



Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement

Table of Contents

Introduction: Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement	3
10 Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement	5
1 ELEVATE LOCAL VOICES	8
2 BUILD A TRULY INCLUSIVE TABLE	9
3 BUILD TRUST-BASED AND RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS	10
4 RECOGNIZE RELATIONSHIPS THAT ALREADY EXIST	11
5 BUILD LOCALLY CONTROLLED ASSETS	12
6 RESPECT NATIVE SOVEREIGNTY WHEN WORKING IN TRIBAL AREAS	13
7 APPROPRIATELY MEASURE AND SHARE IMPACT AND CHANGE	14
8 EMBED PRINCIPLES IN THE FUNDER'S WORK, SYSTEMS AND CULTURE	15
9 RECOGNIZE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES	16
10 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND EACH OTHER	17
Appendix A: Defining Rural with an Equity Lens	18
Appendix B: Principles in Action Case Stories	21
Maine Health Access Foundation	22
El Pomar Foundation	24
Pride Foundation	26
Con Alma Health Foundation	28
Elmina B. Sewall Foundation	30
St. David's Foundation	32
The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation	34
T.L.L. Temple Foundation	36
Roundhouse Foundation	38
The Northwest Area Foundation	41
The Blandin Foundation	44
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation	46
Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque	48
The Just Transition Fund	50
Appendix C: Equitable Rural Narratives Guide	52
Appendix D: Funder Engagement Model Landscape Assessment	55

Introduction: Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement

Effective rural philanthropy **challenges** preconceptions about rural communities; **acknowledges** the historic and continuing marginalization, exclusions and/or disenfranchisement of rural people of color; **recognizes** the value of place to its residents; focuses on building from within; **emphasizes** impact over scale; and **prioritizes** equity, trust-building and co-creation with local partners. The following Principles intend to serve as a framework for funders beginning their engagement with rural communities.

United Philanthropy Forum (Forum) envisions a just and equitable society where all individuals, regardless of geography, race, gender, disability, or background, have the opportunity to participate and prosper. Our commitment to rural equity is rooted in fairness, inclusion, and access, ensuring that marginalized, rural-based communities receive the resources, investment, and recognition they deserve. This work does not discriminate nor promote unfair treatment based on any individual characteristics; rather, it seeks to dismantle systemic barriers and foster equitable prosperity for all.

For more information on defining rural and rural equity in your area, consider applying these tools. We recommend partnering with your [*local Philanthropy-Infrastructure Organization \(PIO\)*](#) to best apply and adapt the following principles for the unique contexts of rural communities you serve and evolving socio-political landscapes.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE*:

This Guide is for both the nearly 100 Philanthropy-Infrastructure Organizations (PIOs) that are Forum members and their more than 7,000 funder members. Clearly, there are different kinds of philanthropic funding organizations – public vs. private and varied in size, focus, processes, and culture. Similarly, PIOs are diverse and fall into two categories. National PIOs focus on funding issues, population or identity groups, philanthropic practices, and/or different types of funders. Regional PIO members are associations and networks focused on a specific geographic region within the US and its territories, varying in size from a metro area like NYC, a state like Minnesota, or multiple states like the Pacific Northwest. Typically, funders and PIOs have different roles and functions. Funders focus on making grants to tax-exempt non-profit organizations as well as educate, advocate, and convene stakeholders and constituents. PIOs focus on providing the forums and sometimes content to inform, shape, inspire, and mobilize their own funder members, providing a safe and trusted space for inquiry, learning, and testing.

Sometimes funders and PIOs do similar work, particularly those PIOs serving defined geographic communities. For example, both have developed a grant-writing resource hub and advocacy toolkit to help rural communities engage with state and federal programs or facilitate training for staff on tribal communities' historical and cultural dynamics. Some things funders do – e.g. establish a consistent presence in a specific rural community by attending local events, meetings, and gatherings. Some things primarily PIOs do – e.g. facilitate regular forums and discussions among philanthropic organizations to identify joint funding opportunities and reduce duplicated efforts or provide a platform for collaborative funding approaches and learnings.

Our Guide encompasses a set of ten principles to guide philanthropic practice in rural communities, each illustrated by examples of activities to advance these principles. Some of these activities are relevant to both funders and PIOs but some are primarily directed at PIOs and some at funders. It depends on the funder, the PIO, and the unique environment in which you work. The Principles emphasize accountability and impact measurement as essential for driving equitable and trust-based engagement.

Thanks to the Forum's PIO Working Group, National Coalition for Responsive Philanthropy, Grantmakers for Southern Progress, Allen Smart at PhilanthropyRx, Deborah Warren, Maeve Goldberg, Community-Based Rural Leaders that participated in focus groups, and FSG for their contributions of concepts and languages.

The Principles were developed from 2022 to 2024 and thus do not reflect the current Administration's federal funding freeze, which impacts philanthropy as a sector as well as nonprofit and PIO partner's work. We hope PIOs and funders can continue to draw on this Principle's guidance to reduce siloing and increase collaboration both within and beyond the sector, and that the Principles can help inform ongoing advocacy work and engagement with state and local governments.

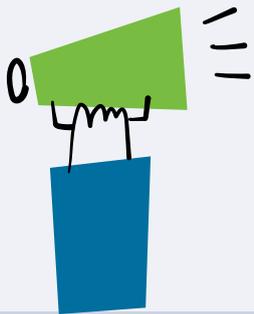


10 Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement

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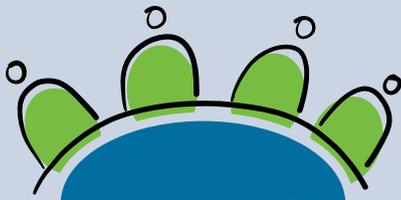
ELEVATE LOCAL VOICES

Listen, learn, and unlearn from authentic rural leaders, particularly from Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, as well as other under- or unrepresented groups, and from those with local lived rural experience. They are trusted and can articulate how identity, history, and politics combine to suppress the power and prosperity of their communities. Don't assume they are well connected to existing political, economic, and philanthropic power structures. They can help funders appreciate a community's history, understand how change happens and how communications flow.



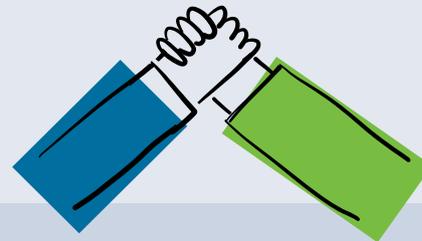
BUILD A TRULY INCLUSIVE TABLE

Search out unfamiliar partners. Reconsider the presence of traditional partners and consider investing in non-traditional organizations and informal structures. Don't look for your typical grantee/partner with formal education, nonprofit management capacity and an established 501(c)(3) structure.



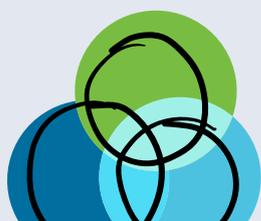
BUILD TRUST-BASED AND RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Focus on building trust, knowing that it can take years of work. Many rural communities are distrustful of outsiders and wary of local leaders who profess to represent the entirety of the community. Seek out leaders that embody the multiple perspectives that exist. Acknowledge that power and privilege undermine trust within the community.



RECOGNIZE RELATIONSHIPS THAT ALREADY EXIST

Search out existing networks before attempting anything new -- networks of collaboration, resource sharing, and co-strategizing. Don't create funder driven collaboratives that ignore what already exists.



BUILD LOCALLY CONTROLLED ASSETS

Invest to build locally anchored, sustainable assets. Account for the centuries of wealth extraction and the concentration of assets in metropolitan areas. Resource communities in ways that build local capacity and power, and enable them to develop solutions that actualize their aspirations. Work within a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity of resources and build on local pride of what was and a vision of what can be.



6

RESPECT NATIVE SOVEREIGNTY WHEN WORKING IN TRIBAL AREAS

Recognize the sovereignty and power of tribal nations, the unique legal and political powers that they bring, and the complex set of identities that tribal members simultaneously wear.



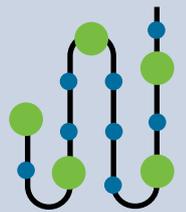
APPROPRIATELY MEASURE AND SHARE IMPACT AND CHANGE

Seek outcomes and benchmarks that reflect the scale, time frame, and aspirations of this rural community. Don't come with an urban lens of "bigger/more is better," as that may not be applicable in a rural context. This may look like deprioritizing quantitative measures in favor of qualitative, embracing the need for longer-term investments, and co-creating indicators of success with community.



EMBED PRINCIPLES IN THE FUNDER'S WORK, SYSTEMS AND CULTURE

Institutionalize language and behaviors within your philanthropic organization that internalize the regard for and respect of rural people and places. Reevaluate how all RFPs are worded; your efforts to hire diverse, inclusive, equity-driven and competent staff; the choices of where to meet and convene; and how your communications implicitly/explicitly value/devalue rural places.



RECOGNIZE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Recognize the long standing and critical contributions that immigrants and refugees make to rural communities, invest in their visions and organizations, and encourage rural communities to welcome these new members.



BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND EACH OTHER

Build partnerships in the public sector, recognizing that local, state, and federal resources are critical to rural communities, but that government is often constrained by regulations, match requirements, and siloed funding.



1 Elevate Local Voices

Listen, learn, and unlearn from authentic rural leaders, particularly from Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, as well as other under- or unrepresented groups, and from those with local lived rural experience. They are trusted and can articulate how identity, history, and politics combine to suppress the power and prosperity of their communities. Don't assume they are well connected to existing political, economic, and philanthropic power structures. They can help funders appreciate a community's history, understand how change happens and how communications flow.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. INVESTING in consistent, long-term community presence and engagement: Sufficiently reaching authentic rural leaders requires a deeper level of investment and commitment.

A. Funders can... Show up at community events, knock on doors, use mailers/fliers, ad/inserts, and paper surveys and other methods for reaching under-connected populations; or, fund grassroots groups that do this.

B. Funders can... Fund initiatives that prioritize long-term, consistent presence in rural communities, allowing time to build authentic relationships and trust with local leaders.

2. ESTABLISHING safeguards for rural leaders to safely share their lived experience: There can be social and resource-based penalties ... to doing so in rural communities due to entrenched power imbalances. Navigating potential danger to vulnerable populations is critical.

A. Funders can... Build responsive, intuitive, and anonymous feedback mechanisms to mitigate safety risks for community leaders and immigrant populations.

B. PIOs and funders can... Adopt risk assessment protocols when engaging with immigrant leaders, with a dedicated practice of safety concerns in areas with high immigrant populations.

3. PRIORITIZING safety and inclusivity when choosing meeting spaces:

A. PIOs and funders can... Hold meetings in trusted, locally relevant venues, with transportation assistance and other essential services provided.

B. PIOs and funders can... Develop a definition of equity and inclusion in language that resonates with the local realities. Diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions can be framed as more inclusive opportunities for all.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

Rural leaders are empowered and willing to share their experiences without fear of repercussions.

Conversations with funders and PIOs lead to actionable changes driven by community input.

Leaders and community members report feeling included, safe, and valued in the process.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

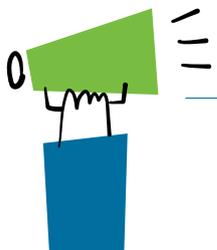
*Maine Health Access Foundation
(Case Story)*

*El Pomar Foundation
(Case Story)*

*St. David's Foundation
(Case Story)*

*Roundhouse Foundation
(Case Story)*

*Northwest Area Foundation
(Case Story)*



2

Build A Truly Inclusive Table

Search out unfamiliar partners. Reconsider the presence of traditional partners and consider investing in non-traditional organizations and informal structures. Don't look for your typical grantee/partner with formal education, nonprofit management capacity and an established 501© (3) structure.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **IDENTIFYING, SUPPORTING, AND RESOURCING** underpaid or unpaid rural leaders: Rural leaders working to advance equity in their communities are often doing so unpaid or underpaid and without the professional training that typically allow traditional leaders access to resources and networks.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Invest in capacity-building stipends, mentorships, and networking opportunities for rural equity leaders working without compensation.
 - B. **Funders can...** Build compensation into funding models for rural leaders contributing to project work, acknowledging their time and expertise.
2. **BUILDING** pathways for non-traditional leaders to access funding opportunities long-term: Rural leaders may lack formal training in grant writing and nonprofit management training, access to technology or internet, and may experience language barriers.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Offer technical assistance in grant writing, digital access, and hold in-person workshops in communities with limited broadband connectivity or language barriers.
 - B. **Funders can...** Develop user-friendly application processes, including phone consultations, simple proposals, and alternative formats for rural leaders without grant-writing experience.
3. **CHAMPIONING** rural leaders as essential partners: Such leaders' perspectives are invaluable, and philanthropy has the resources to identify, include, and grow those leaders.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Host events featuring rural leaders, emphasizing the unique value and expertise they bring, and engaging other potential funders to celebrate community successes and advocate for further philanthropic investment.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Publicly credit rural leaders for their work and ideas.
 - C. **PIOs and funders can...** Ask who is not in the room, especially when meeting with traditional funded leadership and representatives.
 - D. **PIOs and funders can...** Host meetings and convenings in locations central and accessible to the communities they are serving.
4. **OFFERING** wraparound services to facilitate participation and collaboration: Remove barriers to community members participation and ensure accessible, welcoming, and expanding engagement to community members who have been historically excluded.
 - A. **PIOs and Funders can...** Provide translation/interpretation services, transportation, training, food, confidentiality, and stipends for community engagement activities to ensure leaders can participate and feel supported.
 - B. **Funders can...** Provide funding specifically earmarked for training, translation/interpretation, transportation, and other essential services to make community engagement accessible and inclusive.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- New and emerging rural leaders are engaging with funders and PIOs, gaining visibility, and building their capacity to access philanthropic resources.
- Funded projects include budget lines for sufficient rural leadership compensation.
- Increased grant applications are submitted from rural leaders without formal nonprofit management experience, as tracked by the diversity of applicants and applications.
- Applications from non-traditional organizations and leaders increase, with positive feedback on the ease of the process.
- Rural leaders report a stronger sense of inclusion, with an increase in partnerships with funders for community-led initiatives.
- Increased and diversified community participation in collaborative initiatives and meetings because barriers have been removed (transportation, childcare, food, etc.).

