

A diverse group of people, including a Black man and a Black woman in the foreground, are clapping and smiling. They are in a community setting with bookshelves in the background. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, and the woman is wearing a white blazer and a striped skirt. Other people are visible in the background, also clapping.

Empowering Communities

A Renewed Approach to Community Organizing and
Philanthropy



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**Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing
can be changed until it is faced.**

-James Baldwin

Rapid Response Fund Guiding Principles	5
Chair's Reflection	6
Executive Summary	7
Key Findings	7
Recommendations	8
Community Voice	13
The Opportunity for Meaningful Change (Opportunity Statement)	15
The Engagement and Discovery Process	15
National Models	21
Designing A New Way	25
The People's Fund	26
Work of the People's Fund	38
Conclusion	42

Rapid Response Fund Guiding Principles

When the effort launched in 2020, these principles guided the work and were uplifted and integrated into the collective efforts.

1. Commit to Racial Equity
2. Influence through advocacy
3. Shared learning and measurement
4. Collaborate across sectors
5. Encourage innovation
6. Intentional community engagement

***Note**

The use of racial equity in this report is maintained to honor the work done to stand up the Rapid Response Fund. This work pre-dates the current political climate, executive orders and pending legislation that call for the removal or elimination of DEI related efforts and language from nonprofit organizations' work.

Rooted in Love, Powered by Possibility

A reflection on shared power, community brilliance, and what's possible when philanthropy follows the lead of those closest to the work

This body of work is rooted in collective movement grounded in wisdom, driven by love, and powered by possibility. It brings together bold practitioners who embrace the true meaning of philanthropy: “a love for all mankind.” What unfolded wasn’t just an initiative, it was a spark. A spark that lit the way for deeper partnerships, centering community voice, and a vision for philanthropy to deepen its roots in community.

What made this effort remarkable was not a fixation on fixing problems, it was the belief that greater impact comes from creating new possibilities. At its heart was the bold question: What happens when foundations share power—truly share it—with those closest to the work and the struggle? The answer? A surge of energy from urban blocks to rural roads, where people are shaping solutions with heart, wisdom, and lived experience.

Marcus Walton, President and CEO of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and a widely respected philanthropic leader, was invited to reflect on this report. He identified three strengths: the richness of cross-sector partnerships, the resonance of storytelling, and the strategic influence of philanthropy. We agree with Marcus and believe there’s a fourth: organizational culture that can see the values of a both/AND approach that lives in both transaction AND transformation and tradition AND innovation. We recognize the brilliance of what is and value the opportunity to do more.

This is a story of transactions and transformation. One sustains what’s working. The other dares to imagine what’s next. Together, they build a culture where failure isn’t feared, it’s fuel. Fuel for adaptation, learning, and the kind of bold action that uplifts communities and redefines what’s possible.

This work is amplifying brilliance in the places often overlooked—urban centers and rural pockets alike. And at its core, it reminds us that the greatest impact always begins with love—for people, for possibility, and for the future we’re building together.

While this report is grounded in the Cleveland context, we invite you to explore its lessons through your own lens. This kind of movement building and philanthropic innovation is possible anywhere. We welcome your feedback, your thought partnership, and your consideration—whether you are a funder, a nonprofit leader, or a changemaker looking to imagine what’s next.

— **Peter Whitt**

Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, Saint Luke’s Foundation

Chair, Civic Engagement & Nonprofit Advocacy Leadership Committee

Executive Summary

The Funders Collaborative on COVID Recovery-- rebranded as *The Greater Cleveland Funders' Collaborative (GCFC)* to reflect a broader commitment to advancing long-term, systemic change beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic, sponsored this research. Recognizing that equitable recovery must include policy reform and community power-building, GCFC established a **Policy and Advocacy Committee** to strengthen the capacity of foundation and nonprofit leaders, and grassroots community organizers to engage in effective advocacy and systems change.

Process & Participation

The Policy and Advocacy Committee became two workgroups: The Policy and Advocacy Workgroup and The Civic Engagement and Grassroots Advocacy Workgroup. The Civic Engagement and Grassroots Advocacy Workgroup, recognizing the need to include nonprofit advocacy leaders, added to the workgroup's moniker, renaming the committee **The Civic Engagement and Nonprofit Advocacy Leadership Committee**. This committee was composed primarily of grassroots organizers, nonprofit advocacy leaders, and philanthropic practitioners. Their leadership and lived experiences were central to every stage of the project.

Gradient: A Human Equity Think Tank was engaged by the Policy and Advocacy Committee to design and facilitate a stakeholder engagement process focused on reimagining how philanthropic dollars could more effectively support grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders. In addition to committee collaboration, we conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and hosted multiple focus groups with community organizers, nonprofit leaders, and policy influencers from across Greater Cleveland. This work culminated in the development of a conceptual framework rooted in equity, accountability, and authentic partnership.

Participants surfaced persistent tensions, systemic challenges, and relational dynamics that have historically shaped the relationship between philanthropy and the organizing/advocacy ecosystem. They also offered clear recommendations and bold visions for a more just and collaborative future.

Key Findings

- **Lack of Sustainable Investment:** Organizers and advocates reported inconsistent and insufficient funding, often tied to short-term projects rather than long-term systems change.
- **Power Imbalances:** Many participants expressed concerns about philanthropy's top-down approaches and decision-making processes that exclude those most impacted by the issues at hand.
- **Need for Trust and Relationship Building:** There is a deep desire to build mutual trust between grassroots leaders and funders, with an emphasis on healing past harms and co-creating future priorities.
- **Underutilized Community Expertise:** Organizers noted that their on-the-ground knowledge is often overlooked, despite being essential for informing effective public policy and systems change strategies.

