



Civic and Community Engagement in Southwestern Philanthropy

*Building and Strengthening
Communities, Increasing
Philanthropy's Impact*

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I. Executive Summary

Civic engagement is “the process of helping people be active participants in building and strengthening their communities, whether defined as a place or a shared identity or interest.” That is the definition most sectors use for this term. Until now, however, US philanthropy has adhered to a much narrower, constrained definition that focuses mainly on voting behaviors, election processes, and attending public meetings.

This paper seeks to describe the wider, more diverse universe of civic and community engagement activity and how it relates to philanthropy’s impact and effectiveness. We have spoken with PSW members, nonprofits, and other foundations in the region and beyond to learn more about how they are designing and using civic and community engagement strategies in their work.

Driven by technology, the use of civic engagement strategies is a growing national and global trend. Nonprofits, academics, scientists, journalists, and an increasing number of US government agencies at the federal, state and local level, now incorporate these methods into their work, using them in areas like urban planning, the environment, and public health.

These strategies:

- Provide more accurate, targeted and actionable data
- Build community trust in and support for philanthropic programs
- Facilitate coalition building, collective action and public-private partnerships
- Help leverage government funding
- Boost communities’ problem-solving capabilities
- Strengthen community bonds and reduce polarization
- Support equity

While some foundations already use such strategies, the philanthropic sector has yet to fully realize its potential to become a transformative change maker by using these tools.

This concept paper describes how civic engagement is changing the philanthropic landscape, how it manifests in Southwestern philanthropy and where it has made a difference. It examines case studies of civic engagement in action in six issue areas:

- **Community-engaged data.** Community-engaged data collection and research addresses information gaps and produces targeted, actionable data more useful and relevant to communities and decisionmakers. Cutting-edge civic technologies and tools are increasing possibilities for collecting and using such data.
- **Leveraging government funding.** Capacity-building efforts supported by philanthropy help cities, towns, rural areas and community groups access more government funding. As new legislation makes hundreds of billions of dollars available in the coming years, philanthropy has a critical role to play helping communities secure these funds.
- **Service and volunteerism.** Philanthropy created new systems and structures to help older adults find more rewarding service and volunteer opportunities, and to connect them with nonprofits and schools in ways that maximized use of their talents and experience.
- **Health.** Faith-based engagement and community engagement have helped churches connect with surrounding communities to promote well-being and address social determinants of health. Shifts in foundation practices and more community-engaged program officers help strengthen community health.

- **Civic information.** As newspapers continue to disappear, philanthropic support for non-profit community-engaged journalism and other forms of civic information has strengthened local news and information ecosystems to inform community decisionmaking and assist in disaster response.
- **Native American communities.** Long a neglected area, philanthropic engagement with Native American communities has helped create innovative new civic engagement models and uncover regional economic drivers.

Philanthropy's role, of course, extends far beyond grantmaking. Philanthropy helps change systems for the better, build organizations' capacity and seed the field with new ideas that may eventually become policy. Situated at the intersection of the public, private and nonprofit sectors, it is uniquely positioned to convene, connect, and catalyze, incubate new ideas, spur research in neglected areas, fill gaps, and create partnerships and coalitions to collectively tackle problems. It can be more nimble and fast-acting than federal interventions.

Philanthropy Southwest hopes this concept paper will promote discussion among members as to how such strategies can help advance philanthropy's work, and how they might contribute to a Funder Impact Learning Collaborative.

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II. Introduction

What is civic engagement?

“Civic,” says the Oxford English Dictionary, “relates to the duties or activities of people in relation to their town, community, or local area.” Engagement means “participating, becoming involved in, or establishing a meaningful contact or connection with someone or something.”

In its most elemental form, civic engagement means participating in one’s community and connecting with others who share a common interest or space.

[Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#), the main affinity group for funders dedicated to civic engagement practice, has considered what definition best captures the depth and variety of its members’ grantmaking. They settled on the following one:

Civic engagement is the process of helping people be active participants in building and strengthening their communities, whether defined as a place or a shared identity or interest.

Several points in this definition are worth noting. Civic engagement is a process, a way of working. This characterization outlines a big tent approach that encompasses a broad [spectrum](#) of activities and possibilities. Most importantly, it describes community participants as having agency — actively participating in identifying collective problems and advancing solutions.

In a [mapping exercise](#), PACE divided civic engagement into two main categories - civic practices

and issue integration. There are at least 13 topic areas in the civic practices category including volunteering, service learning, leadership development and capacity building, as well as advocacy, community organizing, democracy- building activities, and election-related issues. PACE members also worked in more than 11 “issue integration” areas, using civic engagement strategies to advance their missions in areas such as health, education and public safety. (See Appendix A for the complete list.)

Yet PACE’s thoughtfully crafted characterization of civic engagement is not the working definition of the term most of American philanthropy uses. Unlike almost every other sector, philanthropy adheres to a narrow view of civic engagement, seeing it as primarily dealing with issues surrounding voting, elections, political campaigns, participation in various government forums and the census. Much of the philanthropic sector considers community engagement and activities like volunteering and capacity building to be something completely different, when in fact they are part of a wide range of civic engagement activities.

The confusion is compounded by the contradictory and inconsistent way philanthropy classifies civic engagement work. Candid’s Foundation Center does not include the term “civic engagement” in its main philanthropic [classification system](#), but a search for the term in Candid’s GuideStar yields more than 6,000 results. “Civic participation,” a term the Foundation Center taxonomy does use, is a subcategory of a subcategory, narrowly defined as communicating with public officials and participating in town meetings and similar forums. Candid’s [Democracy Maps](#) use different, more expansive definitions of both civic engagement and civic participation.

How philanthropy thinks and talks about its work has real-world consequences. Grants supporting civic engagement strategies are hard to find. Philanthropic classification systems privilege siloed, prescriptive approaches. Thousands of academics who would like to do more community-engaged and community-driven research [cannot find funding](#). Researchers may be funded to study a community problem but not to connect that study to a search for solutions or

to build a community's capacity to tackle the issue. Grants are not designed to incorporate the timelines and budgets needed to deploy civic engagement strategies.

Another consequence is that much of the important, innovative work philanthropy is doing to empower communities to craft their own solutions to problems remains hidden and undervalued, even as government and the private and non-profit sectors ramp up their use of civic engagement strategies.

Supported by a grant from the Houston Endowment, this concept paper explores some of the significant civic engagement work philanthropy is doing in the Southwest and nationally.

It describes how various PSW members approach civic engagement in the programs they fund, the processes they use, and in the way their foundations relate to their communities. What were the problems they sought to solve? What challenges did they face? What tools and strategies did they employ? Were they able to move the needle on issues their community cares about? Were they able to unlock additional resources for their communities as a result or make programs more sustainable?

The section "Civic Engagement in Action" discusses case studies in a range of issue areas. These describe how vision and strategy translated to action, and what was accomplished. Each case study considers different aspects of civic engagement and best practices. But this is only a sampling of what is happening in the field. Many more PSW members are engaged in this work than those mentioned here.

In order to emphasize the range and diversity of civic engagement strategies, this paper deals less with areas traditionally associated with civic engagement like voting behaviors, election processes and the census. It focuses instead on aspects of civic engagement that impact everyday life and community problem solving. Consistent with PACE's civic engagement definitions, it uses the terms "civic engagement" and "community engagement"

interchangeably.