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

Pride Foundation
(Case Story)

Sewall Foundation
(Case Story)



3

Build Trust-based And Reciprocal Relationships

Focus on building trust, knowing that it can take years of work. Many rural communities are distrustful of outsiders and wary of local leaders who profess to represent the entirety of the community. Seek out leaders that embody the multiple perspectives that exist. Acknowledge that power and privilege undermine trust within the community.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **BEING ACCOUNTABLE** for the disconnect and lack of trust between philanthropy and rural communities due to historical harms and power imbalances: Funders need to explicitly acknowledge to themselves and their constituencies that investments have not reached communities equitably, and examine why.
 - A. **Funders can...** Share the scope of their understanding of this problem with community, commit to addressing it, and offer a plan with tangible steps for doing so.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Convene regular listening sessions with rural community leaders and nonprofits to hear their experiences and examine where and why philanthropic investments have fallen short.
 - C. **PIOs and funders can...** Undergo internal training for all staff on power dynamics and historical inequities in philanthropy. Publicly acknowledge missteps and facilitate a feedback loop for rural communities to confidentially assess progress.
 - D. **PIOs and funders can...** Include accountability statements in written work and communications, outlining specific actions taken to repair trust and ensure equitable engagement with rural communities.
2. **CO-CREATING** a durable definition of trust with communities: Trust can mean funders consistently showing up, following through, or adjusting communication practices, but it will differ based on the unique needs of each community.
 - A. **Funders can...** Engage rural communities in defining what trust looks like in practical terms, incorporating their input into formal trust-building plans with concrete actions and timelines.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Develop and adopt protocols to ensure marginalized communities receive proper credit when their ideas are shared. Introduce co-authored reports or presentations in collaboration with community members.
3. **FACILITATING** transparent, two-way communication and creating space for truth-telling: Making intentional space for bidirectional understanding, expectations, and truth telling to build trust.
 - A. **Funders can...** Organize regular, structured truth-telling sessions with community partners to allow for open discussions about expectations, challenges, and the building of mutual trust.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Partner with trusted intermediaries (i.e. community nonprofit workers) who can mediate visits between PIOs, funders and communities to build trusting relationships.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- Funders and communities can communicate a shared definition of trust responsive to both parties.
- There is increased transparency in communications, with PIOs and funders reporting on the disparities in funding and corrective actions taken, reflecting growing trust from rural partners.
- There is clear attribution of community work and ideas in PIO and funder communications.
- A clear, upward trend in funding reaching its intended recipients in rural communities.
- Community partners report that funders are taking steps toward healing past harms, as reflected in long-term, cooperative funding relationships.
- Communities report feeling that their voices are heard and valued, with feedback loops resulting in tangible changes to funder practices.
- Funders and communities regularly engage in truth telling sessions resulting in clearer expectations and greater alignment for shared goals.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

Con Alma Health Foundation (Case Story)

Maine Health Access Foundation (Case Story)

Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation (Case Story)

4

Recognize Relationships That Already Exist

Search out existing networks before attempting anything new -- networks of collaboration, resource sharing, and co-strategizing. Don't create funder driven collaboratives that ignore what already exists.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **INVESTING IN AND COMMITTING TO** in-person engagement: The best way to understand existing efforts and initiatives within rural communities is by showing up in person, building relationships, listening, and learning from those living there.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Commit to regular in-person visits and relationship-building activities in rural communities. Develop regionally- or community-specific plans to foster local connections.
2. **IDENTIFYING, INVESTING IN, AND COLLABORATING** with existing networks and coalitions:
 - A. **Funders can...** Prioritize partnerships with local PIOs and grassroots networks to leverage existing knowledge and resources, avoiding duplication of efforts by:
 - i. Actively mapping community networks, key stakeholders, and ongoing initiatives before initiating any programs. Developing outreach strategies that reflect this knowledge.
 - ii. Asking lots of questions and listening to the answers.
 - iii. Regularly consult local community foundations to stay informed about existing initiatives. Establish formal collaboration agreements with local entities to ensure alignment with community needs.
 - iv. Engage directly with local stakeholders to ensure rural-specific assets are leveraged, avoiding reliance on resources that are rural-adjacent.
 - v. Direct funding toward strengthening established networks and coalitions, and support community-led initiatives over starting new ones.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Be observers first. Look for where the community is already gathering for support - faith-based leaders and organizations are often prominent examples of these spaces.
 - C. **PIOs can...** Provide a platform for collaborative funding approaches and learnings. This can look like organizing peer learning sessions with other funders to understand previous investments in the region and incorporate these insights into funding strategies.
 - D. **PIOs and funders can...** Utilize state nonprofit associations to navigate rural landscapes and identify potential collaborations with existing efforts.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- PIOs and funders have a clearer understanding of local community dynamics, leading to increased engagement and feedback from rural communities.
- Funders receive reports from PIOs on existing initiatives, and collaboration becomes more streamlined and intentional (this may be more relevant for national PIOs).
- There is improved coordination between funders and thus reductions in duplicated or competing efforts.
- Efficient and effective connections between funders, PIOs, and rural communities, lead to smoother, more coordinated projects.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

*Sewall Foundation
(Case Story)*

*St. David's Foundation
(Case Story)*

*Philanthropy Colorado's
experience with collaborative
funding approach.*

*Exponent Philanthropy's
Catalytic Leadership in
Philanthropy (CLIP)*

5

Build Locally Controlled Assets

Invest to build locally anchored, sustainable assets. Account for the centuries of wealth extraction and the concentration of assets in metropolitan areas. Resource communities in ways that build local capacity and power, and enable them to develop solutions that actualize their aspirations. Work within a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity of resources and build on local pride of what was and a vision of what can be.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **PRIORITIZING** capacity-building for grassroots organizations:
 - A. **Funders can...** Shift funding models to prioritize investments in infrastructure, staffing, leadership, and operational growth for rural organizations, ensuring they are equipped to lead projects without external agents.
2. **ENGAGING** in sustained, long-term rural investments: Ensure that promising projects and initiatives are supported from the project's fruition to completion and do not leave the organization in lower capacity than when the project began.
 - A. **Funders can...** Collaborate with rural communities to identify and invest in local assets and strengths.
 - B. **Funders can...** Support community-organizations to access diverse and independent funding streams, reducing reliance on philanthropic support.
3. **FUNDING** as close to the need as possible:
 - A. **Funders can...** Create hyperlocal investments by connecting directly with community leaders and grassroots organizations to channel resources where they are most needed.
 - B. **Funders can...** Resist always defaulting to larger organizations as fiscal agents without engaging grantees. Explore the benefits and challenges with grantees themselves on the use of fiscal agents, ensure alignment with their goals, and co-create a decision.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- Grassroots organizations report an increase in internal capacity, including new hires or the development of infrastructure, reducing dependency on external fiscal agents.
- Funders track long-term organizational growth in rural communities, including new infrastructure or organizational capacity that extends beyond project timelines.
- Community organizations report decreased reliance on philanthropic funding over time, with more sustainable and diverse income sources established.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

Harry and Jeannette Weinberg Foundation (Case Story)

T.L.L Temple Foundation (Case Story)



6

Respect Native Sovereignty When Working In Tribal Areas

Recognize the sovereignty and power of tribal nations, the unique legal and political powers that they bring, and the complex set of identities that tribal members simultaneously wear.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **WORKING** within tribal structures: There are unique leadership and social structures within tribal communities that philanthropy must understand and work with.
 - A. **Funders can...** Engage directly with tribal leadership and governance structures, following protocols set by the community and ensuring that all decisions are community-led.
2. **COMMITTING** to self-education on historical and cultural dynamics:
 - A. **Funders can...** Secure board buy-in for funding projects that respect tribal sovereignty, emphasizing the long-term commitment needed for success.
 - B. **Funders can...** Encourage board members to participate in learning and/or training sessions about Native sovereignty.
 - C. **PIOs and funders can...** Facilitate training for staff on the historical and cultural dynamics specific to each tribal community they work with, including understanding past harms and unique governance structures.
3. **PLANNING** for long term relationship-building and lasting change:
 - A. **Funders can...** Prioritize extended timelines, with compensation, for project planning to allow for meaningful relationship-building with tribal communities before initiating any programs or partnerships.
 - B. **Funders can...** Design funding strategies that include long-term investments in tribal communities.
 - C. **Funders can...** Establish a consistent presence in the community by attending local events, meetings, and gatherings. Lead with humility, patience, and consistency.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- Tribal communities report feeling respected in decision-making processes, with clear acknowledgment of their sovereignty.
- Projects and initiatives show stronger trust and collaboration from tribal partners, with early engagement translating into long-term partnerships.
- Funders consistently renew or extend grants for tribal initiatives, with tribal communities expressing trust in the process and funders' long-term commitments.
- Funders build credibility with tribal leaders and communities through consistent, respectful engagement.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

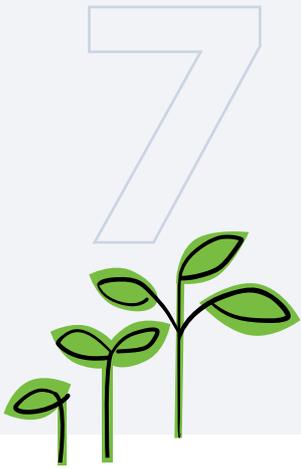
Roundhouse Foundation (Case Story)

Northwest Area Foundation (Case Story)

Native Americans in Philanthropy

Whitener Group Indian Country 101 training module on working with tribal communities.





Appropriately Measure And Share Impact And Change

Seek outcomes and benchmarks that reflect the scale, time frame, and aspirations of this rural community. Don't come with an urban lens of "bigger/more is better," as that may not be applicable in a rural context. This may look like deprioritizing quantitative measures in favor of qualitative, embracing the need for longer-term investments, and co-creating indicators of success with community.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **PRIORITIZING** transparency in rural giving data reporting: A lack of publicly accessible sufficient rural giving data poses a major challenge in rural equity work. Philanthropic entities often underreport or misreport where their dollars are flowing which hinders advocacy efforts at the state and federal levels for rural investment.
 - A. **Funders can...** Commit to publishing detailed annual reports on rural funding allocations.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Improve data reporting quality by integrating best practices and standards from philanthropic data reporting organizations.
 - i. Create buy-in/prioritization from senior leadership.
 - ii. Build broad organizational awareness of participation in data sharing (multiple staff trained and tasked with reporting).
 - iii. Live into values of transparency.
 - iv. Ensure sufficient internal capacity re: systems and staff.
 - C. **PIOs can...** Provide education and training on data reporting for members and connect funders to third party reporting organizations.
2. **ENGAGING** community measures of success in data:
 - A. **Funders can...** Co-create evaluation frameworks with community input to prioritize relevant qualitative and quantitative success indicators.
3. **FACILITATING** knowledge sharing networks for data and reporting: Philanthropy can uniquely advance rural equity by accurately reporting their giving data and sharing learnings back with the communities they serve and with other philanthropic entities.
 - A. **Funders can...** Share their data publicly.
 - B. **PIOs can...** Facilitate data knowledge sharing networks for funders, communities, and other PIOs.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- There is an increase in the clarity, coverage, accessibility, and level of funding data shared publicly.
- Collaborative forums are established for funders, PIOs, and communities to exchange insights, best practices, and data leading to more informed and effective rural investments.

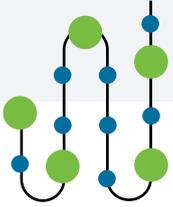
EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

*Blandin Foundation
(Case Story)*

8

Embed Principles In The Funder's Work, Systems And Culture

Institutionalize language and behaviors within your philanthropic organization that internalize the regard for and respect of rural people and places. Reevaluate how all RFPs are worded; your efforts to hire diverse, inclusive, equity-driven and competent staff; the choices of where to meet and convene; and how your communications implicitly/explicitly value/devalue rural places.



WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **PRIORITIZING** funder exposure to rural communities through site visits: Site visits are an essential first step towards challenging harmful and false mainstream narratives (i.e. 'rural is a white monolith') and embracing new organizational systems and cultures of practice.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Offer funding for communities to develop itineraries and host site for visitors so they can best reflect their environments, successes, and needs.
 - B. **PIOs can...** Commit to getting funders to site visits and supporting communities with logistics.
2. **SOLICITING** continuous feedback on the grantmaking process:
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Convene nonprofit leaders, create a safe environment without fear of repercussions, and seek live feedback.
3. **PLANNING** accessible meetings and convenings: Know your audience, community members may not have the resources to show up to meetings or feel comfortable in meetings spaces.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Plan meetings with attention to accessibility and capacity.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:



Funders invest in and regularly attend site visits organized by rural communities, allowing them to showcase their strengths and practices.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

*Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
(Case Story)*

9

Recognize The Contributions Of Immigrants And Refugees

Recognize the long standing and critical contributions that immigrants and refugees make to rural communities, invest in their visions and organizations, and encourage rural communities to welcome these new members.

