



WHAT IS MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

LEARNINGS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A NATIONAL ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION

Jesse Fairbanks, Amira Iwuala, Parker Gilkesson Davis, and Kathy Tran | August 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was made possible by the generous support of The Kresge Foundation. Thanks to the CDPP Core Collective members: Zeinab al Ghanem, Alice Aluoch, Yolanda Gordon, Sharday Hamilton, Jaden Hines, Barbie Izquierdo, Jermaine John, Tamika Moore, and Samantha Reyes, as well as Emerson Hunger Fellows Tenzin Dhakong, Amira Iwuala, Landy Lin, and Akeisha Latch. Special thanks to current and former CLASP colleagues Kisha Bird, Isha Weerasinghe, and Kayla Tawa, who were involved in the early stages of planning and supporting the project.

The authors would like to thank ATD 4th World, a New Deal for Youth, and Kuhakalei Institute who shared critical insight, experience, and guidance as we developed the CDPP project. We also thank the local organizations that helped to recruit community members: the Baltimore Algebra Project, Native American Lifelines, Three Square, the LGBTQ Center of Southern Nevada, Code Switch, Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth, and Native American Student Services at Washington State University.

The authors would like to thank the following CLASP staff: Cara Brumfield, director, public benefit justice; Nia West-Bey, director, youth policy; Elizabeth Lower-Basch, deputy executive director for policy; and Sarah Erdreich for their editorial review as well as Sivan Sherriffe, graphic design/digital specialist, for design.

Most importantly, the authors would like to thank the participants in our intergenerational groups and youth groups in Baltimore, Las Vegas, and tribal communities in the Pacific Northwest. It was our honor and privilege to be in partnership with you as we work toward a world where your visions for economic justice are a reality.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) began a community engagement effort called Community-Driven Policies and Practices (CDPP). The project was led by CLASP staff and a steering committee of community members known as the Core Collective. Together, we facilitated a series of power-building sessions in Baltimore, Las Vegas, and Tribal Nations in the Pacific Northwest. Our goal in these sessions was to create a safe, inspiring space for people experiencing poverty to dream up policies with the potential to deliver economic justice and strategies to advance them. The sessions culminated in an advocacy plan to implement a policy goal that each group believed would advance their vision for economic justice.

The first half of this report summarizes CDPP, including the project's guiding principles, planning team, and engagement strategy. This section also spotlights the advocacy plans that community members drafted while participating in CDPP power-building sessions.

Using CDPP as a case study, the second half of this report explores best practices for engaging people with lived experience of poverty in nonprofit advocacy, based on the ideas of CLASP staff, the Core Collective, and community participants. Each grouping of recommendations is divided into actions that could be carried out by staff leading community engagement and structural changes that would need to be spearheaded by leaders in nonprofits. The recommendations for nonprofit leadership require large-scale changes to the policies, practices, and norms that traditionally govern nonprofit advocacy. We acknowledge that most of these structural changes have **not** been implemented by CLASP or similar nonprofits.

The recommendations fall into five main categories, all of which are essential goals that nonprofits should keep in mind when engaging community members:

1. Building Trust and Secure Relationships
2. Subverting Power Dynamics Rooted in Systemic Injustice
3. Partnering with Community from Design Through Implementation and Evaluation
4. Recruiting and Onboarding Community Members
5. Creating Valuable Experiences for Community Members

The 50+ recommendations in this report are not an exhaustive list of all engagement strategies available to nonprofits. Community engagement is a boundless practice shaped by grassroots leaders over time, with roots in **Indigenous democratic decision-making**. Our intention with this report is to compile recommendations that, in the experience of CLASP staff, promote meaningful community engagement led by nonprofits or governments.

Through CDPP, we were able to assess the merit of a national nonprofit practicing direct, place-based community engagement. We found that direct connections to national nonprofits can provide value to community members through professional development opportunities, access to people in

positions of systemic power, and resources to sustain their advocacy. Place-based projects led by a national organization can expand the tools available to local groups to make large-scale policy change. The value that national organizations can provide community members, however, can be stunted by long-standing norms within nonprofits and philanthropy. This report argues that the individual actions of nonprofit staff can only go so far to ensure meaningful community engagement. The entire system underpinning nonprofit advocacy needs reform to sustain staffs' efforts to create valuable experiences for community members that inspire them to continue fighting for important policy changes.

A Note on Why Community Engagement Matters

Every nonprofit dedicated to advancing economic or racial justice through policymaking must invest time, resources, and labor into strong partnerships with impacted community members to have the greatest impact. Meaningful partnerships between allies and impacted people that reject classism, racism, and other harmful systemic injustices serve as the bedrock of all successful efforts to advance economic and racial justice, as demonstrated by grassroots organizations and movement leaders throughout history. Similarly, policymakers that yield to community leadership are more likely to design accessible, popular programs that redress the root causes of societal problems like poverty. Community leadership is so effective because the people navigating specific issues or policies have the experiential knowledge required to guide institutions toward solutions that work in practice. Through healing-centered relationships with community members, advocates and policymakers unlock the possibility of advancing policies that are both effective and equitable, sustainable and liberatory.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN POLICIES AND PRACTICES PROJECT

Summary

Community-Driven Policies and Practices (CDPP) is a place-based project inspired by community organizing. Our goal was to create a safe, inspiring space for people experiencing poverty to dream up policies with the potential to deliver economic justice and strategies to advance them. A core team of staff at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and a steering committee of community activists facilitated a series of power-building sessions in Baltimore, Las Vegas, and Tribal Nations in the Pacific Northwest. There was a youth group (ages 13 to 21) and an intergenerational group in each location. Over the six meetings, the groups discussed community and belonging, defined economic justice, and learned about different advocacy strategies such as lobbying and community organizing. The meetings culminated in an advocacy plan to implement a policy goal that each group believed would advance their vision for economic justice.

“New advocates who participated in our power-building sessions are just at the tip of the advocacy iceberg. This process hopefully sparked their imagination.”
- Core Collective Member

Guiding Principles and Philosophy

The team of nonprofit staff and community members leading CDPP designed a project grounded in the following truths:

- 1 Poverty is a policy decision.** At every level of government and throughout history, policymakers have made the deliberate choice to exclude Black, Indigenous, and immigrant people from wealth-building opportunities and hamstringing benefits programs that *should* support all people with low incomes. Existing policies and systems fail to provide economic security, let alone justice.
- 2 Policy can deliver economic justice.** But we can't create policies that deliver economic justice without the leadership of people who have experienced poverty because of racist, xenophobic, or otherwise oppressive laws, rules, or regulations. People who have been denied economic justice have the experiential knowledge required to guide policymakers toward solutions that work in practice.
- 3 People with lived experience of poverty decide what's "practical."** In their everyday lives, people living in poverty experience overwhelming pressure to maintain the status quo and adapt to injustice. We refuse to limit people to ideas that are "practical," as defined by the political mainstream. Instead, we offer a generative, welcoming space that centers healing and encourages imagination. Group members deserve the freedom to advocate for abolition, reparations, the creation of new systems, and abundance—whatever they desire.

Based on these guiding principles, CDPP was designed to be place-based, imaginative, and led by people with lived experience of poverty. All advocacy must be guided by these truths if it is to move policymakers at all levels of government toward change that is bold and restorative—change that eliminates poverty and delivers economic justice. We also believe that community members must derive some personal benefit from participating for a community engagement effort to be truly meaningful. CDPP offered community members the opportunity to develop new skills, deepen relationships, and build power, in addition to providing adequate financial compensation for each participant's time and expertise.

Planning Team

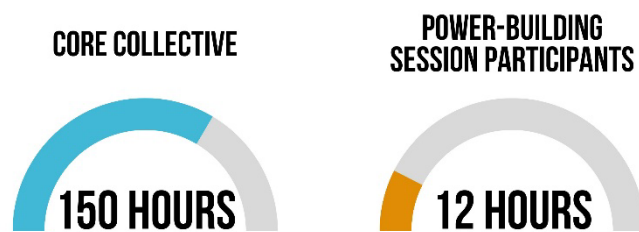
The Core Collective refers to the group of community members who led CDPP in partnership with CLASP staff. The Core Collective was composed of five young people ages 15 to 24, and four members of the already established Community Partnership Group (CPG). The Core Collective was diverse along a number of dimensions such as race, ethnicity, immigration history, and sexual orientation. Members of the Core Collective represented eight states: Florida, Delaware, South Carolina, Maryland, Michigan, Illinois, Nevada, and Washington. Motivated in part by their lived experience of poverty, every member of the Core Collective had engaged in local advocacy related to economic justice within their cities or states prior to joining CDPP.

The Core Collective functioned as a steering committee. Steering committees are vested with institutional power to make decisions, determine priorities, and lead. The Core Collective had responsibilities such as voting on key project-related decisions, developing facilitation materials with CLASP staff, and contributing in working groups. The Core Collective also played a pivotal role in implementing CDPP. Most members either recruited participants, facilitated power-building sessions, or both. Throughout the two-year project, CLASP staff on the Public Benefits Justice (PBJ) and Youth teams partnered closely with the Core Collective to engage with over 50 community members nationwide to advance policies essential for delivering economic justice.

The Community Partnership Group (CPG) is a diverse collective of activists from across the United States who partner with nonprofits, administering agencies, and policymakers to ensure that their work is grounded in the expertise of people directly impacted by poverty and/or anti-poverty policies. Each member of the CPG has developed their expertise through direct experience with public benefits programs—whether through participation or discriminatory exclusion—and their ongoing advocacy to eliminate poverty and barriers to access and inclusion within their communities.

Engagement Strategy

- **Direct vs. Indirect Engagement:** In direct community engagement, staff leading the engagement effort develop personal relationships with the participating community members. Staff directly recruit or onboard people, lead discussions, and manage correspondence. When these responsibilities are outsourced to local organizations or consultants, the engagement effort becomes indirect. CDPP was largely a direct community engagement effort. Apart from generous recruitment support from local organizations, CLASP staff and the Core Collective were solely responsible for onboarding, convening, and advocating alongside community members in the three different locations.
- **Co-Creation vs. Consultation:** Co-creation is an approach to community engagement that centers working relationships with community members. Nonprofit staff committed to co-creation aim to build processes, materials, and more in partnership with community members, as well as offer meaningful leadership opportunities. In contrast, engagement efforts that view community members primarily as consultants seek their advice to inform decisions that are ultimately made by nonprofit staff. CDPP's approach to community engagement was more aligned with co-creation. For CDPP, CLASP staff convened the Core Collective to design and implement the project in partnership with them.
- **Repeat vs. One-Time Engagement:** Repeat engagement involves meeting with the same people over a period of time (e.g., an advisory board or task force), whereas one-time engagement is a single interaction with a group or person (e.g., a focus group or interview). CDPP practiced repeat engagement with both the Core Collective and community members who participated in the power-building sessions. However, the time that CLASP staff engaged with power-building session participants was much shorter and more structured than time spent with the Core Collective.



- **Affinity Groups vs. Diverse Groups:** Affinity groups are intentionally formed around a shared experience, identity, or interest. Conversely, a group is considered diverse if the people within it have different backgrounds. There is often diversity within affinity groups because people have intersecting identities. Engagement efforts that utilize affinity groups recognize diversity within shared experiences. While every community member involved in CDPP had diverse experiences of poverty, CLASP staff used affinity groups to curate spaces where people with additional similarities could be in community with each other. The power-building sessions were affinity groups by geography. As another example, there was a youth-only (ages 13 to 21) group of participants in each location.

- **Power-Building vs. Mobilizing:** An engagement effort that aims to build power involves community members identifying the root causes of systemic injustices affecting them, developing a shared vision, and strategizing about how to change the issue together. Mobilizing, on the other hand, is about activating a large number of people to take a specific action or support a specific cause. Power-building demands a more complex relationship between staff and participating community members. CDPP was a power-building effort that aimed to prepare community members to advance an agreed-upon vision for economic justice.
- **Virtual vs. In-Person:** A virtual engagement effort convenes community members over video or phone call instead of at an in-person location. Because of social distancing and budget constraints, CDPP was a fully virtual engagement effort. All meetings with the Core Collective and community members participating in power-building sessions occurred on Zoom with support from CLASP to cover technology costs. The convening to conclude CDPP was also virtual.
- **Place-Based vs. National:** Engagement efforts that are place-based require community members to live in a shared location. Community members participating in place-based engagement efforts can advocate for policy change at all levels of government, including local, state, and national. National engagement efforts, on the other hand, tend to prioritize federal advocacy. CDPP was place-based, but the channels of systemic power that CLASP staff were best positioned to connect community members to were federal because CLASP is a national nonprofit.



