engagement initiatives, they're not just speaking to communities; they're sparking conversations and action that resonate from the Delta to the Ozarks. GLA's approach goes beyond traditional campaigns by fostering a culture of involvement that transforms spectators into participants, and participants into advocates.

Thanks to allies like Southern Partners Fund, GLA registered over 7,000 voters, mobilized over 30,000 low turnout voters, and conducted outreach to more than 120,000 purged voters.

- Joyce Elliott,
Fmr. State Senator of Arkansas and Executive Director, Get Loud Arkansas

IMPACT

GRANTEE PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Migrant Equity Southeast

Migrant Equity Southeast (MESE) is a Latinx and immigrant-led 501(c)(3) organization that advocates for immigrant rights and engages in mutual aid, education, and outreach with the migrant and refugee communities of South GA.

Recognizing the robust presence of immigrants in GA (one out of 10 GA Residents) and their contributions to the state's workforce and economic fabric, MESE is committed to fighting for the liberation, economic justice, and human rights of underserved migrant and refugee communities at the local level. MESE aims to pilot policy changes tailored to these communities and advocate for an equitable environment for immigrant families within the local government.

Some of their recent highlights include the approval of a bigger school budget and expansion of the ESOL department in the Savannah Chatham County public school system and a partnership with five cities in Coastal GA that led to passing proclamations recognizing the importance of Latinx Heritage Month. Other highlights include the distribution of more than $300,000 in relief payments to food and farm workers, and a continuation of GOTV efforts for eligible Latinx voters. Hurricane Helene halted this work for a few weeks, during which MESE focused on rapid response efforts to help victims of the hurricane who live in rural parts of South GA for whom the general elections were no longer really a priority.

As the October 7th Georgia voter registration deadline approached, MESE also joined coalition efforts to ask for an extension due to the hurricane. Unfortunately, their efforts were ignored, and now know for a fact that there were many people in rural South GA who did not register to vote, not because they didn't care, but because they didn't have power or internet, and were trying to survive.

Hurricane Helene highlighted the challenges, such as lack of access to emergency shelters, and language-appropriate information, that low-income, immigrant communities in rural Georgia often face in terms of disaster preparedness and recovery.

We must work together to create infrastructure and policies that specifically address the needs of these vulnerable populations in the face of increasing climate-related disasters.

- Daniela Rodriguez,
Executive Director,
Migrant Equity Southeast

SOCIAL JUSTICE INSTITUTE

ABOUT THE SOCIAL JUSTICE INSTITUTE

For SPF and its grantees to continue forging ahead, our plans and actions must be thoughtfully nuanced, flexible, and sustainable. The Social Justice Institute (SJI) was born out of this need in 2009 and houses SPF's varied programming, as well as its ongoing capacity building and leadership development fellowships.

Programs under SJI are designed to build knowledge, teach best practices in organizing and organizational management, and help participants network and develop a collective understanding of civil and human rights issues in the context of historical southern movement building.

Programming for 2024 continued to focus on election protection and follow-up redistricting work, and on building philanthropy from within low-income communities as part of SPF's Pathway to Philanthropy program.

SJI's formal capacity-building program strengthens nascent grassroots organizations by helping them become more grounded and effective community leaders. The program provides a grant to organizations fighting to reverse economic, environmental, and social inequities in the rural South and the opportunity to build capacity and strengthen organizational and individual leadership.

Wrapping up our second class following a hiatus, SJI's Young Leaders for Social Change fellowship enhances skills, knowledge, and civic participation among young and emerging community organizers and nonprofit professionals under the age of 35 who are committed to progressive social change across the rural South.

Projects have ranged from creating a mobile dream lab for K-12 students, a know your rights campaign for poultry plant workers, and a youth activist toolkit to 24/7 accessible micro pantries in Bowling Green and a restorative-justice focused healing space for Black and Brown girls.

FELLOWSHIPS

Capacity Building Spotlight: PORTIA SHEPHERD

Blackbelt Women Rising is a gender and environmental justice organization dedicated to advocacy, prevention, and support. They work to address systemic issues impacting women and marginalized communities in the Black Belt, particularly in areas of sexual violence, LGBTQ+ support, and environmental justice. Their work includes creating safe spaces for survivors and advocating for policies that protect communities from environmental and social harm. Through partnerships, outreach, and grassroots organizing, they strive to ensure that those most affected have a voice in the decisions that impact their lives.

Portia's organizing experience with Blackbelt Women Rising has focused on advocating for environmental justice in the Black Belt, where a big part of her work has been engaging with public officials, ensuring that community voices are included in decision-making, and addressing issues like wastewater infrastructure, landfill expansions, and pollution. The lack of public input in these decisions, especially when they directly impact women and marginalized communities, is what drives her advocacy.

In Epes, AL, Blackbelt Women Rising is engaged with local leadership to address environmental concerns, particularly around biomass and other pollution sources. By meeting with Mayer Porter and attending council meetings, we're ensuring that community voices are heard in decisions that affect their health and environment.

According to Portia, funding from SPF has allowed them to continue their efforts in Epes and other communities by funding important initiatives, such as their collaboration with Brown University's Community Noise Lab to monitor and address the impacts of biomass facilities. This will provide the community with critical data to monitor and ensure that the company stays in compliance with environmental standards, protecting residents from potential harm.

The fellowship has helped me refine our organizational strategies, from strengthening our outreach efforts to developing more sustainable programs. It's been a great opportunity to not only grow as a leader but also to see the tangible impact of capacity-building work in real-time.