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

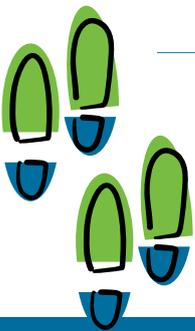
1. **USING** philanthropic resources and power for positive PR: Philanthropy can provide education and outreach support to help communities understand what unique populations of immigrants and refugees exist locally. Using asset-based language, philanthropy can uplift and advocate for the needs and contributions of immigrant and refugee populations that the general public does not normally see.
 - A. **Funders can...** Highlight the contributions of immigrants and refugees to specific rural communities, using storytelling to shift narratives.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Engage with local schools, colleges, universities, and libraries to educate communities about immigrant contributions and services.
2. **INVESTING** in case management and mental health services for immigrant and refugee populations:
 - A. **Funders can...** Fund training programs for community members to become mental health facilitators, focusing on destigmatizing mental health and offering culturally competent services to immigrant populations.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Engage with interfaith groups to connect people and services.
 - C. **PIOs and funders can...** Invest in affinity-group human service organizations (i.e. Latine led and serving organizations).
 - D. **Funders can...** Connect with local libraries and K-12 schools who are often first stops for connecting immigrant populations to services.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- There is increased engagement of immigrant and refugee populations with community organizations.
- New case managers and other community services providers are trained with culturally-centered practices.
- There is increased public awareness of immigrant contributions and support.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (Case Story)



10

Build Partnerships With The Public Sector And Each Other

Build partnerships in the public sector, recognizing that local, state, and federal resources are critical to rural communities, but that government is often constrained by regulations, match requirements, and siloed funding.

***Reminder:** The Principles were developed from 2022 to 2024 and thus do not reflect the current Administration's federal funding freeze, which impacts philanthropy as a sector as well as nonprofit and PIO partner's work. We hope PIOs and funders can continue to draw on this Principle's guidance to reduce siloing and increase collaboration both within and beyond the sector, and that the Principles can help inform ongoing policy advocacy work and engagement with state and local governments.*

WE ADVANCE THIS PRINCIPLE BY:

1. **SUPPORTING** nonprofits to diversify funding streams: Nonprofits can diversify their funding streams by accessing public dollars.
 - A. **Funders can...** Provide technical assistance and support for community-based organizations to develop strategic and financial plans.
2. **INVESTING** in resources to unlock public dollars for rural communities: Providing essential resources (i.e. grant-writing support; advocacy at state/federal levels) to support rural communities in accessing public funds.
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Develop a grant-writing resource hub and advocacy toolkit to assist rural communities in engaging with state and federal programs.
 - B. **PIOs and funders can...** Provide direct funding or in-kind support for grant writers and policy advocates who specialize in rural public funding opportunities, helping nonprofits overcome barriers to access.
3. **MAXIMIZING** impact through cross-sector partnerships:
 - A. **PIOs and funders can...** Partner with public agencies and other philanthropic organizations to align with government funding priorities and local needs.
 - B. **PIOs can...** Facilitate regular forums and discussions among philanthropic organizations to identify joint funding opportunities and reduce duplicated efforts.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WORKING WHEN:

- There is an increased number of rural nonprofits successfully applying for and receiving public funding, with feedback from participants indicating increased capacity to pursue these opportunities.
- Rural organizations report greater diversification of funding sources, with an increase in successful public-sector funding partnerships reflected in reporting data.
- PIOs and funders participate in a greater number of public-private partnerships focused on rural funding.

EXAMPLES OF THIS PRINCIPLE IN ACTION AND RESOURCES:

*Just Transition Fund
(Case Story)*

*Funder Engagement Landscape
Analysis*



Appendix A: Defining Rural with an Equity Lens

Appendix A: Defining Rural with an Equity Lens

BACKGROUND

Rural: There is no one widely held definition of what constitutes “rural.” It means different things to different people. A precise definition, however, may be important for federal and state policymakers, funders, service providers and researchers. No single definition of rural is “correct,” but choice matters significantly. For example, the share of the population who are rural and people of color varies considerably among the definitions, as does the local rural poverty rate relative to the U.S. poverty rate as whole. “Rural” is also a cultural descriptor, constructed over centuries. Social scientists have identified themes that people commonly associate with rural areas that are outlined in the equity considerations under “How to Choose”.

Equity: The purpose of an equity lens is to be deliberately inclusive as an organization makes decisions. It introduces a set of questions into the decision that help the decision makers focus on equity in both their process and outcomes. A lens should both enable an organization to see and understand the inequities and their root causes that shape a place and people and to leverage the strengths and assets of rural places that can both protect and improve social, economic and health factors.

PRIMARY FEDERAL DEFINITIONS

There are many, many definitions of rural that you may consider applying to your unique contexts. The following three federal government agencies and their definitions of rural are generally considered the most widely used:

Federal Agency	Geography	Description	Notes
OMB* Rural = non-metro	County	Groups areas into metro (50,000 or more) and micro (5,000-50,000). All else is nonmetro.	Relevant to regional approaches. *Office of Management and Budget
Census Rural is not Urban Area / Urban Cluster	Urban Areas (UA), Urban Clusters (UC)	Density based. UAs and UCs are defined by population density and adjacency to urban. All else is rural. UAs are cities > 50,000; UCs are 2,500-50,000 people.	Based on decennial census and thus designations can change every 10 years. Research over time can be difficult.
RUCC** USDA/ERS***	Census Tract	**Rural Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) divide the rural-urban spectrum into 9 classifications at the county level. It focuses on population and metro adjacency.	More detailed classification system. Gives programs flexibility to use a looser or tighter definition. ***Economic Research Service

HOW TO CHOOSE

1. Ask the following questions:

A For your coverage area, which people and places are in and out depending on which definition of rural is used?

B How does this definition align with the availability of other data of interest for your priority areas and populations?

C Which definition most aligns with the population's self-definition?

D Many people in rural areas feel a deep connection to where they grew up and have a strong sense of history and place that may not be as evident in urban areas. **Does the community reflect the common themes associated with historic and cultural rural contexts (i.e. the assets and connective tissue that shape values)?**

- *A close-knit sense of community*
- *Strong family support systems and neighborly social ties;*
- *Religious affiliation;*
- *Pride in self and family;*
- *Self-reliance and independence;*
- *importance of justice, loyalty, and faith; and a strong work ethic. Many people in rural areas feel a deep connection to where they grew up and have a strong sense of history and place that may not be as evident in urban areas*

2. Overlay and consider the following dimensions of equity:

Economic distress

Vulnerability to disasters

Population diversity
(e.g. BIPOC, immigrant, refugee populations, etc.)

Role of past and current resource extraction / corporate monopolization
(i.e. who owns local assets?)

Civic infrastructure
(i.e. who is best positioned socially and physically to community resources; what is different about this rural community than their urban counterparts?)

Other possible dimensions
i. Presence and role of entrepreneurship and self-employment in the economy
ii. Class and role of higher income retirement populations
(that can skew average measures of education, affordability, health, etc.).

Appendix B: Principles in Action Case Stories

**The following case stories were developed from 2022 to 2024 and reflect each foundation's programmatic work at that time.*

Appendix B: Principles in Action

Case Stories

**The following case stories were developed from 2022 to 2024 and reflect each foundation's programmatic work at that time.*

MAINE HEALTH ACCESS FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private
 Year founded: 2000
 Total assets: \$136,231,076 (2020)
 Priority areas: Improving health and healthcare access for underserved populations in Maine

Established in 2000 from the sale of Blue Cross Blue Shield Maine to Anthem Insurance Companies, the Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF) is one of Maine's largest health care foundations. Its mission is to broaden access to healthcare for underserved Maine residents and to improve the health of Mainers overall. MeHAF emphasizes community engagement as one of its [organizational values](#), with its website noting that the organization "learn[s] from people in communities across Maine, welcoming perspectives that encourage new ideas and enhance understanding." Echoing this sentiment, Senior Program Officer Charles Dwyer states that "from our very roots, we started with the idea that the voice of the community and the people we serve is important."



“Often it is the people themselves—the residents—that have really innovative ideas and a real understanding of what works.”

For Dwyer and his colleagues, elevating local voices is not merely a gesture; it is a strategic direction informed by experience with place-based initiatives across the state. Back in 2016, says Dwyer, “we realized how the fear of being judged by other community members and/or the real experience of being discriminated against, meant that it was challenging to get community participation in many of the foundation’s supported programs...But residents had a real understanding of what worked in terms of messaging and communicating with their neighbors and others.”

Dwyer continues, “Often it is the people themselves—the residents—that have really innovative ideas and a real understanding of what works.” Dwyer points out that, particularly in small rural communities, residents often take on multiple leadership roles, a reality that became clear to him while he was overseeing a grant to augment critical care services at a community health center in the small border town of Jackman (population 800): “One of the things that I saw working there was that a regular town meeting would draw everyone—the fire chief, the superintendent at the school, the town manager, the church folks. They all got together and just went through the business of the town.” This intensive grassroots involvement led Dwyer to appreciate the importance and potential of involving local residents in planning and implementing grants in rural communities.

Despite the high level of civic participation that Dwyer has observed in the rural communities in which he has worked, he also notes that community members often feel sidelined and passive in healthcare planning and service delivery: “Their experience is generally having many of the traditional service providers taking their orders from their C-suites or from the state policy or federal grant guidance and not really listening to the people that they serve.” In response,

MeHAF endeavors to center community voice in several ways. First, the organization maintains a twenty-person Community Advisory Committee comprising individuals located throughout the state and with diverse backgrounds reflecting the variety of communities residing in Maine. This Committee is distinct from the organization’s board

and provides ongoing guidance to the Foundation based on their firsthand knowledge of trends and needs in various parts of the state. Dwyer acknowledges that a twenty-person committee cannot speak for every community in Maine, but this group still provides critical insight from community leaders with extensive knowledge and connections to MeHAF’s priority population—people who are uninsured and medically underserved. In this way, the Committee bridges the Foundation’s statewide role and the community-level work that it supports.

Second, MeHAF requires prospective grantees to detail how they incorporate community voice in their programming. This detail is not just a contextual detail;

a strict condition for receiving funding is thorough and thoughtful incorporation of community input in how programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated. MeHAF is explicit about this expectation in its application language. For example, the most recent request for proposals for its Community Responsive Grants program specifies that successful applications will describe “meaningful community engagement and include community

leadership and decision-making throughout the project.” The application further specifies that community engagement is “intentional and genuine and includes ongoing interactions with and involvement of the community of focus in most or all levels of the proposed planning or project.” The CRG grants program was created so that communities themselves could drive the entire

process and, if needed, the foundation helped connect applicants with potential fiscal sponsors. “Sometimes these tiny organizations, noted Dwyer, “will have university and other larger institutional partners, but the applicants are typically these grassroots organizations themselves.”

In other advice to small rural communities, Dwyer suggests, “don’t wait until there’s a grant opportunity. Build the net where you can capture the money when it becomes available but start meeting now. Build the trust and relationships with organizations across the community so that you can identify what the needs are and really stick to them very clearly when federal or state money becomes available.”

“**Build the trust and relationships with organizations across the community so that you can identify what the needs are and really stick to them very clearly when federal or state money becomes available.”**

Case Stories

EL POMAR FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1937

Total assets: \$642,000,000 (2022)

Priority areas: Arts and Culture; Civic and Community; Education; Health; Human Services

El Pomar Foundation was established in 1937 to enhance, encourage and promote the current and future wellbeing of the people of Colorado. Despite the mission to serve the entire state, the Foundation's grantmaking was concentrated almost entirely along Colorado's more populous front range, and especially the Pikes Peak region, until the early 2000s. At this time, the Board of Directors took stock of the Foundation's grantmaking history and recognized a need to better serve the rural communities of Colorado. Responding to this need, the Foundation launched the Regional Partnerships program in 2003, resulting in a substantial increase in the proportion of funding going to Colorado rural communities—from 12 percent in the fifteen years preceding the program's launch to an average of more than 30 percent in recent years, and as high as 53 percent in 2019.

12%



30%

El Pomar increased rural grantmaking from 12% to over 30% after launching its Regional Partnerships program.

The Regional Partnerships program establishes 11 regional councils—typically comprising five to seven local and established leaders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—throughout the state that advise the Foundation's grantmaking. Regional councils are asked to identify the most pressing needs in each region and are each allocated \$200,000 annually to recommend grants addressing those challenges. El Pomar leadership has worked to ensure that council members represent a diverse range of backgrounds and sectors as well as geographic areas within a particular region, striving to reflect the diversity of Colorado's population and the resulting variety of cultural perspectives. "Local community leaders are a wonderful asset to the Foundation by informing us about what the needs are in each particular region" explains Maureen Lawrence, Sr. Vice President, General Counsel, and Director of Community Programs at the Foundation. "The model is based on the view that local community leaders will know best what issues face their community, and they can help identify the strategies, solutions, and nonprofit champions most capable of addressing those issues."

\$200,000

Each regional council recommends how to invest \$200,000 annually in local priorities.

The regional councils are not the only step toward engaging and lifting up local voices. Lawrence and her colleagues recognize that it is impossible for the lived experience of the leaders on a single council to reflect the full diversity of their communities. For that reason, regional councils "go out in the community and learn from others," states Lawrence. "The councils will gather others in the region to offer perspectives on particular issues, and often convene experts in a given field or interest area to inform the councils'

recommendations.” In this way, the Foundation works to make sure that they are receiving a fuller set of perspectives from the areas they aim to support.

Among the results of Regional Partnerships is not only a significant increase in the amount of funding going to rural regions in Colorado but also a greater openness to funding different priority areas. “When I started over twenty years ago, there were certain things we would never support, like emergency medical services,” explains Matt Carpenter, Chief Operating Officer at the Foundation. “Now with wildland fires particularly in rural areas, it’s a top interest of our

notes a greater openness kinds of partners in rural not be a Boys & Girls standard food bank.” For out that the Foundation open to working with religious human services. community leaders that leadership, we’re open

El Pomar develops case only – that document provided by the regional “These are living

anything else detailing the process the council went through to identify the issue area and the grant partner as well as what they learned during the term of the grant”. One such case study, for example, pertains to the Foundation’s support of a nursing scholarship at Adams State University to address the shortage of health professionals in the heavily rural San Luis Valley. According to the case study, one important lesson learned from the grant was that it was important to build relationships with other healthcare institutions in the San Luis Valley that were willing to help publicize the scholarship and ensure that job openings existed for graduates.