These case studies also highlight some major characteristics of civic engagement. These include:

- **Asset-based approaches.** Civic engagement strategies try to first identify a community's strengths and leverage those to address community problems. Even under-resourced and marginalized communities have strengths tapping into working systems that can boost initiatives.
- **Capacity building.** Many civic engagement strategies are designed to build community skills in areas like data collection and analysis, advocacy, and fundraising that empower people to do more problem solving.
- **Removing systemic barriers.** In many instances, systemic barriers or the lack of appropriate systems and structures prevents problem solving. In some cases, communities and their philanthropic or research partners helped establish new systems and processes in order to make progress.
- **Ecosystem lens.** Civic engagement practitioners often speak in terms of ecosystems and holistic approaches, referring to the web of interactions between multiple players and stakeholders. Civic engagement strategies often seek to connect different parts of an ecosystem, such as linking job creation and green infrastructure to climate change resilience.
- **Engagement leads to more engagement.** Community engagement and skills building often lead to more engagement, new coalitions and partnerships, and additional community action.

- **Tangible outcomes.** Civic engagement strategies test the effectiveness of programs and policies with the people who matter most. The acid test is whether actions result in tangible improvements on the ground communities recognize and appreciate.

III. Why Use Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement is a growing national and global trend. Many US government agencies at the federal, state and local level as well as thousands of academics, nonprofits, scientists and journalists are turning to civic engagement strategies for their work.

Technology is driving this movement. Smartphones, low-cost sensors, and new mapping and screening tools allow the public to collect information and document hyper-local conditions in ways that were not possible before. The growth of distributed networks that move ideas and information horizontally and foster knowledge exchanges between groups of users is changing the way data is collected and decisions are made. Top-down decision-making is less effective as it encounters these new forces and more public demands for participation and agency.

In a Harvard Business Review [article](#) that later became a book, authors Henry Timms and Jeremy Heimans call these emerging forces “new power” and describe the participatory models and collaborative structures now appearing in every sector and discipline. They predict that the organizations that flourish will be those best able to channel the participatory energy around them.

Many federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, the US Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NASA, the Department of Energy, Department of Transportation and others are expanding their civic engagement initiatives and seeking public input to learn how to improve such processes. Scientists are petitioning the National Science Foundation to launch a new track for citizen and community science.

Civic engagement initiatives are also growing rapidly at the state and local level, increasingly used in urban planning and decisions such as where to build parks, how to mitigate urban heat islands and flooding, and how to identify and address food deserts. In Colorado they are used to detect wildfire smoke. In California community-engaged data collection is linked to air pollution action plans. New Orleans uses it to pinpoint and address flooding hot spots.

Civic engagement strategies often yield more tangible, sustainable results at lower cost. They:

- Provide more accurate, targeted and actionable data
- Build community trust in and support for philanthropic programs
- Facilitate coalition building, collective action and public-private partnerships
- Help leverage government funding
- Boost communities' problem-solving capabilities
- Strengthen community bonds and reduce polarization
- Support equity

While some foundations already use such strategies, the philanthropic sector has yet to realize its potential to become a transformative change maker by using these tools.

Philanthropy's role, of course, extends far beyond grantmaking. Philanthropy helps change systems for the better, builds organizational capacity and seeds the field with new ideas that may eventually become policy. It can be more nimble and fast-acting than federal

interventions. Situated at the intersection of the public, private and nonprofit sectors, it is uniquely positioned to incubate new ideas, spur research in neglected areas, fill gaps, make connections, and create partnerships and coalitions to collectively tackle problems. When philanthropy focuses on underserved communities it helps find lasting solutions to problems rather than simply displacing them to “sacrifice zones.”

IV. Civic Engagement in Action

The case studies in this section describe how civic engagement manifests itself in Southwestern philanthropy’s grantmaking and operating procedures, and how these activities relate to what is going on in other sectors.

A. Community-Engaged Data

Many sectors, including philanthropy, depend on data in order to understand problems, make decisions, and allocate resources. But while data is an essential tool, it can also be inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete.

There are numerous instances where data collectors neglected to ask key questions, ignored context, or aggregated data in ways that masked local problems. For example, state and federal environmental protection and public health agencies may not collect data on the much higher levels of toxic exposure frontline communities experience. A recent [study](#) by the Environmental Data and Governance Initiative (EDGI) found major gaps and disparities in the

inspection data the US EPA uses to track violations and ensure regulatory compliance. Facilities in majority-minority communities had more severe data gaps, and western states, including Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada scored the worst. The problem is so widespread that EDGI created an open-source data tool to measure the amount of missing information.

One way to improve data quality and plug gaps is to expand civic engagement in data collection. The federal government intends to lead the way. In September 2022 US chief data scientist Denice Ross and the Office of Management and Budget [announced](#) a whole-of-government approach to establish data partnerships with local communities, grassroots organizations, underrepresented researchers and state and local governments to address known government data gaps and limitations and to improve equitable access to data. Proposals include helping community-based organizations identify and address social and economic disparities in their cities and towns, and training and loaning equipment to community members to collect local environmental health data to share with government agencies. They have asked members of the public and other stakeholders to tell them which agencies, programs, regions, and communities suffer from unmet needs, flawed data processes, and accountability problems.

New technologies that use smartphones, geospatial information systems, satellites, low-cost sensors, and digital mapping and screening tools are also spurring the global adoption of community-engaged data collection. Many of these technologies are being developed with philanthropic support.

The Communiversity

Some of the most innovative models for community-driven data collection have emerged from the environmental justice movement. More often than not, the data they seek is not being

collected, so they must devise new methods to document the problems frontline communities experience.

The Robert D. Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University in Houston, whose funders include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, JP Morgan Chase Foundation, the Houston Endowment, and the Bezos Earth Fund, have deployed several community-driven data projects in which researchers and communities co-create data.

The “Communiversity” model, first developed by Dr. Beverly Wright at the [Deep South Center for Environmental Justice](#) in New Orleans, is designed to support more equitable research partnerships between university researchers and community members. It is action-oriented and connects the lived experience of communities to theoretical and academic knowledge and to policy change.

The Bullard Center and Deep South Center collaboratively run the [HBCU-CBO Gulf Coast Equity Consortium](#), a partnership of researchers from historically black colleges and universities and community-based organizations that use the Communiversity model. Supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the National Institute of Environmental Health Science, their research is guided by community priorities and concerns, and builds community members’ capacity to participate in the research, gain new skills, and advocate for themselves. Projects are currently underway in Houston, New Orleans, Gulfport, Mobile, and Pensacola.

Long before a formal agreement is signed, the Bullard Center works with community-based groups to create an action plan to help them identify environmental justice concerns and prioritize focus areas and spending efforts. The Center pairs them with an academic expert from an HBCU who matches their research needs, and helps identify possible government and public health partners, and occasionally, additional funding or expert resources. It may help newer environmental justice groups obtain 501c3 status. One Consortium program manager assists with community engagement, while another works the research end.

Few universities currently operate this way. Many academic research grants and funding processes are not designed with scientist-CBO research partnerships in mind, leading to structural barriers. Many university research grants do not accommodate payments to community members. Academic researchers who wish to compensate community partners often resort to workarounds like stipends, honorariums, and gift cards, and sometimes have difficulty securing even these.

The Communiversity model, however, is designed for equitable disbursements and flexibility. Grants and contracts for community groups go through TSU's development office as pass-through grants. While written agreements outline the scope of work and deliverables, funds awarded to community groups are disbursed as general operating support, leaving it up to each community group to decide how best to spend them.

Linking Data to Action

Many underserved communities have become disillusioned with what they call "helicopter science" -- researchers who visit briefly to collect data and then leave without using the data to help solve the problems they identify. Another Bullard Center program, Data to Action, prioritizes data collection that advances problem solving and policy solutions. Data to Action projects in several Houston neighborhoods document pollution, health disparities and other issues and assemble evidence that is used to advocate for government support for mitigation, remediation, and regulation.

Houston's Pleasantville neighborhood is one of these Data to Action communities. Situated near industrial sites and freight transportation routes, residents were concerned about air quality. The nearest government air quality monitor was miles away. The community partnered with the HBCU-CBO Consortium and Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) to learn more about

their local air quality and its health impacts.