PROJECT CHRONOLOGY

With funding from the Kresge Foundation, CLASP staff conceptualized CDPP to introduce a place-based element into the organization's ongoing efforts to engage people with lived experience of poverty. The two-year grant period was split into a planning year—without strict deadlines or deliverables—and an action year.

PHASE I - THE PLANNING YEAR (2021)

ESTABLISHING A STEERING COMMITTEE OF ACTIVISTS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE (THE CORE COLLECTIVE)



1. CLASP staff established a steering committee of community members with lived experience of poverty who were interested in economic justice to co-lead CDPP. The steering committee was intergenerational, including four members of the Community Partnership Group and five youth activists nominated by grassroots partners. The steering committee would later be named the Core Collective.

2. CLASP staff introduced the CDPP project to Core Collective members through a kick-off meeting. CLASP staff set the expectation that the Core Collective would support project design, recruitment, and facilitation. CLASP staff and the Core Collective agreed to meet once a month to make core decisions about the project.

3. CLASP staff prioritized relationship-building with the Core Collective in the first quarter of the grant period. CLASP staff incorporated open-ended icebreakers at the beginning of each meeting and prepared several games that encouraged people to share their passions.

MAKING KEY DECISIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT

4. The Core Collective created a group charter describing the steering committee's unique value and purpose, as well as their hopes for CDPP. Members of the Core Collective expressed wanting to learn from, build power with, and advocate alongside people in their communities who are also impacted by poverty. The Core Collective seemed inspired by community organizing.

5. The Core Collective discussed decision-making processes, consensus-building, and conflict resolution. Ultimately, the collective expressed comfort with both ranked choice voting and working groups in making important decisions.

6. The Core Collective learned about participatory research and community organizing through two examples, then discussed what engagement strategies they hoped to apply to CDPP such as affirming peoples' inherent value through adequate compensation and developing relationships that are neither transactional nor extractive. All of the Core Collective's preferences in community engagement centered on power-building.

7. The Core Collective split into age-based affinity groups to develop guiding questions for CDPP that were visionary, action-oriented, and easy to understand. The project's guiding question became, "What would it take to advance policies that deliver economic justice to your community?"

8. CLASP staff facilitated a workshop about policy where members of the Core Collective produced outlines of advocacy plans. After the workshop, the collective decided that developing an advocacy plan could be a productive and collaborative way for community members to answer the project's guiding question.



SELECTING LOCATIONS AND FACILITATORS FOR PLACE-BASED POWER-BUILDING SESSIONS

9. The Core Collective met independently from CLASP staff to brainstorm criteria for deciding where to facilitate virtual power-building sessions. The group identified existing relationships to community-based organizations, geographic diversity, and high percentages of people who represented different identities that they wanted to prioritize as important considerations.

10. CLASP staff compiled demographic data from each location to inform the Core Collective's decision. The places ultimately chosen were Baltimore, MD; Las Vegas, NV; and Tribal Nations in the Northwest. Additionally, the Core Collective decided to host a separate youth-only (ages 13 to 21) and intergenerational group in each location to prioritize youth voices.

11. CLASP staff identified members of the Core Collective who were interested in co-facilitating the power-building sessions. To help the Core Collective gauge their interest, CLASP staff planned an educational meeting to share tips for facilitating and talked through the responsibility in one-on-one check-ins.

PHASE II - THE ACTION YEAR (2022)

After making the project's core decisions, CLASP staff and the Core Collective split into working groups to prepare for the power-building sessions. The working groups included the Sample Agenda Working Group, Place-Based Teams split up by location, and the Community-Building Working Group.

PREPARING FOR POWER-BUILDING SESSIONS

The Sample Agenda Working Group met weekly to develop rough agendas with suggested activities, questions, and goals for each of the six power-building sessions.

The Community-Building Working Group reminded us to prioritize relationships among the Core Collective during this rigorous period in the project, experimenting with activities that centered joy and gave members space to bond outside of project-related meetings such as a virtual game night.

The Place-Based Teams met virtually with community-based organizations in search of recruitment support. The Baltimore and Tribal Nations Teams found a single community-based or student-led organization to recruit participants, while the Las Vegas Team pivoted to a mass distribution strategy with the support of local food banks, youth shelters, and community health organizations.

The Place-Based Teams met virtually every week to transform sample agendas into detailed facilitation guides with discussion questions and activities to help meet the goals of each session. Outside of these meetings, CLASP staff created supplemental materials like Jamboards.

FACILITATING POWER-BUILDING SESSIONS AND VIRTUAL CONVENING

The Place-Based Teams facilitated a series of power-building sessions for a separate youth-only (ages 13 to 21) and intergenerational group in each location. Over six meetings, each group discussed community and belonging, created a shared definition of economic justice, learned about advocacy strategies, and outlined policy goals. The power-building sessions culminated in an advocacy plan to implement one of the policy goals that each group developed to advance their vision for economic justice. These meetings are described in more detail below.

An ad-hoc Tech Working Group of CLASP staff was created to support facilitators during each session. The Tech Working Group developed a spreadsheet to determine who was available to provide tech support at each of the 36 total sessions, many of which occurred in the evening.

The Core Collective planned and hosted a two-day virtual convening to conclude CDPP. On the first day, one panelist from each of the six groups summarized their advocacy plan. We also reserved an hour for community building across locations. On the second day, group members facilitated small group discussions with policymakers about the solutions proposed in their advocacy plans. There were several goals for the convening, including to platform each group's ideas in front of people with systemic power and to inspire groups to continue their advocacy.

POWER-BUILDING SESSION SUMMARIES

CLASP staff and the Core Collective (the project's steering committee) hosted virtual power-building sessions with community members representing Las Vegas, Baltimore, and Tribal Nations. The Core Collective designed these sessions as safe, inspiring spaces for people experiencing poverty to dream up policies that had the potential to deliver economic justice and strategies to advance them. Over the six meetings, the groups discussed community and belonging, created a shared definition of economic justice, and learned about advocacy strategies such as lobbying and community organizing. The meetings culminated in each group creating an advocacy plan to advance a policy that aligned with their vision for economic justice.

Session #1: Building Community

The goal of the first session was to build community among group members. The session began with an icebreaker where group members identified values that were important to them, such as honesty, accountability, or justice. This session included discussion questions about community and belonging. Group members shared if and why they feel a sense of belonging in the place they currently live. This discussion helped facilitators understand what conditions needed to be met for participants to feel in community with others. These questions also encouraged group members to think about the place-based context that would later influence their policy goals and advocacy strategy. At the end of this session, participants were asked to take a picture of something in their community that can make life simpler or harder and caption it.

Session #2: Creating a Shared Definition of Economic Justice

This session began with a virtual gallery walk of the photos that group members took after the first session. The goal of the second session was to create a shared definition of economic justice. The Core Collective had chosen the project's guiding question: "What would it take to advance policies that deliver economic justice to your community?" It was important for group members to define what economic justice meant to them. Between the second and third sessions, facilitators combined every group member's personal understanding of economic justice into a shared definition to be revised by the group.

Session #3: Learning about Policy and Advocacy

The goal of the third session was to deepen group members' knowledge of policy and advocacy strategies in preparation for drafting their advocacy plans. Group members learned about four advocacy strategies: community organizing, administrative advocacy, legislative advocacy, and direct service. The facilitation plan for this session diverged slightly between locations, as facilitators of each group used different tools to explain advocacy strategies. For example, one group invited people who specialize in each type of advocacy to speak to group members in a panel discussion. Another group utilized presentations and breakout sessions to discuss the four strategies. During this session, group members also shared their artistic expression of economic justice.

Session #4: Understanding Power and Developing Policy Goals

The goal of the fourth power-building session was to brainstorm policy solutions that aligned with group members' vision for economic justice. After learning about systemic injustices and the power of policy change, group members engaged in discussion about their vision for economic justice and developed a long list of policy goals. Each group then voted on one policy goal to be the focus of their advocacy plan. Examples of policy goals that groups chose include ending homelessness in Las Vegas and bringing attention to the issue of missing Indigenous women and children in tribal communities. Some groups ended this session with some independent journaling to the prompt, "Policymakers can deliver economic justice to me or us by...".



Sessions #5 and #6: Drafting an Advocacy Plan

The goal of the fifth and sixth power-building sessions was to draft an advocacy plan for the agreed-upon goal. Facilitators defined an advocacy plan as a guidebook that explained how the group will fight for a policy goal. Group members built out their advocacy plans by answering a series of discussion questions, such as “What do we want people to understand about this policy issue?”, “Who can deliver this policy goal?”, and “What resources do we already have to help us advocate?” After the final session, CLASP staff synthesized and packaged each group's discussion into a written advocacy plan.

Our Steps to Creating an Advocacy Plan



OUR MOVEMENT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

NEWS INVESTIGATION
AMERICA'S AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS
 FAMILIES NO LONGER ON WAIT LISTS AS LONG AS 18 YEARS

larger

THE PAST

- UP TO 1 YEAR
- 1-2 YEARS
- 2-5 YEARS
- MORE THAN 5 YEARS
- UNAVAILABLE OR UNRELIABLE DATA

OVER



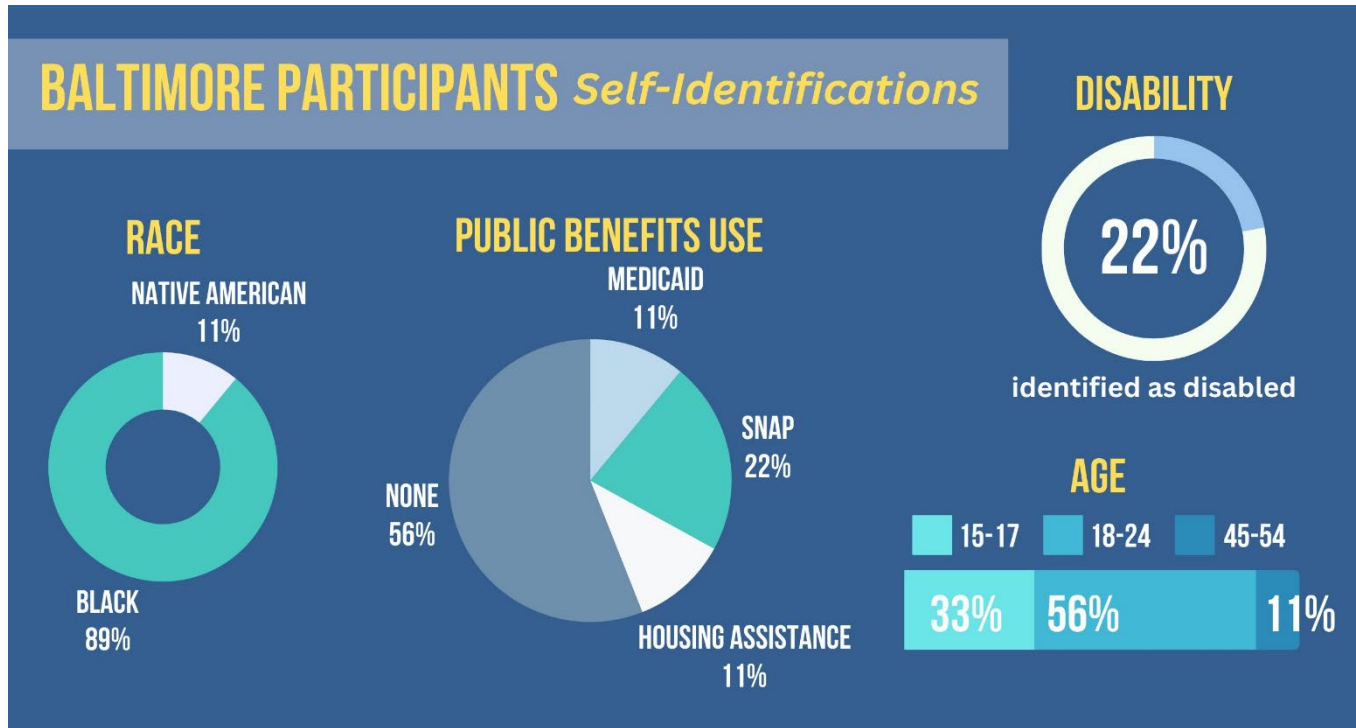
A photograph of a protest. A large banner reads "Highway of Tears" and "Remember Our Lost Home!". Another sign says "THEY ARE HOME!".