The Foundation also maintains a newsletter shared with council members across the state, which shares information about what the various councils are focused on. The Foundation also holds an annual statewide meeting of council members to create “cross-council conversations about issues that these different groups face,” explains Carpenter.

Reflecting on the Foundation’s key findings from its nearly twenty years of working more closely with rural communities, Lawrence comments that “we’ve observed a resourcefulness and creativity across rural Colorado. If there’s a community need, people are going to jump in.”

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“We’ve observed a resourcefulness and creativity across rural Colorado. If there’s a community need, people are going to jump in.”

Board.” Carpenter also to working with different areas where “there may Club or a United Way or a instance, Carpenter points has become increasingly churches that provide non- “If we’re told by the local [a church] is run by good to that.”

studies – for internal use the important lessons councils. Says Lawrence, documents more than

Case Stories

PRIDE FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: **Public**

Year founded: **1985**

Total assets: **\$46,183,751 (2021)**

Priority areas: **Equity and justice for LGBTQ+ communities**

\$70M

Pride Foundation has invested over \$70 million in LGBTQ+ communities since 1985.

Pride Foundation was established in 1985 in Seattle at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Since then, the organization has been a driving force for equity and justice in the LGBTQ+ community. Pride Foundation CEO Katie Carter describes the organization as a “community-embedded foundation,” citing the fact that the Foundation serves as both a grantmaker (having invested more than \$70 million in grants) and a public foundation that stewards contributions from those committed to supporting LGBTQ+ communities. “We started at a moment when there was an increased desire to find ways to help resource the burgeoning LGBTQ+ movement,” says Carter. “We were set up to be able to receive bequests and other gifts from LGBTQ+ people and our allies who wanted to make sure that their resources went back to the community.” The Foundation’s grantees range from direct service organizations providing case management and free HIV testing to advocacy organizations pushing for legislation that safeguards and promotes the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals.

\$1.5M

With just \$1.5 million in annual grantmaking, Pride remains one of the largest funders of LGBTQ+ organizations in the Northwest.

Although the organization is headquartered in Seattle, its service area also covers the rest of Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, and Alaska. This vast geographic coverage makes the Pride Foundation one of the most influential LGBTQ+ organizations, particularly in rural areas. “We are one of the biggest resourcers of LGBTQ+ organizations in the Northwest, which is a privilege and also unfortunate because we only give away about \$1.5 million a year, and that’s triple what it was before the pandemic,” explains Carter. The LGBTQ+ community has long been marginalized and discriminated against, often in a way that has rendered many of the barriers they face invisible. This, among many other factors, has contributed to persistent and chronic underfunding by institutional philanthropy of LGBTQ+ communities, organizations, and issues. Funders for LGBTQ Issues [reported that](#) in 2021, only \$0.28 for every \$100 awarded by U.S. Foundations went to LGBTQ communities.

The situation is particularly difficult in rural communities. As Carter points out, in places like Washington and Oregon there are major urban areas that can shift the political landscape significantly: “For example, in Seattle and Portland, there are statewide organizations supporting LGBTQ+ communities through advocacy and legislative changes. In Alaska, Idaho, and Montana, there are fewer groups who are doing anything related to equity for LGBTQ+ communities, due to lack of resourcing.”

This scarcity of funding has resulted in a movement advanced in part by organizations that are volunteer-led and that often must do significant work with hardly any funding. Consequently, Pride Foundation makes a point of seeking out grantee partners with a variety of organizational profiles, including those that are fiscally sponsored, managed

by volunteers, or just starting out. Carter explains that many groups supporting local LGBTQ+ communities, especially in rural areas, end up being either programs of or fiscally sponsored by other, larger organizations in those areas. It is a priority of Pride Foundation to make sure that these groups doing critical work in their home communities have access to resources and a network of support. “A big part of our staff’s time is traveling around different areas and talking to people our contacts tell us about. You really have to seek out the people who are doing the organizing,” says Carter.

Having to create the support structures their communities have needed for so long with little access to funding has led many of these groups to focus on meeting the immediate needs of their communities. As Carter explains, “I think groups have to be very frugal with their resources because they cannot expect increasing support from mainstream philanthropy. The immediate priority isn’t necessarily about how to grow and scale this work (though sometimes it has had to be). Often, groups’ efforts are focused on how they can support our people who are needing so many different things, from safety to healthcare to housing to mental health support”.

Pride Foundation addresses this reality by prioritizing outreach and relationship building with groups across the Northwest, as well as by making sure that their applications are low-barrier and straightforward, thus ensuring that activists and volunteers can focus on

their work without being burdened by bureaucratic processes. “We don’t need a lengthy grant application from them when we know these groups and organizations and know the communities that they’re working in. We just need to have a better understanding of what they need from us,” explains Carter. In addition to low-barrier grant applications, the Foundation sometimes makes grants proactively without requiring applications at all.

Reflecting on her work, Carter recognizes the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities in rural spaces, acknowledging that “the folks that we’re working with often don’t feel safe or at home in their communities.” A critical part of Pride Foundation’s mission is to change this reality so that all LGBTQ+ people can be their whole, full selves in all the communities they call home. However, Carter also stresses the importance of not overgeneralizing about rural communities and not overlooking the important work and progress of LGBTQ+ activists: “I think one of the things that gets lost in this idea that all rural red places are not hospitable to LGBTQ+ people is the fact that there are groups who are actively working to make those spaces more open and inclusive.”

Carter and the foundation struggle with the question of whether they should be doing larger grants to smaller organizations that have no access to resources and thus fund a shorter list of groups. “A \$50,000 grant in a rural community could ‘move the needle’ in a way that it might not in an urban community. What if we concentrated our resources on groups who were really outside, didn’t have access to other kinds of resources?” She concludes, “It’s a real curiosity and one that we are exploring”.



“I think one of the things that gets lost in this idea that all rural red places are not hospitable to LGBTQ+ people is the fact that there are groups who are actively working to make those spaces more open and inclusive.”

Case Stories

CON ALMA HEALTH FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private (health conversion)

Year founded: 2001

Total assets: \$33,282,263 (2021)

Priority areas: Health and human services

Con Alma Health Foundation (CAHF) is a health conversation foundation established with \$20 million from the sale of Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Mexico. As of 2001, the Foundation had allocated nearly \$20 million to nonprofits working to improve health and health equity for New Mexico's underserved communities, many of whom reside in the state's sizeable rural regions.

\$20M

Con Alma has allocated nearly \$20 million to advance health equity in New Mexico's underserved and rural communities.

One of CAHF's distinguishing characteristics is the emphasis it places on building relationships with both grantees and applicants. To illustrate, former executive director Denise Herrera¹ notes that the Foundation recently commissioned a 10-year review of its grantmaking to understand how grantees perceive the organization and how to improve the grantmaking process. "Many nonprofits refer to us as a relational and community-oriented funder," explains Herrera, summarizing the results of the study. "We've done a good job of building relationships and being viewed as a trusted voice in the community."

CAHF has earned this reputation by maintaining three priorities in its work with grantees and applicants. First, the Foundation makes a point of engaging meaningfully both with those who have received funding and those who have not. "My team will always return calls and emails from an applicant that didn't get funded who wants feedback," remarks Herrera. As with applicants, Foundation staff also make time to build relationships with grantees. "It's a really big deal in New Mexico when you show up, like at a grand opening of a new office space or a recognition ceremony that they're hosting for their clients or their staff. They remember that."

While showing up is a key aspect of CAHF's relational approach to philanthropy, Herrera makes clear that it is also possible to show up too much. This awareness reflects the

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“It's a really big deal in New Mexico when you show up, like at a grand opening of a new office space or a recognition ceremony that they're hosting for their clients or their staff. They remember that.”

¹ Ms. Herrera led the organization from 2020-2023.

second priority underlying the organization's relational approach to grantmaking: respect for nonprofits' time. Herrera explains that the Foundation used to conduct site visits with all prospective grantees, who were required to have the executive director, a board member, and another staff member present. While these site visits allowed the Foundation to gather important information about applicants, Herrera says that the value they generated did not justify the time and effort spent by prospective grantees (as well as by the Foundation itself), especially given the fact that many of these applicants do not end up receiving grants. This cognizance of and respect for people's time speaks to the awareness among CAHF leadership of the challenges that nonprofits, especially rural nonprofits, face. "That's a consideration that's always on my mind," says Herrera. "Many rural communities just don't have much capacity. It's not that they don't work hard; they just don't have capacity." Recognizing this reality, CAHF has significantly scaled back its site visit policy out of respect for the limited and valuable time of its prospective partners.

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“Many rural communities just don't have much capacity. It's not that they don't work hard; they just don't have capacity.”

The final priority reflecting CAHF's reputation for valuing relationships is representation. The Foundation's leadership takes care to ensure that grantees, applicants, program partners, and other stakeholders see themselves in the organization. For instance, the Foundation maintains a diverse Board of Directors, whose bylaws require geographic, ethnic, and gender diversity, including at least three members who represent Native communities. "Because we have colleagues on our board that are from the communities we work with, that almost gives us an instant foot in the door," notes Herrera. "It doesn't mean that we're automatically respected or well-received, but it at least gives us that initial introduction to some of these communities that might historically be mistrustful of systems that were not designed for them to succeed."

Herrera recognizes that CAHF is not perfect but stresses that the organization is taking steps to improve. For example, she acknowledges that the Foundation's applications are available only in English and that "in a state like New Mexico, we should at least have Spanish as an option, and in some cases Navajo." Herrera makes clear that CAHF is working on making it possible for prospective grantees to apply in their native language. "We need to be creative with how we accept applications. Maybe we can accept a short video in the applicant's native language instead of a written application."

By engaging respectfully with partners, respecting people's time and ensuring the representation of diverse identities in its structure, CAHF is an example of how a funder can and should build trust-based and reciprocal relationships with rural communities.

Case Stories

ELMINA B. SEWALL FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1982

Total assets: \$198,399,545 (2020)

Priority areas: Community development, environmental conservation, and animal welfare in Maine

The Elmina B. Sewall Foundation works to improve the well-being of people, animals, and the environment throughout the state of Maine. According to Executive Director Gabriela Alcalde, the Foundation has “a strong commitment to equity and centering community, focusing on community leadership and what the community prioritizes.” Stemming from this emphasis on community, a central aspect of the Sewall Foundation’s philanthropic strategy is partnership, not only through the Foundation’s direct collaborations with its grantees but also through its role in fostering networks among the organizations it supports. “We make sure that we aren’t creating an environment of competition and a sense of scarcity,” says Alcalde. “We really try to take more of an ecosystem approach where we try to, if a community has done any sort of community planning or has any sort of priorities that they’ve created, we will use those.”

An example of the Foundation’s prioritization of collaboration and partnership is its support for the [Katahdin Collaborative](#), a network of community, recreation, economic development, and government agencies working to revitalize the heavily rural Katahdin region. “Our effort has been to provide them as much support as possible so that their vision is backed by reliable, consistent funding,” explains Alcalde, who also notes that the Foundation increasingly makes multiyear grants to partnerships such as the Katahdin Collaborative. “It’s really hard to develop trusting relationships and long-term plans if you don’t know whether you’re going to have funding to continue that work next year.”

The Sewall Foundation initially explored setting up its own funder-driven collaborative in Katahdin, but the program officer leading the work came to realize that there were collaborative networks already forming in the region. As Alcalde recounts, “Our approach shifted from ‘We want to create a strategy for the Katahdin region’ to ‘It’s already happening, so why don’t we fund that?’” This respect for community-established priorities and initiatives illustrates the Sewall Foundation’s commitment to recognizing relationships that

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“We really try to take more of an ecosystem approach where we try to, if a community has done any sort of community planning or has any sort of priorities that they’ve created, we will use those.”

already exist in the communities it aims to support, rather than imposing its own vision and standards for what collaboration should look like.

Even though collaboration is often vital in rural contexts, Alcalde points out that identifying opportunities for partnership and network-building can be difficult in rural areas, where efforts to improve wellbeing and to catalyze social change are often informal—e.g., carried out by organizations that may not be officially incorporated as 501(c)(3) entities, may not have websites, and may not be led by professional nonprofit managers—and therefore less visible to funders. Indeed, the Katahdin Collaborative itself began as an informal roundtable among interested community stakeholders. Given this

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“You need to go into communities and have coffee with people, have conversations. They tell you who to meet with. Being in a community provides a unique and incomparable way to get to know those relationships.”

reduced visibility, Alcalde contends that fostering collaboration in rural communities requires spending time in those communities: “You need to go into communities and have coffee with people, have conversations. They tell you who to meet with. Being in a community provides a unique and incomparable way to get to know those relationships.”

The often-informal nature of organizing and collaborating in rural areas also requires that funders interested in supporting partnership take an open-minded approach to how those partnerships are structured. “We’ve actually been growing the number of grants that we make through fiscal sponsorship because that allows groups to come together without having to be 501(c)(3) organizations,” explains Alcalde. The Foundation also makes larger grants specially for partnerships and collaboratives. “It’s a soft way to incentivize collaboration without requiring it. We understand that it’s not our role to tell people they need to work together.”