Recommendations

- **Create a Dedicated Fund for Organizing and Advocacy:** Establish a permanent, flexible, and community-informed fund to support grassroots leaders and advocacy work aligned with racial and economic justice.
- **Shift Philanthropic Practices:** Encourage funders to invest in relationship building, provide multiyear general operating support, and explore participatory grantmaking models.
- **Strengthen the Infrastructure of Organizing Ecosystems:** Support capacity-building for organizations rooted in historically marginalized communities, especially those led by Black and Brown leaders.
- **Develop Shared Accountability Mechanisms:** Establish co-created metrics and evaluation strategies that reflect both community impact and movement-building goals.

By centering community expertise and fostering authentic partnerships, Cleveland has the opportunity to become a national model for equitable philanthropy—showcasing what is possible when organizers, advocates, and funders move in alignment. The **People's Fund framework** outlined in this report offers a bold vision and actionable pathway for transforming how philanthropic investments are made—honoring the leadership of those most proximate to injustice and best positioned to advance meaningful change.

This work builds upon Cleveland's rich legacy of community organizing and policy advocacy—reflected in foundational texts like Randy Cunningham's *Democratizing Cleveland: The Rise and Fall of Community Organizing in Cleveland, 1957–1985*. Cunningham's work offers an essential historical lens, capturing the momentum, challenges, and transformative potential of grassroots movements that shaped the city's civic landscape.

While *Democratizing Cleveland* serves as a critical reference to understand where we've been, the GCFC's work invites us to move from reflection to action. It is a living effort—an active response to the present moment—designed to catalyze post-pandemic resilience, advance equity, and expand philanthropy's role as a partner in community-led change.

We encourage you to explore both the GCFC report and *Democratizing Cleveland*. Together, they illuminate a powerful continuum—from the foundations of Cleveland's organizing tradition to the urgent, ongoing work of building a more just and inclusive future in Cleveland and across the nation.

In closing, this collaborative GCFC initiative has reaffirmed that community voice and grassroots advocacy are the lifeblood of systemic change. In the face of deep social reckoning and political headwinds—especially as philanthropic support for racial equity, which surged in 2020, is now declining in response to organized backlash (Schneider, 2023; Daniels, 2023)—renewed investment in organizing and policy advocacy is not just timely, but imperative. The proposed funding and collaborative leadership framework represent a bold yet pragmatic step forward; piloting it now would provide a powerful proof-of-concept opportunity that can be tested, refined, and scaled.

While this work is grounded in Cleveland's own organizing legacy—once described as a “vibrant activist culture” (Cunningham, 2007)—its relevance extends well beyond the region. In cities across the country, from midsize communities to large urban centers, this model offers a roadmap for repairing fractured trust, restoring alignment between philanthropic goals and community needs, and reinvigorating collaboration with grassroots leaders and nonprofit advocates.

This framework is a direct response to the deeply held convictions articulated by participants in this study: that centering community voice, cultivating authentic partnership, and committing to sustained, equity-driven investment are essential to transforming philanthropy's role—from that of a traditional gatekeeper to a strategic ally in the pursuit of justice. Cleveland stands uniquely positioned to reclaim its leadership as a national exemplar, offering a replicable and scalable model for community-driven transformation at a moment of profound social and political urgency.

If we really want to foster the freedom of self-determination, I believe Philanthropy must invest directly in the people it intends on uplifting. I firmly believe to achieve optimum success; the people must be hands-on in addressing the problem as the drivers of engagement and service delivery.

As a colleague of Timothy Tramble, President and CEO at Saint Luke's Foundation, I have seen firsthand how deeply he embodies community-centered leadership. In reflecting on his experience, he shared:

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“After more than 20 years leading a Community Development Corporation, one lesson I carried forward is the importance of listening to, and elevating, community voices. At Saint Luke's Foundation, this practice is central to our organizational culture and grantmaking strategy. But I've also learned this: not every community stakeholder or group come to the table free of bias or with a willingness to put the greater good above personal interests. Sharing power requires discernment, social dexterity, trust, and an unwavering commitment to center those most impacted. It isn't easy and can get messy, but when done by reputably credible messengers, by far, it produces more favorable long-term outcomes.”

Background

The Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund (RRF) was established in March 2020 to respond to pressing needs laid bare by the global pandemic. It was designed to complement the work of public health and other public-sector agencies and to expand nonprofit capacity to respond to the health, safety, and basic needs of residents throughout the region. RRF raised and distributed more than \$20 million in grants to more than 675 nonprofit groups and organizations in Cuyahoga, Lake, and Geauga counties.



“The Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund (RRF) consists of grantmaking professionals from multiple funding organizations that are focused on continuing to administer pooled fund dollars to support frontline, nonprofit organizations in meeting immediate needs of people most affected by the Coronavirus pandemic.”

In September 2021, the RRF became the Funders' Collaborative for Covid Recovery (FCCR) expanded its scope beyond basic needs to include nonprofit resiliency, long-term recovery, and coronavirus vaccine uptake.

The partnership has expanded to include nearly 50 philanthropic foundations, nonprofits, and government entities, all united in their mission to stabilize the region and drive long-term recovery. With a strong focus on distressed communities, low-income individuals, and those with critical or chronic health conditions, the RRF aims to support those most vulnerable to the pandemic's health and economic impacts.

The FCCR was an unprecedented effort that leveraged relationships among several foundations including the Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, and the Saint Lukes Foundation. These foundations along with other funding partners raised and allocated resources to invest in ongoing efforts.

The first two phases of the work addressed the immediate needs of Clevelanders as the community navigated the COVID-19 Pandemic. A desire to address disparate impact and to use lessons learned from a major collective funding effort, led the collaborative to invest in additional initiatives to benefit Cleveland.

Building on the work of the initial accomplishments, funding partners shifted their focus from rapid response grantmaking to long-term COVID recovery, using resources to:

- Increase vaccine access and uptake
- Address homelessness
- Advocate for long-term policy change to promote economic well-being and equity
- Support grassroots advocacy efforts
- Build resilience in the nonprofit community

A Workgroup Focused on Community

Whose Voice Is Missing?