ENDS

THE CRISIS OF MISSING, MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN

ADVOCACY PLAN SPOTLIGHTS

Baltimore



Baltimore Youth Group

Problem: The Baltimore Youth Group’s advocacy plan makes the root cause of poverty clear: policies in the United States deny women, trans people, Black people, Indigenous people, and others equal access to resources and opportunity. Because Black and Indigenous people don’t have access to the same resources and opportunities as white people, poverty rates are higher in these communities. Too many young people in Baltimore are subject to gun violence because policies fail to protect them.

Solution: Broadly, the Baltimore Youth Group acknowledged that many policies needed to change to eliminate poverty and achieve true racial equality in the United States, starting with the government delivering reparations to Black and Indigenous people. The government must also transform school into a place that fully supports and uplifts Black, Indigenous, and brown youth. Their advocacy plan seeks to remove all police from schools, invest in supportive services, and promote financial literacy and civic engagement.

“We—the community—hold the power to put government officials in power. The community can build campaigns around our needs to influence policymakers.”

Strategy Highlight

In their advocacy plan, the Baltimore Youth Group prioritized educating the community and legislators about the difference between equality and equity. Equitable policies recognize that people need different financial supports because the experiences that they and their ancestors’ have had with injustice are unique.

Baltimore Intergenerational Group

Problem: The Baltimore Intergenerational Group’s advocacy plan centers Black people. Black people have been excluded from wealth-building opportunities and exploited throughout history. Exclusionary and oppressive laws are a big part of why Black people in the U.S. have less financial security, including savings and assets, than white people.

Solution: The Baltimore Intergenerational Group’s advocacy plan seeks to make housing affordable to everyone by delivering reparations through land redistribution, expanding homeownership programs, establishing a renters’ tax credit, and other programs. Throughout history, Black people have been excluded from homeownership programs, displaced from their homes and communities by white mob violence and gentrification, and more. Black people continue to experience systemic barriers to housing today.

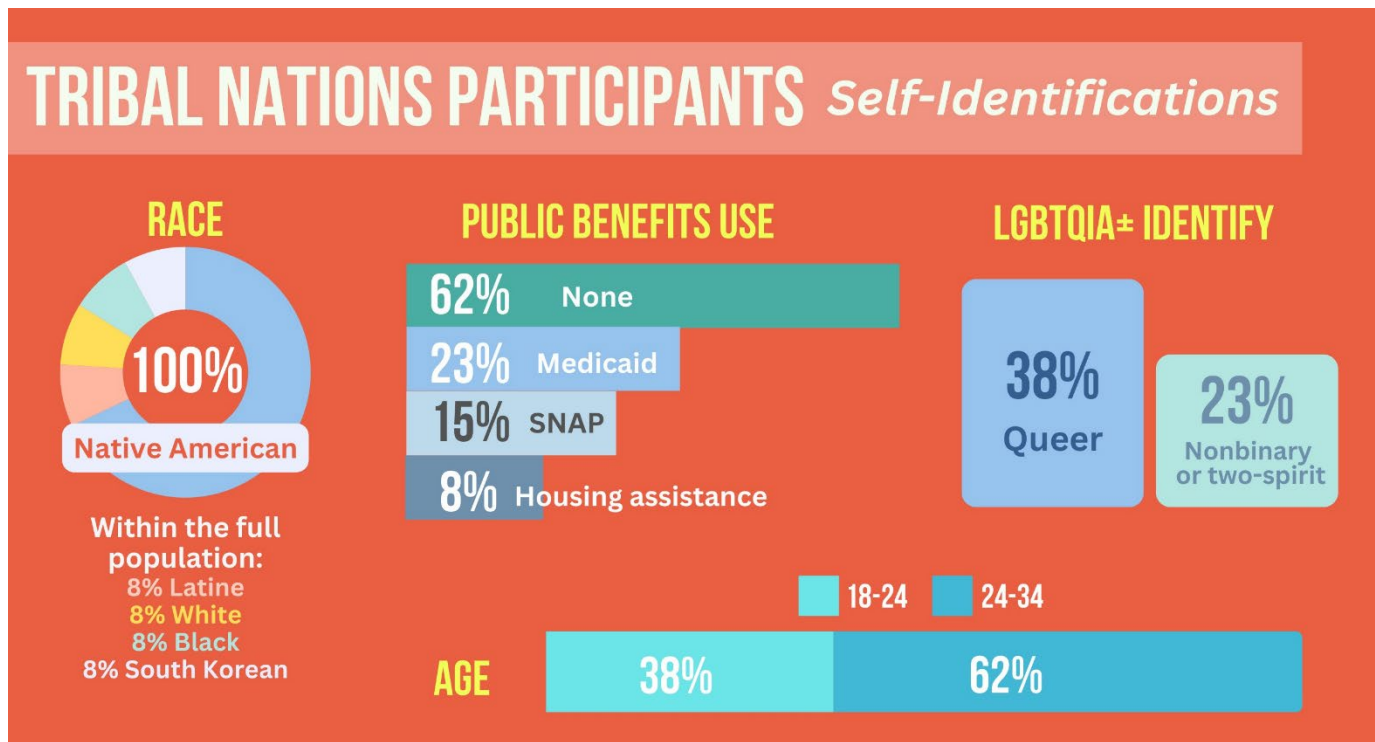
“We [Black people] should be valued by our experience and expertise, not ignored, taken advantage of, or treated as placeholders.”

Strategy Highlight

The Baltimore Intergenerational Group stressed the importance of building support for affordable housing outside of political campaigns in their advocacy plan. The group wants their mobilization strategy to not be overly dependent on election season.



Tribal Nations



Tribal Nations Youth Group

Problem: The Tribal Nations Youth Group’s advocacy plan focuses on the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and children. A key challenge is the lack of coordination between tribal governments and the federal government. When a non-Native engages in a criminal act, the tribal government does not have jurisdiction to arrest the non-Native; the United States government also has little to no prosecution power to convict the non-Native if the crime is committed on tribal land. The Department of Justice and local police departments do not consistently or accurately track cases of missing or murdered Indigenous peoples.

Solution: To protect Indigenous women and children, tribal and federal governments must collaborate more consistently. The Tribal Nations Youth group proposed improving real-time data tracking, reconciling jurisdiction laws between the federal government and sovereign nations, and increasing resources for women's outreach programs and shelters.

“Our understanding of economic justice begins with the recognition of the injustices that have happened in the past. Some of these injustices include an erasure of Indigenous cultures, language, and land.”

Strategy Highlight

The Tribal Nations Youth Group centered relationship-building in their advocacy plan. The group agreed that a great first step would be calling attention to this issue at existing Native women events on the group members’ college campus to build a larger coalition.

Tribal Nations Intergenerational Group

Problem: The Tribal Nations Intergenerational Group’s advocacy plan focuses on equity in education. Accurate representations of Indigenous history and knowledge are critically important, yet school systems are not required to teach either. When these topics are taught, it is often in ways that minimize or misinterpret the harsh realities of history. Other barriers to an accurate curriculum are the lack of adequate research and data about the injustices facing Indigenous communities and limited Indigenous representation among educators. The group’s advocacy plan makes clear that Indigenous peoples are still here and have valid systems of knowledge that should be included in curriculums.

Solution: The Baltimore Intergenerational Group’s advocacy plan seeks to make housing affordable to everyone by delivering reparations through land redistribution, expanding homeownership programs, establishing a renters’ tax credit, and other programs. Throughout history, Black people have been excluded from homeownership programs, displaced from their homes and communities by white mob violence and gentrification, and more. Black people continue to experience systemic barriers to housing today.

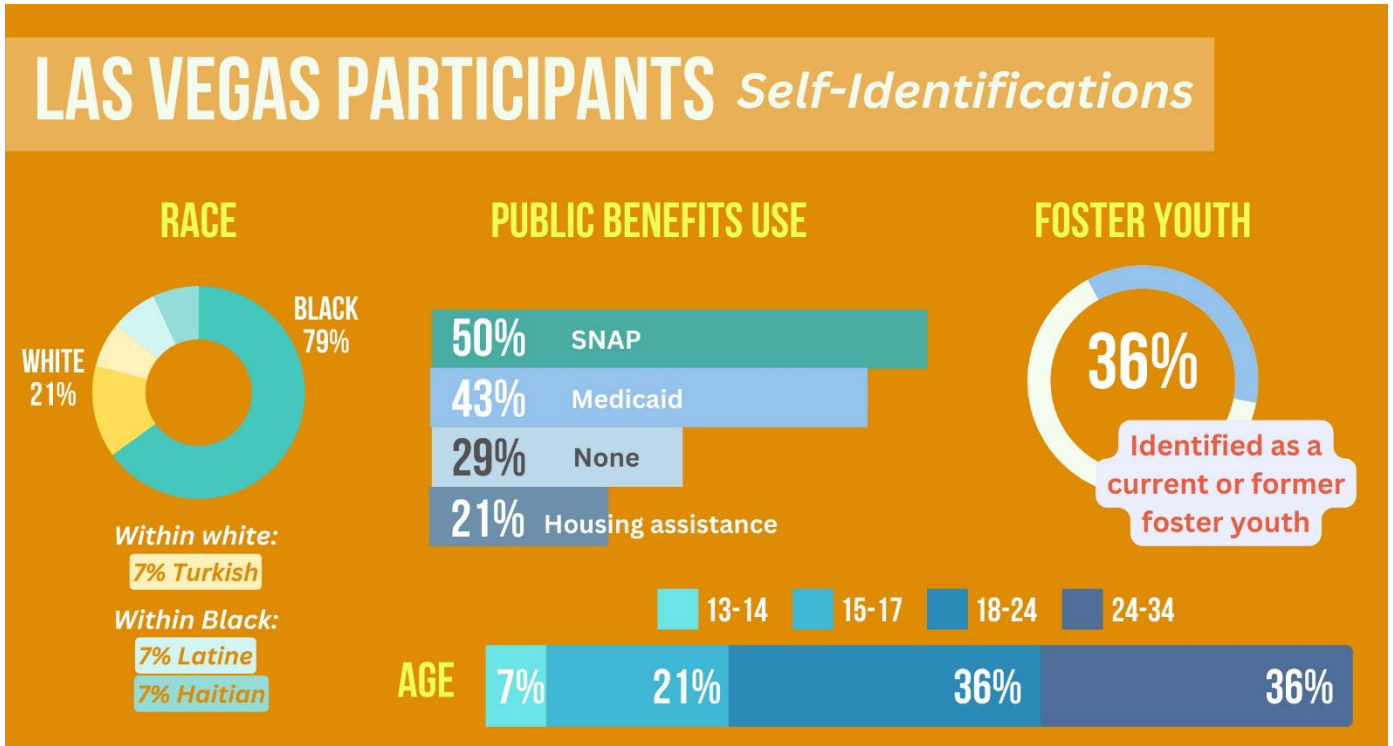
“Our current economic system has never produced economic justice, nor was it intended to do so. This country’s economic system is based on the continued abuses of marginalized communities, and 400 years of conditioning to this system has resulted in a deeply embedded, unjust economic system. All levels of U.S. government, institutions, and people who make policy have contributed to this injustice in some way.”

Strategy Highlight

The Tribal Nations Intergenerational Group acknowledges the importance of local change to bolster future national advocacy efforts. The advocacy plan calls for new curricula within the group members’ college that is designed by and for Indigenous peoples, representing the land and the original caretakers.



Las Vegas



Las Vegas Youth Group

Problem: The Las Vegas Youth Group’s advocacy plan was designed to prevent homelessness in Las Vegas. They found that homelessness exists because housing is too expensive, and the government does not do enough to support unhoused people and prevent homelessness. The group also clarified that homelessness is a persistent cycle: without access to wraparound support, and due to the repercussions that result from criminalizing homelessness, people are likely to experience homelessness again.

Solution: The Las Vegas Youth Group acknowledged that we need many policy changes to end homelessness. To help people exit homelessness, every person experiencing homelessness should be guaranteed emergency and transitional housing that respects their autonomy. Vacant homes and buildings should be redeveloped into housing to help people transition out of homelessness. An emergency fund for at-risk people also needs to be created to help people stay housed by paying down overdue rent and other housing-related debt. Further, limits should be placed on landlords to restrict their ability to excessively raise rents. These changes should be paid for by divesting from the police and increasing taxes on the wealthy.

“Ultimately, the government won’t end homelessness without people showing up in large numbers to demand change. We need a united front, which starts with community-building.”

Strategy Highlight

The Las Vegas Youth Group identified volunteering at direct service organizations like shelters as an important first step to enacting their advocacy plan because they want to be in deeper community with people experiencing homelessness.