Alcalde acknowledges that encouraging but not insisting on collaboration means accepting that organizations will sometimes appear to duplicate each other’s work and miss opportunities to combine efforts. However, she also argues that funders who try to reduce duplication often fail to take account of how cultural diversity leads to organizational diversity. “We tend to assume that rural communities are homogeneous, but they’re not,” says Alcalde. “Sometimes the same services are needed for different cultural groups. Some of the immigrant groups in communities where we work want their own services because it’s more culturally appropriate. There may be something about community dynamics and relationships that we are not aware of, nor is it our business to get involved in.”

Although the Sewall Foundation endeavors to be as receptive as possible to community-established priorities, Alcalde asserts that the organization also adheres to its own values. Alcalde continues, “I think that it’s a dance there, where we don’t want to exclude organizations or efforts that aren’t where we are on our values, but we also don’t want to undermine our values by ignoring that.”

Concludes Alcalde, “I think we just have to go in with the understanding that as funders, there’s a lot we don’t know and we make mistakes. How do we mitigate the harm that our mistakes can cause others?”

Case Stories

ST. DAVID'S FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Health-focused grant maker

Year founded: 1996

Priority areas: Healthcare; Non-Medical Drivers of Health

St. David's Foundation works to advance health equity in Central Texas, specifically throughout Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson Counties. Through a unique relationship with St. David's HealthCare, the Foundation reinvests proceeds from the hospital system back into the community to pursue its mission. Investing more than \$85 million in its five-county area annually, St. David's Foundation is one of the largest health-focused philanthropies in the United States.

\$85M

St. David's Foundation invests over \$85 million annually to advance health equity across Central Texas.

When Abena Asante and William Buster joined St. David's Foundation in 2016, the organization was making grants almost exclusively in the Austin area, despite having a service area covering the broader—and largely rural—central Texas region. The Foundation's Board members recognized this funding gap but did not yet have a strategy in place to engage the overlooked rural areas in their service area. "What we did was lead our board through a series of conversations relating to how to make investments in rural communities," recalls Asante, reflecting on her first steps as Senior Program Officer in developing the Foundation's current "Thriving Rural Communities" strategic priority.

One of the necessary steps that Asante identified during initial conversations with both communities and the Foundation Board was "the recognition that there are assets within rural communities and that while talents often exist, opportunities do not. It was central to any successful efforts that the Foundation not approach the rural work with a rescue mentality of a knight in shining armor coming to save the community!" Key assets in rural spaces, based on Asante's observations and experiences, are the sense of community, pride in being rural, and an inherent resiliency. "Because many of these communities are resource-constrained with limited infrastructure, residents often shop at the same grocery stores and attend the same schools, sporting activities, and festivals. This familiarity brings them together more easily," observes Asante.

Yet the capacity to come together is not sufficient to achieve social impact if, as Asante noticed, residents "do not link with each other and do not share their strengths in strategic ways to address issues in their community." In short, the strong communal sentiment in the rural areas served by St. David's Foundation was an important but largely untapped resource. To better explore this potential, Asante recruited William Moore, Principal at The Strategy Group, an international consulting firm with the mission of "harnessing the power of community to improve lives." Together, Moore and Asante adapted and implemented a community engagement and leadership development approach known as Network Weaving (originally developed by community organizer and social scientist June Holley). Network Weavers are local residents who act as hubs connecting various groups and individuals in a community, helping them address local issues by sharing information and resources. They strategically grow a network of engaged residents, enabling them to identify community

needs and organize for action. As Moore explains, “we support residents who wish to become network weavers whose job is really to take their deep knowledge of community, the people that live in their community, and the problems that residents are concerned about, and then begin weaving together connections of people who also share an interest in bringing about change in their community.”

One of the ways in which these network weavers move residents to action is through a series of participatory grantmaking opportunities called “shared gifting circles,” which are comprised of rural community residents who each receive a fixed sum of money to distribute, ranging from \$500 to \$1,500. These participants keep a portion of their gift to spend on community projects they want to lead, but they gift the remaining money to projects proposed by other participants. Each participant has a brief period to “pitch” their project and to respond to questions from co-participants. In this way, residents are both grantees and grantors supporting each other’s work with their time, effort, and funds. Around 20 to 40 shared projects occur over a 12-to-18-month period.

An example of a shared gifting project is the creation of an annual Bastrop County Youth Summit, an event designed to inspire youth to become advocates for change in their schools and communities. “By joining forces together, the network weavers were able to partner with the school system and other stakeholders to provide youth with an opportunity to organize and frame what a successful summit would look like,” recounts Asante. “This project was a chance for a subset of the weavers to dig deeper into youth engagement and foster a space for youth to shape the agenda around improving health and wellbeing for themselves and for their community,” adds Moore. Initiated with shared gifting dollars, the summit also drew support from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, the Bastrop Independent School District, and multiple corporate and community partners in the region.

There are two specific and important ways in which the type of networks that Asante and Moore aim to develop differ from existing networks in rural communities. First, community residents may be adept at coming together in response to clear and urgent crises, such as a natural disaster, but Asante and Moore hope to build more durable, sustained networks of residents. As Moore notes, “the question is how do we keep people connected in the non-crisis times working collaboratively on issues that people feel are important.”

The second important differentiator centers on diversity. People are often inclined to associate with others who are like them on various dimensions. St. David’s Foundation has encouraged network weavers from different backgrounds to build collaborative relationships and support each other’s work. This focus on forming diverse networks is particularly important in light of the substantial and growing Hispanic population in the Central Texas region. Asante and Moore are forthright in acknowledging that diversity in their network building initiative can create some turbulence, as people with different backgrounds and lived experiences tend to give priority to different causes. Still, Moore is clear that “we seek diversity in each cohort of new network weavers to more deeply understand different perspectives within our communities and give voice and opportunity to those who have not had the power or resources to influence change.”

**\$500–
\$1500**

Participants in shared gifting circles receive \$500–\$1,500 to support their own ideas and fund others in their community.

20–40

Each cycle supports 20 to 40 grassroots projects over 12 to 18 months

Case Stories

THE HARRY AND JEANETTE WEINBERG FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1959

Total assets: \$3.1 billion (2023)

Priority areas: Housing; Health; Jobs; Education; Aging

Since 1990, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation has distributed grants totaling more than \$3 billion across a range of issue areas and its six priority communities:

Baltimore, Israel, New York City, northeastern Pennsylvania, San Francisco, and Hawaii.

Along with northeastern Pennsylvania, Hawaii has been a core focus of the Foundation's recent efforts to place more emphasis on rural communities in its grantmaking.

\$3B

Since 1990, the Weinberg Foundation has awarded over \$3 billion in grants across six priority communities.

In 2017, recognizing philanthropy's underinvestment in these places, the Foundation began providing grants in the rural areas around its priority communities. Four years into these investments, the Foundation started to review the work done so far and assess how its grantmaking could be more strategic in supporting rural communities. The organization hired a consultant with both extensive knowledge of the nonprofit sector and relevant experience as a Native Hawaiian residing in a rural community. Guided by this consultant, the Foundation team reviewed over 100 sources, including varying federal definitions of rural and rural-specific funds, and conducted 38 interviews with a diverse set of partners, particularly those with a focus on people of color in rural places. This comprehensive listening tour and reflection process led to a new strategic framework for the Foundation's rural grantmaking. In Hawaii and northeastern Pennsylvania, this plan focuses on developing locally controlled assets in rural communities – i.e., assets that are owned by local people and institutions rather than by outside entities.

100+

The Foundation reviewed over 100 sources to guide its rural grantmaking strategy.

In 2021, the Foundation launched an initiative focused on community development financial institutions (CDFIs), lenders with a mission to promote economic development by providing financial products and services to people underserved by traditional financial institutions. As Program Officer Xan Avendaño recounts, the Weinberg Foundation's support of CDFIs began during the COVID-19 pandemic as staff recognized that many nonprofits did not have the capacity to absorb and manage large sums of federal funding distributed through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA): "Many community-based organizations in rural areas leverage every resource they can bring into their communities, but applying for and reporting on federal grants requires significant bandwidth. CDFIs can provide flexible capital and technical assistance to these organizations, supplementing their capacity to take advantage of every available dollar." Through its first grants to CDFIs, the Foundation began to support efforts to bolster local capacity to harness federal funding and deploy it to best use in these communities. By that same logic, the Foundation adopted shorter application processes and accelerated timelines for processing applications

38

Insights from 38 interviews helped refine the Foundation's approach to rural investment.

The Foundation also worked with CDFIs to build financial capacity for rural households to qualify for rental and homeownership opportunities. “Local families, especially Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, often do not have the financial history to qualify for the housing being developed in their home communities,” notes Avendaño. “Several CDFIs and other nonprofits provide culturally relevant financial tools to enable people to access rental and homeownership opportunities in rural areas.”

The Weinberg Foundation also invests in food systems. Only five to ten percent of locally consumed food is grown in Hawaii, partly due to the large number of very small farmers there who can’t compete for school or other institutional contracts. Avendaño points out that although these investments create jobs and bolster local food markets, they are not purely economic in nature: “Access to affordable, locally produced, culturally relevant foods—taro, breadfruit, etc.—is also key to addressing health disparities in Hawaii.” Following this point, Avendaño stresses that an Indigenous framing extends beyond conventional economic connotations: “The term ‘assets’ in Indigenous contexts is not solely focused on individual wealth. It’s focused on community strengths and well-being.”

Though markedly different in racial and ethnic composition from rural Hawaii, northeastern Pennsylvania also lacks the capacity and scale to secure federal resources. “These are two communities where the Foundation is committed to building relationships for the long haul,” says Avendaño.

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“The term ‘assets’ in Indigenous contexts is not solely focused on individual wealth. It’s focused on community strengths and well-being.”

Case Stories

T.L.L. TEMPLE FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1962

Total assets: \$520,251,753

Priority areas: Education; Economic Opportunity; Health; Human Services; Conservation

The T.L.L. Temple Foundation supports rural communities in East Texas to alleviate poverty, foster prosperity, and advance health and wellbeing. The focus on rural communities is a key feature of the Foundation, whose website specifies this underlying organizational belief: “Rural people and rural places are important to us. We recognize the challenges of rural isolation and are committed to bringing resources to rural communities in East Texas.” This connection to rural East Texas is deeply embedded in the organization’s history. The Foundation was established and continues to be led by members of the Temple family, whose wealth derives from a profitable timber business headquartered in this region.

For former President and CEO Wynn Rosser, the organization’s historical connection to rural East Texas strikes a personal note: “I was a rural kid. My personal story and the Foundation’s story are tightly coupled around this rural East Texas region. I grew up seeing

Temple-Inland trucks on the highway.” Rosser’s lived experience in the area gives him sobering perspective on the pronounced need for the services that the T.L.L. Temple Foundation supports: “I left East Texas when I was 18 and came back when I was 48. I’ve now been here almost eight years. Some things were reassuringly similar to what I left, and some things were disturbingly the same. I often think, ‘Wow, rural kids still don’t have X, Y, and Z.’” Rosser’s statement reflects the challenges that many East Texas communities face, including declining population, slowing economic growth, limited access to broadband, and discouraging education and health outcomes.

To address these problems, the Foundation has made substantial investments to strengthen regional economic ecosystems in East Texas. Program Officer Jerry Kenney recalls their decision-making process. “When we went looking at impact investing, we realized that we didn’t have the vehicles to make a minimum viable rural ecosystem if nobody is concerned about the system because everyone is so busy with the scarcity mindset of keeping the

businesses, hospitals, and schools we have open, nobody is thinking through the longer-term vision of where we are going. Focusing on keeping hold of what they have prevents a community from the longer-term innovation and visioning towards something related to prosperity, which is where we want to go.”

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“...Focusing on keeping hold of what they have prevents a community from the longer-term innovation and visioning towards something related to prosperity, which is where we want to go.”

\$1.15M

The Foundation invested \$1.15 million to help two CDFIs launch East Texas offices with local staff.

One of the foundation's CDFI initiatives is the [*Rural Opportunity Catalyst for East Texas \(ROC-ET\)*](#), which provides financial support and unlocks capital for small businesses in the underserved communities of the region. After identifying the pivotal role played by community development finance institutions (CDFIs) in spurring economic development and realizing that there were no CDFIs in the Foundation's service area (roughly the size of South Carolina), the Foundation team issued a request for proposals to existing CDFIs to open an office in East Texas. "One of the things we emphasized throughout the RFP process was that we want the CDFI to become part of the fabric of East Texas. You have to be here and be a part of our community," explains Jerry Kenney, Program Officer for Education and Economic Opportunity.

\$1.4M

CDFIs made over \$1.4 million in loans across East Texas since mid-2022.

The Foundation chose two CDFIs with effective existing operations and clear commitment to underserved rural communities across the south—Communities Unlimited and PeopleFund—to launch offices in East Texas with local staffing, providing them with \$1.15 million in working capital and helping them to get established in their new locations. "I would say the most important thing we did was that we just completely unloaded our network onto them," says Kenney. "We set up regional leadership teams where they could meet the local players. I think that sharing these relationships with the CDFIs opened a lot of doors for them."

237

CDFI activity has supported 237 local jobs as of April 2024.

Since June 2022, Communities Unlimited and PeopleFund have made more than \$1.4 million in loans, creating or helping to retain 237 jobs as of April 2024 (the Foundation maintains a dashboard on its website). In the coming years, Kenney and his colleagues expect these numbers to grow significantly, and they plan to collect additional data to make the case for investment in East Texas: "We're going to collect indicators for outcomes such as successful loan repayments, because there's some skepticism that you can really invest in these underserved populations. We want to erase that skepticism."

\$3.1M

The Foundation plans to track \$3.1 million in projected outcomes to make the case for rural investment.