From the beginning, in 2016, researchers involved community members in project design. They asked residents what they wanted to monitor, where to locate the air monitors, and what they wanted to do with the data. They helped them develop a community action plan. In 2019 [ACTS](#) (Achieving Community Tasks Successfully), a local community nonprofit founded by a retired nurse, worked with EDF to install five low-cost air monitors in the neighborhood. Residents were taught how to maintain the monitors and collect the data. The community owns the data and decides how to use it. ACTS hired a graduate student from the University of Texas School of Public Health to analyze and visualize the data so the community could see trends and identify pollution sources. A Memorandum of Understanding with the Bullard Center outlines where the data will be housed.

Since one of the goals of data collection in Pleasantville is to share the information with elected officials and spur the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to take action, the Bullard Center and EDF use air monitors that integrate easily into city networks.

Pleasantville has other problems besides air quality. These include food insecurity and toxic release incidents, fires and floods. Once the community established a partnership with the HBCU-CBO Consortium, it could mobilize this relationship for other purposes. It has partnered with the HBCU-CBO Consortium to produce health and disaster response surveys to better understand local needs in this area.

Community engagement helps researchers ask better questions and align areas of inquiry with community priorities and policy decisions. Community members gain research and data skills that can be applied elsewhere.

Community-Centered Data Tools

New community-centered mapping and screening tools are providing everyone from departments of public works to neighborhood associations with detailed information about their communities.

Eighteen states, including New Mexico and Colorado, and the federal government have created [environmental mapping and screening tools](#) that combine layers of different data sets with detailed demographic, socio-economic and public health information to describe hyper-local conditions. The White House is developing a Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool that will help identify underserved communities and play a role in funding decisions.

These tools are developed with civic engagement in mind. Colorado's [EnviroScreen tool](#), one of the newest, launched in June 2022. Its developers engaged [hundreds of community members](#) and other stakeholders in the state throughout its development, integrating their suggestions into the tool's design to make it useful to a broad range of users. The tool will help identify the locations, sources, rates, and impacts of a range of environmental and health indicators across the state, influence interventions and public policy, and assist with research and advocacy. Almost 80 percent of public meeting participants said they would use the tool. Some communities requested an option to report data from their communities and others suggested linking the map to real-time monitors and sensor networks.

Other interactive digital tools like park equity maps help residents and policymakers quickly identify underserved communities that lack green space and parks to pinpoint more targeted investments. Maryland's [park equity map](#), for example, includes data layers on population density, concentrations of children and the elderly, neighborhood walkability, distance to public transportation, the location of grocery stores and public schools, and a host of other socio-economic indicators. Such tools make it easier to identify barriers to accessing public spaces, the needs of communities, and promote more fruitful city planning discussions.

Philanthropy continues to play a critical role developing and supporting these new research

methods and data tools. As more of these community-driven research methodologies and tools come online, they will give the public a greater role in planning, remediation, and resilience strategies, and will enable more informed public policy discussions.

B. Leveraging Government Funding

Since 2020, the federal government has made available more than \$2 trillion to state and local governments and other groups to recover and rebuild from the pandemic. Recent significant legislation includes the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill (2021), the American Rescue Plan (2022), and the Inflation Reduction Act (2022). The latter makes hundreds of billions of dollars available in areas that have long been underfunded, including affordable housing, pollution remediation, transportation, water and sewer infrastructure, climate change mitigation, and workforce training and development.

In addition, the Biden administration issued an executive order establishing the Justice40 Initiative, which seeks to deliver 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain federal investments and grants to disadvantaged communities that are underserved and overburdened by pollution. Major federal agencies, including the Department of Energy, Department of Transportation, Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Health and Human Services have established Justice40 task forces. HHS alone has [13 programs](#) included in the initiative.

In the past, federal assistance has been [diverted](#) from communities in need to more affluent, politically connected neighborhoods and projects. Unincorporated communities and smaller cities and towns in particular often lack the connections, resources and expertise needed to secure federal funding.

Some federal agencies are establishing regional technical assistance centers to address this, but

cannot meet the demand. Recognizing the need and a unique opportunity, philanthropy has become instrumental in helping communities unlock federal and state funding. This capacity-building work is a core civic engagement principle, and one of the most impactful and cost-effective actions philanthropy can take. It delivers impressive returns and creates a path to long-term sustainability.

Capacity-Building for Justice40

There are many such efforts. The Bezos Earth Fund, established in 2020, has moved quickly to help underserved communities build capacity to access federal funds in Justice40 covered programs. In 2021 alone it committed [\\$150 million dollars](#) to provide training for networks and consortia of grassroots organizations to apply for federal grants, and to monitor, document and communicate how states and local government spend Justice40 funds to ensure that money reaches the appropriate communities. Efforts include creating a Data Collaborative that will address data gaps, track Justice40 investments, and convene diverse stakeholders.

Several foundations, including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the JPB Foundation support a [Justice40 accelerator](#) to help local community groups learn how to apply for federal grants. In the past two years, the accelerator has served 101 organizations in 35 states and territories. In PSW member states it has assisted a number of grassroots organizations in Texas, New Mexico and Colorado.

Returns on accelerator investments are impressive. The Atlanta-based Partnership for Southern Equity, a core team member of the Justice40 accelerator, invests \$75,000 in each cohort member they accept into the program over a 12–18 month period. The sum includes \$25,000 in general operating support and \$15,000 worth of technical assistance. Trainings include individual readiness assessments, workshops on government procurement practices, and a Federal Funding Preparation Workshop series that features speakers from relevant federal

government grant programs.

With the accelerator's help one such community group, the Green Door Initiative in Detroit, leveraged an operating budget of \$300,000 into \$3 million by winning a Department of Energy grant for a solar energy project for underserved Detroit neighborhoods. With the funds, the Initiative started an environmental careers training program for local residents, converting a shuttered elementary school into a job training center. So far it has trained nearly 900 individuals.

The Florida-based Anthropocene Alliance, also supported by philanthropy, has helped 140 frontline grass roots organizations in 38 US states and territories with grant writing assistance, partner referrals and media and advocacy expertise, channeling more than \$20 million to local community-based organizations to address pollution and climate change.

With support from the Bezos Earth Fund, the Bullard Center is establishing 20 "information hubs" across the country to be run by the HBCU-CBO Consortium to help disadvantaged communities access Justice40 investments and to provide training and technical assistance to apply for federal grants.

Help for Small Towns and Rural Areas

Not only nonprofits need help. Smaller cities and towns and rural areas also find themselves at a disadvantage when they compete for federal funds.

To remedy this, a coalition of philanthropies working with the National League of Cities, US Conference of Mayors and others have set up a [local infrastructure hub](#) to help smaller towns and cities navigate over 400 funding opportunities and to compete for federal infrastructure grants. Grant application "bootcamps" include technical support, access to subject matter experts and individualized coaching.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of leveraging government dollars, though, is the Regenesi Institute in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Harold Mitchell, a town resident, founded the non-profit to address the problem of toxic waste sites in Arkwright and Forest Park, two majority Black neighborhoods, that were making residents (including Mitchell) sick, and to deal with disinvestment and the lack of municipal amenities like roads, sidewalks, and sewage and waterlines. The Regenesi Institute helped these communities leverage an initial \$20,000 EPA grant into almost [\\$300 million](#) of government, private sector and foundation funding over two decades.