Tribal Nations Intergenerational Group

Problem: The Las Vegas Intergenerational Group focused on increasing access to healthy and affordable food. One of the underlying challenges to achieving this goal can be found in the food production industry. Commercial farms prioritize profits over providing healthy, high-quality food, and the government does not do enough to regulate the industry. For many people who work long hours, have limited time and food budgets, or live in neighborhoods with insufficient access to fresh and healthy food, unhealthy food is often their only option.

Solution: The group argues that the federal government must enforce stronger regulations regarding the quality of our food. The group would also like to create more incentives for farmers to grow fruits and vegetables. However, these solutions feel out of reach because big agriculture companies have so much political power. Therefore, there should also be a federal grant program to create and maintain community gardens in all neighborhoods. Investing in community gardens would make the food system more reliable.

“To build momentum for a federal program that invests in community gardens, we can convince legislators to fund a city- or state-wide pilot program. The U.S. Congress may be more willing to fund a federal program if they can see a successful example.”

Strategy Highlight

The Las Vegas Intergenerational Group’s advocacy plan focused on building proof that community gardens work. Group members considered researching existing community gardens and finding land in neighborhoods across the city to show policymakers their vision for where they’d like to grow.



BEST PRACTICES FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In planning and implementing Community-Driven Policies and Practices (CDPP) with the Core Collective, CLASP staff learned a lot about meaningful community engagement. An engagement effort can be described as meaningful if community members derive some personal benefit from participating. For one-time engagement efforts like focus groups, the benefit can be simple, such as receiving compensation or meeting new people. The potential benefit of participating needs to be more substantial for repeat engagement efforts like CDPP, where community members contribute significant time and labor. CDPP was a meaningful engagement effort because it offered community members the opportunity to develop new skills, deepen relationships, and build power, in addition to providing adequate compensation.

We center community members in our definition of meaningful because a primary goal of all engagement efforts should be to invest in the future of leaders with lived experience. People with lived experience have the experiential knowledge required to guide policymakers toward solutions that work in practice. If community members have a positive experience participating in an engagement effort, they are more likely to continue advocating, in turn growing the movement. In contrast, engagement efforts that don't center community members' well-being and personal growth are often exploitative.

Using CDPP as an example, this section of the report outlines more than 50 recommendations for nonprofits interested in meaningful community engagement. The recommendations cover how to build secure relationships, share power, practice transparency, and more. They include both successful approaches tested during CDPP and untested strategies that CLASP staff plan to apply in future engagement efforts to mitigate certain problems. To compile these recommendations, every member of the CDPP planning team, including the Core Collective and CLASP staff, completed two interviews. Community members who participated in power-building sessions also submitted an exit survey.

The recommendations are organized as follows:

1. Building Trust and Secure Relationships
2. Subverting Power Dynamics Rooted in Systemic Injustice
3. Partnering with Community from Design Through Implementation and Evaluation
4. Recruiting and Onboarding Community Members
5. Creating Meaningful Experiences for Community Members

Each group of recommendations is divided into suggestions for staff leading engagement efforts and nonprofit leadership. We organized the recommendations this way because the recommendations for nonprofit leadership require large-scale changes to the policies, practices, and norms that traditionally govern nonprofit advocacy. Most of these systemic or institutional changes have **not** been implemented by CLASP or similar nonprofits. Although this report focuses on philanthropy and nonprofits, many of the recommendations also apply to government efforts to engage the community.

BUILDING TRUST AND SECURE RELATIONSHIPS

Strong and enduring relationships are key to community engagement efforts. Staff at national organizations like CLASP must develop relationships with state and local organizations, participating community members, and policymakers who can help community members achieve their goals, among other stakeholders. This breadth and depth of relationship management demands significant staff time and resources. In this section, we explain how nonprofit staff can prioritize trust- and relationship-building in their community engagement. We then outline institutional investments that can magnify the impact of individual actions.

Spotlight

1. **Communicate quickly and in ways that work for participants.** Staff can encourage open communication by consistently responding to participants within 24 hours. Quick response times demonstrate reliability and show community members that they are a priority.
2. **Ensure that there are enough staff dedicated to nurturing meaningful relationships with community members.** Community engagement demands significant staff capacity and time. When the staff's workload is too great and their attention is divided, relationships with community members can suffer.



Recommendations for Staff Leading Community Engagement

Trust is at the center of all secure relationships between nonprofit staff and community members. People experiencing poverty have likely been disappointed by government agencies, charities, and/or researchers at some point in their lives—too often in the moment when they courageously seek assistance. Indigenous and Black people have been harmed by public policies of the past and present, leading to a deep-rooted and rational distrust. Nonprofit staff must be intentional about overcoming these negative associations and restoring trust.

- 1 Get to know community members outside of structured meetings.** Staff often set up recurring meetings to engage community members over a long period of time. Because these meetings are one of the few opportunities to make important decisions related to the project or advocacy effort, they can be highly structured or rigid. Staff may find it challenging to facilitate genuine relationship-building beyond icebreakers. Staff can plan extra meetings or events where relationship-building is the primary focus, offering incentives like food for community members who attend. Staff can also get to know community members by texting them or planning one-on-one meetings to check in. Community members may not be able to engage during standard work hours, so staff should plan to have conversations with community members outside of traditional work hours.

Example: The Core Collective and CLASP staff planned a paint night where attendees listened to music and expressed themselves creatively. Staff sent out an RSVP form a couple of weeks prior to the event so they could mail attendees paint kits.

Tip: Staff can send more than just reminder texts; they can ask community members about their weekends or send funny memes aligned with their interests.

- 2 Assert the value of difference and solidarity early.** Even among community members with shared identities or experiences of poverty, there is diversity. That diversity can have a systemic power dynamic attached to it, like race, or it can just be a simple difference. For example, some community members participating in CDPP perceived their experience of poverty as less intense or noteworthy than others. Early in the project, this false comparison led them to assume their opinions weren't important enough to share during discussions. CLASP staff aimed to create a culture of inclusion where all participant voices were valued by validating everyone's experiences, acknowledging differences, and communicating the power of solidarity.

Example: During the first power-building session, facilitators asked group members to agree to a list of shared beliefs that asserted people’s deservingness such as, “People can do what they want with their money.”

Tip: Facilitators can encourage people to share their motivations for joining the project or advocacy effort through activities like show and tell. A facilitator should take the mic first to demonstrate that community members don’t have to share personal experiences if they prefer to keep certain information private.

“ **One of the best parts of CDPP was learning about the things people experience in their own cities and finding similarities and difference in our experiences of poverty.**”

- Core Collective Member

3 Discuss and revisit conversations about participants’ capacity and interests. Community members experiencing poverty deal with hardships that limit their spare time and deplete their energy on a daily basis. Sometimes they can account for time constraints or low energy levels when assessing their capacity, but the conditions of poverty are not always predictable. One unexpected or expensive event can dramatically reduce a person’s capacity to participate. Staff must give community members grace to miscalculate their capacity and check in frequently. If a community member seems overwhelmed or unresponsive, staff should reach out with compassion, affirmation that they’re still welcome, and a clear idea of what support the nonprofit can provide.

Tip: Always respond to community members within 24 hours, even if it’s just to confirm that you’ve received a message.

4 Communicate quickly and in ways that work for participants. It can take courage for community members to approach nonprofit staff with a question or concern, especially early in an engagement effort when staff are still strangers. Staff can encourage open communication by consistently responding to participants within 24 hours. Quick response times demonstrate reliability and show community members that they are a priority. Staff should also adapt to community members’ preferred mode of communication: one person may prefer phone calls, while another communicates exclusively over email.

5 Take accountability and act quickly when problems occur. Some major responsibilities of relationship management include fielding community members' concerns, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and responding rapidly in emergency situations. Unfortunately, most nonprofits do not have staff whose primary responsibility is to nurture and manage relationships with community members. At CLASP, there is no designated staff member with these responsibilities; if community members feel mistreated or imperiled, concerns are usually brought to the staff member who they feel closest to. Individual staff should admit fault when appropriate, seek solutions, and attempt to restore trust on behalf of the organization.

Example: Several members of the Core Collective were paid quarterly. One quarter, a community member's payment was delayed, causing them to be a day late on their rent. CLASP staff wrote a letter of commitment to the community member's landlord to help them de-escalate the situation. The letter confirmed that the community member was late on their rent due to an internal error at CLASP and clarified when the payment would be available.

Tip: Staff leading an engagement effort should become familiar with their organization's finance department. Staff should be able to communicate information about internal processes to community members, acknowledging deficits where they exist.



Recommendations for Nonprofit Leadership

To preempt the distrust caused by organizational deficits, nonprofit leadership must ensure that the organizational policies and processes are equipped for community engagements. Organizational policies that support community engagement help prevent staff from overextending themselves and streamline internal processes so that undue administrative or time burdens are not put on participants. Staff members spearheading community engagement tend to absorb the labor of identifying shortcomings in organizational policies or processes and advocating for institutional changes. CLASP staff have identified several key areas of growth for nonprofits interested in pursuing community engagement:

- 1 Equip staff with the skills needed to navigate complex conversations with community members.** Once trust has been established, community members experiencing poverty may open up about a personal hardship in search of advice or support. Most staff at policy advocacy organizations are not social workers. They are not trained to provide holistic support to community members experiencing hardships such as losing a loved one, being a victim of theft, or navigating homelessness. Nonprofits must provide staff with the skills to handle these complex conversations and empower them to set appropriate boundaries. Advocacy nonprofits should consider partnering with organizations that do have social workers on staff or can otherwise support participants with local resources and referrals. In the absence of training and partnerships, nonprofits may over-rely on staff who have personally navigated similar hardships and can offer advice based on those lived experiences. Staff may not know how to set the appropriate boundaries with participants, which can lead to staff overextension and burnout. In other cases, untrained staff may say the wrong things and cause harm or disrupt trust.
- 2 Invest in infrastructure to aid community members experiencing financial crises.** During an engagement effort, it's common for community members living in poverty to confront evictions, food insecurity, police violence, mental health challenges, family separation, and more. All of these challenges can be expensive. Nonprofits should commit to assisting community members in times of crisis because financial emergencies are destabilizing and time-consuming: they can significantly limit a person's ability to participate or lead. Offering financial support amid a crisis demonstrates awareness, care, and concern for community members who are enduring the volatility of poverty. Nonprofits can prepare to support community members during financial crises by allocating money in the project's budget for emergency assistance, developing a process for expediting payments, and supplying a transparent list of financial supports that the organization can provide. Nonprofits dedicated to community engagement should also consider establishing a crisis relief fund that is not project-specific and can be used to support community members working across the organization. All funds for crisis relief should avoid requirements that ask applicants to prove their worthiness, or solicit stories or explanations to verify need because this can re-traumatize people.

3 Design a reliable and stress-free process for compensating community members. All community members involved in a project or advocacy effort should receive adequate compensation. If the payment process is transparent, simple, and prompt, community members will be more likely to join and continue participating in a project because their contribution is clearly valued. However, many nonprofits' processes are designed for salaried workers who can weather payment delays. Nonprofits must minimize processing times and eliminate excessive paperwork or documentation requirements. Nonprofits must also offer flexible payment options like gift cards for minors, unbanked people, and/or those who don't have a social security number or otherwise cannot receive direct deposit. Lastly, nonprofits should have the capacity to expedite payments when requested.

Example: To pay incentives to the 50+ community members participating in power-building sessions, CLASP staff used a participant management software called ethn.io. The software allowed community members to select their preferred form of payment from direct deposit, Venmo, and gift cards.

4 Ensure that there is enough staff dedicated to nurturing meaningful relationships with community members. Community engagement demands significant staff capacity and time. In direct engagement efforts especially, it can be challenging for staff to form secure relationships with dozens of community members while also juggling other work priorities. At CLASP, for example, staff on policy teams continued to lead advocacy on major issue areas during large-scale engagement efforts. When the staff's workload is too great and their attention is divided, relationships with community members can suffer. Nonprofits can hire dedicated staff, such as community coordinators, to serve as a clear point-person for community members seeking support, information, or advice. However, the nonprofit must be careful to not centralize relationship management, making it the sole responsibility of a single person or team. Community coordinators or organizers should share relationship management with policy analysts, researchers, and other staff who are part of the project or advocacy effort. If a nonprofit is unable or unwilling to hire dedicated staff, it may be more sustainable to keep direct engagement efforts small-scale.