A related initiative recently launched by the Foundation is ConnectRURAL, a five-year, \$3.1 million program to strengthen the capacity of rural communities to plan for, secure, and manage federal and state funding opportunities. Also a collaboration between the Foundation and Communities Unlimited, ConnectRURAL provides staffing and technical assistance to community organizations by embedding Community Resource Managers in regional hubs across East Texas, connecting them to Communities Unlimited's multi-state network of expertise in areas such as rural water systems, broadband, entrepreneurship, small business lending, and community sustainability. These Community Resource Managers are collaborating directly with community leaders to advance local priorities and identify and apply for funding opportunities. "All of our federal processes and most philanthropic processes are built on an urban scale, where you have to have really good grant writers and really good report writers in multiple-step processes that require a lot of attention," says Rosser. "Those processes are not right sized or appropriate for rural organizations that sometimes have less staff capacity." By helping to shore up the capacity of local community organizations, Rosser and his team aim to correct this imbalance.

Additionally, the program establishes a funding mechanism for communities in the region to access matching funds, which are often required by federal and state grants and contracts. ConnectRURAL also places AmeriCorps members in organizations throughout the region to assist communities with securing resources and implementing programs to achieve their goals. "It's going to build up capacity in our nonprofit space, but it's also going to build up the next cadre of rural leaders," notes Kenney.

Case Stories

ROUNDHOUSE FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 2002

Total assets: \$365,000,000 (2023)

Priority areas: Arts and Culture; Education; Environmental Stewardship; Social Services

Roundhouse Foundation Elevates Indigenous Voices

The Roundhouse Foundation was launched by Kathy Deggendorfer with the mission of supporting programs that inspire creativity and the arts in the largely rural area of Sisters, the Oregon town where the organization is based. While the Foundation remains dedicated to supporting the arts, it has transitioned to funding creative problem-solving more broadly. “We recognized really quickly that it’s hard to be creative when your teeth hurt and you don’t have access to clean water or healthy food,” explains Erin Borla, who is Deggendorfer’s daughter and executive director and trustee of the Roundhouse Foundation. “We expanded our program focus areas to include environmental stewardship, social services, and education.” Borla has also overseen the expansion of its purview to encompass all of Oregon’s rural communities, including federally recognized

and unrecognized Tribal Nations. This strategic funding decision is unique in the landscape of philanthropy and foundations. Nationally, less than one-percent of philanthropic dollars support Native-led or Native-serving projects ([Native Americans in Philanthropy, 2019](#)).

Borla and her Foundation colleagues have been intentional as they engage with Native tribes by reaching out to people in her network who had experience working with these communities: “We contacted these folks and said, ‘Tell us how we do this work authentically – how we don’t show up as the white savior and are truly there as a partner.’”

Among the important lessons she learned from these discussions is that respecting tribal sovereignty means developing an understanding of how decisions are made within each individual tribe. “It is critical for me, as the leader of our organization, to

show up and listen to tribal leaders, to show up on-site, with an open heart and with no agenda,” says Borla. Recognizing the complexity of approaching Native communities as a white ally but determined to do so as thoughtfully as possible, Borla enrolled in a certificate program in tribal relations at Portland State University. The Roundhouse Foundation has also joined Native Americans in Philanthropy to learn best practices with other funders from across the country. Additionally, the Foundation is transitioning

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“We contacted these folks and said, ‘Tell us how we do this work authentically – how we don’t show up as the white savior and are truly there as a partner.’”

from an ad-hoc committee of Indigenous advisors to a more formal Indigenous Advisory Committee. This body will help guide the Foundation in its Native-focused grantmaking, ensuring that those with lived experience in tribal communities have input in the Foundation's activities.

>25%

Over 25% of the Foundation's \$15 million grant portfolio in 2023 supported Native-led or Native-serving organizations.

In 2023, more than a quarter of the Foundation's roughly \$15 million grantmaking portfolio went to Native-led or Native-serving organizations. In addition to providing material assistance (Borla cites an example of replacing a broken freezer at one community's food bank), the Foundation has invested heavily in advancing Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (ITEK), which has gained increasing recognition not only from philanthropists but also from government agencies ranging from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy. Borla views ITEK both as an indispensable environmental tool in light of the challenges produced by climate change

and as a celebration of "Let's go back to the here for sixteen thousand about what works. How by taking some of those them today?" The has been particularly the practice of cultural land management American tribes for to promote biodiverse landscapes, like the goals

Borla's recognition of matched by an equally the sensitivity around into practice. As she what worked? What get soil health back? How by applying some of those lessons? But then it does become a little bit sticky. Who owns that lesson? Are they willing to share that lesson? And if we talk about cultural burning, who gets to do the cultural burning? And how do we elevate the workforce of our native partners where they're the ones applying the fire?"

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“Let's go back to the people that have lived here for sixteen thousand plus years and learn about what works. How do we live in this space by taking some of those lessons and applying them today?”

Indigenous ingenuity: people that have lived plus years and learn do we live in this space lessons and applying Roundhouse Foundation active in supporting burning, a form of passed down by Native millennia and designed and fire-resilient of prescribed burning.

the value of ITEK is important awareness of putting such knowledge explains, "First we ask, didn't work? How do we do we live in this space

As one response to these questions, the Foundation has funded the Traditional Ecological Inquiry Program at Long Tom Watershed Council as well as the Tribal Ecological Forestry Program at Lomakatsi Restoration Project, which provides Native youth paid internships and other opportunities to explore and share traditional ecological knowledge such as cultural burning.

The Roundhouse Foundation also pays homage to traditional Native American knowledge by supporting cultural institutions that sustain tribal arts and language. For example, the Foundation is a funder of the tribally owned and maintained Museum at Warm Springs,

whose mission is to preserve the culture, history, and traditions of the three tribes comprising The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and the people of the Columbia River Plateau.

In March of 2024, Roundhouse Foundation launched the Funding Rural podcast, with seventeen episodes specifically aiming to help funders understand how best to engage with rural and Indigenous spaces. Guests from the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, the Pit River Tribe in California and Oregon, and Minnesota Ojibwe are featured among other rural voices.

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“If you show up with an open heart, people are going to see your authenticity and know what you’re trying to do. Rely on your own presence and your own being, which sounds a little woo, but that advice was super helpful for me...”

Borla says the best advice she ever got for working in Indigenous spaces was when someone said to her, ‘One tribe? You know one tribe. Don’t think that you know how all native people interact with one another, because you know one entity.’ The flipside is lack of confidence, and Erin encourages other funders not to be afraid of stumbling along the way.

“If you show up with an open heart, people are going to see your authenticity and know what you’re trying to do. Rely on your own presence and your own being, which sounds a little woo, but that advice was super helpful for me...” Borla says. “Oftentimes, particularly as white allies, we get in that space where we don’t want to ask because we feel like we should know. But if I don’t ask, I’m never going to know, and I really want to be an ally.”

ROUNDHOUSE FOUNDATION RESOURCES REGARDING INDIGENOUS FUNDING:

- **[Elevating Indigenous Voices:](#)** This page includes RHF’s approach to Indigenous partnerships, RHF Indigenous advisory board, and resources for philanthropists.
- **[Funding Rural:](#)** A podcast about how philanthropy can better serve rural and Indigenous communities and spark systemic change.
- **[Trust for Public Lands Rural Schoolyards Project:](#)** Detailed report about a nonprofit/government/RHF collaborative project in a 50% Indigenous community of Chiloquin, Oregon and why it was a success.
- **[Regional Community College Career & Technical Education Program:](#)** What started in 2020 as a pilot at Central Oregon Community College has grown to include 10 regional community colleges.
- **[Oregon’s Rural Pharmacies:](#)** Report about the importance and growing scarcity of pharmacies in rural spaces, specifically Oregon, and potential solutions.
- **[Healing, Bridging, and Thriving NEA Summit on Arts and Culture in Communities:](#)** In January 2024 the National Endowment of the Arts partnered with the White House Domestic Policy Council to host Healing, Bridging, and Thriving Summit on Arts and Culture in Communities.

Case Stories

THE NORTHWEST AREA FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1934

Total assets: \$565,953,353 (2021)

Priority areas: Building social, racial, and economic justice in the Foundation's eight-state region

76

The Foundation serves eight states and 76 Native nations

The mission of the Northwest Area Foundation is to stand alongside changemakers in its region of eight states and 76 Native nations and fund work that leads to racial, social, and economic justice. The Foundation's priority region was shaped by the Great Northern Railway, which generated the wealth that helped to establish the Foundation. As [acknowledged and detailed on the organization's website](#), the construction of the Great Northern Railway was instrumental in the westward expansion of the United States but also had devastating effects on Native communities. The railroad broke up Native lands and accelerated the growth of extractive industries that wrought severe environmental damage throughout the region. In recognition of this history, the Foundation centers Native communities in its grantmaking approach as an act of repair and as an acknowledgment of Native sovereignty in the Foundation's prioritized geography.

40%

40% of the Foundation's grantmaking is dedicated to Native-led organizations.

This restorative approach to philanthropy begins with the Foundation's commitment to devoting 40 percent of its grantmaking to Native-led organizations. Program Officer John Fetzer emphasizes the importance of selecting Native-led, as opposed to Native-serving, organizations: "We're looking for work that's of, by, and for the community—work that's dreamt up and led by Native people." While organizations that serve but are not led by Native communities often do undeniably valuable work, focusing on organizations led by Native individuals reflects the Foundation's commitment to respecting the agency of Native communities to determine and pursue their own priorities.

\$20M

\$20 million from the Foundation helped launch the Indian Land Tenure Foundation in 2002.

A particularly high-profile example of the Northwest Area Foundation's support for Native-led organizations is its role in establishing the Indian Land Tenure Foundation (ILTF), a national nonprofit organization that works to protect and promote the rights of Native peoples to own and manage their ancestral lands. ILTF was seeded by a \$20 million grant in 2002 from the Northwest Area Foundation, one of the largest grants ever made to a Native American-controlled organization at the time. A more recent grant that reflects the Foundation's regard for Native-led initiatives is a \$1 million, four-year gift to Native Voices Rising, a research, donor education, re-granting, and capacity-building collaborative created and led by Common Counsel Foundation and Native Americans in Philanthropy.

\$1M

A recent \$1 million grant backs Native Voices Rising, a Native-led collaborative.

Fetzer notes that his organization's emphasis on Native leadership manifests not only in its grantees but also in the Northwest Area Foundation itself: "We've long had Native board members and numerous Native staff. It's important that we keep Native voices in our work

internally so that we understand the complexities of working with tribal nations.” Fetzer explains that understanding such complexities is key to respecting Native sovereignty, as it is central to recognizing Native society and government as arenas distinct from—even while embedded within—the broader American political and cultural context: “We say that we serve eight states and 76 tribal nations. We recognize those tribal nations as separate but on par with other governments, and we understand the dynamics of working with these governments.”

According to Fetzer, one of the most important dynamics at play in tribal nations is the importance of showing up and taking the time to get to know the community: “Tribal communities are often very skeptical of outsiders because we have been screwed over a lot by outsiders. You’re not going to get trust unless you work at it and earn it. Having people that show up in the community and are willing to sit down and just talk and listen is really important because you’re trying to establish a relationship.” Fetzer acknowledges that Native American reservations are often located in remote and heavily rural areas of the country, making it difficult for urban-based funders to show up and

interact with these communities. But, “people often really do appreciate that you meet them on their turf and you get a sense of their community and you get a sense of the issues that they’re up against when they’re talking about being a food desert, for example. It’s not that they don’t have a grocery store in five miles’ but it’s ‘not having a grocery store for 45 miles,’ so if they want to get food, they are making a day trip. “

Fetzer recognizes that the Foundation has not always operated in perfect alignment with this value. For example, he references an [evaluation](#) of the Foundation’s grantmaking from 1998 to 2008, a period during which the organization shifted its focus toward long-term, multi-million-dollar funding partnerships with communities, including three Native American reservations. These reservation communities received \$500,000 planning grants, followed by 10-year implementation grants ranging from \$6 million to \$10 million. As the evaluation notes, in many cases, the

Foundation overlooked expertise from the communities engaged in these efforts. Fetzer acknowledges that community partners were frustrated and that, in the case of tribal communities, the Foundation’s approach cut against the principle of respecting Native autonomy. Yet, Fetzer also points out that the Foundation’s leadership learned from this oversight and has since placed greater priority in deferring to community-driven solutions: “Let’s first respect organizations on the ground that are doing this work. What’s actually happening here that’s good and that we can build on?”

Fetzer notes that a second lesson is the need to “be careful about our worldviews and our sense of what some of these concepts mean”. He cited this example: “We would go

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“We’ve long had Native board members and numerous Native staff. It’s important that we keep Native voices in our work internally so that we understand the complexities of working with tribal nations.”

into communities and say, ‘we want to help build wealth here,’ meaning, “we want to help you make more money and have more financial success and people over time are going to be building up wealth.” Fetzer recalls the pushback from the community. “For us, wealth means collectively we’re doing a lot better, that our culture is thriving, that our youth and our elders are doing well, and they’re healthy, and they’re included, and they’re part of everything.”

The Northwest Area Foundation demonstrates that respecting Native sovereignty involves recognizing not only the autonomy of tribal governments but also the capacity of Native communities to develop home-grown solutions to the problems they face without the top-down direction of funders from outside their communities. Reflecting on NWAFF’s commitment to do 40% of its grantmaking in Native communities, Fetzer emphasizes, ‘At the time it was a bit of a stretch goal, but we wanted to make it clear that a mainstream foundation can, in fact, do this. We’re a private, independent foundation and we want to demonstrate that we actually do this work and make a strong commitment to it every year. We want to challenge the field that this is something that any foundation can do if you really want to.’

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“For us, wealth means collectively we’re doing a lot better, that our culture is thriving, that our youth and our elders are doing well, and they’re healthy, and they’re included, and they’re part of everything.”