Civic engagement strategies played an important role in this achievement, which is now held up as a national and international exemplar. These strategies included:

- **Community involvement.** A third of community residents signed on to the effort. Data collected by the community on health impacts helped secure federal grants.
- **Building consensus.** The Institute focused on building consensus and trust between the community and other partners, rather than on litigation.
- **Broad coalitions and partnerships.** The Institute worked with local industry, and local, state and federal government to apply for and manage government funding.
- **Assistance from philanthropy and higher education.** Regenesi received support from foundations and assistance from universities for capacity building and administrative support, data collection and analysis, and community facilities.
- **Holistic approach.** Regenesi connected its goal of environmental cleanup to more livable neighborhoods and jobs and skills training.

The current moment presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for philanthropy to play a transformative role to ensure government funds reach those who need them most. Civic engagement is a key strategy to achieve those goals.

C. Service and Volunteerism

Community service and volunteerism are core civic engagement activities, embodying the idea of active participation in building and strengthening communities. But they are also dynamic fields that must adapt and reinvent themselves as times and needs change.

The Virginia Piper Trust, a place-based philanthropy in Maricopa County, Arizona, embarked on a civic engagement initiative a number of years ago to reinvent volunteerism for adults 50 years and older. Unusually, they and their partners carefully [documented](#) the entire process. Today, their work serves as a useful blueprint to help understand how civic engagement initiatives progress from vision to implementation.

Maricopa County is over 9000 square miles, one of the largest counties in the US. It includes Phoenix and over two dozen other cities and towns. About [a third](#) of the county's 4.5 million inhabitants are over 50 years-old.

In the mid 2000's, the Piper Trust began a series of surveys, focus groups, and conversations with local organizations in an effort to better understand this cohort. A visiting nurses survey found that [83 percent](#) of older adults in the county rated their health as good or excellent and 88 percent needed no help to accomplish daily tasks. Focus groups revealed that many in this cohort wished to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways but had negative views of volunteering, associating it with mundane and menial work. These hard-charging baby boomers, many of them retired executives and professionals, wanted to use their career skills to make substantive contributions to organizations.

Untapped Human Capital

A hallmark of civic engagement strategies is adopting an asset-based approach, identifying a community's strengths and building on them. The Piper Trust rejected the traditional needs-focused "frailty model" for older adults and viewed Maricopa's cohort as a huge, untapped reserve of human capital. It also wanted to change the way the larger community viewed older adults. It used the term "civic engagement" to describe this work because it resonated more positively with residents than "volunteerism." The Piper Trust defined civic engagement as "the opportunity for older adults to engage in meaningful activities to make their communities a better place." They also favored language that characterized the over-fifty population as "experienced" and "skilled" rather than "older" and "senior."

The Piper Trust freely borrowed ideas from national and local models, adapting them to local needs and collaborating with national networks. They tapped into the expertise of [CoGenerate.org](https://cogenerate.org/) (formerly known as Civic Ventures and [Encore.org](https://encore.org/)) a national organization that specialized in deploying the talent and career skills of older adults for social purpose work. Later, they also collaborated with AARP and the national initiative Coming of Age.

Piper Trust program managers involved in designing the effort had backgrounds in local and state government and were familiar with the strengths and gaps in government programs for older adults. It soon became clear that no organization or government agency in Maricopa County was equipped to handle a program that would match experienced older workers with nonprofits. They would need to fill that gap.

The Piper Trust helped organize a consortium of local foundations that included the Arizona Community Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, and corporate sponsors such as Intel to create Experience Matters, a 501c3 "one-stop hub" to connect highly skilled older adults with nonprofits that needed their expertise. Started with \$145,000 in seed money, Experience Matters eventually grew to a staff of 13 with an annual budget of \$2 million and created some of its own revenue streams.

Civic engagement strategies succeed most often when encounters are carefully structured and managed. When two different knowledge groups with different sets of experiences and expectations work together, clearly outlining procedures and responsibilities and the scope of work helps prevent misunderstandings.

Piper Trust research showed that many nonprofits did not understand how to properly use skilled volunteers or manage their roles within their organizations. So Experience Matters created a [structure](#) for such encounters. It offered four different types of programs for older adults to choose from:

- **Encore Fellows**, part of the national program started by CoGenerate, matched highly-skilled professionals with nonprofits that could use their skills. Fellows worked in 6-12 month positions and were paid a stipend. Areas of expertise Fellows offered included financial analysis, risk management, marketing strategies, data evaluation and business planning.
- **Service by Design Associates** offered shorter pro bono placements for skilled professionals.
- **Americorps**, part of the national service network, matched volunteers with opportunities in Maricopa County schools.
- **RSVP** offered more traditional volunteer opportunities for varied experience levels.

Trainings prepared executive-level volunteers for a nonprofit experience that might differ substantially from their previous work experiences, explaining the differences in goals and operations between for-profit businesses and mission-driven organizations and telling them what to expect. Senior staff from nonprofits interested in utilizing Encore Fellows or highly skilled associates had to complete a two-day workshop to learn how to create specific job descriptions for skilled professional volunteers. Before placements were made, job descriptions clearly defined the scope of work, outlined needed skills and described desired outcomes.

Nonprofits were taught how to engage with skilled volunteer workers. Experience Matters employed “engagement advisers” to monitor placements and troubleshoot issues that may come up between volunteers and their host organizations. After a volunteer’s term ended, Experience Matters conducted a survey to measure the financial impact of his or her work and to determine if other resources became available as a result.

The Piper Trust experimented with creating other older adult volunteer experiences in different cities by offering small planning grants to organizations that included municipal governments, public libraries and community colleges. This granting strategy allowed the recipients to envision different ways to tackle challenges. The Piper Trust, in turn, was able to see a range of different options for implementing its strategy. Four of seven proposed programs received additional funding for implementation. One of them, in Tempe, has become a nationally recognized model for civic engagement.

Even before it received a planning grant, the city of Tempe had been exploring how to better serve its older adults and create a place where residents could gather to learn more about options available to them. With Piper Trust support, in 2004 the city and Friends of the Tempe Public Library launched Tempe Connections in the library’s main branch, creating the [Connections Cafe](#) as a gathering place for socializing, workshops and information on civic engagement opportunities for older adults.

The program drew so much interest that in 2006, with support from the Piper Trust and Americorps, Tempe Connections decided to offer more older adult volunteering opportunities and to establish a local chapter of [Experience Corps](#), a program that provides tutors to local elementary schools. In 2011, the AARP Foundation took over management of the national network, which operates in 22 cities. The Tempe chapter remains one of the largest in the country, has tutored thousands of children and has been so successful that it has helped develop and implement [tutoring models](#) for other communities across the country, and advises on best practices for volunteer management.

Several factors contributed to the success of Tempe's civic engagement program:

First, the city council and key municipal agencies supported the Piper Trust's effort to utilize the experience and talent of older adults more effectively.

Second, by funding the Connections Cafe as a gathering place, the Piper Trust helped create [civic infrastructure](#), scaffolding that supported regular opportunities for people to connect with each other.

Third, the Friends of Tempe Public Library and their collaborators developed programs that would complement existing city literacy and youth programs.

Fourth, the city was ready to take on some of the costs of administering the program, which is supplemented by revenue from the library cafe.

PACE executive director Kristen Cambell has observed that engagement begets more engagement, and one sees this happening in Tempe. The enthusiastic public response to Tempe Connections encouraged the citizen's advisory committee that helps manage the program to think bigger and build on their success.

Another characteristic of civic engagement is that it constantly evolves. Today, the [Experience Matters](#) program is housed at the Arizona State University Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation. The Virginia Piper Trust and [CoGenerate.org](#) are reimagining their work to become more intergenerational, to cross boundaries that have divided volunteers by age in order to maximize each generation's strengths and connect them.

The Piper Trust's civic engagement approach to volunteerism applies to that field now more than ever. A September 2022 [cover story](#) in the Chronicle of Philanthropy examined the state of

volunteerism in the wake of the COVID pandemic, which drastically reduced volunteer numbers. Organizations that continue to rely on outdated models of volunteering have struggled to rebuild their volunteer base. Those that have used civic engagement approaches have flourished.