Tip: In CLASP staff's opinion, one staff person should be the primary point of contact for no more than five community members. This ratio allows staff to prioritize their relationships with community members.

5 Retain staff leading community engagement efforts through adequate compensation and flexibility. If a nonprofit fails to retain staff leading engagement efforts, they risk losing that person’s valuable connections to the community. Staff turnover can create a complicated social environment for community members, leading to confusion or anxiety about who at the organization to contact for emotional, informational, or other kinds of support. Departing staff should always introduce community members to their next point of contact, but it’s natural for people to feel awkward reaching out to a stranger or acquaintance about sensitive topics. Nonprofits should do everything in their power to avoid losing meaningful community partnerships because of staff fatigue. Organizational policy and culture must encourage people to take compensatory time off for hours worked outside of the traditional 9 to 5, and compensation packages should reflect the truth that community engagement is a valuable skill and can take an invisible toll on staff.



SUBVERTING POWER DYNAMICS ROOTED IN SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Nonprofit staff interested in engaging a diverse group of community members must plan to confront several power dynamics rooted in **systemic injustices**. One example of systemic injustice is racism, which structurally disadvantages people who are racialized as Black, Indigenous, Brown, and/or Asian while privileging white people. Injustices like racism, classism, ableism, adultism, or sexism are systemic: they're embedded in the public policies and cultural norms of a place—past and present. These injustices permeate the systems on which individual lives and institutions are built because governments have failed to deliver reparations for past injustices and continue to reinforce them.

Spotlight

1. **Iterate often that people do not have to share stories of hardship to receive support or have their opinions valued.** Community members should not be expected to share personal experiences in detail at any point during a project or advocacy effort.
2. **Carry as much administrative labor as possible to help distribute labor equitably.** Staff should look for innovative ways to reduce or eliminate administrative tasks that are usually expected of consultants, such as submitting invoices on community members' behalf or sending out contracts for virtual signatures.

Recommendations for Staff Leading Community Engagement

Systemic injustices define relationships between marginalized communities and the dominant culture, ultimately trickling down to produce power dynamics in interpersonal relationships and group settings. Thus, power dynamics rooted in systemic injustice affect staff and community members' ability to build trust and relationships across differences in race, class, gender, and culture, among other areas. Staff must acknowledge power dynamics and demonstrate solidarity to facilitate trust- and relationship-building in a project or advocacy effort. Ignoring or failing to disrupt power dynamics can result in an engagement effort that replicates present systemic injustices, creating a social environment where community members feel dehumanized and, in turn, unwilling to participate. This section details how staff leading a project or advocacy effort can subvert power dynamics between themselves and community members, as well as among community members. Even community members with shared experiences must navigate power dynamics in their relationships to one another because people hold intersectional identities.

- 1 **Respect and value community members' knowledge and expertise.** Community members understand the local history, culture, and political dynamics of the place where they live. Community members also possess valuable lived experience navigating place-based injustice such as displacement, gentrification, and police violence. Community members hold all this experiential knowledge in addition to a variety of other skills unique to each person, like creative expression. In all projects or advocacy efforts, community members' knowledge should be respected and uplifted to the same degree as nonprofit

staff's knowledge about policy, advocacy, and other issues. Nonprofit staff can disrupt traditional student-teacher dynamics by finding opportunities for members of the community to share their expertise with others participating in the project or advocacy effort, positioning everyone as an educator.

Example: The first power-building session asked participating community members to teach facilitators about the place where they live, providing an early opportunity to subvert the student-teacher dynamic.

2 Learn together about white supremacy culture and norms in the workplace. White supremacy wrongfully claims that white people and their ideas, beliefs, and actions hold inherent value because of their race. Over time, this delusion has reinforced norms that uphold white supremacy or privilege white people as the dominant, socially acceptable culture. White supremacist culture pervades even the most progressive and diverse nonprofits, often in ways that are hard to see. Therefore, throughout a long-term engagement effort, community members are likely to wrestle with white supremacist culture in their working relationship with nonprofit staff and each other. Examples of white supremacist norms that some members of the Core Collective struggled to overcome were fear of open conflict, narrow and racially coded conceptions of “professionalism,” and perfectionism. These tensions were exacerbated because there was no effort to learn about white supremacy culture as a group and assess whether the Core Collective’s norms disrupted white supremacy.

Tip: Community members should create group norms *after* discussing common white supremacist norms so that the group can assess whether they reject white supremacist culture.

3 Make individual plans to subvert predictable power dynamics. It is possible to predict many of the power dynamics that systemic injustices force upon diverse groups. Staff must consider their own positionality—as individuals and representatives of an organization—to develop strategies for disrupting power dynamics in interpersonal relationships with community members. Each staff member leading an engagement effort should do some introspection before recruitment starts, making individual plans to subvert power dynamics at play in their diverse relationships. As part of this personal commitment, staff should expect to learn about different cultures and experiences to minimize the educational burden usually placed on community members.

“ It’s important for people in leadership positions to be mindful if they are asking people of color to have difficult or emotional conversations surrounded by white people.”

4 Be prepared to adapt to unexpected power dynamics. Sometimes differences among community members that seem mundane on the surface actually introduce a power dynamic to the group. For example, in one of the power-building sessions, a third of community members were attending college in the city where group members lived. Facilitators noticed that college students sometimes used language that separated themselves from locals (e.g., “people here”) when discussing social issues impacting community members, often comparing their current location to their hometowns. These language choices could have othered community members born and raised in the city, in turn silencing them during group discussions. Facilitators adapted to this power dynamic by splitting community members into affinity groups more often, highlighting the specific knowledge that locals had, and acknowledging the behavior privately with members of the group who were recent transplants. Another unexpected power dynamic that arose during CDPP was between people who had significant experience advocating and people who were new advocates. If unexpected power dynamics go unaddressed, facilitators may notice some community members dominating group discussion.

Tip: In long-term engagement efforts, staff should facilitate repeated conversations about conflict resolution where community members can express their preferences and co-create a common process for addressing harmful behaviors.)

5 Intervene when a power dynamic or unspoken norm rooted in systemic injustice harms the group. Community members can be complicit in or perpetuate white supremacy culture for a number of reasons. They may fear social or financial consequences that usually come from defying the dominant culture, or they may be unaware of alternatives. Because systemic injustices undergird all public policies, institutions, and relationships, some marginalized people have learned to assimilate as an act of survival. Therefore, instances where marginalized members of the community perpetuate white supremacy should be confronted with compassion. Nonprofit staff can begin by having a one-on-one conversation with the person perpetuating white supremacy culture or taking advantage of a power dynamic to explain why the behavior is harmful. If their behavior personally harmed someone else in the group, a mediated conversation may be needed. Before convening community members for a long-term engagement effort, staff should agree on a plan for interrupting harmful behaviors that centers community members’ healing.

Example: In Las Vegas, facilitators clearly explained how they would handle misgendering and other microaggressions while discussing group norms in the first power-building session.

Tip: Consider consulting with a restorative justice practitioner or mediator to encourage open conflict.

6 Normalize questions about money and requests for support. In repeat engagement efforts where community members are hired as consultants, salaried staff leading the engagement effort represent the nonprofit. Community members frequently come to nonprofit staff about payments, absences, and other concerns a person would usually bring to their supervisor. Staff should ask community members if they have payment-related questions during recruitment and onboarding, and proactively offer community members payment-related information like estimated dates when payments will hit their bank accounts. Staff must also respond with transparency and speed to requests for financial accommodation like advanced payments, rejecting the white supremacist idea that basic needs are private matters to be handled independently.

Tip: If a nonprofit is engaging community members directly for the first time, there may be money-related questions staff must create policies for in real time. Staff can be honest about delays caused by the need to develop new processes, but there should be some urgency to provide clarity to community members.

7 Create pathways for community members to complain if a staff member abuses a power dynamic or perpetuates white supremacy culture. Because nonprofit staff occupy a privileged position akin to a supervisor in many engagement efforts, community members may find it challenging to hold staff accountable for harmful behaviors. In past jobs, confronting a supervisor may have put community members at risk of a job loss or other unfair repercussions. Standing up to someone with institutional power might feel risky. Therefore, staff should not assume that community members will call out their harmful behaviors in public or private settings. Instead, staff need to create official processes for community members to file complaints that eliminate any risk associated with calling out a supervisor. All complaints should be taken seriously by discussing them internally and reporting back ways that nonprofit staff will reform the behavior.

Example: In CDPP, staff encouraged direct and open conflict. Members of the Core Collective confided in trusted staff members, and the complaint was then brought directly to the staff member accused of harmful behavior with a request for them to ask the community member to have a one-on-one conversation. However, this strategy for addressing harmful behaviors from CLASP staff was never formally established. In practice, this strategy could have excluded people who would have preferred to remain anonymous.

8 Cede power and control in support of community members' leadership. Some nonprofit staff struggle to abandon the participant-facilitator dynamic and accept community members' leadership. Releasing control over an aspect of the project or advocacy effort can evoke feelings of fear in nonprofit staff: they may worry that a task won't be accomplished in time or that the final product won't meet funders' expectations. Staff must remind themselves that these feelings have roots in white supremacy culture, namely paternalism and perfectionism. Nonprofit staff should never make assumptions about community members' capacity, interest, or skill set. Instead, staff should frequently approach community members with leadership opportunities and assure them that they will have full staff support. Failing to entrust tasks to enthusiastic community members or create opportunities for genuine co-creation significantly limits community members' influence over the project or advocacy effort, risking disengagement.

Tip: Staff should develop shared values and standards for community leadership that underpin the project. Staff can then use this shared understanding of community leadership to hold each other accountable.

9 Emphasize that weaknesses or deficits that people observe in their communities are systemic, not individual. Too often, poverty and related struggles are framed as the result of personal failings rather than the result of systemic and structural inequality. Staff must understand and reiterate often that the challenges facing community members are the result of systemic failures, shifting the focus from blaming individuals. Emphasizing the systemic quality of social issues encourages community members to advocate for large-scale systems change, rather than rely on individual interventions, while also affirming that their and their loved ones' personal struggles are not the result of individual failings.

Example: To initiate conversations about systemic injustices among people participating in the power-building sessions, the Core Collective relied on a tree analogy created by the National Collaborative for Transformative Youth (formerly CLASP's Youth team). You can see how staff explain this complicated concept in [this video](#).

Tip: Facilitators should always use asset-based language that focuses on a community's strengths and potential, rather than what's wrong or what's missing.

10 Utilize affinity groups. Affinity groups allow people with shared identities, experiences, or interests to connect with others who can empathize with them. In many engagement efforts, community members form affinity groups organically, as people are drawn to others with similar life experience. Staff can also consider intentionally organizing people into affinity

groups as a useful facilitation tool. In affinity groups, community members may be more willing to share personal experiences or express their opinions. CLASP staff utilized affinity groups to combat adultism among community members who participated in the power-building sessions. There was a separate, youth-only group in each location. To deepen relationships within the Core Collective, CLASP staff could have hosted more closed meetings for young members to bond. That being said, diverse groups like the Core Collective that subvert power dynamics and center solidarity can be very **restorative**.

Example: Early in the process of designing CDPP, CLASP staff separated adult and youth members of the Core Collective to develop goals for CDPP. The groups then collaborated to combine them.

- 11 Reject the blanket falsehood that nonprofits empower community members.** Empowerment means giving strength and potential to someone else, which ignores the very real power that community members already hold. Community members who unite can wield people power with the potential to change policy. Staff assuming that the nonprofits leading an engagement effort possess some superior power that can unlock the potential of participants introduces a paternalistic dynamic with roots in white saviorism. Nonetheless, nonprofits can and should share their institutional power with community members by, for example, creating official bodies like steering committees to facilitate shared decision-making authority over a project or advocacy effort.
- 12 Iterate often that people do not have to share stories of hardship to receive support or have their opinions valued.** Nonprofit staff are rarely asked to share personal experiences. Instead, staff are asked about their professional opinions, and those opinions are taken seriously because of their titles—a class privilege not afforded to people experiencing poverty. Community members are often pressured to prove their knowledge about a systemic injustice by talking about traumatizing experiences. This pressure is multiplied for people of color who are also forced to prove their basic humanity in many everyday situations like visiting the doctor’s office. Community members should not be expected to share personal experiences in detail at any point during a project or advocacy effort. Staff can help relieve this racist and classist burden of proof by not requiring community members to share stories that verify eligibility during recruitment; upon request for financial support; or while advocating for needed policy changes. Any efforts to incorporate community members’ stories into a project or advocacy effort must be person-led, and the person must retain control of when, how, and where to share their story.
- 13 Avoid punitive behaviors.** Community members manage work, caregiving, and other responsibilities against the backdrop of systemic injustices like poverty. Therefore, one unexpected event like a job loss may cause a community member to miss a meeting or stop responding to texts. Staff should not attach financial consequences to a community

member's participation or quality of work, nor should community members be chastised for taking a step back from the project or advocacy effort for any reason.