In 2021, the GCFC recognized the pivotal role community engagement plays in driving shared learning and achieving equitable outcomes. A workgroup focused on community was launched. Tracy Carter, Adrienne Mundorf, and Peter Whitt elevated the need to focus on grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders as valuable voices, absent from the effort to support Cleveland's long-term recovery.

The workgroup evolved into a committee led by Adrienne Mundorf (previously of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland), and Peter Whitt, VP Strategic Partnerships, Saint Luke's Foundation.

A Survey of Needs

The Sisters of Charity Foundation and The Saint Luke's Foundation collaborated to create and disseminate a survey of needs to grassroots leaders. 22 respondents completed the survey, providing valuable insights. Here's what the survey revealed

- Grassroots leaders must be compensated for their time, expertise, and contributions.
- Smaller organizations need more financial support to sustain organizing and advocacy efforts.

The Policy and Advocacy Committee

The Policy and Advocacy Committee evolved to address two critical issue areas essential for successful long-term recovery:

- 1) Advocating for policy change that drives economic equity and well-being.
- 2) Supporting grassroots advocacy initiatives.

Peter Whitt, VP, Strategic Initiatives, Saint Luke's Foundation and Jeanine Gergel of Foundation Management Services, were appointed to lead the GCFC Policy And Advocacy Committee. Two working committees emerged.

The Policy and Advocacy Workgroup, led by Jeanine Gergel, focused on building the philanthropic sector's capacity to engage with policy issues. The work of this group led to the creation of the NEO Policy Lab in partnership with the Center for Community Solutions.

The Civic Engagement and Nonprofit Advocacy Leadership Workgroup, led by Peter Whitt, worked to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had been excluded and underserved. This committee championed the idea of a platform for people from disadvantaged backgrounds and experiences to influence the actions of engaged funders.

Under Peter Whitt's leadership, The Civic Engagement and Nonprofit Advocacy Leadership Committee grew to include:

- **Dionne Huffman, Saint Luke's Foundation**
- **Khalilah Worley, Greater Cleveland Congregations**
- **Zulma Zabala, The Center for Community Solutions***
- **Erika Anthony, Cleveland Votes**
- **Donavan Young, The George Gund Foundation**
- **Joe Black, The Cleveland Foundation**
- **Trevelle Harp, Neighborhood Leadership Institute**

Each member brought distinct expertise spanning nonprofit advocacy leadership, philanthropy and grantmaking, community organizing, and justice-centered advocacy. Collectively, these leaders shaped the vision, informed the strategic direction, and advanced the core principles that underpin this conceptual model for reimagining community-led philanthropy focused on policy and advocacy.



Community Voice



Philanthropies should invest in long-term, authentic relationships with community leaders and organizers. This includes providing opportunities for shared learning, regular consultations, and co-designing solutions.

-Community Leader

The Opportunity for Meaningful Change (Opportunity Statement)

Equity remains elusive as the normal way of life for many. Foundations and other funders rely on program teams to assess and advocate for those most impacted by persistent disparities.

Cleveland has limited grassroots, human-centered mechanisms to elevate the policy-change efforts advocated for by community and nonprofit leaders who are proximate to, and center lived experiences of those most impacted by disinvestment.

As evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, philanthropy could become more effective by building deep and transformational relationships with the people for whom day-to-day issues can be relieved by their philanthropic influence and actions.

The Engagement and Discovery Process

The stakeholder voices that informed this design process include nonprofit advocacy leaders, community organizers, and funder.

Nonprofit advocacy leaders

Leaders who adequately represent communities' lived experiences of oppression, inequality, and inequity. Leaders who citizens respect and are naturally inclined to follow. They may be able to serve as an expert and provide testimony or insight on specific policy issues that could need to be changed. They hold leadership roles within nonprofit organizations.

Community organizers

Organizes on the ground level, knocking on doors and "pounding the pavement" to get community buy-in and awareness around an issue.

Funders

Philanthropic leaders, individual donors, and corporate, private, and community philanthropy members. Program officers, boards, and other stakeholders.



A Conceptual Model for Philanthropy to Support Community Organizing

This initiative was guided by the shared belief of community members, philanthropy leaders, grassroots community organizers, and nonprofit advocacy leaders that philanthropy must evolve to foster deeper, more inclusive, and equity-centered partnerships with communities. Through this exploration, we surfaced key insights that shaped both the conceptual model and the action steps that follow. These insights reflect the lived experiences and strategic perspectives of those working in philanthropy and those closest to community priorities—and, most importantly, the voices of the communities they serve.

Themes and Recommendations

1. Easier Access to Resources for Community Issues

Communities often face barriers in accessing resources necessary to address their unique challenges. One of the primary frustrations expressed by stakeholders is that access to philanthropic support is too complicated and opaque. Organizations and individuals working on the ground often struggle with time-consuming application processes, unclear funding priorities, and a lack of transparency in how decisions are made.

Recommendations:

- **Simplify Application Processes:** Create clear, streamlined, and less bureaucratic grantmaking processes. This includes moving towards online portals that provide easy navigation and transparent criteria.
- **Proactive Funding Strategies:** Rather than waiting for communities to apply for grants, funders can adopt a more proactive stance, reaching out to community organizations to understand their needs and provide tailored resources.
- **Flexible Funding Models:** Provide flexible funding models that respond to the dynamic needs of communities allowing for adjustments as situations evolve. This could include multi-year funding and unrestricted grants that give organizers the freedom to use funds where they are most needed. The Satterberg Foundation has successfully implemented a trust-based philanthropy model. See the [Satterberg Foundation's work here](https://satterberg.org/). (<https://satterberg.org/>)

2. Desire for Meaningful Relationships with Philanthropy

Communities want philanthropy to go beyond just providing financial support and instead focus on building genuine and lasting relationships. This means actively engaging with community members, listening to their needs and concerns, and working together to find sustainable solutions. By building trust and partnerships with communities, philanthropy can better understand the complex issues facing these communities and provide more effective support.

