



Center *for the*
Study *of*
Social Policy

***TOWARD HEALTH AND RACIAL EQUITY:
Reflections on 10 Years of Building Healthy Communities
A Summary***

A Report for The California Endowment

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A Summary

Over ten years beginning in 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) invested \$1.75 billion and partnered with 14 communities across California, as well as many state-level organizations and alliances, on *Building Healthy Communities* (BHC), an innovative initiative to achieve health equity. Now, in 2020, BHC closes not as an initiative, but as a way of work for TCE and as a major driving force for achieving health equity and racial justice in California.

BHC's scope and theory of change became broad and ambitious: improve health status by building "people power," transforming policy and public systems, and expanding opportunities in communities that have been historically marginalized. The initiative's contributions are comparably weighty and significant:

- A new health equity dialogue in California,
- A richer understanding of power building that starts with community organizing and builds connections to other sources of influence,
- Policy "game changers" that affected millions of lives, often achieved through a cumulative capacity-building approach to systems change, and
- The beginning of a new ecosystem approach to realizing health equity.

BHC also provides a wealth of learning opportunities. Lessons are particularly rich in the area of how "people power" became a means to advance racial and health equity, as well as an end in itself in terms of community voice, agency, and self-efficacy.

This report focuses on BHC's **primary contributions** and **lessons**. It lifts these up while recognizing that California's evolving health equity landscape during this 10-year period resulted from the work of hundreds of local and statewide organizations and thousands of committed leaders. BHC's contributions were integral to, but only part of, the work of a broader equity ecosystem.

The report draws on many sources of information, including past and current BHC evaluation reports and analyses. In addition, 40 people shared their reflections about BHC through interviews, including leaders from the public and non-profit sectors, from other California foundations, and from TCE's board, Executive Team, and staff. Leaders outside of TCE shared their perspectives on BHC as equity champions who have fought for health equity and racial justice in California for decades.

BHC'S Contributions to Advancing Health Equity in California

The contributions to health equity by the many partners working together through BHC ranged from directly impacting the lives of millions of Californians, to helping change the way that the public and policymakers understand health equity and act to achieve it, to building power among people and in communities that have been historically marginalized within the state. As a result of expanded health coverage in California, over 4 million people now have coverage who didn't in 2010.¹ By altering state education policy related to school suspensions, 400,000 plus young people are not suspended/expelled from schools.² A million Californians became eligible for reclassification or release from prison as the result of sustained advocacy for changes in the justice system.³ BHC partners' efforts contributed to over 1250 local policy wins, system changes, and other tangible benefits for communities.

Along the way, not everything was a success. The work was tough and often fraught with tension. The foundation often had to "feel its way" as it became a more active and visible presence in the fight for health equity. Understanding of how to center racial equity within BHC came late. Systematic feedback from partners as part of a learning agenda took shape primarily in BHC's second half. However, both the false starts and the achievements generated valuable learning that can be used to assess the path forward and forge a new future grounded in health equity and racial justice.

Contribution #1: A New Health Equity Dialogue in California

BHC helped broaden the definition of health and the understanding of health equity among policymakers and the general public with a new urgency.

With BHC communities and TCE statewide investments focusing on school discipline, criminal justice reform, and environmental justice, the social determinants of health became more broadly understood and discussed, certainly within the philanthropic and public policy worlds.

BHC also helped raise awareness about uneven access to health care in California and promoted a powerful narrative: that health care is unequally distributed, and that this injustice is associated with a person's race and zip code. This storyline, in turn, helped create public will for expanding coverage to all residents, regardless of immigration status, under the Affordable Care Act (ACA).

BHC and partners helped create a different policy dialogue about health in California – one more attuned to the impact of racial disparities, place, and historical and systemic

¹ Tom Pyun, "Ten Years of Building Community Power to Achieve Health Equity: A Retrospective." (April 2020)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

oppression. This in turn creates a policy climate in which larger-scale solutions can be proposed and root causes of inequities addressed.

