



# Minnesota Freedom Fund 2020

An Ethical Leadership Case Study

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# TL;DR

- The Minnesota Freedom Fund gets people out of jail when they can't afford bail.
- In 2020, donations to the MFF surged after the killing of George Floyd.
- Did MFF manage and disburse the new funds honestly and transparently?

A silhouette of a person sitting in a jail cell, looking out through a window with a grid pattern. The person's head is resting on their hand, suggesting despair or contemplation. The background is dark, with light coming from the window, creating a strong contrast.

# Bail

## A Broken System

Black people in Minnesota:

- 7% of total population
- 31% of prison & jail population

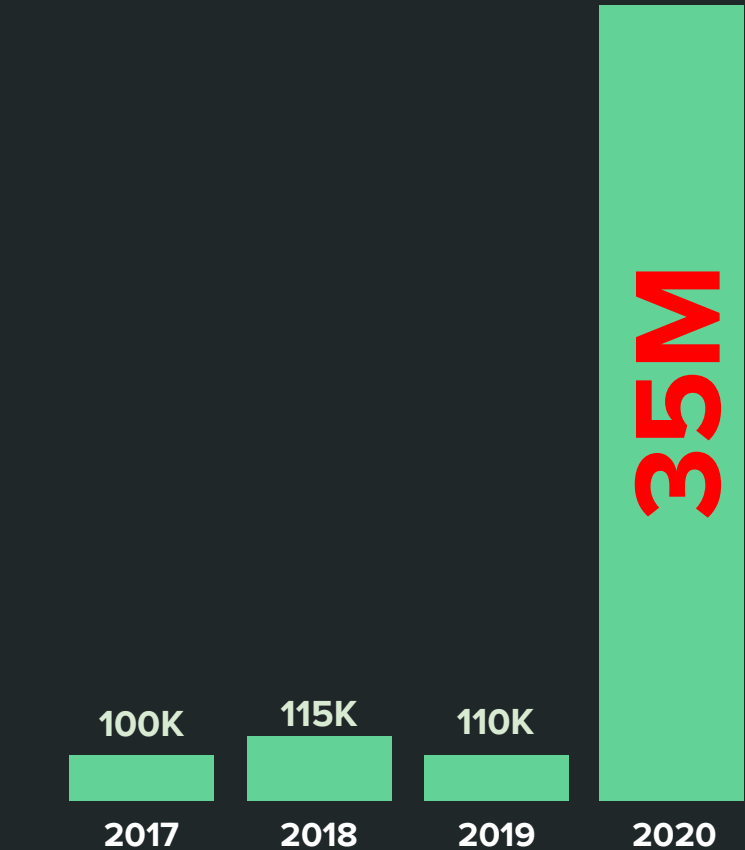
Indigenous people in Minnesota:

- 1% of total population
- 8% of prison & jail population

> 60% of incarcerated people are in pre-trial detention.

# Unprecedented giving

- Worldwide donor response to horrific events
- Message donating = many first-time donors
- Alone in its market segment



*Not to scale*

# “Stealing and Hoarding”

- Bail for protesters
- Bail for other detainees
- Long-term legal costs for ex-detainees
- Freedom bonds for immigrants detained by ICE

# Backlash

“The Freedom Fund... paid \$350,000 to bail out a twice convicted rapist, who is charged in two current cases with kidnapping, assault, and sexual assault.”

- National Review



**NATIONAL UNREST**



**GEORGE SOROS-BACKED ORGANIZATION 'MINNESOTA FREEDOM FUND' RELEASING MURDERERS, RAPISTS FROM JAIL**

# Backlash

“Kamala Harris helped violent rioters in Minnesota get out of jail to do more damage.”

- Sen. Tom Cotton





# Problems

- **Organizational capacity.** 1 full-time staff, 2 part-time.
- **Leadership issues.** Public concerns about staff integrity.
- **Bureaucracy.** Bail must be paid in cash, in person, and in exact change.
- **Donor expectations.** Where did MY money go?
- **Scammers.** Unscrupulous Venmo accounts to divert donations.

# Remedies

- **Executive director.** Search continues under an interim ED.
- **Communications coordinator.** Systematically manage public presence.
- **New staff.** Rid of questionable staffer; full vetting process.

# Amends

“We want to acknowledge and apologize for the harm that we caused to Native peoples and BIPOC communities in Minnesota by not doing our due diligence to be in the right relationship with those impacted by the harms of mass incarceration.”

“[N]ew leadership will help to heal and repair any damage to that trust, and deepen the organization’s commitment to its anti-racist work.”