D. Health

The movement towards civic engagement among health funders began to accelerate several years ago as more foundations decided to concentrate on the way social and economic factors like income, housing, safety and food security, what some call social determinants of health (SDoH), affect the well-being of communities. Studies show that up to [80 percent](#) of health outcomes can be attributed to factors outside the doctor's office.

The Episcopal Health Foundation (EHF) in Houston and the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) are two examples of Southwestern health-focused philanthropies that have integrated civic engagement strategies into their grantmaking and operating procedures. EHF and CHF demonstrate how non-grant support is often as important as grants.

Faith-Based Engagement

The Episcopal Health Foundation combines faith-based engagement with a health mission to build and strengthen communities. It focuses on addressing underlying conditions that can lead to poor health and on strengthening community health. EHF also works with over 150 churches in a 57-county service area with a population of 11 million. EHF's board is chaired by the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas and includes several clergy members.

Several years ago, to strengthen and support its civic engagement activities, the foundation created a separate division for community and congregational engagement and collaboration.

Like the Virginia Piper Trust, EHF took an asset-based approach. The foundation sought to help connect churches to their surrounding communities and to learn more about communities through their connections with local churches.

EHF encouraged both communities and churches to take the lead in deciding which issues and strategies were most important to them. It also offered to help congregations figure out what kinds of outreach they wanted, and provided training and technical assistance. By creating many different avenues for engagement, EHF has also established multiple channels for community engagement and feedback, and has gained a better understanding of the most pressing issues in the counties it serves.

Community Problem Solving

Suggestions for initiatives have bubbled up from congregations and communities. In recent years many congregations became concerned about mental health. After conversations with congregations, EHF helped them identify and join mental health networks and connect with experts, and hosted mental health first aid trainings and meetings with local mental health services.

EHF's [Texas Community-Centered Health Homes](#) initiative is a large scale, long-term investment in community clinics that helps them brainstorm and execute programs with community partners to improve conditions that affect community health. Based on a model first developed by the [Prevention Institute](#), EHF has committed over \$17 million to this program since it [launched](#) in 2018. The initial 13 participating clinics received grants of up to \$500,000 to develop and implement their own community-specific work. EHF also provided training, coaching and technical assistance.

A look at some of these programs shows a broad range of responses. The People's Community Clinic in Austin collaborated with the Dell Medical School at University of Texas at Austin to

develop an [SDoH screening tool](#) to assess the social determinants of health that impact each patient and strengthen a referral system for social services. Several community clinics and their partners advocated for sidewalks to reduce traffic injuries and increase opportunities for exercise and community connectedness. Many initiated [Food RX](#) programs to give patients and their families more access to fruits and vegetables. Still others focused on creating community gathering spaces and rehabilitating local parks to increase community cohesion and opportunities for physical activity.

A Spiritual Roadmap

EHF's [Holy Currencies Ministry Incubation Program](#) is a faith-based civic engagement program created by the [Kaleidoscope Institute](#), part of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, to help congregations better connect to their communities and diverse populations in their neighborhoods. It focuses on assisting parishioners to develop a ministry plan and roadmap for building relationships, community partnerships and congregational leadership by drawing on their spiritual values and a holistic model of stewardship for inspiration and guidance. EHF thinks of Holy Currencies as an “idea incubator” that helps congregations engage with God’s work in the world. To increase the capacity of congregations and other organizations to do civic engagement work, EHF also has an [Activating Community Voice Program](#) that helps organizations design, plan and execute successful community engagement efforts, and a [peer learning network](#) to strengthen the capacity of community groups to form coalitions and do collaborative work.

The Engaged Program Officer

Several years ago the Colorado Health Foundation, the state’s [largest foundation](#), decided to focus on health equity, with civic engagement as a core strategy. In late 2017 CHF introduced a new [Community Engagement IMPACT Practice Model](#) to guide these efforts. CHF’s definition of community includes neighborhoods, individuals, organizations, networks, coalitions, regions

and systems. The model reorients foundation processes and relationships with grantees, emphasizes collaborative problem solving, and gives greater weight to community priorities.

It also redefines the role of the program officer. Program officers are expected to spend considerable time in their assigned communities learning about, listening to and discussing community concerns, building relationships with a range of diverse stakeholders and organizations of varying power, and identifying emerging leaders and groups that may be eligible for future support. They take an active role in connecting like-minded groups, catalyzing coalitions and networks, and encouraging partnerships.

The model attempts to streamline and simplify grantmaking. It supports pre-proposal technical assistance for organizations that seek to submit proposals, guidance for organizations that apply for funding and feedback for those that did not receive grants. If a promising emerging group does not yet qualify for funds, program officers may help them achieve 501c3 status to become eligible. Some grants provide general operating support, others are program or project-based. Most are multi-year.

One of the Foundation's four focus areas, "Strengthen Community Health," gives a sense of the breadth of their grantmaking strategy to promote healthy communities. It encompasses housing, community centers and marketplaces, community wealth building, food security and economic development. Many grants emphasize solutions that originate in or are being driven by communities. Capacity building is a key feature. CHF's equity collective infrastructure program unlocks investment capital for organizations that would not otherwise be eligible for loans to create endowments, purchase property, and scale up. Like EHF, CHF also invests in health-related community organizing and advocacy work to seek policy changes to remove barriers to health.

Evaluation and accountability mechanisms for programs that use civic engagement strategies often consider benchmarks that differ from traditional evaluation methods. The IMPACT model

looks at “success milestones” such as improvements in organizational capacity, the formation of networks, and cases where seed projects lead to bigger, more strategic projects. Evaluation criteria may emerge from a dialogue between Foundation staff and grantees rather than a prescribed list.

E. Civic Information

The US news industry has been in crisis for 20 years. According to a Northwestern University [study](#), since 2005 the US has lost more than a fourth of its newspapers, and is on track to lose a third by 2025. An average of more than two newspapers vanishes each week. Newspaper employment has dropped 70 percent and revenues have declined 60 percent. Seventy million people now live in more than 200 counties with no local newspaper or in almost 2000 counties with only one paper that is usually a weekly.

News Deserts

These “news deserts” are particularly acute in the west. Texas has lost more journalists per capita than almost every other state. It has [21 counties without a single newspaper](#), and 134 counties with single papers that are mostly weeklies with few journalists. In addition to news deserts, as many as 10 percent of Americans of voting age live in “orphan counties” — border regions that get broadcast signals only from neighboring states. These communities are often cut off from state and local news.

There are few digital alternatives for news in these places. The dearth of reliable, nonpartisan news and information is made worse by the lack of broadband access in many rural and underserved areas. Of the 200 counties with no newspaper, only six have a digital alternative that provide state and local news. Of the almost 2000 counties without a daily paper (two-

thirds of all US counties), fewer than 100 have digital alternatives.

What happens to a community without a shared local source of news? Accurate, nonpartisan news and information is connective tissue that knits together communities, and its absence leads to a noticeable decline in civic health. People feel more disconnected, and there is less shared public understanding of local issues.

Studies have documented that when a local newspaper disappears, business and government corruption increases, misinformation and polarization grow, and voter participation decreases. The lack of local news may also lead to higher [borrowing costs](#) for municipal and revenue bonds, more regulatory violations, and [increased pollution](#). Voters lack basic, fact-checked information about candidates for office, such as their employment histories and policy positions.

Chances are the local media in your area (and sometimes state and national media) are not covering the issues your foundation is working so hard to address. Many news organizations lack the resources to hire reporters to cover topics like education, health, and local governance, including tracking where and how public funds are spent.