Example: Youth activists in the Core Collective were paid in advance of the work period to demonstrate that CLASP trusted community members to contribute to the project or advocacy effort as their capacity allowed.

14 Carry as much administrative labor as possible to help distribute labor equitably.

Nonprofit staff should handle all administrative tasks, including scheduling meetings, taking notes, and submitting invoices. Administrative tasks may be time intensive and feel low impact to staff, but promptly completing them can help community members stay oriented and reassured. Staff should look for innovative ways to reduce or eliminate administrative tasks that are usually expected of consultants, such as submitting invoices on community members' behalf or sending out contracts for virtual signatures. Attempts to reduce administrative burdens on community members may also require staff in the Finance and Human Resource departments to modify how they collect documentation and verify information. In general, all requests of community members to collaborate should either be an opportunity for them to develop an important skill like facilitation or meaningfully shape the project or advocacy effort.



PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY FROM DESIGN THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Meaningful partnership with community members means sharing decision-making. This applies to major decisions, but also to smaller, more informal decision points. For example, if a meeting is being planned for community members to pick where a nonprofit will invest resources, the staff drafting the discussion questions will influence the scope of the meeting. Excluding community members from planning can result in nonprofit staff having a disproportionate influence over the project or advocacy effort, often unintentionally. Therefore, in addition to formal decision-making powers that are granted to groups like steering committees, community members must have ample opportunity to co-create with nonprofit staff.

Spotlight

1. **Be ready and eager to transition to working groups.** As a project or advocacy effort transitions from ideation to implementation, it may be more appropriate for people to split into smaller teams with specific duties, otherwise known as working groups.
2. **Pay community members at a competitive rate.** Compensation amounts should be equal to or more than rates of other consultants who are providing project support. Community members who feel financially secure will be better able to volunteer for leadership roles and consistently partner with staff.

Recommendations for Staff Leading Community Engagement

Co-creation is an approach to community engagement that centers working relationships with community members throughout a project or advocacy effort. Engagement efforts that center co-creation aim to build processes, materials, and other parts of the project together, as well as shift leadership responsibilities away from nonprofit staff. Nonprofit staff must commit to co-creation to meaningfully engage community members at every stage of a project or advocacy effort—from design through implementation and evaluation. The following section outlines actions that nonprofit staff can take to move beyond consultation and toward co-creation.

“ ***Co-creation is sometimes stepping in faith without a clear roadmap of implementation. You create the process together.*** ”
- *Core Collective Member*

1 Develop a steering committee vested with institutional power to co-lead. Steering committees are an official body that can be given institutional power over high-impact decisions. Steering committee members are expected to hold certain responsibilities and dedicate their time to an effort, in exchange for compensation and access to skill-building opportunities. One strength of steering committees is the potential to transfer decision-making authority to impacted people in the community who use their expertise and lived experience to improve a project, program, or advocacy effort. To honor that power, staff must center transparency and consistency in their communication with community members on steering committees. Staff must bring important decisions to the steering committee and create frequent opportunities for community members to co-create or lead.

Example: The Core Collective had a big, open-ended charge to design and execute CDPP. As a result, the statement of work (SOW) we provided was vague. Some community members found this ambiguity frustrating, teaching us that future SOWs should have clearer direction.

Tip: Staff leading an engagement effort should take time during the recruitment process to draft a clear statement of work for steering committee members.

2 Embrace different types of meeting structures for different goals. Especially in repeat engagement efforts where community members hold an expansive list of responsibilities, it is important for staff to structure meetings in ways that serve explicit goals. In CDPP, the staff's working relationship with community members was multi-faceted: the Core Collective held more than just decision-making responsibilities. Members also provided updates on tasks they led individually, brainstormed ideas, and problem-solved in meetings with staff. CLASP staff tried to structure meetings differently to meet each of these goals. For example, meetings dedicated to brainstorming often included independent journaling and full group discussion, while educational meetings paired panels or presentations with games to gauge comprehension or interest. Over-reliance on a particular meeting structure such as small group discussions can feel monotonous, especially when the structure does not match the meeting's goal, and eventually lead to project fatigue. Different meeting structures also support different learning styles and can accommodate people who are neurodivergent.

Tip: Some common goals for meetings include providing status updates, brainstorming ideas, building community, learning or sharing information, solving problems, and making decisions. Staff leading an engagement effort can try making a template agenda for meetings that center each of these common goals to streamline planning.

3 Fight the instinct to hide problems or disagreements from community members and try their suggestions. Community members deserve to feel like the project or advocacy effort they're joining has direction and stability. With this intention in mind, nonprofit staff can sometimes withhold information about problems and seek solutions without community input. But collaborative problem-solving, however messy, is an integral part of co-creation. Nonprofit staff should problem-solve in partnership with community members, especially if the solution will result in a change in strategy or goals. Nonprofit staff should expect to put the solutions recommended by community members into practice and report back on progress. Soliciting and then ignoring feedback would cause community members to doubt that staff truly cared about their opinions.

Tip: Don't be scared to have casual meetings with community members about how to solve problems. The key to problem-solving meetings is clearly describing the issue and identifying desired feedback.

4 Be ready and eager to transition to working groups. In long-term community engagement, early interactions with the community are often streamlined into a single recurring meeting. This meeting structure can begin to feel inorganic or directionless over time. As an effort transitions from ideation to implementation, it may be more appropriate for people to split into smaller teams with specific duties, otherwise known as working groups. Working groups enable community members to explore a topic fully and share detailed opinions, increasing feelings of ownership over the final product or decision. In working groups, staff and community members can co-create with each other, disrupting the usual author-reviewer relationship where staff create materials independently and then solicit feedback from community members. Working groups also allow for less formal meetings, so members can get to know each other through casual conversation.

5 Keep community members informed. Community members who aren't given enough information about the project can't be active participants or partners. Feeling disoriented is silencing; community members may be too embarrassed to admit that they're confused or unclear about something. Nonprofit staff can keep people informed about the project or advocacy effort through proactive, routine communication. For example, CLASP staff began most monthly meetings for CDPP with a round of updates. Another option could be sending weekly emails with detailed information about how the project or advocacy effort has progressed. In addition to providing regular updates, staff should give community members ample time to receive and process information. Community members deserve time to collect their thoughts and ask questions before immediately being asked to share their opinion or make a decision. Without consistent information-sharing, even community members on steering committees may begin to feel tokenized, or like they're there for show or to check a

box without any real influence.

Tip: Facilitators can start every meeting with a brief reminder of what occurred during the last meeting and what has transpired since.

6 Monitor energy levels and troubleshoot fatigue caused by the project or advocacy effort. Both nonprofit staff and community members are prone to burnout during long-term projects or advocacy efforts. For community members, everyday stresses of poverty can pile up and sap their energy. If a community member seems depleted, staff should reach out with compassion, curiosity, and a clear idea of what support the nonprofit can provide. It's also important to acknowledge that the project or advocacy effort itself can be draining. All community members participating in CDPP were experiencing poverty, meaning they were expected to imagine and fight for policy changes that would directly impact their lives. The stakes were high. Staff can lessen project fatigue by planning experiences for community members that feel meaningful despite their emotional toll.

Tip: Signs that community members may be feeling overextended include missing or not participating during meetings, taking a long time to respond to texts, or avoiding leadership roles.

Recommendations for Nonprofit Leadership

Differences in available or paid time between nonprofit staff and community members can make co-creation a challenge. Compared to nonprofit staff, contracts with community members tend to limit how much time they can contribute to a project or advocacy effort. Full-time staff have up to 160 hours per month to spend on a project, while community members are sometimes hired as consultants paid to contribute 10 to 20 hours per month, or approximately 10 percent of the maximum time staff can contribute. Nonprofit staff leading engagement efforts must account for this time differential when seeking community members' partnership: they may not ask community members to join more informal planning meetings or lead on a task because they want to ensure people are not asked to work for more hours than they are paid for. Below are organizational changes that could make the working relationship between nonprofit staff and community members more equitable. Nonprofits that strive to make community members feel valued will see them enthusiastically take on more leadership roles, driving the co-creation process.

1 Host in-person events to reignite interest and deepen relationships. Sometimes energy levels drop because people lose inspiration for the project or advocacy effort, or because they feel disconnected from the people involved. In both cases, a large-scale intervention may be needed to reignite interest. CLASP staff engaged with CDPP's Core Collective

virtually for over a year. After the power-building sessions concluded for CDPP, attendance for the last two meetings with the full Core Collective declined. However, community members were very responsive to staff who were part of their working groups. In other words, CLASP staff were more successful in developing deep relationships within working groups than among the full steering committee. This dynamic became clear at the end of the project as we tried to celebrate our accomplishments and plan for the future together. Long-term engagement efforts, especially virtual ones, should include in-person events like Hill days, planning retreats, and other direct actions. In-person events help people maintain their connection to the movement and each other. To plan in-person events that are accessible, staff will need a significant investment from their organization. The organization should expect to cover lodging and transportation costs as well as expenses like child care, food, and compensation.

Tip: In the grant proposal, staff should budget for at least one in-person activity every six months.

2 Pay community members at a competitive rate. Community members sitting on steering committees contribute their lived expertise, time, and labor. They must be adequately compensated. As a general rule, compensation amounts should be equal to or more than rates of other consultants who are providing project support. Community members' rate should account for the up-front costs associated with co-leading a project or advocacy effort, such as child care or time off from work. Staff should also be empowered to have transparent conversations with community members about their compensation, working with them to determine what other areas in the budget can be cut if the group desires a higher rate. Community members who feel financially secure will be in a better headspace to volunteer for leadership roles and consistently partner with staff.

Example: Members of the Core Collective were paid at a rate of \$100/hour. Some members were paid quarterly while others preferred invoicing for monthly payments.

Tip: Regardless of the size and duration of the engagement effort, compensation should often be the biggest chunk of the budget.

3 Inform community members of unintended financial consequences. Additional income can cause unintended consequences for community members experiencing poverty. Independent contracting can lead to people owing money during tax season if they do not make payments of estimated taxes to cover their self-employment taxes, and an influx of cash can disqualify community members from certain public benefits, such as housing assistance, Medicaid, or SNAP. These consequences can be devastating, especially if people are not expecting them. Nonprofits should plan to advise community members who are hired as consultants on the finances of independent contracting, as well as provide staff with the knowledge needed to help forecast any impact payments will have on their benefits. Nonprofits should also explore flexible payment options that allow people to receive non-cash compensation if preferred.

Example: CLASP staff hired an external consultant to teach some Core Collective members about the finances of being a consultant.

4 Invest in community members' emotional and spiritual wellness. Another benefit that many nonprofit staff, but not consultants, enjoy is employee-sponsored health insurance. Some community members may not have access to mental health care to help them process emotions that arise because of the sensitive, deeply personal topics central to a project or advocacy effort. Over time, investing in community members' mental health will increase retention and engagement. Nonprofits should open any healing-centered events like meditation teachings for internal staff to community partners.

5 Hire community members as part- or full-time staff. Unfortunately, even if an organization implements all of the above recommendations, the extreme difference in time commitment between nonprofit staff and community partners who consult will still limit co-creation. There will be aspects of the project or advocacy effort that must be spearheaded or completed by nonprofit staff, likely relegating community members' input to a brainstorming or review session. An alternative to consulting with community members is hiring them as part- or full-time staff who work between 20 and 40 hours a week, instead of 10 to 20 a month. This work arrangement would enable community members to attend planning meetings, co-author materials, and more. The position could be temporary, lasting the duration of the project or advocacy effort, and paired with a community steering committee or advisory board of consultants. That said, there should be more than one part- or full-time position open to community members to avoid tokenization. Nonprofits must consider hiring community members as part- or full-time employees to move beyond consultation and toward co-creation.

RECRUITING AND ONBOARDING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The first interactions that nonprofit staff have with community members occur during recruitment or onboarding. Recruitment is the extensive process of finding community members to join the project or advocacy effort. Once community members decide to join, they are onboarded, or provided all the information and tools they need to be active participants or partners. These initial interactions between nonprofit staff and community members set the foundation for their working relationship. During both recruitment and onboarding, community members assess a lot of information to ultimately decide if the opportunity is worth their time.