Moreover, communities want to be seen as equal partners in the philanthropic process rather than just passive recipients of charity. They want to have a say in how funds are allocated and be involved in decision-making processes. This not only empowers communities but also ensures that their needs are being met in a way that is respectful and culturally sensitive. By prioritizing meaningful relationships, philanthropy can create a more equitable and collaborative approach to addressing social issues.

Philanthropic leaders acknowledge the valuable opportunity to connect with and cultivate relationships with community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders, many of whom remain outside their existing networks.

Recommendations:

- **Engagement Beyond Grantmaking:** Philanthropic organizations should invest in long-term, authentic relationships with community leaders and organizers. This includes providing opportunities for shared learning, regular consultations, and co-designing solutions.
- **Community Voice in Decision-Making:** Establish advisory boards or working groups that include community leaders to help shape the priorities and strategies of philanthropic organizations. This ensures that funding priorities align with the actual needs of communities and not just the interests of funders.
- **Transparent Communication:** Develop consistent and open channels of communication to create trust. Regular updates, feedback loops, and open forums for discussion can strengthen the bond between philanthropic organizations and communities.

3. Philanthropy's Obligation to Understand and Support Community Organizing

Community organizers are often on the frontlines, facing systemic challenges, and they need more than just financial support—they need recognition of the strategic, long-term nature of their work. The research indicates that philanthropy must move beyond traditional forms of grantmaking and adopt a deeper commitment to understanding and supporting community organizing as a crucial component of social justice.

Recommendations:

- **Education and Training for Funders:** Philanthropic organizations should invest in educating their staff and decision-makers about the nuances of community organizing. This could include training on the value of grassroots organizing, its challenges, and its long-term impact on social change.

- **Support for Community Organizing as a Field:** Funders can help elevate the status of community organizing by recognizing it as a legitimate and important profession. This might include offering grants specifically for training, capacity building, and professional development for community organizers.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Philanthropy can encourage collaboration between organizers, government, business, and other sectors to create a more holistic approach to community development and social change.

4. Respect and Support for the Vocation of Community Organizing

There is a growing recognition of the need to respect and support community organizing as a professional vocation. Research indicates that community organizers often face low pay, lack of benefits, and inadequate resources, which undermines their ability to do the work effectively and sustainably. For organizing to thrive, organizers must be compensated fairly and provided with the necessary resources to succeed.

Recommendations:

- **Competitive Salaries and Benefits:** Philanthropy can advance the economic mobility of community organizers. By advocating for and funding organizers and nonprofit organizations at levels that reflect the importance and complexity of their work. This could include advocating for salary standards and providing grants that cover staff compensation
- **Resource Allocation for Organizing Infrastructure:** Funders should support the infrastructure of community organizations, by providing grants for tools, training, and operational support. This ensures that community organizers have the resources they need to effectively mobilize, educate, and advocate for their communities.
- **Recognition of Organizing as Professional Work:** A concerted effort must be made to position community organizing as a respected and professional field. This could include establishing career pathways, certifications, and professional networks that support organizers' career development.

5. A Reset of the Historical Relationship Between Philanthropy and Community Organizers

- Historically, the relationship between philanthropy and community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders has been strained. Funders have often viewed organizers with skepticism or as temporary players in the social change landscape. Community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders, in turn, have felt the pressure of relying on funders who may not fully understand or appreciate their work.

Grassroots leaders conveyed the importance of resetting this relationship to ensure that philanthropy provides resources specifically for organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders to work on policy advocacy issues. This approach should be reflective of and driven by the needs prioritized by the community. Philanthropic investments in programs and policy and advocacy efforts will support deeper transformation creating conditions for people to thrive where they live, work, and play.

Recommendations:

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“Philanthropic entities must understand that community organizing is essential to fostering sustainable social change.”

-Community Member

Stakeholder Interview and Focus Group Participants

- Joe Black, Cleveland Foundation
- Dionne Huffman, St. Luke's Foundation
- Peter Whitt, St. Luke's Foundation
- Khalilah Worley Billy, Greater Cleveland Congregations
- Charde Hollins, Relevant Connections
- Andrew Katusin, The Cleveland Foundation
- Donovan Young, Fowler Family Foundation
- Tom O'Brien, Neighborhood Connections
- Letitia Lopez, Julia De Burgos
- Erika Anthony, Cleveland Votes
- Shawn Brown, Humane League
- Erika Brown, Neighborhood Connections
- Jonathan Welle, Cleveland Owns
- Bree Easterling, Policy Matters
- Jose Cabrera, Young Latino Network
- Zulma Zabala, Center for Community Solutions
- Joi Carter, Neighborhood Connections
- Fred Ward, The Khnemu Foundation
- Angela D'Orazio, Homeless Services





National Models

National Models of Shifting Power and Investing in Community Leadership

National Models of Shifting Power and Investing in Community Leadership

As we conducted research for this project, several national institutions emerged as powerful examples of how philanthropy can shift power, resource equity, and uplift the leadership of grassroots organizers and nonprofit advocates. While not exhaustive, this list reflects a growing movement among foundations that are reimagining their roles—not as distant funders, but as collaborative partners in systemic change.

From participatory grantmaking frameworks to long-term, trust-based investments in movement infrastructure, institutions such as Borealis Philanthropy, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, The California Endowment and The Woods Fund Chicago, and are leading efforts to center community voice, share decision-making power, and build sustained capacity within communities. Their approaches challenge traditional philanthropic norms and affirm that those closest to the challenges are best positioned to drive meaningful, lasting solutions.

The People's Fund model, developed organically through the insights and experiences of Northeast Ohio organizers, advocates, and philanthropic leaders, reflects this same ethos. It stands as a local manifestation of a broader national shift—a bold, community-centered approach that contributes to the growing body of work redefining how philanthropy can align with justice, equity, and transformational partnership.