Creating and sustaining sources of reliable, nonpartisan news and information is a public service and core civic engagement activity. Many foundations now believe that a healthy local news and information ecosystem is essential for communities to thrive.

Journalism Rooted in Communities

Numerous PSW members support nonprofit news organizations in their respective states, or underwrite coverage of critical issue areas like health and the environment. But in an era of increased partisanship and mistrust of the news media, in addition to creating more sustainable business models for the digital age, these nonprofit news outlets must also rebuild trust with

the communities they serve.

They are doing this through civic engagement and participatory reporting. This new type of journalism is designed to be more equitable and responsive. News outlets interact more with readers and viewers and what communities tell them are their information needs, departing from the sensationalized news formulas that characterize so much commercial media. Their journalism tends to be more solutions oriented, and there is greater focus on community problem solving. Many new models and communities of practice are emerging in this dynamic, growing field.

In the Southwest the Texas Tribune, a member-supported, nonpartisan media organization, is one of the oldest and best known of these efforts and has become a national exemplar. The Tribune covers public policy, politics, government and statewide issues. It has the largest statehouse bureau in the United States, and is now a go-to source for information on state and local government and public policy. It has created new business models and revenue streams. It provides its content for free to news organizations throughout the state. Its investigative reporting has increased government accountability. Many PSW members fund its work, including its coverage of rural Texas counties.

The Tribune focuses on civic engagement. It has created databases of public information. Its festivals and regional symposiums have reinvented the public square, becoming venues for discussion and debate, and gathering places for civic discourse.

More Southwestern foundations are creating similar organizations to provide civic information and strengthen local news and information ecosystems. In Houston, foundation-funded community listening sessions, surveys and focus groups revealed that many residents felt they were not getting the news and information they needed on local government and public services. Rural and minority residents felt existing media did not cover their communities accurately or address their information needs. In response, the Houston Endowment, Kinder

Foundation, Arnold Ventures and other funders have committed \$20 million to launch a new independent, nonprofit [local news initiative](#) in Greater Houston that will be one of the largest in the country.

Civic engagement will play a central role in its operations, and will help identify and inform coverage areas. A community advisory committee of diverse stakeholders will provide feedback. Like the Texas Tribune, the news initiative will provide its coverage for free to other Houston news outlets.

News collaboratives supported in part by philanthropy have [emerged in many states](#) as a way to pool resources, amplify coverage, and strengthen local information ecosystems. Some include strategic partnerships with libraries, universities, and regional journalism and freedom of information associations. One of these, the [Colorado News Collaborative](#), is a statewide network of 170 news organizations that share news coverage and support services.

In smaller media markets news collaboratives play a critical role in addressing news deserts and enabling coverage that would be beyond the reach of small newsrooms. In Oklahoma the Inasmuch Foundation, Kirkpatrick Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and the Democracy Fund helped found and support the Oklahoma Media Center, which now has 28 journalism collaborators. The Center provides training, has launched an Innovation Fund to help members explore ways to engage diverse audiences and test new business models, and facilitates and funds reporting collaborations. The Kirkpatrick Foundation helped fund a data journalist to serve member newsrooms. OMC pays for subscriptions to legislative and government spending tracking services, helped fund town halls and “listening tours” in rural areas and facilitates partnerships with local universities for polling and data collection.

New Forms of Civic Information

Civic information comes in many forms, and some go beyond journalism. The Chicago-based

City Bureau has trained hundreds of people to become part of a [Documenters](#) network. Members attend under-reported public meetings and publish multimedia reports to create a public record. Now in seven cities, the City Bureau is expanding its network with philanthropic support. The Bullard Center is helping several Houston communities create multi-hazard “information hubs” to provide disaster response information for extreme weather events and manmade disasters. Each community decides what they need and how best to communicate with residents.

New Jersey is the first state in the country to create a [Civic Information Consortium](#) to address local news deserts. The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation helped develop and promote this new civic information model. The independent, nonpartisan Consortium receives state funding as well as philanthropic and individual charitable donations. Its governing board includes members appointed by the governor and both parties in the legislature, as well as community members. Organizations receiving grants must partner with one of six public colleges and universities that are Consortium members.

Recent grants included funding for freelance reporters to cover municipal meetings in two counties that are news deserts, and for a news agency that produces multimedia reports for and about state residents with disabilities. The consortium’s bylaws ensure grantees have editorial independence.

Southwestern philanthropy will continue to play a major role creating and sustaining civic information as new models for informing communities emerge. Strong local news and information ecosystems are vital components of almost every philanthropic endeavor. As one foundation staffer put it, “when news and information sources are good, programs work better.”

F. Native American Communities

Native American issues are one of the most neglected areas in the philanthropic sector.

Although 2% of the US population is Native American and has great needs, only [.4%](#) of philanthropic dollars go to help address issues in tribal communities. Despite having some of the country's largest Native American populations, the Southwest has similarly low levels of philanthropic investment.

In Oklahoma, where 12% of the population is Native American with a poverty rate of 15%, only .46% of philanthropic dollars went to these communities between 2010-2020, according to an [analysis](#) of Candid data for Casey Family Programs. In Nevada, where Native Americans are 3.64% of the state's population and have a 12.2% poverty rate, only .08% of philanthropic dollars were directed to these communities. Among PSW member states, only New Mexico has a giving threshold that exceeds .66%. Although 5 percent of philanthropic grants there go to Native Americans, most of these funds come from outside the region.

Aside from fairness and equity arguments, there are additional reasons for philanthropy to engage with tribal communities. A 2022 [series](#) by *Indian Country Today* and nine news partners, supported by the Walton Family Foundation and the Institute for Nonprofit News, revealed that tribes are often the [largest drivers of regional and rural economies](#). In Oklahoma in 2019 they contributed \$15.6 billion directly to the state economy, billions more indirectly, and helped support over 113,000 jobs. The series also reported that many tribal members were interested in green jobs and environmental cleanup and restoration work as jobs of the future and as a way to diversify away from gaming and oil and gas production.

Little of this was known to the public because data about the impact of tribal nations on local and state economies is sparse, as is reporting on tribal communities. A 2022 [study](#) by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis cited critical gaps in Indian Country business data and the lack of data on tribally owned enterprises, which play key public and private roles in their

regions. The *Indian Country Today* series, an example of how information can inform civic discourse and public policy, will help the public and private sector capitalize on Indian Country's strengths to make strategic investments.

Yet another reason for philanthropy to engage with Native Americans is that some of the most creative and innovative civic engagement approaches and [methodologies](#) have emerged from work with tribal communities. Many of these are now used throughout North America and abroad in non-native communities, and some have led to scientific breakthroughs.

How did this occur? Tribal communities have a long, often traumatic history working with government agencies, academic researchers, and external funding. Researchers and government representatives often misrepresented their motives, used extractive and exploitative methods, excluded tribal members from decision-making that affected their communities and generated [bad or misleading data](#). Externally crafted policies and solutions imposed on tribes with little consultation have had devastating effects.

As a result, today many tribal communities will only accept external funding if it is deployed through civic engagement strategies and equitable partnership models that give tribes a key role in developing research questions and collecting data. Guidelines they have developed for [research and data governance](#) represent civic engagement best practices and have spread to other sectors, particularly to underserved and marginalized communities that have also been excluded from funding and decision-making processes. Federal agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families have adopted such practices and now require contractors and grantees to use collaborative [evaluation methods](#), developed in part by tribal members, for their work in tribal communities.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Working with tribal communities poses challenges because of their unique federal status,

sovereignty issues, and the lack of reliable data. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which has worked with tribal communities for decades, is an example of one foundation that has sorted through these issues. It has become one of the largest funders of tribal communities in the Southwest.