Minnesota Freedom Fund  
Accountability Statement

# Discussion

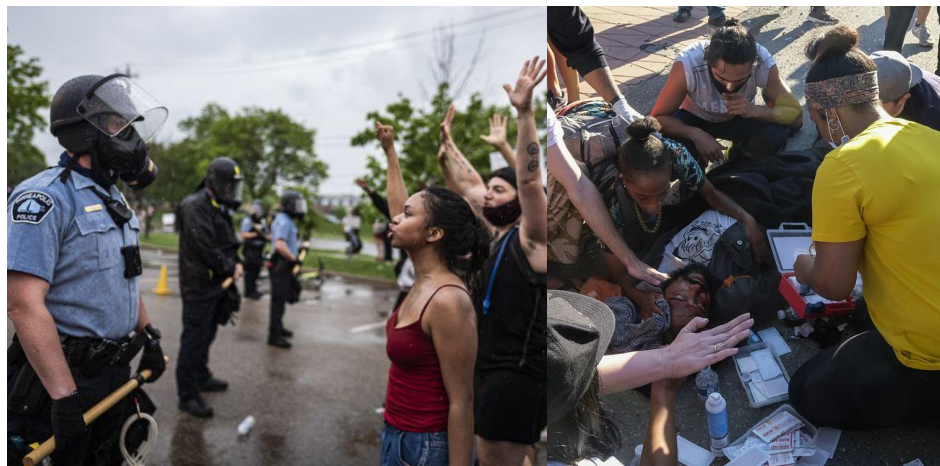
- What degree of responsibility was on the Minnesota Freedom Fund to thoroughly check the background of the full-time staffer who was later accused of misrepresentation and poaching?
- What would MFF have had to do to be fully prepared for the unexpected influx of funding and public attention that took place in 2020?
- Does MFF's short-term mission (minimizing pretrial detention) conflict with its long-term vision (the abolition of cash bail)? Are the two goals aligned? Why?

# Discussion

- How would you expect this episode to affect MFF's capacity to pursue either its short-term mission or its long-term vision going forward?
- What are MFF's responsibilities to other community organizations that are working on related or parallel issues?
- Imagine you are jailed and awaiting trial in Minneapolis on a felony charge, such as DUI or assault. How does MFF bailing out dozens of protesters affect your feelings about your own situation?

# For more information...

- **Minnesota Freedom Fund**  
<https://mnfreedomfund.org>
- **The Bail Project**  
<https://bailproject.org/>
- Paper: **The Hidden Costs of Pretrial Detention**  
<https://nicic.gov/hidden-costs-pret-rial-detention>



# Op. Cit.

- The Minnesota Freedom Fund Has \$30 Million and an Identity Crisis, New York Times, June 16, 2020:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/style/minnesota-freedom-fund-donations.html>
- Kamala Harris tweeted support for a bail fund, but the money didn't just assist protesters, The Washington Post, Sept. 3, 2020:  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/03/kamala-harris-tweeted-support-bail-fund-money-didnt-just-assist-protestors>
- Minnesota Freedom Fund Bails Out Violent Criminals Along With Protesters, National Review, August 11, 2020:  
<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/minnesota-freedom-fund-bails-out-violent-criminals-along-with-protesters/>
- University of Minnesota student takes on injustices in the bail system, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, April 5, 2017:  
<https://www.startribune.com/university-of-minnesota-student-takes-on-injustices-in-the-bail-system/418289153>
- Racial justice groups have never had so much cash. It's actually hard to spend it., Vox, June 19, 2020:  
<https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/6/19/21294819/minnesota-freedom-fund-donations-police-protests>
- The controversy over how the Minnesota Freedom Fund is spending its donations, explained, Fast Company, June 28, 2020:  
<https://www.fastcompany.com/90517597/the-controversy-over-how-the-minnesota-freedom-fund-is-spending-its-donations-explained>
- Minnesota nonprofit with \$35M bails out those accused of violent crimes, Fox 9 News, August 9, 2020:  
<https://www.fox9.com/news/minnesota-nonprofit-with-35m-bails-out-those-accused-of-violent-crimes>



# Disclaimer

The case study here analyzed is made for educational purposes only and it is based on publicly available documents. The case is publicly shared to advance the collective consciousness of the nonprofit social sector and to develop nonprofit ethical leadership practices. The case does not reflect an official position of the university toward the interested parties. Although formulated with sound academic and critical analyses methods, the case does not claim to represent the full realities of the organizations and people involved, especially in their most recent developments or internal remedies. For questions and concerns please contact the USF Office of General Counsel [generalcounsel@usfca.edu](mailto:generalcounsel@usfca.edu) or Dr. Marco Tavanti [mtavanti@usfca.edu](mailto:mtavanti@usfca.edu).