Case Stories

THE BLANDIN FOUNDATION

Type of foundation:	Private
Year founded:	1941
Total assets:	\$473,816,755 (2022)
Priority areas:	Community wealth-building and rural placemaking

The Blandin Foundation supports rural communities throughout Minnesota, guided by a new strategic plan that believes “that rural places and people have been held back by long-standing unfair structures, systems and practices based on place (where we live), race (who we are) and class (economic status)”. With three new priority areas – Community Wealth Building, Rural Placemaking and Small Communities – the Foundation is also increasingly focused on “raising our voices and the voices of rural Minnesotans” to advocate for changing the outdated funding structures that hold back rural communities.

The Foundation was established in 1941 by Charles K. Blandin to focus on rural prosperity in the Grand Rapids region. Following the sale of the Blandin Paper Company in 1977, the Foundation grew both in its financial resources and in its service area, expanding to further wellbeing in rural communities throughout the state.

<3000

The Blandin Foundation focuses on communities with populations under 3,000, an often-overlooked segment in philanthropy.

The Blandin Foundation puts special emphasis on serving small rural communities in Minnesota (including those with less than 3,000 inhabitants), a segment of society that philanthropy often overlooks. “There aren’t many foundations that are looking at very small places,” explains Senior Director of Programming Jaci David. “And so, I think we’re building more best practices in this area.”

One of these best practices is measuring impact in a way that is consonant with the scale and capacity of social change efforts in small rural communities. When it comes to impact measurement, the broader philanthropy sector tends to adopt an urban-centric “more is better” lens, but the Blandin Foundation appreciates the ways in which one seemingly small grant can be the start of a new stream of support. “We’re learning a lot about how to land money in those small places with limited nonprofit infrastructure,” says David, who offers the example of a very small community that requested a grant to purchase a cooking stove for their community center. While having a functioning stove might seem insignificant from a conventional philanthropic perspective, David notes that such equipment allows the community center—one of the town’s few civic institutions—to host the functions and events that bring community members together to gather and address the challenges they face. As David points out, “We need to measure not just what gets completed but also the future things that the community then uses those resources for.”

\$100,000

\$100,000 grant awarded to the Two Harbors Public Library to improve accessibility for patrons with disabilities.

Importantly, the Blandin Foundation does not only make small grants. For instance, it recently made [Rural Boost Grants](#) specifically to encourage Minnesotans living in rural and tribal communities to be visionary and creative as they move their communities forward after enduring the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These grants were often substantial, such as a \$100,000 grant to the Two Harbors Public Library to become more

accessible to patrons with disabilities. Still, the Foundation's focus on smaller communities means that many of its grants are \$50,000 or less.

An important aspect of conducting impact measurement to be responsive to the unique circumstances of small rural communities is greater openness to using qualitative data. As David explains, the traditional philanthropic emphasis on quantitative data often does a disservice to rural communities: "Rural communities struggle with this when they're trying to access larger grants because you can't show the same economies of scale as an urban community might be able to. You can't show that your youth program is serving the same number of kids [as an urban program does]." Accordingly, the Blandin Foundation deliberately integrates qualitative data into its impact assessment practices, such as direct testimonies from program participants. "Quantitative data in rural communities just doesn't really tell the full story," says David.

David notes that providing funding for a small capital project constitutes not only a meaningful improvement for a very small community but also an opportunity for the Foundation to engage the community further with more ambitious and innovative work. "Because we now have this funding relationship with this community, we can move to the next step with that community, engage a little bit more deeply to understand what their needs are, and then help them to achieve that next step." To this end, the Blandin Foundation not only supports small capital projects but also invests in capacity-building for organizations, equipping them with the skills and resources to carry out their programs more effectively and to advocate with lawmakers to secure funding for their localities. "We're learning a lot about how to land money in those small places where there isn't the nonprofit infrastructures and leaders are tapped out. And particularly for funding those projects that most funders don't feel are innovative", David points out.

\$738,000

A \$10,000 grant helped a regional coalition secure two federal grants totaling \$738,000.

David stresses that such capacity-building efforts often begin with a small grant for a very specific project. For instance, the Foundation awarded a \$10,000 grant for a regional coalition focused on housing unhoused individuals, enabling the group to hire a locally based consultant to assist with applying for a federal grant. This assistance led to the group receiving two grants totaling \$738,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. As this example demonstrates, without understanding the process of moving from a small capital grant to a more ambitious capacity-building relationship, it is easy to underestimate the impact of that initial grant. "We want to articulate and measure the impact that helping communities do those small things can achieve in terms of what the next step is," explains David. She also notes that defining mid-term measurements, as compared to short- and long-term ones, is challenging.

David makes clear that the Foundation continues to wrestle with what its measurements are going to be under the new strategic plan. "We want to be able to measure what's different in a community because we were there... I hope that we can show that communities are able to access more resources because of the work we've been able to do and that rural leaders are equipped to be able to use those resources to make positive change in their community."

Case Stories

WINTHROP ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

Type of foundation: Private

Year founded: 1974

Total assets: \$157,147,472 (2020)

Priority areas: Economic equity; Educational equity; Social, ethnic, and racial equity

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation relentlessly pursues economic, educational, social, ethnic, and racial equity for all of Arkansas. Winthrop Rockefeller, the 37th governor of Arkansas, founded it. It is one of the state’s most influential philanthropic institutions, with a remarkable history of launching the Arkansas Community Foundation, Southern Bancorp (now one of the largest community development organizations in the United States), Arkansas Teacher Corps, and more. Operating from its base in Little Rock, the Foundation’s grantmaking extends across Arkansas.

Reflecting on her experience leading grantmaking in rural areas of her state, Foundation CEO Dr. Sherece West-Scantlebury notes, “When you approach rural communities, you understand that these communities tend to be very under-resourced.” It is challenging, she continues, to find funding partners or collaborators. While resource scarcity in rural communities is real, West-Scantlebury acknowledges having difficulty making the point because “I never want to talk about rural communities as if they’re deficit-based.”

She emphasizes that, despite misperceptions from urban funders that “you can’t do some pretty progressive, thoughtful, transformational grantmaking in the rural context, that by putting a grant in, say, Dumas, Arkansas, you may see change quicker than you will in Chicago.”

“

Asset framing is key for us because you don’t invest in people’s deficits but in people’s potential...

West-Scantlebury’s thoughtfulness in language use reflects a broader commitment at the Foundation to deploy language carefully and intentionally. “We asset frame everything,” she explains, describing people and communities primarily according to their aspirations, strengths, and contributions before discussing their challenges and deficits. “Asset framing is key for us because you don’t invest in people’s deficits but in people’s potential. We rarely use any negative language to describe rural communities because we don’t want to feed into any pathologies, and we

don’t want to contribute to any negative speech on rural communities.”

The Foundation’s commitment to equity is not just a part of its grantmaking or branding; it is a guiding principle that permeates all it does. The organization’s language, which is carefully and intentionally deployed, makes it clear that equity is at the heart of it all. This is evident in the organization’s mission statement—“To relentlessly pursue economic, educational, social, ethnic, and racial equity for all Arkansas”—and in its series of [“equity reports”](#) that cover the business case for equity in Arkansas, the need for access to capital, and a comprehensive report on financial hardship faced by economically disadvantaged families in the state. The Foundation’s written output, with phrases such as “we will dismantle and reconfigure systems to best serve families with the least wealth and education,” reflects this bold commitment to equity.

Yet, equity is not only an objective of the organization's grantmaking or a feature of its branding; it is an ethos that permeates how the institution carries out its work internally. For example, the Foundation screens potential hires for an understanding of equity. Given the importance of equity in everything the Foundation does, West-Scantlebury determined that becoming a staff member requires an essay demonstrating deep and accurate knowledge of equity. "The essay as part of the application process helps us to know that the candidate understands equity," says West-Scantlebury. "It serves both as a writing sample and a way for us to know that you can articulate what equity is." To West-Scantlebury and her team, equity is "ensuring that there are no barriers to people accessing the resources they need to thrive." With the most rural parts of Arkansas lagging other areas in education, broadband access, health outcomes, and financial well-being, this definition speaks to the critical need to address the socioeconomic obstacles facing rural Arkansans.

West-Scantlebury advocates for rural funders to prioritize investing in systems change rather than solely funding programs. She argues that merely implementing programs will not solve poverty; actual change occurs through policy reforms and systemic interventions. While she acknowledges the value of funding after-school programs, she emphasizes funding policy and advocacy that redirects state resources to address the systemic challenges in rural communities. This shift, she believes, is essential for sustainability, as continuous philanthropic funding of individual programs is often not a viable long-term solution. She proposes a systemic approach that empowers communities to identify their assets through asset mapping and geo-mapping activities. By leveraging data and community input, this approach enables the development of comprehensive, locally-driven plans that align with the community's vision and economic realities.

The Foundation's commitment to rural philanthropic engagement, systems, and culture is not just a statement; it is a practice. The Foundation holds its board meetings and grantee convenings in different areas of the state, demonstrating its dedication to all parts of Arkansas. As Foundation CEO, Dr. Sherece West-Scantlebury explains, "We're a statewide foundation. We're not a Little Rock foundation and don't require all people to come to us. We visit all parts of our state." This approach underscores the Foundation's commitment to inclusivity and its recognition of the importance of the most remote parts of Arkansas.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Foundation's commitment to equity can be seen in how the organization assesses grantmaking opportunities and provides funding. The Foundation's website makes clear that the first two criteria considered are that the prospective grantee "has an explicit commitment to educational, economic, social, ethnic, and racial equity" and that the grantee "has an explicit strategy to disrupt the status quo, address the root causes of inequity, and eliminate policies and practices that perpetuate barriers to equity." The Foundation prioritizes general operating support for those selected for funding, giving its partners much-needed flexibility and capacity to pursue their missions. The Foundation's website notes, "This is especially important for organizations led by and serving people of color who tend to receive less grant money with more strings attached than their white counterparts." The foundation has done away with letters of agreement and proposals, getting the basics from potential grantees and doing exit interviews instead of requiring written reports. Notes West-Scantlebury, organizations rarely exit. "You might come in and out now and again, but you rarely exit."

Case Stories

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER DUBUQUE

Type of foundation: Community

Year founded: 2003

Total assets: \$144,233,578 (2021)

Priority areas: Equity & Inclusion, Academic Achievement, Economic Opportunity (across 7 counties in Northeast Iowa)

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque works to advance a vibrant and inclusive region that includes Dubuque, a city on the Mississippi River in Iowa, and its heavily rural neighboring counties. This work is done in close collaboration with eight affiliate community foundations in the region. As a convener, the Foundation brings together local leaders to identify, understand, and find solutions to complex community challenges. And through endowment-building and annual grant cycles, it mobilizes resources that help address these issues. “Grantmaking and endowments are only a couple of the tools we use. We still have very little unrestricted money and are really more of a rural development hub,” says President and CEO Nancy Van Milligen.

One example of this mobilizing function is the Foundation’s pivotal role in the establishment of Inclusive Dubuque, a cross-sector network of leaders dedicated to building a welcoming and equitable Dubuque region. “In 2011 IBM came to town and opened a new customer service center with 1,100 very diverse employees, and they came to us and other leaders and said, ‘Hey, our diverse employees are not being treated well,’” Van Milligen recounts. “And so, we helped create this network called Inclusive Dubuque.” In the beginning, we were leery talking about equity, but we have learned it’s actually a good journey in rural, homogeneous regions to start slow and build the capacity of the residents to get on board with equity. Now we’re all in and after George Floyd was murdered, our rural counties came to us and said, “Please help. We need help having these conversations in our community.”

Network members meet regularly to share information and tools to promote an equitable and inclusive culture in Dubuque, reflecting a growing awareness in the city of the diversity of its constituents. In its 10 years, Inclusive Dubuque has grown to include a cohort of 30 local business leaders fostering equitable and welcoming workplaces, a Rural Equity Network driving inclusive practices in rural communities, and several workshops for business and nonprofit HR managers to initiate and expand their organizations’ diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Although predominantly white, the Dubuque area encompasses several immigrant communities, including growing Marshallese, Guatemalan, and Mexican populations. The Foundation has embraced these communities by celebrating their contributions to the culture of Dubuque and investing in their visions. As part of this priority, the Foundation has done asset mapping of these communities – where they are, where the churches are, who are the formal and informal leaders. “That was a charge to really get into the communities and get to know them,” recalls Van Milligen.

1,100

The Foundation helped launch Inclusive Dubuque after IBM hired 1,100 diverse employees who faced challenges with inclusion.

50

A group of 50 community leaders, one-third from immigrant communities, is prioritizing solutions from the Immigrant Community Assessment.

Published in 2023, the Foundation's *Immigrant Community Assessment* – the first of its kind in Dubuque – provides a big-picture view of the region's immigrant communities and the organizations that serve them. It is the result of a four-year, collaborative effort with local nonprofits and immigrant communities, and it is designed to serve as a strategic roadmap for service providers to use during the next five to 10 years. One of the first outcomes of this work was the launch of a Better Together Committee. This group of about 50 community leaders – about one-third of whom are from immigrant communities – is tasked with prioritizing the report's recommendations and implementing solutions. For example, the committee is currently working to train more medical interpreters to work in local clinics and hospitals.

The result of this work has been both a sharpened understanding of the considerable health and human service needs of these communities and a greater appreciation for the cultural enrichment that they bring to the region. Says Van Milligen, “the reality in Iowa is that we need workforce in a huge way, and when you look at the data, it's going to be immigrants who fill those jobs. Recognizing this need, the Foundation has organized a training program for business leaders to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge to recruit and retain immigrants. Participants learn how to enhance their organizations' cultural competency and build meaningful relationships with immigrant communities, creating pathways to employment.