Spotlight

1. **Do one-on-ones with community members interested in participating.** One-on-ones with staff leading the engagement effort initiate a personal relationship, help assuage fears that the paid opportunity is a scam, and give people the privacy to ask questions or communicate needs.
2. **Establish co-creation as a normal practice as soon as possible.** Incorporating co-creation early will help community members understand their role and see how their opinions influence the project.

Recommendations for Staff Leading Community Engagement

There are a number of reasons why a community member may choose to join a project or advocacy effort, from skill-building to potentially changing an issue they care about to receiving adequate compensation. The primary goal of the nonprofit staff during the recruitment process should be to accurately describe the project or advocacy effort so that community members can make a fully informed decision about whether they would like to join. In onboarding, staff must provide community members with the necessary information or skills building at a paced rate conducive to different learning styles. This section explains strategies for recruitment and onboarding that aim to make community members feel oriented and empowered as they enter into a project or advocacy effort, ultimately increasing participation and retention.

- 1 **Tend to the relationship between staff members leading the community engagement effort.** Before speaking with community-based organizations or individuals who may be interested in the project, staff should take time to get aligned on goals, roles, and preferred community engagement practices. At CLASP, policy teams hadn't partnered on long-term projects that involved community engagement prior to CDPP. The Public Benefits Justice and Youth teams had separate work styles and approaches to community engagement. Some members of the Core Collective intuited these small misalignments in onboarding meetings, leading to confusion about the steering committee's role. Luckily, CLASP staff addressed this confusion quickly, holding an internal retreat to create alignment. At the retreat both policy teams discussed their approaches to community engagement, developed a rough timeline leading up to the power-building sessions, and divided leadership responsibilities. Putting the work in early to surface unspoken differences and develop consistent messaging helps

prevent confusion among community members in recruitment and onboarding conversations. It also assures community members that the project or advocacy effort has a clear direction, improving retention throughout a long-term engagement period.

2 Identify who is personally impacted by the systemic injustice central to the project or advocacy effort. Before staff begin recruiting, they must understand who represents community members within the context of their project or advocacy effort. The term “community members” refers to people who are personally impacted because of a shared identity, experience, and/or location. The Core Collective defined community members broadly as people experiencing poverty. However, they also identified priority populations to be over-represented in CDPP, a project about economic justice. Each location for the CDPP power-building sessions was chosen because a large number of people who had been denied economic justice lived there. Some of CDPP’s priority populations included foster youth, Indigenous peoples, and Black people. Staff should identify which community members to prioritize recruiting early in the project’s planning stages, as who is included in the definition of community members greatly impacts outreach strategy.

3 Simplify outreach materials and recruitment conversations. Recruitment conversations are often the first time that nonprofit staff speak to somebody outside of their organization about the project. As a result, these conversations can feel clunky. Staff may have to practice a few times to identify what information is necessary to communicate, in addition to what excites people. The most important information to communicate directly to community members during recruitment is the project’s purpose, including its intended impact; what participation might look like; compensation; expected weekly time commitment; potential start and end dates; and contact information for a staff member at the organization. For CDPP recruitment, CLASP staff found that a one-pager, a flyer, and template emails were sufficient outreach materials to communicate key information and pique community members’ interest. Nonprofit staff should develop a standard elevator pitch for the project or advocacy effort to share during recruitment conversations, workshopping it as they speak with more community members. Outreach materials can be both concise *and* accurate. Staff can simplify these materials because they will have additional opportunities to share important information with community members during the onboarding process.

Example:



Tip: It’s likely that the language staff use internally to describe the project or advocacy effort isn’t accessible to community members who are learning about the project for the first time. People in charge of recruitment may need to experiment with new ways to describe it.

4 Understand which outreach strategies to use. The most appropriate outreach strategies for recruiting community members depend on the identities or experiences that the nonprofit wants represented and its existing relationships to state or local organizations, among other factors. Nonprofits with strong ties to state or local organizations can often outsource recruitment, contracting with a single organization to recruit a set number of participants. This kind of recruitment can be especially useful for recruiting community members with shared identities or experiences. For example, CLASP's recruitment partner in the Pacific Northwest was a student group led by Native youth. All people participating in that power-building session identified as Indigenous, and many of them knew each other and had prior experience advocating. In comparison, CLASP did not have a primary recruitment partner in Las Vegas, where one goal was to center foster youth. A member of the Core Collective had connections with program administrators in the Nevada child welfare system, and CLASP staff made new connections with local health centers, youth shelters, and food banks. Because the Core Collective's primary connections were caseworkers and direct service organizations, CLASP staff used a mass distribution strategy for outreach. Staff asked recruitment partners to get information about joining the project or advocacy effort in front of as many people as possible. This mass distribution strategy resulted in diverse groups of community members with significant representation from foster youth. If staff know the strengths of different outreach strategies, they can more clearly communicate their recruitment needs to state and local organizations.

Tip: For partnerships with local or state organizations, staff should keep requests for proposals (RFPs) low effort. For CDPP, CLASP did not require an RFP at all because staff needed only recruitment support.

Tip: When pursuing a mass distribution strategy, it's best to cast a large net. Try to get materials out through both virtual and physical channels.

5 Acknowledge the negative history between national nonprofits and community members. National nonprofits have historically mistreated community members in a number of ways. One common example is tokenism, or the practice of including marginalized people in a project or advocacy effort to give the appearance of diversity without genuine power-sharing. Many local organizations who have earned community members' trust have a duty to protect them from tokenism and other harmful practices. Therefore, local organizations can be hesitant to partner with national nonprofits. By being forthright about this negative history in early conversations with potential state and local partners, staff at national organizations demonstrate humility and signal a commitment to non-repetition. This frankness can help nonprofit staff form new partnerships with organizations cautious of national nonprofits.

6 Research the policy, direct service, and advocacy landscape unique to community members' location. The history of a location matters more in place-based projects or advocacy efforts than in national ones. Although many policies rooted in systemic injustice are federal, their local implementation has been unique; and obstacles to policy change vary by place. Trusted local organizations may be unwilling to partner with national nonprofits that appear ignorant to the specific challenges facing their state or city. For CDPP recruitment, even small actions like mispronouncing the name of a major city signaled to local organizations that CLASP was out of touch, thwarting a potential partnership. Local organizations do not want the work of educating staff at national nonprofits about a location's policy and advocacy landscape to fall on community members participating in a place-based project or advocacy effort. In addition to reading articles and other materials, staff can think of research into a location as an opportunity to form new relationships with local organizations, many of which have cataloged local histories and experiences.



7 Remember that recruitment and onboarding are long processes. Relationship management ramps up once staff finish developing their outreach strategy and begin recruiting. Introductory conversations alone can take one to two months to schedule and complete. But most importantly, the recruitment and onboarding process is not linear: it rarely progresses smoothly from one step to the next. At any point during recruitment conversations, a potential organizational partner may drop off because of a community crisis that needs their full capacity; or a community member may stop responding because they're feeling overwhelmed by other responsibilities. Accounting for delays outside of their control, staff leading engagement efforts should reserve *at least* six months to develop a recruitment and onboarding strategy, design accessible materials, and conduct outreach. Staff may need even more time if their nonprofit doesn't have pre-existing relationships with state and local organizations.

Example: CDPP's funder was always open to grant extensions without additional funding.

Tip: Don't get discouraged by failed conversations with potential recruitment partners: not everyone is the right partner.

8 Set a start date. Community members can be hesitant to commit to a project or advocacy effort without knowing when it will begin. For CDPP, community members responded well to flyers depicting a start and end month. CLASP staff then asked for days of the week and times that community members were generally unavailable in one-on-one recruitment calls. After calls with community members who are considering the project or advocacy effort, staff should be able to propose dates and times for each of the meetings. Community members may not be able to engage during standard nonprofit working hours, so staff should expect to accommodate people who work inflexible hours or care for loved ones full-time when scheduling meetings or events.

Example: CLASP staff held most CDPP power-building sessions after 5 p.m. so that people could attend after work.

9 Do one-on-ones with community members interested in participating. Regardless of outreach strategy, staff should consider having one-on-one conversations with community members who are thinking about joining the project or advocacy effort. These conversations initiate a personal relationship, help assuage fears that the paid opportunity is a scam, and give people the privacy to ask questions or communicate needs. Ultimately, staff leading the engagement effort are the best spokespeople for the project. They can provide nuanced information about compensation, accessibility services, and more. If community members feel like they can reliably come to a staff member about project-related questions, rather than being redirected, they are more likely to join and stick around.

Tip: People in charge of recruitment should have rough talking points for introductory one-on-ones, but let the conversation flow. The goal is to make a connection.

10 Use self-attestation to assess eligibility. In most engagement efforts, nonprofit staff are recruiting community members with specific identities or experiences. Staff must trust community members' understanding of their own experience, avoiding burdensome requests to prove eligibility. For CDPP, CLASP staff communicated on the recruitment flyer that anybody "experiencing poverty" could participate in the power-building sessions. Thus, it was assumed that any community member who contacted CLASP staff qualified to be in the power-building sessions. At no point did CLASP staff ask community members to verify that their incomes were below the federal poverty line. Staff recruiting for projects or advocacy efforts should avoid verbally screening participants to verify if they have experience with poverty or other systemic injustices, as doing so can make people feel suspected, invalidated, or embarrassed. At most, staff should ask community members to complete a screening survey with non-invasive questions to confirm their eligibility and interest.

11 Offer a less time-intensive alternative to community members who are interested in participating but lack capacity. Long-term, repeat engagement is necessary for cultivating a working relationship between community members and nonprofit staff that centers co-creation. However, serving on a steering committee or even participating in a series of power-building sessions is a significant time commitment. Some community members may not be able to attend because of scheduling constraints. There were several community members interested in CDPP who were not able to participate because of the time commitment. To accommodate people who care about the project or advocacy effort but can't make a long-term commitment, staff should prepare less time-intensive alternatives like interviews, surveys, or one-time focus groups. They should pay people the same rate for participating in these short-term alternatives and keep in contact, continuing to offer opportunities to be involved in the project or advocacy effort.

12 Avoid kick-off meetings that inundate community members with information. Some staff may feel like they have to explain everything about the project or advocacy effort to community members as soon as they join. As a result, kick-off meetings sometimes center education over relationship-building. In onboarding CDPP's Core Collective, CLASP staff spent over half of the kick-off meeting presenting information about the project to community members. Informing the Core Collective about the project in this lecture format proved ineffective. Months later, community members expressed confusion about the project's goals and the steering committee's role; staff and the Core Collective had to pause project planning to re-orient everyone through more hands-on activities like creating a charter. Instead of inundating community members with information in early meetings, staff should sequence foundational knowledge so that community members can understand the project or advocacy effort at a paced rate over time. Early meetings should include nuggets of information, rather than boulders, and prioritize community-building.

Tip: Before the first meeting with community members, staff can map out a series of onboarding meetings to ensure that all relevant information is communicated at a rate conducive to learning.

13 Establish co-creation as a normal practice as soon as possible. Because national nonprofits have historically extracted information from community members, the shift away from a participant-facilitator dynamic to partners who co-create can feel disorienting. There are many more unknowns in a project or advocacy effort that centers co-creation, as most key decisions haven't been made by the onboarding period. Staff are intentionally keeping the project as open-ended as possible so that it can be shaped by community members. In addition to affirming their intention to co-lead CDPP on a regular basis, CLASP staff planned an activity during onboarding to help everyone understand what was known versus what still had to be discovered about the project. CLASP staff also interspersed meetings that moved project planning forward in small ways. For example, the Core Collective met independently from CLASP staff to brainstorm qualities that they thought were important in choosing locations to facilitate power-building sessions. Incorporating co-creation early will help community members understand their role and witness their opinions influence the project.

Example: After recognizing there was some confusion about the CDPP's goals, CLASP staff asked community members to develop a charter defining the Core Collective's charge. This activity also helped CLASP staff understand the Core Collective's hopes for CDPP.

Tip: Some community members may be too uncomfortable with unknowns and decide the project isn't for them—that's okay!

Recommendations for Nonprofit Leadership

Staff have a lot of control over the onboarding process, but successful recruitment relies heavily on the nonprofit's history with state and local organizations. Many community-based organizations are hesitant to partner with national nonprofit or government groups that they haven't worked with previously. In the past, researchers, advocates, and government officials have extracted knowledge from community members without delivering any real benefit in exchange. To protect community members from this one-sided transaction, local organizations can be very selective in the national projects or advocacy efforts they choose to support. Below are some ways that national nonprofits can maximize community participation in engagement efforts by investing in strong, non-transactional relationships with state and local organizations.