The following summaries highlight the missions of these foundations and their commitments to advancing this work. We acknowledge that many others are engaged in similar efforts across the country.

Borealis Philanthropy

Our Approach

Directly affected communities are the essential creative force in the larger arc of social change, and we've built Borealis Philanthropy from the ground up as a vehicle to resource these communities.

Borealis Philanthropy directs resources to people building powerful, thriving communities that serve all of us, with those most impacted by injustice leading the way. We invest in leaders, organizations, and movements using diverse and innovative strategies to pursue transformational change, and we work with donors to support movements in ways they may not be able to do on their own. Through our work with both funders and grantee partners, we aim to shift power and invest in communities.

Learn more about Borealis Philanthropy here: [link](#)

Maguerite Casey Foundation

Shifting Power. Powering Freedom.

It's not enough for communities to be merely represented in our economy and democracy — they must be powerful enough to shape them. Marguerite Casey Foundation helps community leaders gain the freedom they need to lead, so their communities can gain the power they need to change how society works.

Learn more about Marguerite Casey Fund here: [Marguerite Casey Foundation](#) | [Home](#)

The California Endowment

The California Endowment's mission is to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians.

With smart grant making—which we call “change making”—good leadership, and people power, we believe we can make the state of health in California better for all. We don't focus on prescriptions.

People Power

Developing young and adult leaders to work intergenerationally to raise up the voice of marginalized communities and promote greater civic activism as essential building blocks for an inclusive, equitably prosperous state.

Learn more about The California Endowment here: [Our Story - The California Endowment](#)

Woods Fund Chicago

Fighting For Racial Justice

Woods Fund Chicago approaches all facets of our work with a foundation of racial justice. We are committed to funding community organizing and public policy advocacy that advances racial equity and economic justice. We firmly believe that the people most impacted by structural racism and economic injustice should lead the process of defining problems and developing solutions. Our work centers BIPOC voices, leadership, and organizing. We are devoted to disrupting white supremacy culture, confronting power, redistributing resources, and creating systemic transformation for real change.

Learn more about Woods Fund Chicago here: [Woods Fund Chicago](#)



Designing A New Way

The People's Fund (Conceptual Model)

The People's Fund

A Transformative Practice for Civic Engagement

The People's Fund is a transformative practice designed to elevate grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders as expert collaborators in shaping a new model for policy and advocacy support within the philanthropic ecosystem.

By formally recognizing these leaders as trusted advisors and co-creators, the framework repositions community voice and expertise as central to philanthropic decision-making. Through structured collaboration with funders, these leaders will bring critical community-level insight to bear on strategy development, policy design, and issue advocacy—fostering deeper trust, greater transparency, and authentic community engagement.

The People's Fund presents a forward-looking model for catalyzing community-driven policy outcomes. It enables philanthropic institutions to align more closely with the lived realities of the communities they serve, advancing more equitable and sustainable impact across Northeast Ohio.

The People's Fund is a working title for the model that was developed with community and philanthropic input.

Developing The People's Fund North Star

Any transformative project should define a noble purpose- a north star. As you begin to absorb the ideas and ideals of this effort, we submit for your consideration the following north star.

The People's Fund is the practice used by philanthropic institutions to reimagine traditional power dynamics by actively partnering with grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders. Through shared decision-making and targeted resource alignment—both financial and strategic—funders are advancing policy and advocacy efforts that drive equity-centered outcomes.

This approach strengthens the philanthropic infrastructure and establishes a scalable model for values-aligned collaboration.

Building Upon Philanthropy's Legacy

The People's Fund as a Model for Community-Driven Change

For generations, philanthropy has played a crucial role in uplifting communities, addressing systemic inequities, and providing resources to support social progress. Foundations, charitable trusts, and high-net-worth individuals have funded transformative initiatives in education, healthcare, economic development, and social justice. These investments have led to meaningful change, improving the lives of millions through scholarships, workforce development programs, small business support, and critical social services. The generosity and commitment of philanthropic organizations have provided stability and innovation in times of crisis and opportunity.

Yet, while philanthropy has achieved tremendous impact, there remains a unique opportunity to **expand its role by shifting power directly into the hands of communities**. Traditional models of giving often prioritize funders' strategic interests over grassroots needs, unintentionally limiting the agency of those most affected by systemic challenges. The **People's Fund** seeks to build upon philanthropy's strong legacy while pioneering a **more intentional, community-centered approach** that experiments with a process to share decision-making power and resources with local leaders, advocates, and organizations. Ultimately, a new way of funding will emerge that is representative of a shared power structure.

This model is not about replacing philanthropy but enhancing it—**aligning resources with lived experience, local expertise, and grassroots innovation**. By embedding community members into the leadership, policy and advocacy, and funding processes, the People's Fund creates **a more dynamic, responsive, and sustainable philanthropic ecosystem**. This shift allows for deeper investments in **policy and advocacy, leadership development, and systemic change**, ensuring that funding is not only a means of support but a tool for long-term transformation.

Through this **power-sharing approach**, the People's Fund will help shape policies that reflect community priorities, drive advocacy led by those most affected, and create sustainable, generational impact. It represents a profound evolution of philanthropy—one that recognizes that true progress happens when communities have the **resources, autonomy, and leadership capacity to drive their own solutions**.

The People's Fund is a community-focused concept designed to redefine philanthropy by positioning grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders as expert collaborators in shaping policy and advocacy support. By embedding those closest to the issues as thought leaders and decision-makers, this model fosters a new era of trust, transparency, and community-driven impact within the philanthropic ecosystem. This approach acknowledges that **grassroots leaders are not just beneficiaries but essential architects of change**—leveraging deep community insights to influence funding strategies, shape advocacy initiatives, and drive systemic policy reform.