In addition, the Foundation has published stories highlighting the experiences of immigrants in Dubuque, linked to the hashtag #AllofUsDubuque and compiled on the website www.allofusdubuque.com. The Foundation also helped bring a national storytelling initiative called the Facing Project to Dubuque to enable Marshallese residents to share their stories and build connections in the community.

“

“Our goal is to bring people along in our work and understand how supporting immigrant and minority communities in our region strengthens Dubuque for everyone...”

The Foundation has also helped immigrants to form their own organizations for advancing health and wellbeing in their communities. For example, Van Milligen refers to a group of Latinx women who were trying to form a community support organization but could not open a checking account with a local credit union without being incorporated as a 501(c)(3). “We are now walking them through the process to get incorporated as a nonprofit. We also give them training on what else they need to do and on some effective tools that they can use to achieve their goals.”

The Foundation's effort to welcome, celebrate, and foster positive connections with immigrant communities has not always been easy. Van Milligen acknowledges that some stakeholders have questioned whether the Foundation should be placing so much emphasis on immigrant communities when the majority white population faces significant challenges of its own. According to Van Milligen, it is important to hear these reservations while still making progress that supports the well-being of those in need. “I really believe strongly that we want people to work with us and invest in us because they share our values,” explains Van Milligan. “Our goal is to bring people along in our work and understand how supporting immigrant and minority communities in our region strengthens Dubuque for everyone. Maybe some people aren't willing to walk this journey with us. But many are, and we welcome the involvement of anyone who wants to create a strong, vibrant, and welcoming region for all.”

Case Stories

THE JUST TRANSITION FUND

Type of foundation:	Fiscally sponsored philanthropic initiative
Year founded:	2015
Grantmaking budget:	\$5,000,000 (2023)
Priority areas:	Economic revitalization and policy advocacy for coal-impacted communities

The Just Transition Fund (JTF) supports communities across the United States that are economically hardest hit by the decline of the coal industry. Conservatively, 10% of U.S. counties are impacted by coal, in 46 out of 50 states. The JTF helps to build resilient communities by promoting solutions that are equitable, inclusive, and low carbon, promoting economic diversification, expanding workforce development, and improving infrastructure in communities—typically rural communities—where coal mines and coal power plants are shutting down.

10%

10% of U.S. counties, across 46 states, are impacted by the decline of the coal industry.

The foundation supports access to federal investments by community-based groups so that they can identify, prepare, and apply for federal funds; advocates to advance transition policy at the state and federal level, and brings together transition stakeholders to share best practices and models, and showcase innovative solutions.

Through grants and technical assistance provided through its Federal Access Center, the JTF helps its grantees develop partnerships with other community organizations, navigate often-burdensome application processes, meet federal match requirements, and engage experts for tasks such as research and grant writing. Deputy Director of Partnerships, Rachael Young explains, “This work is especially timely in light of the Biden administration’s commitment to coal-impacted communities: there are now hundreds of billions of federal dollars available just for coal communities to support economic revitalization and development.”

Fiscally sponsored by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, the JTF was established in 2015 by the Rockefeller Family Fund and the Appalachia Funders Network (with support from a variety of foundations) in response to the creation of Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER), an initiative of the Appalachian Regional Commission that unlocked federal funding specifically for communities transitioning away from coal. “Our co-founders, Heidi Binko and Sandra Mikush, saw a real need and opportunity for philanthropy to play a strategic role in building the on-the-ground community capacity necessary to access these federal dollars, to ensure that they really got to where they were most needed,” explains Young.

In addition to helping its grantees access federal money, the JTF has begun to relay feedback from grantees to government funders to build an understanding of how to make grant opportunities more accessible and equitable. “We work with our community partners to understand their experience applying for government funding—especially the barriers and challenges,” explains Young. “We’re working to organize that feedback and share recommendations with government agencies.” Young recognizes that shifting

the requirements imposed by government funders is a challenging task, but the JTF is built largely on the idea that partnering with the public sector in this way can lead to meaningful change: “We know that some barriers are within the control of agencies themselves to address, and there are also things they can’t change. Part of our work is to identify what agencies can change directly, and what requires legislative action.”

Where a change in legislation is required to catalyze broader change, the JTF engages directly on policymaking through its [National Economic Transition \(NET\)](#) initiative. Launched in 2019, NET is a policy platform outlining a series of proposed solutions for coal community transition, many of which have been adopted by the previous White House. For example, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act extends a tax on coal that funds benefits for miners suffering from black lung disease. NET was created by coal community leaders from across the country who were convened by the JTF, focusing on policies and priorities these community partners have already developed, bringing everyone together to ensure there is a unified, comprehensive, coordinated set of policy recommendations related to coal transition, rather than piecemeal campaigns led by individual partners.

The JTF is also involved in supporting the establishment of state funds focused on supporting the workers and communities who are impacted by the closure of coal plants and mines. “At the state level, our focus is on helping to create state-wide transition funds. Through our grantmaking, we support community-based partners who are working to help create and implement those policies, and we also work directly with state officials themselves,” says Young. The JTF’s relationships with state-level government also show in its partnership with the Midwest Governors Association, a consortium of governors and their staff designed to address public policy issues of significance to the Midwest. The JTF has worked with the Association to facilitate a year-long series of conversations about topics related to coal transition and power plant closure, resulting in a [white paper](#) outlining numerous recommendations to state-based policymakers.

As summarized by Young, “unless and until the severe economic distress being experienced by coal-impacted places is addressed, it will be impossible to build the broad-based political will necessary to advance climate solutions.” A common misconception about their work, continues Young, is “that we’re focused exclusively on the transition from coal into clean energy (but) that in a given place, clean energy may be part of the economic solution, but it is not the whole solution. We think it’s very important to focus on economic diversification, rather than replacing one mono-economy with another.” In addition to clean energy, JTF focuses on sectors including outdoor recreation and tourism, sustainable agriculture, remote work and building the knowledge economy.

As the transition away from coal has had outsized impact on rural communities, the JTF demonstrates how philanthropy can be a force for change not only through the provision of grants to community organizations but also through leveraging public and private resources and guiding policy change to accelerate a just economic transition – from the ground up.

Appendix C:
Equitable Rural Narratives Guide
Engaging Equitable Rural Narratives

Appendix C:

Equitable Rural Narratives Guide

Engaging Equitable Rural Narratives

MAKING THE CASE SUBCOMMITTEE CHARGE:

1. Provide resources to foster true narratives and counter false ones about who lives and works in our rural communities, and why metro, state, regional and national funders should care.
2. Discern why and how the Working Group should define 'rural' particularly within an equity context and what it does with these definition(s).

HOW DO RURAL NARRATIVES IMPACT RURAL EQUITY?

1. True rural narratives acknowledge that each community has its own unique strengths and assets that can build solutions for equity, health, education, climate resilience, and other issues funders engage in.
2. Uninformed narratives about rural communities hide their diversity, resilience, and essential contributions, while reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating inequities tied to place, race, and class.
3. Funders' preconception about working in rural can fuel "us/them" dynamics, eroding trust and limiting effective philanthropic investment in rural equity.
4. Rural communities receive disproportionately low private investment in equity-focused work, often due to a lack of direct relationships and an overemphasis on scale rather than impact.
5. Shifting these narratives presents an opportunity for funders to foster transformative change built from within.

USING AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH FOR RURAL NARRATIVES:

1. Asset-based language highlights the strengths, opportunities, and contributions of rural communities that are both tangible and intangible. Deficit-based language focuses on challenges, scarcity and loss, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and ignoring existing strengths.

EXAMPLE: *"The Foundation has embraced these communities by celebrating their contributions to the culture of Dubuque and investing in their visions. As part of this priority, the Foundation has done asset mapping of these communities - where they are, where the churches are, who are the formal and informal leaders."*

- CASE STORY: COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER DUBUQUE

2. Using asset-based narratives fosters dignity, respect, and recognition of rural contributions, setting up funding relationships as community lead partnerships.

RURAL NARRATIVES FILL-IN-THE-BLANK:

1. Rural project talking points are not one size fits all. Narratives should include:

<p>A.</p> <p>Asset-based language.</p>	<p>B.</p> <p>Accurate demographic information using qualitative (i.e. lived experience) and quantitative (i.e. Census) data.</p>	<p>C.</p> <p>Funder issues as opportunities.</p>
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EXAMPLE: WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA HEALTH EQUITY COALITION

“Health, like wealth, is not evenly distributed across our region. Black and Indigenous residents and people from rural communities suffer more disease and die earlier than their White and urban counterparts.

No one knows more about the causes and human cost of those disparities than the community-led organizations and informal leaders who confront them every day. Those leaders have the lived insights to create solutions that work on the ground, not just on paper. They’re a part of their communities, so when they speak, people who may have learned to be skeptical of outside experts heed what they say.”

Source: <https://www.healthequitywnc.org/collaboration>

OPPORTUNITY Build access to healthcare in rural western North Carolina.

- SPECIFICITY**
- Western North Carolina is home to people impacted by inaccessible healthcare.
 - People of color are part of WNC and are impacted to a greater degree.
 - Past funder engagement in this region on this issue has been meet with skepticism.

- EXISTING ASSETS**
- Organizations have already been working for years to address this issue.
 - There are community leaders with expertise based in lived experience.- There are strong and existing relationships and networks amongst community-based organizations.
 - Western NC community-based organizations have consistently demonstrated that they are trusted and creative stewards of funds. Philanthropic dollars go further in rural spaces.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- **Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group:** If You’ve Seen One Rural Place ... You’ve Seen One Rural Place.
- **Center on Rural Innovation:** Who lives in rural America? How data shapes (and misshapes) conceptions of diversity in rural America
- **UNC School of Government and Rural North Carolina Economic Development Center:** Building Assets for the Rural Future
- **Urban Institute:** Supporting Asset-Based Rural Investment and Capacity Building

Appendix D: Funder Engagement Model Landscape Assessment

Appendix D: Funder Engagement Model Landscape Assessment

The Funder Engagement Model Assessment is a review of established engagement models by funders supporting communities in accessing federal funds. The document is organized via major funders and the purpose of the funder/partnership engagement. The following information was developed from 2022 to 2024 and thus do not reflect the current Administration's federal funding freeze, which impacts philanthropy as a sector as well as nonprofit and PIO partner's work.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

1. ***Council of Michigan Foundations*** - Piloted a Statewide Equity Fund to pool \$2 million supporting the work of regional collaboratives working with local government to help inform investments. The pooled resources supported bringing technical assistance into municipalities for planning and sharing innovative approaches, metrics, and tools.
2. ***Dogwood Health Trust*** - Developed a leverage fund to hire consultants and pay for staff to help write proposals and support compliance work for local government.
3. ***Ford Family Foundation*** - Matched the Oregon state legislature with a \$500,000 rural capacity fund for hiring grant writers.
4. ***Forefront*** - The Equitable Access & Capacity Initiative (EACI) is collaborative effort between BDO, Forefront, and IFF, to support Illinois nonprofit organizations in preparing for and managing government funding and assist nonprofits in building healthy financial systems.
5. ***Just Transition Fund*** - Aims to drive federal investments in coal communities by helping local organizations submit competitive federal applications for community-led transition projects. Prioritizes support for work that is led by and serves low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities most impacted by the transition.

LONG TERM POWER BUILDING

1. ***Z. Smith Reynolds and BC/BC Foundations*** - Funded MDC Rural Forward to support the ARPA Partnership, now called Local Partnership for Public Funding, with 7 community-based partners and 4 statewide partners, a multi-year effort to build community capacity to set priorities and build relationships with local officials.

POLICY ADVOCACY

1. ***Packard Foundation*** - Awarded a \$1 million, 2-year grant in 2021 to the Latino Community Foundation to support the Latino Power Fund to track the flow of ARPA funding and ensure the equitable distribution of funds to Latino communities.

2. **Rhode Island Community Foundation** – Worked with stakeholders to develop spending recommendations for state leaders to as they decided how to spend the state’s \$1.1 billion ARPA fund.
3. **Castle Foundation** – Co-sponsored a bill in the Hawai’i legislature to fund an early childhood educator stipend program to expand public Pre-K in Hawai’i. The Castle Foundation funding stipends ran 1-3 years while the state tax base recovered from the pandemic shock.

COOPERATIVE GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIPS

1. Philanthropic Liaisons and Offices of Strategic Partnership

- A. **North Carolina Philanthropy Liaison** – Helps build, strengthen, and institutionalize relationships between North Carolina state government and the philanthropic sector.
- B. **Michigan Governor’s Office of Foundation Liaison** – Identifies and brokers strategic partnerships between the State of Michigan and foundations to encourage the success of programs and policy reforms.
- C. **Los Angeles Center for Strategic Partnerships** – Developed a shared agenda between LA County, nonprofits, philanthropy and other sectors to maximize resources and impact.
- D. Similar offices exist in **Newark** and the **State of California**.

2. Partnerships with US Department of Agriculture

- A. Philanthropy Southeast engaged their members in the Georgia launch of USDA’s **Rural Partners Network** in September 2022, a push which targeted rural communities in 5 states to better access federal funds.

PROJECT BASED DIRECT FUNDING

1. **Knight Foundation** – Doubled Macon-Bibb County’s ARPA investments in New Town Macon, GA to increase availability of affordable housing by building new rental units and renovating existing ones.

RESOURCE SHARING*

**The following information was developed from 2022 to 2024 and thus do not reflect the current Administration’s federal funding freeze, which impacts philanthropy as a sector as well as nonprofit and PIO partner’s work.*

1. **Virginia Funders Network ARPA Toolkit**
2. **Philanthropy Missouri ARPA Funder Briefing**
3. **National Council of Nonprofits ARPA Principles**
4. **Southern Economic Advancement Project ARPA Toolkit**
5. **Council of Michigan Foundations Guide for Philanthropy on Partnerships to Equitably Shape Public Funding**



Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement