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Deaconess Foundation Invests \$100,000 in NextGen Grantmakers, a Youth Participatory Grantmaking Initiative Powered by Vision for Children at Risk

ST. LOUIS – September 2, 2025 – [Deaconess Foundation](#) today announced its partnership with [Vision for Children at Risk](#) (VCR), an organization dedicated to promoting the well-being of youth and their families, to launch a transformative youth participatory grantmaking initiative – [NextGen Grantmakers](#) – aimed at placing funding decisions directly in the hands of young changemakers. This approach shifts traditional grantmaking power structures to youth—not just as beneficiaries, but as decision-makers—who will design, lead, and allocate grant funds to efforts that matter most to them and their communities.

VCR will guide the program through strategic facilitation, capacity building, and logistical support. NextGen Grantmakers will be led by a diverse cohort of youth, part of VCR's Youth Advisory Council, who will decide how to allocate the funds following training on equitable grantmaking practices. Together, they will manage the distribution of \$100,000 in grant funds to youth-led and/or youth-serving projects that prioritize equity, justice, and community impact.

"We believe young people carry wisdom and lived experience that our region urgently needs. We trust their voices, and we stand with the priorities they set," said Bethany Johnson-Javois, President and CEO of Deaconess Foundation. "By funding this initiative, we are not only championing youth-led solutions but also advancing the broader field's knowledge of the important role of intermediaries, community-stewarded funds, and participatory philanthropy."

Key features of the initiative include:

- **Youth-led Decision Making:** Grant decisions made entirely by youth.
- **Capacity Building:** Training and mentorship in grant evaluation, equity, and leadership.
- **Community-Centered Focus:** Supporting initiatives rooted in community needs and youth vision.
- **Transparent Process:** Open call for proposals, inclusive review, and public sharing of outcomes.

"Youth are not just the future – they are the present, and their voices are essential in shaping the change they want to see," said Sanaria Sulaiman, President and CEO of Vision for Children at Risk. "Through this youth-led initiative, our Youth Advisory Council members are leading with purpose, making funding decisions that directly impact their

communities. This is what true youth leadership looks like – authentic, informed, and driven by lived experience.”

“Serving on the Advisory Council has greatly shaped my perspective on connecting with my generation through meaningful, solution-driven conversations,” said Abraham Blue, VCR Youth Advisory Council (YAC) member. “Focusing on other youth through strategic planning has been at the core of my leadership, and YAC has embodied that vision. I truly appreciate the positive impact it’s making on the generation.”

The request for proposals for NextGen Grantmakers will open on Tuesday, September 2, 2025. Proposals must be submitted by Friday, September 26th, 2025, at 11:59 pm. Eligible organizations are serving youth ages 10-24 and proposing efforts in alignment with our three priority areas: (1) youth mental health, well-being & emotional intelligence, (2) safety programming for youth, and (3) youth leadership development & personal growth programming within Deaconess’ seven county footprint. Interested youth organizations and initiatives can learn more and apply at <https://deaconess.org/funding-opportunities/>.

About Deaconess Foundation

Deaconess Foundation envisions a community that values the health and well-being of all and gives priority attention to the most invisibilized. Deaconess seeks to create conditions where liberation is the lived reality within seven generations. A ministry of the United Church of Christ, Deaconess has invested more than \$100 million to improve the health of the St. Louis community since 1998. Our grants and cultivated relationships support the accelerated change in conditions through policy, advocacy, and/or organizing efforts building and wielding power to transform systems to respond to the will of the people.

The Foundation’s advocacy and grantmaking footprint includes St. Louis City, St. Louis, Jefferson, St. Charles and Franklin Counties in Missouri and Madison, St. Clair and Monroe Counties in Illinois. For more information, visit deaconess.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter and Instagram @deaconessfound and on Facebook at facebook.com/deaconessfoundation.

About Vision for Children at Risk (VCR)

Vision for Children at Risk is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the well-being of children, youth, families, and communities. For more than 30 years, we’ve worked to challenge and transform the deep-rooted inequities in our region’s systems, especially those that impact young people and those who care for them.

We believe that sustainable change starts by listening to those closest to the challenges. That’s why we center the voices, creativity, and leadership of youth and community

members in everything we do. Their lived experiences guide our work, spark new ideas, and inspire lasting solutions.

At VCR, we're committed to empowering families, uplifting communities, and creating spaces where young people are not just heard—but supported, included, and equipped to lead. Through deep collaboration, innovative thinking, and a relentless focus on equity, we work to ensure that every child and youth has the opportunity to thrive.

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