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Black Americans donate to make a difference

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - African American donors give away higher percentages of their incomes than white donors, according to a new study.

But they don't see themselves as big players in the charitable arena, and that presents an image problem, say experts like Judy Belk, a senior vice president for Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. "African Americans have been very uncomfortable with the title of philanthropist," Belk said. "If you don't see role models who look like you when people start talking about issues related to philanthropy, you start believing, 'Hey, maybe I'm not a philanthropist.'" Belk said she got so weary of hearing this that she helped produce a 12-minute video released in November, dubbed, "I Am A Philanthropist," which features diverse faces, races and ethnicities of donors and grant-makers. Despite the challenges presented by that image problem, blacks do play a major, growing role in philanthropic circles. Each year, black donors give away 25 percent more of their incomes than white donors, according to a report released last month by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

Nearly two-thirds of black households make charitable donations, worth a total of about \$11 billion a year, the report said.

The report cites black churches as a historically important repository of giving, but notes that other important causes are coming to the fore.

While religious giving was the largest charitable category overall, it leveled off in dollar terms in 2010, according to Giving USA, a Chicago-area foundation that publishes philanthropy data and trends. At the same time, contributions for the arts increased almost 6 percent, a trend that was consistent across all racial groups.

Identity-based giving is gaining momentum in the Latino, Asian American, Arab American, and Native American communities, according to the Kellogg report.

Black Americans have produced the steadiest growth of new identity-based charitable funds over the last four decades of any racial or ethnic group examined in the report. While 12 black funds existed in 1970, more than six times that number exist today. They award grants that range from \$1,250 to \$17 million, and they have a median annual grantmaking budget of \$35,000.

Belk said she is encouraged by the new findings, but added that much work needs to be done to connect blacks to resources that can help them strategize their philanthropic giving.

"It's confirmed what many of us who had our ear to the ground already knew," said Belk.

FINDING ISSUES THAT RESONATE She suggested that charitable organizations find bridges between black donors and issues that will resonate with them: Global health organizations, for example, could launch giving campaigns encouraging blacks to help fight AIDS in Africa, while environmental groups could work toward getting black donors to take on toxic pollution that affects minority communities.

"Many diverse donors say they are not seeing organizations reach out to them," she said. "I've heard fundraisers for environmental organizations assume that African Americans aren't interested. But a lot of organizations are missing an opportunity by not reaching out to this group." Charities can also make an effort to get involved with new websites that focus on the efforts of black philanthropists, she says. These include Millions Give Back, a campaign that's part of the Women's Funding Network and open to women with at least \$25,000 to give; and Black Gives Back, a chronicle of black philanthropy with a special focus on younger donors.

Belk said African-Americans give now "because we have been the beneficiaries of giving and generosity." Belk, who attended Northwestern University, received financial support from charitable donors and became the first generation in her family to go to college.

"One of the reasons that I give is that philanthropy has been so transformative in my own life," she said.

Others, such as Cheryl Pemberton of New York City, hope to set an example that blacks can follow. Pemberton is featured on Bolder Giving, a website that shares stories of people pledging significant percentages of their assets to worthy causes. With five sorority sisters, she started the Five Pearls Foundation to increase prenatal education and enhance youth and community development programs for underserved communities.

The philanthropic spirit, Pemberton said, is something she grew up with: "My mother was always teaching us about our history, encouraging us to be proud of our heritage and taking action against injustice. And my father was active in our neighborhood association and taking a stand on issues that affected the community." Another mode of giving is modeled by Woodrow Myers, Jr., a man so motivated to give that he packed up a hospital and shipped it halfway across the world.

A director at the Stanford University Hospital and Clinics and managing director of his own healthcare management company, Myers first visited Mozambique in 1988. Struck by the acute need for healthcare supplies there, he got his chance to do something big when the Robert F. Kennedy Medical Center in Los Angeles closed at the end of 2004.

Myers arranged to have the remains of that hospital shipped to Mozambique in three giant ocean containers. Those big boxes held beds, TVs, operating-room equipment, sterile surgical packs and pictures of Robert F. Kennedy.

Myers' son and daughter formed the Myers Family Foundation in 2006.

"It allows them to work with me, and to bring the family together," Myers said, adding, to "get your family involved and do it in a sustained way over time, that's so much better than just writing checks to whoever asks you for them, or dumping all your money in one place." Belk agreed, and said she believed that the future of African-American giving also boils down to a diversity in charities. As blacks

continue to expand the causes they give to and establish more funds and foundations, they'll no longer have to question their identity as philanthropists -- just the best ways to create commanding legacies of giving.

(Editing by Linda Stern and Andrea Evans)

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