When death rates skyrocketed in tribal communities during the COVID pandemic, more foundations sought to engage with Native Americans. They found that using civic engagement strategies to assemble diverse partnerships was an effective way to tackle problems. The Navajo Water Access Coordination Group is one such [collaborative effort](#). The partnership included Navajo leaders and tribal agencies, state and federal agencies, nonprofits, universities, and philanthropy.

The problem they all sought to solve was the lack of access to safe water in Navajo communities. As many as 30% of Navajo Nation homes lack access to piped water. During the pandemic, many tribal members had to drive several hours to obtain water. In 2020 the Navajo Nation requested a Centers for Disease Control and Indian Health Services survey that determined that additional safe water access points were needed in 59 of the 110 Navajo Nation communities. Federal funding for these projects was available but came with restrictions and early deadlines.

The project's key philanthropic funder was the Agnes Nelms Haury Program in Environmental and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. The program functions as a foundation and is overseen by a Donor Advised Fund board. Guided by Navajo leadership and Navajo water authorities, the Haury Program helped identify and fill critical funding gaps not covered by federal dollars.

By August 2021, 59 new safe water points were functioning. With philanthropic support, NWACG devised a communications strategy that created a mobile phone mapping tool to show the new water access locations that included video messages and push alerts, and radio and

print ads publicizing the new water availability.

As is common with civic engagement efforts, this one led to further engagement. The Navajo Nation's water difficulties are fundamentally systemic water infrastructure problems. Encouraged by its success, the NWACG is making plans for new collaborative projects that map water sources across the Navajo Nation and help identify water contaminated by the hundreds of abandoned mines in the area.

Building Connections and Capacity

Native Americans in Philanthropy, a network of Native and non-Native nonprofits, tribal communities, foundations and community leaders, is trying to eliminate barriers to philanthropic engagement with tribal communities. It has formed partnerships and learning communities with several philanthropy-serving organizations, including the Biodiversity Funders Group and the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, to identify and co-resource funding opportunities.

Matching fund requirements have long been a barrier to tribes' participation in grant programs. A [group of funders](#) contributed to NAP's Tribal Nations Conservation Pledge and Funding Collaborative to fulfill the matching funds requirement for tribes applying for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's [America the Beautiful Challenge](#) grants. By doing so, NAP increased the percentage of tribally-led projects in the program from an original 10 percent set-aside to one-third of all projects.

Many NAP initiatives revolve around civic engagement strategies for their implementation. In 2021-2022, supported by the Skoll Foundation and the Marguerite Casey Foundation, its Tribal Nations Initiative conducted [listening sessions](#) (a civic engagement best practice) around the country to get guidance from tribal leaders about their priorities and needs, and where they would most like to see philanthropy play a role and fill in funding gaps.

At a December 12, 2022 listening session for Arkansas, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas and Utah, tribal leaders had many questions concerning how to structure equitable partnerships with the philanthropic sector. There was a desire to access funding for needs federal funding does not cover. One of Indian Country's biggest needs is philanthropic infrastructure — more entities for fiscal sponsorships, pass-through grants, and technical support for grant applications and management. Some tribes like the Hopi and Osage have already established foundations to facilitate grantmaking. Tribal priorities included preserving and transmitting their native languages and culture to future generations, building basic water and power infrastructure, and creating and sustaining family and youth programs.

Participatory grantmaking, giving communities power to decide who and what to fund, is a core civic engagement practice. With pooled funds from over 50 donors, NAP has established [Native Voices Rising](#), a Native-led participatory grantmaking collaborative.

NAP is also introducing new civic engagement models. One of the latest and most innovative is helping to underwrite, with philanthropic support, the cost of two positions in a new [Office of Strategic Partnerships](#) (OSP) at the Department of the Interior. The OSP will help build public-private partnerships with tribal leaders, philanthropy, nonprofits, and governmental partners to leverage federal resources and support tribally-led projects on conservation, education, and economic development.

A Seat at the Table

The Walton Family Foundation is also trying to create new collaborative mechanisms to facilitate partnerships between philanthropy and tribal communities, and to give tribes a greater role in shaping public policies that affect them.

The 30 Native American tribes living in the Colorado River basin together own at least 25% of its

water rights, but historically have been excluded from state and federal decision-making on the river's management and governance. Their indigenous knowledge of river management, gained over thousands of years, has been dismissed. Federal data surveys have [ignored](#) tribal water use. They were [not consulted](#) for the river's original Colorado River Compact in 1922, the development of management frameworks and studies, or drought contingency planning in 2013 and 2021. Many tribes lack access to basic water infrastructure.

Guidelines to manage the river are set to expire in 2026. With support from the Walton Family Foundation and other funders, Colorado River basin tribes formed a coalition to coordinate their positions and to demand to be active partners in problem-solving, decision-making, and governance on the river's future along with states and the federal government. The Walton Family Foundation supports their [Water and Tribes Initiative](#), and helped organize a meeting to give the tribes a venue to discuss water issues with other Colorado River stakeholders, including representatives of state water agencies and utilities. For many of these agencies, it was their first time meeting with Colorado River basin tribes. Several of them, including representatives of the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the Colorado Water Conservation board, now comprise part of the Initiative's leadership team.

The Walton Family Foundation also helped fund a water policy expert for one tribe and grant writers for others to increase tribes' capacity to participate in water governance conversations. An array of public utilities, universities, foundations and nonprofits partner with the initiative and support its work.

By facilitating a collective tribal voice, the Walton Foundation made it easier for 30 tribes spanning several states to coordinate their positions on Colorado River water use. Institutional stakeholders like utilities and state governments, in turn, find it easier to negotiate with a collective tribal entity.

V. Best Practices

The following are general best practices for civic engagement:

Be accessible. According to Candid, [90 percent](#) of US foundations do not have websites. Of those that do, many do not list contact information or have only a general mailbox. Many others do not accept uninvited grant proposals. All this creates barriers to involving community participation in the search for solutions to social problems, and works against community-based organizations that may have deep ties to their communities and valuable insights into problems, but dwell outside philanthropic circles. Without entry points, there are few ways for important community actors to meet and discuss their work and local conditions with funders. By limiting access to its networks, philanthropy may get an inaccurate or incomplete picture of the true drivers of problems in communities and actions needed to bring about meaningful change.

There is a common misconception that small foundations will be overwhelmed with grantseekers if they list more specific contact information or accept unsolicited grant proposals. Colorado's Anschutz Family Foundation, which has six staff members, and New Mexico's McCune Charitable Foundation, which has five, demonstrate this is not the case. Both accept unsolicited proposals and have manageable workloads.

Four Anschutz Family Foundation staff divide the state into regions, and handle grant applications in their assigned areas. Staff members travel 6-8 weeks a year in their region, meeting people and making site visits. Applications are streamlined, but the option to write a letter of inquiry or speak to a program officer first helps new applicants or those who have been turned down in the past save time when inquiring about grant possibilities. Each staff member pre-reviews 40-80 proposals per grant cycle. The foundation has a policy of answering every inquiry within four weeks. In order to meet with more nonprofits in remote rural areas, the Anschutz Family Foundation and other Colorado funders attend Rural Philanthropy Days

and regional [listening tours](#) organized by the [Community Resource Center](#), which is supported by several PSW members.

The McCune Charitable Foundation offers grantseekers one-on-one conversations with foundation staff and invites nonprofits to sign up to attend [introductory roundtables](#). It is also launching a [participatory grantmaking](#) effort.

Creating opportunities for interactions with nonprofits and community members not only burnishes a foundation's brand. It also gives foundations more insight into what is happening in their community and exposure to groups they may have overlooked. It is the start of a dialogue with communities that is civic engagement.