This model creates space for authentic partnerships with philanthropic leaders, and aligns investment with lived experience, ensuring that civic engagement efforts are not just well-funded but truly transformative.

If implemented, this framework would **catalyze a shift toward more, community-driven** philanthropy.

A demonstration pilot is essential to validate the model and establish proof of concept. This will require targeted investment in both financial capital and capacity-building resources. To support early implementation and institutional readiness, the model calls for a strategic incubation partner to house and steward the effort.

A **Community Stewardship Council**—comprising trusted community leaders and philanthropic stakeholders—will be established to provide governance, ensure accountability, and guide strategic direction.

To support implementation and generate meaningful insights, an 18- to 24-month pilot phase is recommended. This timeframe will allow for structured execution of the proposed funding framework, real-time learning from community and organizational experiences, and iterative refinement of strategies. The pilot is intentionally designed to surface early outcomes, evaluate the impact of philanthropic investments in grassroots organizing and nonprofit advocacy, and produce actionable data to inform the long-term scalability and sustainability of this community-centered funding model.



Shift Power to
Share Power

There's an Extensive New Guide to Sharing Power in Philanthropy. Will Funders Take Its Advice?

Mike Scutari | November 21, 2023



The Power Factor

For too many, power is something that happens to them—not with them. Decisions are made in boardrooms relying on a single perspective, often far from the lived experiences of the people those decisions affect most. And when that happens, philanthropy can start to feel distant, disconnected from the real hopes and challenges of our communities.

If we're serious about sharing power, then we have to start by being honest about where power currently resides. That means acknowledging it, confronting it, and then committing to shift it—so that decision-making becomes a shared endeavor, not a top-down directive. When power is shared, transparency grows, trust deepens, and the outcomes we seek—equity, justice, opportunity—start to take root in the lives of those who need it most.

- The People's Fund provides a space where funders, community organizers, and non-profit advocacy leaders can work together to build power, collaborate, organize, advocate, and fund community voice.
- This framework will sustain existing philanthropic efforts and catalyze a shift toward more opportunities for community-driven philanthropy.

Shift Power to Share Power

This visual illustrates the transition from a traditional philanthropic model to one grounded in shared power and community partnership.

Isolated Relationships

Current Relationship



Change Process



Formalized Collaborative Relationships

Funders shift policy/advocacy and grantmaking power to organizer and non-profit advocacy leaders.



Change Process



Authentic Relationships + Co-Production = Greater Impact

New framework for a community-driven philanthropic approach to policy and advocacy.





You can't talk about equity and not talk about money. Do for us what you are doing for the large organizations that already have the money but are not doing the work--give us the money.

Community Leader



Activating the Model

Actions and Expected Outcomes

To bring this model to life, a strategic and intentional activation process will ensure that community voices are centered, relationships are cultivated, and systemic change is advanced. This approach leverages **narrative-building, relationship development, education, advocacy, and funding** to create a more community-driven model of philanthropic support for policy influence.

- **Building Relationships & Trust** – The foundation of this model is **strong, authentic relationships** between community leaders, philanthropic institutions, and grassroots organizations. By fostering trust and open communication, we create a dynamic ecosystem where power is shared, and decisions are informed by lived experience.
- **Education, Training & Advocacy** – Providing **education, training, and advocacy support** ensures that community members and grassroots leaders are equipped with the knowledge and tools to engage in policy conversations, influence decision-making, and build long-term capacity for systems change. Additionally, opportunities for philanthropic leaders to share the legal structural limitations, grant-making policies, and other operational norms can be realized.
- **Funding & Grant-Making** – Shifting funding models toward **more participatory, community-led grant-making** ensures that resources are allocated based on the priorities and needs of those most affected by systemic inequities. This approach **prioritizes flexibility, sustainability, and trust-based philanthropy** to maximize impact.

Pilot Implementation

Establish a leadership, team, and advisory council structure to activate this model effectively, and implement the following steps:

1. **Funding Partners** – a pooled fund to ensure sustainability.
2. **Hire a Lead Organizer** – to serve as the **primary connector between community voice, community stewardship council, and philanthropy**. This individual will engage stakeholders, coordinate efforts, and ensure that community priorities are reflected in funding and advocacy efforts.
3. **Leverage a Nonprofit Incubator** – **to serve as the fiscal sponsor** and back-office support for the project, providing administrative infrastructure while ensuring the work remains community-centered.
4. **Community Stewardship Council**- This community stewardship council is a collaborative, community-rooted council that provides a mechanism for checks and balances between the lead community organizer and team and the project. Serving as an advisory body and a bridge between philanthropy and community, the role of the council is to ensure that resources are distributed with equity, transparency, and alignment to the needs, priorities, and leadership of the communities being served.
5. **Launch & Learn** – The lead organizer will manage this initiative, collaborating with other partners to document insights, best practices, and challenges throughout the process. This iterative approach will allow for continuous refinement, ensuring that the model evolves based on real-time learnings and community feedback.

By activating this model through **relationship-building, education, advocacy, and intentional grant-making**, we can shift traditional philanthropic structures toward a **more equitable, community-led approach** that drives sustainable change.