With the Endowment's help, we in California fundamentally changed the notion about whether health care access is a government responsibility, whether this is something that we owe one another. At least now, the discussion is more like, "Okay, how do we do this, not whether [to do this]." That was a sea change, not just in policy, but in people's hearts and minds. – Anthony Wright, Executive Director, Health Access California

Contribution #2: A Richer Approach to Power-Building

Over the course of BHC, *building power to advance racial and health equity* evolved from being one piece of the initiative's Theory of Change to be its centerpiece.

In BHC's early years, power building was positioned primarily as a *means to an end*, one force among others to secure policy victories and improve public systems. Now, TCE's commitment runs considerably deeper. Power building is seen as both means and end. Its *ends* include individuals and communities with a collective sense of agency to exert control over the conditions shaping their lives – a critical measure of health and well-being especially crucial for long-disempowered populations.

Both dimensions are expressed in documents that chart the foundation's course for the next ten years. There, power building is described as *centered in a deep investment in community organizing that builds the capacity of people in communities that have been historically marginalized to influence and make decisions, set the agenda and create policy shifts, and shape public narrative, cultural beliefs, and values. The goal of power building is to influence life outcomes for people most impacted by injustice, enabling them to take collective responsibility for health and justice for all.*⁴

California health equity leaders recognize that BHC successfully spotlighted power building and helped people see its importance as a vehicle for change. Power building is growing in areas of the state where community power was too rarely recognized—for example in the Central Valley and in northwestern California (Del Norte County and Tribal Lands). Simultaneously, while TCE was neither the first nor only California foundation to invest in power building, the scope of its investments have helped power building become a more validated target for philanthropic investment.

⁴ This description is drawn from the Goal Paper on Power Building, prepared by TCE's Power Building Workgroup, Internal document, July 2019.

There's been a sea change in the power-building landscape over the last 10 years, and TCE was behind much of it. They were doing this without a playbook, so, sure, they had missteps. But by the end of BHC, power building had really taken off, not just on the coast where it was strengthened, but inland where it had been almost non-existent. – John Kim, Executive Director, The Advancement Project

Power building's emergence as BHC's centerpiece happened gradually. The path by which power building came to be central to BHC is shown in Figure I. What this milestone summary cannot capture are the years of community effort, state policy advocacy, and growth in power building theory and practice that are the BHC partners' fuller contribution to health equity in California. These grew from early BHC "community engagement" efforts in 2010 to deeper power building investments that accounted for roughly 77% of TCE's total \$1.75 billion expenditures through BHC by 2020.⁵

The forces that shaped BHC's power building approach are shown more fully in Figure II, which depicts forces that—individually and together—led to BHC's understanding and approach. The strongest factors were the close, embedded relationships TCE shared with 14 BHC communities, and the way community organizing in local sites demonstrated the effectiveness of power building to TCE leaders. Over time, these factors coalesced with others, and particularly with close state-level partnerships and alliances, into a power-building approach larger than the sum of its parts and a rich source of learning for others.

Figure I: Milestones in the Emergence of People Power as the Central BHC Strategy

2010: BHC is launched in 14 California communities, guided by 10 Outcomes that define a healthy community and with a commitment to strong community engagement.

2011: The Drivers of Change identify Resident Power and Youth Leadership as two of five "drivers" that define BHC's approach.

2014: BHC's Theory of Change incorporates the Drivers of Change as one of the main elements to advance policy and systems change.

2016: TCE's report on BHC at midpoint, "A New Power Grid: Building Healthy Communities at Year 5," confirms power building as the most important strategy to achieve health equity.