- PORTIA SHEPHERD

FELLOWSHIPS

Young Leaders for Social Change Spotlight: TAKEIYA SMITH

Takeiya Smith is a West Virginia Native and Executive Director of the Young West Virginia Power Building Movement. She is also one of SPF's only Social Justice Institute (SJI) participants to have completed the Young Leaders for Social Change and Capacity Building fellowships.

Takeiya began youth organizing as a student on campus and now helps other young leaders become active participants in the systems impacting their daily lives.

Over the last decade, she has mobilized young people throughout the state to address a variety of social issues, ranging from equality in schools to economic justice and voter education. Takeiya utilizes her lived experience, skill in grassroots organizing, collaboration with value-aligned partners and vitality of students to fuel her work toward making a safer, more equitable home for all West Virginians.

Through her organization, she's geting people registered to vote, helping create voting plans, and educating folks about what will be on their ballot. They have also helped people call their senators for the first time, bringing democracy directly to the doorstep through their canvassing.

Additionally, her organization has hosted student town halls, provided education on bills and on how to take action, phone banked, and provided civics training. Voter registration tables, social causes, and community organizing were all once cultural staples and Takeiya and her fellow organizers are working to revive that mentality in the communities we grew up in.

The YLSC fellowship helped us connect over shared experiences, gave us space to collectively problem solve, and generate new ideas with others.

We were able to learn from facilitators outside of our normal scope to help us expand the way we looked at our work. It was also a space where we learned about other opportunities to help our work be sustainable.

- TAKEIYA SMITH

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Southern Partners Fund, Inc.

INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT

To the Board of Directors of
Southern Partners Fund, Inc.

Opinion

We have audited the accompanying financial statements of Southern Partners Fund, Inc., (a nonprofit organization) (the "Fund"), which comprise the statements of financial position as of December 31, 2024 and 2023, and the related statements of activities, functional expenses and cash flows for the years then ended, and the related notes to the financial statements.

In our opinion, the financial statements referred to above present fairly, in all material respects, the financial position of Southern Partners Fund, Inc. as of December 31, 2024 and 2023, and the changes in its net assets and its cash flows for the years then ended in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.

Basis for Opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with auditing standards generally accepted in the United States of America. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements section of our report. We are required to be independent of the Fund and to meet our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with the relevant ethical requirements relating to our audit. We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our audit opinion.

Responsibilities of Management for the Financial Statements

Management is responsible for the preparation and fair presentation of the financial statements in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America, and for the design, implementation, and maintenance of internal control relevant to the preparation and fair presentation of financial statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial statements, management is required to evaluate whether there are conditions or events, considered in the aggregate, that raise substantial doubt about the Fund's ability to continue as a going concern within one year after the date that the financial statements are available to be issued.

Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Statements

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial statements as a whole are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance but is not absolute assurance and therefore is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. The risk of not detecting a material misstatement resulting from fraud is higher than for one resulting from error, as fraud may involve

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collusion, forgery, intentional omissions, misrepresentations, or the override of internal control. Misstatements, including omissions, are considered material if there is a substantial likelihood that, individually or in the aggregate, they would influence the judgment made by a reasonable user based on the financial statements.

In performing an audit in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards, we:

- Exercise professional judgment and maintain professional skepticism throughout the audit.
- Identify and assess the risks of material misstatement of the financial statements, whether due to fraud or error, and design and perform audit procedures responsive to those risks. Such procedures include examining, on a test basis, evidence regarding the amounts and disclosures in the financial statements.
- Obtain an understanding of internal control relevant to the audit in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of the Fund's internal control. Accordingly, no such opinion is expressed.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of accounting policies used and the reasonableness of significant accounting estimates made by management, as well as evaluate the overall presentation of the financial statements.
- Conclude whether, in our judgment, there are conditions or events, considered in the aggregate, that raise substantial doubt about the Fund's ability to continue as a going concern for a reasonable period of time.

We are required to communicate with those charged with governance regarding, among other matters, the planned scope and timing of the audit, significant audit findings, and certain internal control related matters that we identified during the audit.

Fulton & Kozak LLC

Morrow, Georgia
July 31, 2025

FINANCIALS | 2024

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Southern Partners Fund, Inc.

STATEMENTS OF FINANCIAL POSITION

December 31, 2024

ASSETS	2024	2023
CURRENT ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	$ 5,043,300	$ 7,086,321
Cash – donor advised	6,491	5,933
Marketable securities	12,974,633	11,775,180
Contributions receivable	216	216
Pledges receivable	50,000	250,000
Prepaid expenses	15,530	10,296
TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS	18,090,170	19,127,946
MARKETABLE SECURITIES – ENDOWMENT	6,230,341	6,230,341
PLEDGES RECEIVABLE – LONG-TERM, NET	-	47,619
FIXED ASSETS, NET	16,448	24,167
OPERATING RIGHT OF USE ASSET	45,307	89,756
SECURITY DEPOSIT	3,779	3,779
TOTAL ASSETS	$ 24,386,045	$ 25,523,608
LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS		
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Accounts payable	$ 31,778	$ 36,516
Grants payable	65,000	182,500
Payroll liabilities	88,162	63,747
Lease liability	54,742	52,346
TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES	239,682	335,109
LEASE LIABILITY – LONG TERM	-	54,680
TOTAL LIABILITIES	239,682	389,789
NET ASSETS		
Without donor restrictions	17,636,491	18,309,039
With donor restrictions		
Restricted by purpose or time	279,531	594,439
Restricted for endowment	6,230,341	6,230,341
Total net assets with donor restrictions	6,509,872	6,824,780
TOTAL NET ASSETS	24,146,363	25,133,819
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	$ 24,386,045	$ 25,523,608

Southern Partners Fund

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(404) 541-9091

southernpartnersfund.org