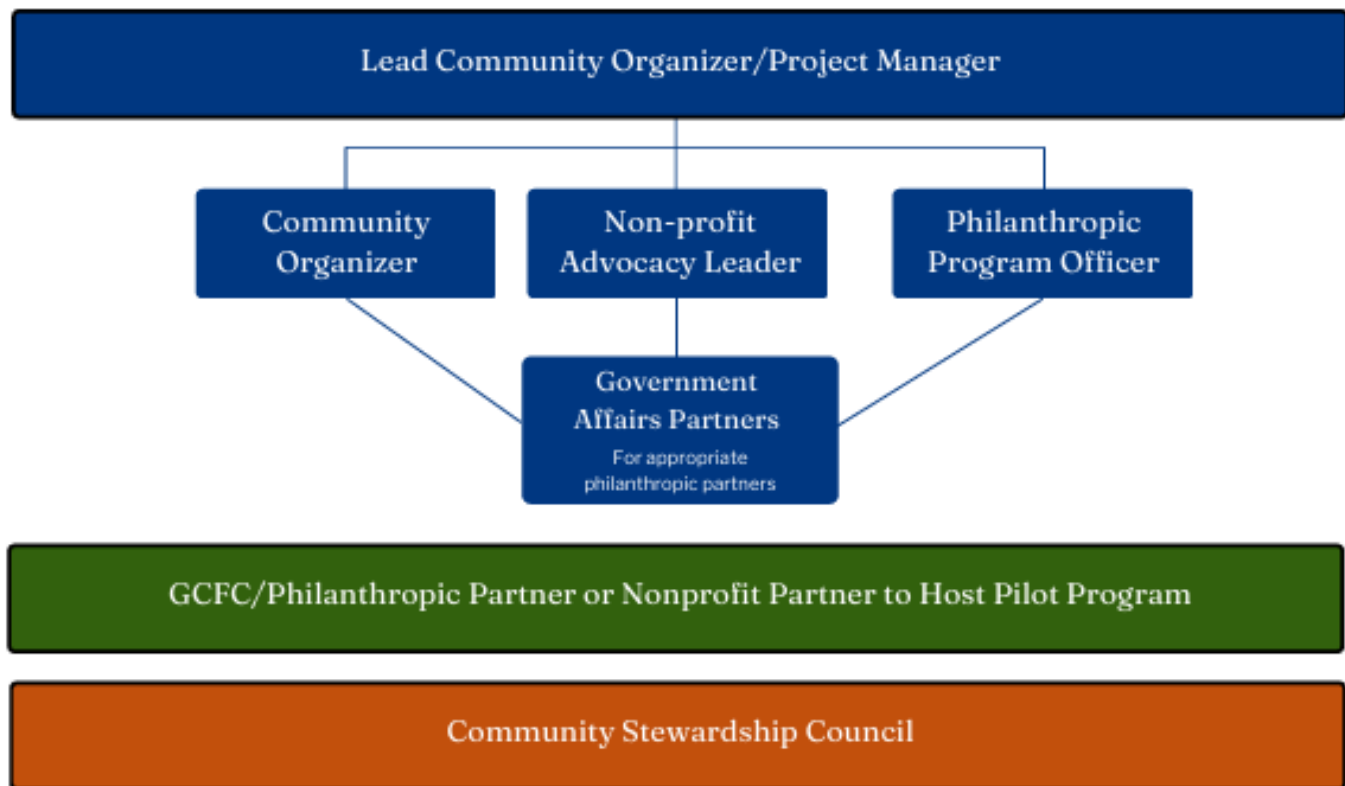
Organizational Structure: A Collaborative and Community-Centered Approach

The organizational structure of this initiative is designed to **prioritize community voice, streamline operations, and foster sustainable impact**. At its core, this model integrates **leadership, operational support, and an iterative learning process** to ensure alignment between philanthropy and community-driven solutions.

- **Lead Organizer** – Serves as the primary **connector between community voice, philanthropic partners, and the community stewardship council**, ensuring that grassroots insights directly inform funding, policy, and advocacy efforts. The **Lead Organizer work full-time**, and be compensated at a level that reflects **local, state, and national market wages and benefits**.
- **Community Organizer & Nonprofit Advocacy Leader Fellows** – Emerging leaders from the nonprofit and advocacy sectors will participate as time-limited fellows (12-18 months with an optional extension provision), providing critical community engagement and policy and advocacy expertise.
- **Philanthropic Program Officer Fellow (Loaned Executive Model)** – A **philanthropic professional will participate a fellow, leveraging a loaned executive model**, to learn policy and advocacy organizing and agenda development skills from the community perspective. This will foster deeper alignment between funding institutions and community-driven priorities.
- **Nonprofit Incubator** – Provides **administrative and back-office support**, allowing the Lead Organizer and fellows to focus on relationship-building and engagement while ensuring fiscal accountability.
- **Government Affairs Partner** - will play a strategic and advocacy-focused role in supporting the fund. This partner will help to deepen relationships between philanthropic donors, nonprofit advocacy leaders, and community organizers. Their work will help align the fund's impact with policy influence, public sector engagement, and long-term systems change.
- **Community Stewardship Council** - shared decision-making, thought-partnership, strategic planning, fundraising, and creating a shared policy and advocacy agenda that aligns with community voice and philanthropic partners' priorities.
- **Learning Partner** – Captures **learnings from the design and operation** of the model, refining best practices and creating a blueprint for scalable community-led funding and advocacy efforts.

The organizational structure depicted on the following page illustrates a collaborative leadership model that includes a Lead Organizer responsible for overall project management, alongside key roles such as a Grassroots Community Organizer, a Nonprofit Advocacy Leader, a Foundation Program Officer, and a Government Affairs Partner focused on capacity building. Funders and a Community Stewardship Council are also integrated to ensure alignment, accountability, and shared decision-making throughout the initiative.

Organizational Structure



Organizational Structure

Lead Organizer/Project Manager

- This role is ideally suited for a community organizer with at least 5 years of experience.

Community Organizers and Non-profit Advocacy Leaders

- 24-month fellowship or employment.

Philanthropic Program Officer

- 12-month loaned executive program to develop community organizing and policy and advocacy skills and knowledge.

Government Affairs Partners

- Provide government affairs training/coaching.

GCFC/Philanthropic Partners/Host Organization

- Funding and back-office support.

Community Stewardship Council

- Community voice, leadership, and accountability.

Salary Proposal and Comparison

(US workforce data as of 2024)

Lead Community Organizer/Project Manager

Recommended salary: \$120,000.00 per year, plus benefits

Lead Community Organizers typically earn higher salaries than entry-level Community Organizers, reflecting their advanced responsibilities and experience. Here's an overview of average salaries for Lead Community Organizers in Northeast Ohio and comparable U.S. cities: **Cleveland, OH:** \$59,773 per year.

- **Columbus, OH:** \$117,683 per year, which is 11% above the national average for this role.
- **Atlanta, GA:** \$124,509 annually, about 17% higher than the national average for this position.
- **National Average:** \$106,096 per year.

Community Organizer and Nonprofit Advocacy Leader Fellows

Recommended salaries: \$90,000.00 per year, plus benefits

Typical salaries for grassroots community organizers range from less than \$30K per year to just shy of \$70K per year. Benefits are not typically included. Stakeholders who weighed in on this project highlighted higher wages and benefits as an essential outcome of a reimagined model of community-centered philanthropy. Here are salary comparisons local to Northeast Ohio and beyond:

- **Cleveland, OH:** \$29,887 - \$33,207 per year
- **Columbus, OH:** \$58,842 - \$65,379 per year
- **Atlanta, GA:** \$62,255 - \$69,172 per year
- **National Average:** \$53,048 - \$58,942 per year

Philanthropic Program Officer (in-kind) salary:

Program officer salaries vary significantly across institutions. This model introduces a loaned-executive fellowship structure, in which program officers participate as peer fellows alongside grassroots community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders. Participants retain their full employment status with their home organizations and continue to receive their existing compensation during the fellowship. Compensation levels are aligned with prevailing salaries for program officers at the local, state, and national levels, ensuring equity and consistency across the collaborative.

A woman with long dark hair and glasses, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, stands in a meeting room. She is pointing her right hand towards a whiteboard. The whiteboard is covered with numerous colorful sticky notes (pink, yellow, orange) arranged in a structured manner. In the foreground, there is a white table with several laptops, notebooks, pens, and a small potted plant. The background shows a window with blinds and a large 'X' drawn on the wall.

Work of the People's Fund

Relationship Building

Convene collaborators

- Convene community organizers, non-profit advocacy leaders, and philanthropic partners including emergent pooled funding efforts, to begin relationship-building and shared visioning work.
- Facilitate a process that delivers shared learning and mutually agreed upon opportunities for organizers, non-profit advocacy leaders and funders to collaborate.

Bridge community interests and funders' policy initiatives

- Develop a shared agenda to leverage existing work of foundations to further policy outcomes.
- Create a shared learning process that supports co-production of new initiatives and fosters mutuality.

Build partnerships with community organizing entities

- Lead community organizer/project manager will cultivate partnerships with organizing entities such as Cleveland Votes/Democracy Collective, NEO Policy Lab, GCC, Neighborhood Connections, Young Latino Network, Urban League, NAACP, Building Freedom Ohio, and others.
- Synthesize learning from the policy and advocacy eco-system and identify priority issues lifted by organizations and citizen-voice to ensure community needs are not lost in translation.

Education, Training, and Advocacy

Support a policy and advocacy learning exchange

- Lead Organizer will collaborate with the **NEO Policy Lab** for philanthropy and community organizing.

Activate the Community Stewardship Council

- With results from early community organizing actions, lead organizer makes recommendations to the community stewardship council and funding partners on pooled fund distributions for organizing/policy initiatives.

Increase the number of fellowship positions

- Increase the number of positions available for:
 - grassroots community organizers
 - non-profit advocacy leaders
 - philanthropic program officers

Provide professional development

- Provide opportunities for community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders to deepen knowledge of grantmaking practices, and funding partners' priorities and capabilities.
- Create opportunities for philanthropic program officers to develop deeper knowledge of community organizing.
- People's Fund Fellows will participate in curated professional development opportunities, which will also be made accessible to community organizers, nonprofit advocacy leaders, and philanthropic program officers outside the formal fellowship cohort.

Grow government affairs fluency

- Community organizers and nonprofit advocacy leaders will expand government affairs skills and practices through mentoring and capacity building with government affairs partners.
- Fellows will work with government affairs staff at foundations and other funding partner organizations.

Funding and Grantmaking

Create a pooled fund and fund development plan

- Organizers collaborate with GCFC and other funding partners to create a community-led funding mechanism operated collaboratively by partners, organizers and non-profit advocacy leaders, and community members.

Establish Community Stewardship Council

- The community stewardship council is established as the primary advisory council.

Grantmaking

- Distribute resources to fellows to activate community organizing work directly from The People's Fund.
- Co-produce grant-making strategies and processes with funding partners.
- Fellows and lead organizer share grant-making plans with the Community Stewardship Council.

Conclusion

Philanthropy is at a crossroads. To truly support community organizing and contribute to meaningful social change, it must evolve from a funding model based on control and hierarchy to one that embraces collaboration, transparency, and long-term investment in the people and processes driving social justice. By addressing these outcomes—simplifying access to resources, building meaningful relationships, supporting community organizers professionally, and resetting the historical dynamic—philanthropy can help create a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future. This blueprint is an invitation to philanthropies to be bold, visionary, and responsive in their efforts to support those who are on the frontlines of social transformation.

Looking Ahead

While GCFC was the catalyst and incubator for this important exploration of the relationship between community organizing and philanthropy in Northeast Ohio, we now have a foundation from which this initiative can be activated in Northeast Ohio and beyond. We invite other funders and collaborators to continue building and investing in this model.

For more information about The People's Fund model or to join the conversation about community-led philanthropy, contact:

Peter Whitt, Vice President, Strategic Initiatives

Saint Luke's Foundation | www.saintlukesfoundation.org

email: pwhitt@stlukesfdn.org

phone: (216) 577-1906

This report was produced by:

- Gradient A Human Equity Think Tank | www.gradientthinktank.com
- Peter Whitt, Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, Saint Luke's Foundation
- Members of the Policy and Advocacy Committee

Citations

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