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Behind a Collaborative Funding Push to Build Movements and Organizing Power

Bill Pitkin, Guest Contributor



PEOPLE LIVE IN RVs NOT FAR FROM GOOGLE'S HEADQUARTERS IN MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIFORNIA. SUNDRY PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK

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Philanthropy has become increasingly comfortable with funding community organizing and movement building to advance racial and economic equity, particularly in response to threats to democracy, civil rights and community life since the 2016 election. At the same time, funders have given growing attention to land use and affordable housing challenges in many communities. This is especially true on the West Coast, where leading funders in California have come together to support grassroots organizing to address the root causes of long-term housing challenges that are squeezing low and middle-class households as well as driving a surge in homelessness.

Coming Together

The Fund for an Inclusive California was launched in the fall of 2017 after a couple of years of meetings and planning among foundations concerned about increasing displacement and gentrification in communities of color across the state. Several of the funders had supported grassroots organizing and had noticed that these strategies were not typically part of philanthropy's efforts around housing, which has tended to support direct services and affordable housing production.

The funders engaged in a "learning journey" to better understand the causes of displacement and what policy and organizing could do to address it. For Alexandra Desautels of the California Endowment, the joint learning about root causes of displacement in communities that funders were working in was vital to getting them on the same page. The group quickly realized that by pooling funding and efforts they could better coordinate to support policy advocacy and community-driven solutions.

The fund is part of a larger effort by [Neighborhood Funders Group](#) to mobilize philanthropic support for movement- and power-building through its [Amplify Fund](#). Organizers of the fund learned from philanthropic collaboratives like [Native Voices Rising](#) and [Climate Equity Action Fund](#) in supporting grassroots organizing and movements.

In addition to Amplify, funding partners include public and community foundations ([East Bay Community Foundation](#), [San Francisco Foundation](#), [California Community Foundation](#) and [Liberty Hill Foundation](#)), private and family foundations ([Akonadi Foundation](#), [the California Endowment](#), [the James Irvine Foundation](#), [Weingart Foundation](#), [Sunlight Giving](#)), as well as the [Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#). To date, it has mobilized nearly \$11 million for efforts in four regions (Bay Area, Central Valley, Inland Empire and Los Angeles), as well as statewide.

Sharing and Building Power

The backbone of the Fund for an Inclusive California is [Common Counsel Foundation](#), a social justice funder with 30 years of experience working with donors and activists to build community leadership. Common Counsel's staff is well-versed in organizing and social justice work. Jazmin Segura, program officer for the fund, has a background in immigrant rights organizing. As she says, "We believe that low-

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income communities and communities of color who bear the brunt of unjust housing policies and the negative impacts of profit-driven development should have decision-making power to determine what development looks like in their local neighborhoods.”

The funding partners serve as the steering committee for the fund, and they oversee the budget and work of the backbone. What is unique about the fund is that the funders share power with a group of 35 community advisors, made up of the core grantees in the regions who are directly involved in organizing and movement-building.

According to Jazmin, “it was important for us to lean on the process and relationship-building” in setting up the fund. The funders determine which regions to focus on and select the core grantees that receive core operating support. The community advisors provide input into priorities and values for the fund and develop strategies for grantmaking to support capacity-building and organizing infrastructure in each region. According to Tony Samara, a community advisor representing the Regional Tenant Organizing Network in the Bay Area, these funds support meetings, assemblies and grants to grassroots organizing groups.

The steering committee and community advisors have created a table for shared learning, planning and decision making, and they work from a common project budget. At one of their joint meetings, a community advisor declared that it was the first time in her 35 years of working in the nonprofit sector that a funder had shared their budget with a grantee. From the grantees’ perspective, this is refreshing, because it demonstrates changed behavior from funders, not just platitudes and words about partnership and “co-creation.” As Tony Samara explained, “there’s actually now a collective space that’s become somewhat institutionalized... it creates another cultural center of gravity.”

In addition to core operating support and funding for capacity-building and movement infrastructure, a portion of the fund is set aside for emerging opportunities that arise. This has been useful as work in regions has expanded, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. With increasing challenges of residents losing jobs or housing, or suddenly needing help with child care and healthcare for essential workers, the fund has provided rapid-response funding for a range of community efforts and organizations, many outside the community advisor group.

In response, the fund has also simplified processes in the face of the pandemic to lessen burdens for grantees (e.g., accepting proposals submitted to other funders, advancing grants directly for renewal and not requiring final reports). This flexibility has been appreciated by grantees, who have had to adjust to organizing in an environment where in-person meetings and actions are not viable, and the challenges faced by low-income renters have multiplied.

Learning for the Future

The Fund for an Inclusive California was set up with a three-year timeline, designed to sunset in 2021. Outcomes from the collaborative approach to funding, learning and decision-making have been impressive. Funders and grantees have created joint understanding and approaches, and funders have shared power in important ways that have supported organizing capacity and infrastructure and provided funding to grassroots community groups. On the policy front, the network of community advisors was instrumental in raising awareness and getting landmark [tenant protection policies](#) passed at the state and local levels in 2019, and they are deeply involved in current efforts to provide relief for renters in the face of the pandemic and economic crisis.

Given the success, as well as the continuing—and, in the current economic crisis, undoubtedly growing—need, the fund will probably not completely disappear next year. According to fund organizers, they are currently in conversation about how it might “evolve” or “transition,” seeing this current period as perhaps the first phase of a longer effort. A collaborative learning and evaluation process is informing this work and sharing lessons more broadly with the field and philanthropy.

The fund’s approach to core support and regional infrastructure has provided stability and built trust to let grantees do the work they are best positioned to do. As Alex Desautels summarized, “when you provide space and flexible support, good things happen.” A collaborative can be a safer place for foundation program staff to engage in these types of practices (e.g., core support and funding organizing), even if they cannot in their own organizations. Community advisor Tony Samara’s advice to funders is to “study this model and replicate it; I would love to see funds like this all over the country.”

The fund’s approach to flexible funding and shared decision-making has also broadened the tent, growing what organizers call the “bigger we” fighting for more just housing and community development policies. Groups from sectors such as education, criminal justice and immigrants’ rights are engaged, as they recognize the intersections between their issues and housing stability. For both funders and grantees, the collaborative approach and relationship-building have created what Alex Desautels called a “ripple effect into deep partnerships,” even beyond the work of the fund.

The Fund for an Inclusive California represents a promising example of how philanthropy can address the racial and economic inequities that plague our communities. By creating shared understanding, learning and decision-making, and providing flexible support for organizing and power-building, the fund is set up to build infrastructure for long-term structural and systemic change.

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