Borrow and adapt. Many foundations, government agencies, and nonprofits have developed civic engagement practices and funding frameworks for years and continue to improve their methodologies. Many of the initiatives described in this paper were built on models developed elsewhere. PSW members borrowed them in consultation with the originators and modified them to suit local needs. Take full advantage of this wealth of experience, knowing that there are instances where philanthropy may need to create new systems and structures.

Civic engagement is a full-time pursuit. It is difficult to do good civic engagement work if it is considered an add-on. Successful organizations make civic engagement a core institutional strategy and have full-time staff dedicated to civic and community engagement. These staff members spend a great deal of time in communities learning about conditions and community views that help inform foundation initiatives.

Incorporate civic engagement practices into grant and program design. Make civic engagement a specific feature of your grant-making. Grants should take account of community relationship building and planning phases, allow for community input and create possibilities for community-driven projects. Recognize work already being done by the community that is of

value, even if results were limited because it was under-resourced. Support inclusive coalitions and processes geared to outcomes communities can see and feel. Collecting data and designing and implementing accountability mechanisms are some of the activities that can be done jointly with communities. Compensate community members for their participation. Make effective civic engagement practices a condition for greater funding.

Give unrestricted funds. Once you've done due diligence on potential grantees, consider giving them [general operating support](#). Civic engagement is by its nature adaptive and dynamic, and may require organizations to pivot as communities grow and change, and new challenges emerge. Restricted grants may limit the flexibility of grantees to address unanticipated needs and invest in infrastructure and administrative capacity. In many cases, general operating support helps nonprofits fulfill their missions. Benchmarks for progress and accountability remain, though they may be managed differently.

Clearly outline responsibilities in agreements and manage expectations. Civic engagement strategies work best when they clearly outline rules of engagement and procedures between parties from the outset, often through written agreements. Such agreements establish the scope of work, the responsibilities of each party, agreed upon goals, dispute resolution mechanisms, benchmarks, timelines, and communications strategies.

Think long-term. Change takes time. It's possible to use civic engagement for projects with limited scope, but lasting solutions spring from sustained engagement, building knowledge, long-term relationships, and channeling a community's energy and enthusiasm. Multi-year grants and 5-10 year timelines work best, with benchmarks and milestones that chart progress along the way.

VI. Questions for Philanthropy Southwest Members

Until now, much of philanthropy has viewed civic engagement through a narrow lens. By widening the aperture, we see there is a great deal of significant civic and community engagement activity going on in Southwestern philanthropy. PSW members and others have used these strategies successfully to amplify their work, activate community participation, solve problems and get results. In some cases, Southwestern philanthropies are national leaders in their fields. In others, they have not yet reached their potential.

As other sectors increasingly turn to civic engagement to accomplish their goals, philanthropy has the opportunity to better align itself with what is happening in the wider world to take advantage of possible synergies. Philanthropy still underinvests in civic engagement even as other sectors transition towards it. With that in mind, this paper concludes with questions for Philanthropy Southwest members to consider:

- What are the major issues currently impacting your community and your top priorities for the coming year? How might civic engagement strategies help advance this work? How can you and your peers best use these emerging tools?
- Is there interest in establishing a learning community for civic and community engagement practice in the form of a Funders Impact Learning Collaborative or in some other form?
- What should such an initiative look like? How should it be structured to maximize its usefulness? What features would you most like to see? What kind of training and learning opportunities would be most helpful?
- How should philanthropy interact with federal, state and local civic engagement

activities? What opportunities might there be?

Philanthropy Southwest is eager for your feedback, thoughts, comments and suggestions as it explores civic and community engagement in the Southwest.

It is worth noting that two other regional philanthropy-serving organizations, Philanthropy Northwest and Philanthropy Southeast, have embarked on similar explorations.

PSW welcomes your responses to these questions, any thoughts and comments you have on the ideas expressed in this paper, and to continuing the conversation.

Philanthropy Southwest

March 2023

VII. Appendix A

PACE Definitions of Civic Engagement

[Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#) (PACE) uses the following definition of civic engagement:

Civic engagement is the process of helping people be active participants in building and strengthening their communities, whether defined as a place or a shared identity or interest.

This definition encompasses a broad spectrum of activities. Funders may engage in multiple categories. PACE also describes civic engagement as “a spectrum of participatory activities that strengthen communities and further the principles of democracy and self-governance.”

Below is a list of PACE members’ different funding activities. PACE divides these activities into two main categories: “civic practices” and “issue integration.” The categories are intentionally broad in order to be inclusive.

Civic Practices

- **Voting and Elections:** Nonpartisan voter registration and engagement in electoral processes
- **Political Participation:** non-electoral, nonpartisan citizen engagement with government, such as public meeting engagement and participatory budgeting
- **Service:** Volunteering, national service, neighboring
- **Advocacy and Public Policy:** Nonpartisan or 501c4 support of policy advancement
- **Community Organizing:** Mobilizing individuals to self-organize around issues

- **Political Reform:** systems-level advancements, such as campaign finance, re-districting, modernizing election processes
- **Civic Infrastructure:** systems-level, such as building nonprofit or philanthropic capacity for problem solving, open data/transparency, information/journalism
- **Deliberative Democracy:** sustained dialogue, citizen decision-making, consensus building
- **Leadership Development:** professional development, personal leadership, cultivating public service
- **Social Capital/Cohesion:** encouraging interactions between neighbors, trust building, or informal community-building activities
- **Charitable Giving:** encouraging individual philanthropy and/or greater institutional giving/investments
- **Place-making/Community Development:** encouraging connections to places and supporting building of communities
- **Civic Learning:** school-based civic education, service-learning, youth development

Issue Integration

Many PACE members view their civic engagement work as a strategy to address other community or social issues. The following are some examples of the types of issues that may be contained within each category:

- **Health:** access to care, public health, community clinics
- **Equity:** LGBTQ, race/ethnicity, gender issues
- **Environment:** preservation, sustainability, climate, environmental justice

- **Safety:** crime prevention, public safety
- **Veterans:** post-combat care, reintegration, military family support
- **Education (K-12):** graduation, student development, college readiness
- **Education (Higher):** post-secondary ed and community college
- **Economics (Community-level):** entrepreneurship, innovation, tourism, city planning
- **Economics (Individual-level):** income mobility and inequality, workforce training and development
- **Engagement technology:** civic tech, tech development, digital divide
- **Arts and Humanities:** public art, fine arts, cultural development

Source: <https://pacefunders.kumu.io/the-pace-network-map>

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Philanthropy Southwest

Founded in 1949, Philanthropy Southwest is the premier philanthropy serving organization in the Southwestern United States, with hundreds of member organizations in Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. A network for community foundations, corporate foundations, private and family foundations and philanthropists, PSW offers valuable connections and leading-edge learning that result in stronger philanthropy within foundations and across the region. The challenges that people and communities in the Southwest are many and unique, and PSW believes that philanthropy, when done well, can be a huge part of the solution.

Houston Endowment

The Houston Endowment is a place-based private foundation committed to addressing Greater Houston's most significant challenges and reducing barriers to opportunities. It pursues bold goals through strong partnerships, community involvement, and long-term thinking. Inspired by the legacy of founders Jesse H. and Mary Gibbs Jones, the Endowment works with fellow Houstonians to bring together expertise, funding and leadership to create meaningful change and expand opportunity for all. With anticipated funding of more than \$1 billion over the next 10 years, the Endowment promises to stay in step with the needs of an ever-evolving Greater Houston.

About the Author:

Louise Lief is a consultant to philanthropy, media and nonprofits, focusing on civic engagement and collaborative approaches to connect diverse communities and advance problem solving. She is founder of the Science and the Media Project that explores the relationship of science to civic life. A former founding deputy director of the International Reporting Project, public policy scholar at the Wilson Center and Scholar-in-Residence at the American University School of Communication Investigative Reporting Workshop, she is an award-winning writer and producer.

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