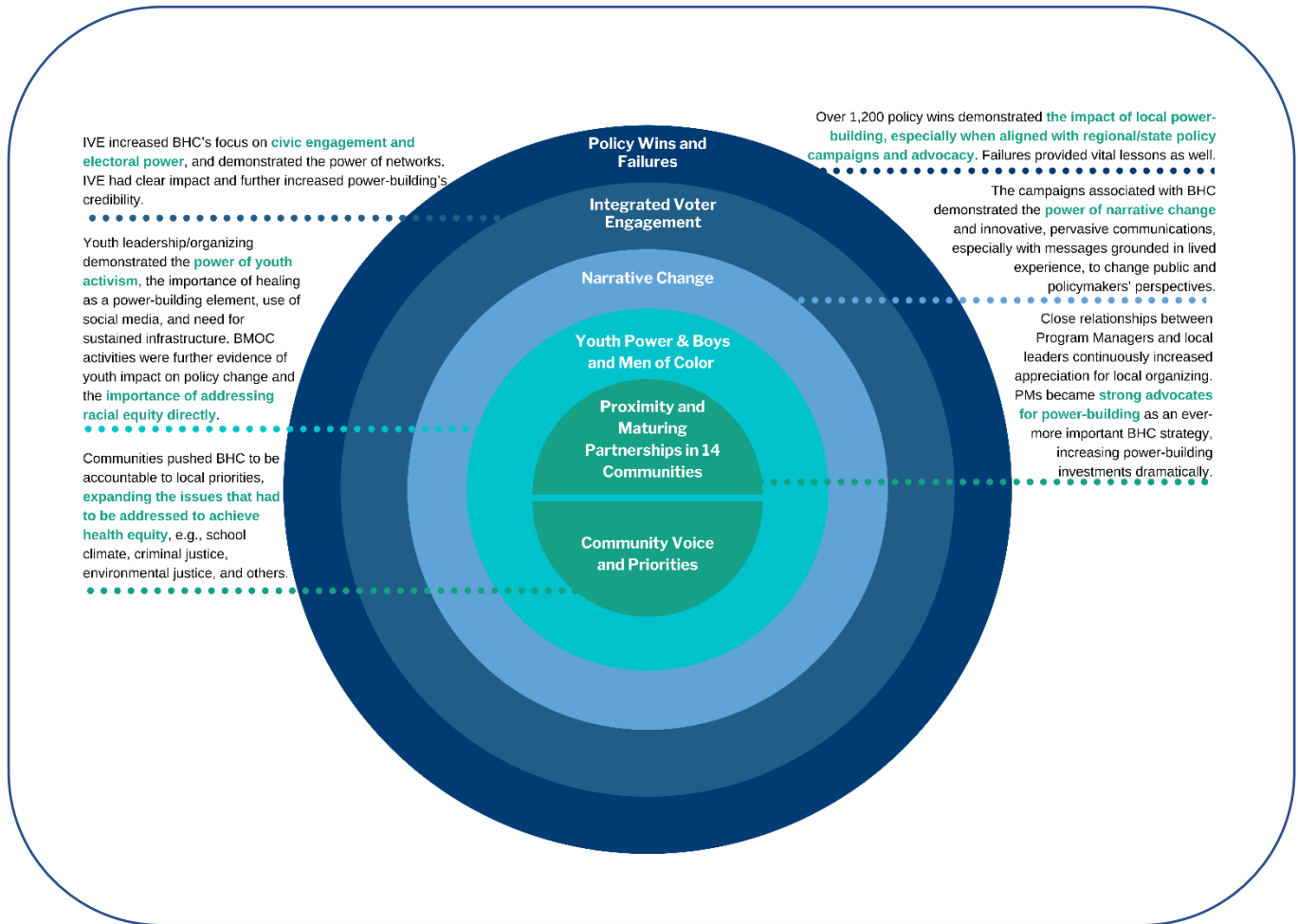
2016-17: "People Power" is identified as Goal #1 of the North Star Goals and Indicators, a revised BHC results framework.

2018: The Equity Research Institute at USC defines the capacities of a power ecosystem (often referred to as the "Power Flower" framework).

2019: TCE's board specifies "People Power" as the first of Three Bold Ideas to guide TCE's investments for the next decade.

⁵ Center for Outcomes Research and Education, Issue Brief #1: A Review of BHC Grants and Investments, July 2020.

Figure II: The Forces that Shaped BHC’s Approach to Power Building



The key factors include:

- **Community voice and priorities.** In BHC’s initial years, local leaders pushed TCE to keep its promise for BHC’s work to be based on community-driven priorities rather than foundation-prescribed goals.
- **Partnerships and proximity in 14 communities.** Program Managers, who were deeply engaged with communities and sometimes resided within them, became strong advocates for power building and shifted their local investments to community organizing and base-building.
- **Youth power and Boys and Men of Color.** As youth organizing grew into a more prominent BHC component across sites, it made critical contributions to BHC’s power-building approach and California’s health equity landscape, including: an

understanding of how trauma and healing were intertwined with organizing work; social media as an essential organizing component; the importance of infrastructure for expanding and sustaining power; and the creation of a new generation of social justice leaders of color. Investments in Boys and Men of Color (BMOC), initially a separate strand of work at TCE, helped bring an explicit racial equity and youth development framework to the forefront of BHC's power-building approach.

- **Narrative change.** BHC's innovative communications strategies changed how policymakers and the public thought about critical issues of health equity and racial justice—for example, the linked “Health4All” and ACA implementation campaigns, as well as statewide campaigns on school discipline and criminal justice. The success and legitimacy of narrative change strategies demonstrated a new philanthropic approach to influencing critical public policy debates in California. The use of simple, compelling language and strong coordination with local organizing work were key ingredients of success.
- **Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE).** IVE broadened the range and impact of BHC's power-building approach through integration of issue education, community organizing, and policy advocacy; the presence of strong, experienced state-level leadership networks; and impact on electoral power. Because IVE's impact could be measured through increases in voter registration and voting, it also helped convince skeptics that power building produced concrete benefits and communicable outcomes.
- **The lessons learned from policy wins and failures.** Finally, community leaders' and state advocates' experience of securing policy wins, falling short, trying again, and building on their learning shaped BHC's approach, particularly when local and state-level approaches were well-aligned and reinforced one another.

Contribution #3: Game-Changing Policies and “Arcs of Change”

From BHC's early days, building power was linked to changing policies, systems, and conditions that create or perpetuate health inequities. And, because BHC invested in base-building and policy advocacy organizations over many years, partners were able to go beyond specific policy “wins” and accumulate the capacities needed to advocate for further, deeper, lasting change and be ready when windows of opportunity opened. This approach to building *cumulative capacity for change* is a major contribution of BHC and the many partners, coalitions, and alliances connected to it.

We do experience “lightning in a bottle” moments of transformative change, but we can't underestimate the years and years of capacity building and advocacy support it takes “in-between-moments” to reap the benefits of such moments. I know of tiny nonprofits that have labored in relative obscurity for many years but were ready for

the primetime moment of transformative change when that moment showed up recently – a reminder that “moments” are both combustible and also created over time. – Robert Ross, President and CEO, TCE

Building power and capacity for sustained policy and systems change happened at a different pace in each BHC community and on diverse issues such as securing resources for cleaner water and directing tax revenues to youth programming. A typical sequence for developing cumulative capacity included: starting with community organizing and power building; tackling ‘win-able’ issues while looking at the full scale of systems change needed; determining how to influence decision makers over time; and all the while developing the local and state-level capacity needed to respond effectively to emerging opportunities and sustain change-making efforts for the long haul.

As long-term capacity building continues as a signature TCE strategy for policy change in the next decade, it will be important to gauge progress in a comprehensive way. *Achieving policy wins* clearly counts, as even small changes can make a concrete difference in people’s lives. *Holding policymakers and systems accountable for implementation* is equally essential for lasting, long-term transformation.

In addition, BHC’s experience suggests the importance of tracking *the capacity and power of key organizations, coalitions, and alliances to bring about policy and systems change*, using indicators such as (1) the capacity of grassroots power-building organizations to organize and mobilize adults and youth, (2) the ability of power-building networks to acquire or connect to key capacities such as policy analysis and sophisticated communications, and (3) the increase in connections within networks of power-builders, across communities as well as among local, regional, and state level organizations.

Contribution #4: An Ecosystem Approach to Power-Building

In its final three years, the learning generated through BHC coalesced into a new understanding of a power-building ecosystem. The ecosystem is grounded in local organizing and base-building but recognizes the need for other capacities and relationships with statewide influencers to ensure that local organizations – and the people they represent, who have often been excluded from power – have agency to close health and other equity gaps.⁶

In the three years that BHC leaders have been using the ecosystem framework, experience has illuminated factors of effectiveness and key areas for further learning:

⁶ The nature and characteristics of a power-building ecosystem have been explored and described by The USC Equity Research Institute (ERI), for example, in the report, [California Health and Justice for All Power-Building Landscape: An Assessment](#) (October 2019).

- **A power-building ecosystem must center local base-building organizations while connecting them to sources of regional and statewide influence.** Efforts to combine local and state strategies through BHC were often successful but could be difficult and frustrating as well. While highly effective, statewide campaigns could be out of sync with local priorities and feel “foundation-imposed” rather than “foundation-supported.” Hard-won lessons are showing the way to get the combination of local, regional, and state strategies right.
- **The ecosystem requires infrastructure.** Capacity building will be required at multiple levels, with partners prioritizing support in leadership development, strategic communications and narrative change, data collection and usage, and policy advocacy.
- **With effective infrastructure support, the power-building ecosystem will engage new organizations and expand to additional jurisdictions.** BHC demonstrated that if base-building organizations have the needed capacity, they will reach out to communities that have been historically under-resourced and form alliances with other organizers around common concerns. By BHC’s second half, power building in the 14 BHC communities had expanded into surrounding neighborhoods, communities, counties, and even regions.

TCE leaders and partners recognize both the promise and challenges that lie ahead for a power-building ecosystem. It will require a clearer purpose, pathways for getting there, and a stronger focus on capturing learning in real time as partners test new action strategies.

I hope the next trajectory of the ecosystem is...about the strategic pathways forward for California to get to health equity for all. That requires attention to the geography of change in California. It means being aware of how folks grab the narrative and wield power in the electoral arena. It’s about seeding the power-building ecosystem within the State – understanding what that looks like in different places and that what’s needed will vary according to the different context and capacity and future directions of a place. – Jennifer Ito, Research Director, Equity Research Institute, University of Southern California

BHC’S Lessons as a Platform for Future Learning

The following lessons are platforms for future learning, both for TCE and its partners and potentially for other philanthropies and public sector agencies seeking to advance health equity and racial justice.

- **Lesson #1: Be prepared to invest for decades.** Tackling years of systemic oppression embedded in public policy and systems requires more than a time-limited initiative.

- **Lesson #2: Center racial equity and justice from the start.** Define how the commitment to anti-racism work will show up in detailed plans for policy and systems change, grantmaking priorities, ongoing professional development, and consideration of multi-issue, multi-racial movement-building grants. In working with public sector partners, encourage and assist them to (1) have a strong racial equity lens, (2) engage in root cause analysis of structural racism, and (3) share power with communities.
- **Lesson #3: Redefine foundation leadership as part of an ecosystem, not apart from it.** In an ecosystem approach, foundations need to redefine the nature of shared leadership, usually stepping back to support communities and grantees in visible leadership positions, while knowing when a foundation’s credibility and unique resources require more “upfront” leadership roles.
- **Lesson #4: Invest in long-term capacity to prepare for opening policy windows.** Many policy changes to which BHC partners contributed stemmed from advocacy efforts over many years’ time, paired with unique policy windows of opportunity that opened.
- **Lesson #5: Restructure grant-making and investment practices to support a long-term health equity and racial justice agenda.** This requires expanded support for organizations led by people of color, long term partnerships with grantees, core support for organizing, base-building, and policy advocates, and exploring additional ways to support community power beyond investments in organizing, such as redeploying capital to community decision-making and/or to community enterprises.
- **Lesson #6: Look for opportunities to link issue-specific campaigns with broader coalitions for equity and justice.** Individual movements can acquire additional power by connecting across themes of health equity and racial justice, since the root causes of many inequities in America's economy and public systems are identical.
- **Lesson #7: Seed grassroots organizations and invest in a leadership pipeline.** In geographic areas where power-building resources have been scarce for decades or longer, seeding, cultivating, and assessing new organizations is essential.
- **Lesson #8: Cultivate inside-outside partnerships with public leaders.** When community advocates make common cause with public agency leaders, stronger and faster system changes can result given respective strengths these partners bring to the table.

- **Lesson #9: Pair narrative change with organizing efforts.** Narrative change communications strategies are at their best when they're closely linked to grassroots efforts so that messaging centers the experiences of the most impacted populations.
- **Lesson #10: Measure the growth of power-building capacity over time.** In addition to tracking policy wins and implementation, track the capacity of grassroots organizations, their connections to additional capacities and power sources, and the strength of network connections within local, regional, and state power-building coalitions.

As important as any of these specific lessons is the broader approach to learning that underlies them. BHC's experience suggests that in undertaking the next generation of work, TCE or any other funder should commit to a learning strategy based on continuous, emergent learning rather than on pre-defined solutions from even the best prior lessons.

Some partners credit TCE with having done such "real time" learning and adaptation through BHC. The near-continuous refinement of BHC's central focus on "people power" is cited as evidence of the foundation's willingness to listen, learn, and adapt. Other partners, particularly those in local communities, simultaneously note the lack of opportunities to reflect on experience, translate lessons into action, assess impact, and have their voices and insights be heard by the foundation.

Both views can be true. Looking forward, the learning strategy should be organization wide at TCE and extend to – and be co-owned by – partners in the ecosystem. In the next ten years, the strategies that grow from TCE's initial set of "Bold Ideas" from the *Beyond 2020* plan (see Figure III) are best treated as hypotheses rather than rigid rules for implementation. The aim should be to start with the best ideas gleaned from partners' experience; test these collaboratively, with partners; observe the impact of strategies; keep effective solutions while changing or abandoning those that don't work; and integrate unexpected insights and effective ways of work along the way. Such a platform for learning, carried out with community and state allies, grounded in "disciplined adaptation," and

FIGURE III: TCE'S FUTURE DIRECTIONS

TCE's Board has adopted three "bold ideas" that set the direction for the next decade of the foundation's work:

Bold Idea 1: People Power: *Developing young and adult leaders to work intergenerationally to raise up the voice of marginalized communities and promote greater civic activism as essential building blocks for an inclusive, equitably prosperous state.*

Bold Idea 2: Reimagining Our Institutions: *Transforming our public institutions to become significant investors in, and champions of, racial and social equity, and in the healthy development and success of young people for generations to come.*

Bold Idea 3: A 21st Century Health for All System: *Ensuring prevention, community wellness, and access to quality health care for ALL Californians.*

consistently maintained, can pay off richly for health equity and racial justice in California and for the broader philanthropic field.

TCE'S Leadership in this Moment

Many colleagues in California see TCE as well positioned for leadership and partnership in this “tsunami” moment of racial reckoning, and for pushing forward even greater seismic change. This peer assessment comes from the foundation’s long-standing stature as a driver for health equity; its recent, more explicit focus on racial equity; the willingness to invest in power building; and TCE’s partnerships with forces of community power and with state-level policy advocates, all of whom press for change.

At the same time, TCE’s colleagues urge the foundation to be modest and humble about BHC’s achievements, given the magnitude of remaining work. For all the advances in health care coverage, school climate, criminal justice, environmental justice, and other areas, California’s health inequities have barely budged. Differential treatment of people and communities of color by public systems is still rampant. Power-building networks are still nascent in many places and require continued investment.

TCE has certainly helped move the needle on power building. However, what they’ve done is only the tip of the iceberg. We still need a next generation of power building. – Chet Hewitt, President and CEO, Sierra Health Foundation

TCE must also address its own challenges as it prepares for the next phase: being even bolder and more explicit about racial equity and the anti-racist work that will be required by the Foundation and its partners; acting with greater organizational unity in interactions with the field; thinking through its role as a part of, not an orchestrator of, the power-building ecosystem; and rethinking its grant-making and investment strategies to more fully support community power building beyond community organizing.

Finally, TCE needs to share what it is learning – with its community and state partners, with other philanthropies, and with the broader social justice field. In the next ten years, emergent learning will assume even more profound importance as TCE moves from running an initiative focused on health and racial equity, to embodying health and racial equity in its way of work.

The beauty of BHC was that we had many different strategies going in different places, so we learned a lot about who we are and what we believe in. Now, we’re at the point of figuring out how to make the powerful successes we had become the normal way of doing things. We’re moving from a single foundation initiative to an approach based on our identity as a foundation committed to health equity and racial justice. That’s the real legacy of BHC. – Ray Colmenar, Director, TCE