- 1 Allot time for staff to establish new organizational partnerships and maintain old connections that aren't in service of a goal.** Too often, nonprofits only encourage staff to reach out to state and local organizations when they have a time-sensitive request for support. This dynamic reinforces transactional relationships between national, state, and local organizations. By reserving time for staff to foster connections with people working at state and local organizations outside of a particular project or advocacy context, national nonprofits can earn the trust of community-based groups prior to asking for their recruitment or onboarding support.
- 2 Set realistic goals and expectations for community participation.** Well-established partnerships with state and local groups who have earned the trust of community members can catapult participation rates in an engagement effort. On the other hand, nonprofits with weak or scant partnerships may struggle to recruit their ideal number of community members. Nonprofits must set realistic goals for recruitment based on previous efforts made to form or deepen relationships at the state and local level.
- 3 Invest in advocacy led by potential state and local partners, especially community-based organizations.** Local organizations with a cautious approach to national partnerships are more likely to reject or ignore requests from strangers. In general, national nonprofits, especially those new to community engagement or organizing, should have the foresight to invest in work that local organizations already do before they seek support for their own project or advocacy effort. CLASP struggled to find recruitment support from a single local organization in Las Vegas because CLASP hadn't previously supported community-based organizations in Nevada. National nonprofits can cultivate non-transactional relationships with local organizations by sponsoring events or sending staff to support local direct actions, for example.

4 Hire and retain staff that represent the identities and experiences central to the project or advocacy effort. Understandably, local organizations and residents will not join a project if staff conducting outreach appear out-of-touch or ignorant to the injustices in their lives. For example, in Las Vegas, the Core Collective hoped to have more representation from immigrant communities, but it proved challenging for a white, monolingual staff member to earn the trust of immigrant-led organizations during a 30-minute introductory meeting. On the other hand, the same staff member had no trouble initiating partnerships with organizations serving foster and homeless youth. Community members quickly trusted the staff member because they had personal experience with child welfare and sheltered homelessness. The lived experience of people conducting outreach influences which identities are represented in the project or advocacy effort, especially in places where the nonprofit hasn't developed a positive reputation yet or in projects with tight timelines.

5 Offer pass-through funding to community-based organizations for their support. Working relationships between national and state or local organizations can vary significantly. National nonprofits, which are comparatively well-funded, should budget to pay state and local organizations for any support requested, including small, low-effort requests like emailing information about an engagement opportunity to community members in their network. The more time- and capacity-intensive the request, the more national nonprofits should expect to offer in compensation. Local organizations that are cautious of national nonprofits may be willing to take a chance and enter into a new partnership if compensation accurately reflects their expertise and contribution.

Example: State and local organizations who provided recruitment support for CDPP were offered between \$500 and \$3,000, depending on how many community members they recruited. However, most organizations did not accept the payment.

Tip: All funding offered to community-based organizations should be unrestricted funds.

6 Budget for translation and interpretation services. Language access can be a huge barrier to participation for people with limited English proficiency. A key reason why CDPP did not have high participation rates from immigrant communities is because CLASP did not budget for sufficient translation and interpretation services. For highly structured, short-term engagement efforts like interviews or focus groups, nonprofits should plan to provide translation and interpretation services. Staff would need outreach and meeting materials translated, in addition to interpretation services during the one-to-two hour engagement. Service needs increase significantly in repeat engagement efforts like CDPP, where there are several opportunities for community members to take on leadership roles. Interpreters may be needed for one-on-one check-ins, working group meetings, and more. Nonprofits interested in partnering with communities with limited English proficiency must make a

significant investment in language access, which could include consulting support and additional staff.

Example: CLASP could have invested more resources into making power-building session slides and materials multilingual for people who preferred Spanish.

7 Supply any technology that community members may need to participate. In virtual engagement efforts especially, interested community members may not have access to the technology they need to fully participate. For example, community members participating in CDPP needed access to a laptop or tablet to engage with interactive virtual tools like Padlet and view slides. Joining meetings on a cell phone would have excluded community members from certain activities. CLASP was able to purchase laptops and tablets for participating community members who did not have access to either device. Importantly, CLASP did not require community members to return the devices after CDPP ended because staff believed it was important to invest in community members' futures as advocates. Some grants explicitly disallow such uses of funds. To support people without wi-fi, CLASP staff shared information about how to qualify for free or reduced-price internet through a **federal program**. If the nonprofit cannot provide technology to interested community members, staff may have to adapt their facilitation plans in ways that are harmful to people with different learning styles or disabilities, such as simplifying or eliminating interactive elements. Relying too much on group discussions may cause some community members to disengage over time.

Tip: : Email any materials that will be presented during a meeting to community members prior to the meeting so that people with limited technology access can still follow along.



CREATING VALUABLE EXPERIENCES FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Systemic injustices can rob people of the energy to focus on much beyond their basic needs. Poverty especially can deflect community members' imaginations, as they are forced to put all their creative energies toward calculating how to survive: it constrains people's spare time. These realities impact retention throughout a long-term project or advocacy effort. Although some disengagement caused by systemic injustices is unavoidable, staff can keep community members interested in a project or advocacy effort by offering valuable skill-building and leadership opportunities worthy of their spare time.

Spotlight

1. **Provide a variety of leadership opportunities.** Community members should have opportunities to lead during public events like presentations and within their private working relationships with nonprofit staff.
2. **Design discussion questions that are approachable and open-ended.** Broad questions that use simple language invite community members to share all their thoughts without being afraid that they aren't answering the questions correctly.

Recommendations for Staff Leading Engagement Efforts

Staff leading a direct engagement effort have significant control over how meetings with all community members are structured. Staff are often responsible for setting agendas, developing discussion questions, and investing time into community members' priorities. While many of the recommendations in this section are within the control of staff, some require organizational buy-in and resources.

- 1 **Set clear goals that can be accomplished within the timeframe of the meeting.** Every meeting with community members should have a purpose that's communicated in an agenda prior to the meeting. Community members will be more willing to share their opinions when expectations are clear. CLASP staff also found it useful to overestimate how much time it would take to accomplish the meeting goals so that community members have time to ask questions or engage with each other's ideas. Attempting to do too much in a single meeting can make community members feel unheard or rushed.

Tip: In addition to sharing the meeting goals in all agendas, facilitators can insert time at the beginning of the meeting to explain how the goals will be achieved.

- 2 **Ensure meetings with community members are fully staffed.** Most meetings with community members have facilitators and support staff. Facilitators serve as the anchor for all meetings with community members, moving conversation forward and keeping

participants engaged. To fulfill this role, facilitators must be fully present. CLASP staff found that bringing on an additional staff member to manage technology needs during the meeting helped facilitators follow any talking points and ask thoughtful follow-up questions, especially during online meetings. Similarly, community members experiencing issues with technology can seek support and get the issue resolved more reliably. Small inconveniences like missing the first 15 minutes of a meeting because of technology issues can build up, leaving community members feeling unsupported or deprioritized.

Tip: Always have two facilitators so that the meeting or event can still happen if one of the facilitators experiences an emergency.

3 Dedicate time for community members to be visionary. The motivation behind most projects or advocacy efforts is the potential to make meaningful progress toward a more just world. However, nonprofits new to community engagement tend to pre-emptively decide what progress is meaningful based on the organization's internal analysis of what's practical, rather than the vision and perspectives of community members who are impacted by injustices. If nonprofits fail to align their long-term goals with community members' visions, people may disengage from the project or advocacy effort, leading to declining participation. To keep people inspired and engaged, staff must understand community members' personal motivations for joining and guide the group toward a shared vision. Staff can begin the visioning process by offering multiple options for community members to express their hopes. Some people may prefer verbal options like group discussions, while others prefer written options like independent journaling. Staff should also always include opportunities for creative expression to help people gather or organize their thoughts.

Example: For CDPP, community members participating in power-building sessions defined economic justice for themselves through creative expression, group discussion, and independent journaling. The Core Collective used several tools to facilitate visioning, including word clouds and virtual white boards like Jamboard.

4 Approach education with playfulness and a preference for hands-on learning. Throughout an engagement effort, staff may hold educational meetings for a number of reasons. They may want to foster a shared understanding about a challenge facing the community or give people an opportunity to learn new skills. In educational meetings, staff should avoid overly technical or theoretical explanations. Information should only be shared in a lecture format if it serves as a foundation for continued conversations and hands-on learning. With the Core Collective, CLASP staff primarily built skills through direct practice: the Core Collective designed facilitation guides, conducted outreach to local organizations,

and more alongside CLASP staff. There were fewer hands-on learning opportunities for community members who participated in CDPP power-building sessions, where meetings were highly structured and narrower in purpose. The power-building sessions included one educational meeting about different advocacy strategies. Community members then applied that knowledge to draft an advocacy plan in the next two sessions, and have one 30-minute meeting with policymakers. Upon reflection, CLASP staff wished they would have offered more opportunities for community members to practice advocating; lobbying policymakers or organizing a direct action would have accelerated the skill-building process.

Example: In Las Vegas, facilitators taught community members about advocacy through a panel discussion with people who specialized in different forms of advocacy. This format was particularly beneficial for group members who didn't have much experience advocating.

Tip: Keep a certain level of anonymity if you use games or competitive activities to check for comprehension. Community members should not be encouraged to compare themselves to each other, especially the rate with which they process information.

5 Design discussion questions that are approachable and open-ended. Most meetings with community members include group discussion, where community members can exchange ideas with one another, air out disagreements, or come to a shared decision. In CDPP, members of the Core Collective responded better to questions that were short and open-ended than to extremely narrow, long-winded questions. An example of a short, open-ended question is, "What is important in choosing locations for power-building sessions?", whereas "What demographics, politics, and other qualities should we consider in choosing locations for power-building sessions?" is a lengthy and prescriptive question. Broad questions that use simple language invite community members to share all their thoughts without the fear that they aren't answering correctly. A facilitator's ultimate goal with discussion questions is to encourage every participant to share their thoughts freely and respond to the ideas of others.

Tip Always provide both a written and a verbal option for participating in the discussion.

6 Provide a variety of leadership opportunities. Co-creation requires elevating community members to positions of leadership, where their vision and strategy are supported by nonprofit staff. Community members should have opportunities to lead during public events like presentations and within their more private working relationships with nonprofit staff. In CDPP, staff offered the Core Collective several leadership roles, including but not limited to conducting outreach to state and local organizations, creating facilitation plans for each of the power-building sessions, and actually facilitating the sessions. Members of the Core Collective mentioned that they felt labor was distributed equally, and that they were not expected to lead without staff support. In comparison, community members in power-building sessions had fewer leadership opportunities because the engagement effort was short-term and highly structured. Nonprofit staff should offer a variety of leadership opportunities because community members will likely be interested in different aspects of the project or advocacy effort. It's through leadership opportunities that community members can hone their skills and become equal partners, rather than advisors or consultants, to nonprofit staff.

Tip: Treat an engagement effort like a professional development opportunity. What leadership opportunities can make it onto community members' resumes?

7 Connect community members to channels of systemic power. Before starting an engagement effort, staff at nonprofits should reflect on what value being connected to their organization can bring into community members' lives. For one, nonprofits of various sizes have positive reputations that grant them access to people in positions of systemic power. National organizations focused on advocacy can connect community members to federal policymakers or grant officers at private foundations. Staff should seek ways to connect community members to channels of systemic power in both short- and long-term engagement efforts. For community members participating in the CDPP power-building sessions, CLASP staff organized a two-day convening to conclude the project. At the convening, members of each group facilitated a 30-minute discussion about their advocacy plans with relevant policymakers in the federal government. Community members received contact information for all government officials who participated. Staff at national nonprofits especially can leverage their organization's reputation to build bridges between community members and people in government who create the policies that directly impact their lives.

8 Develop an off-boarding strategy. One of the most precious outcomes of an effort to engage the community is welcoming more people into the movement for a more just world. Therefore, nonprofit staff should plan to supply community partners with opportunities to continue their project-related work or advocacy after the engagement period has officially ended. Although a handful of participants joined A New Deal for Youth, an established peer

cohort at CLASP, staff were not able to stay in close contact with 50+ community members after CDPP ended because CLASP lacked funding to support community members in implementing their advocacy plans and didn't have a clear off-boarding strategy. To encourage more community members to stay engaged in the movement for economic justice, CLASP staff could have offered low-effort options like a group listserv where everyone involved in CDPP could share relevant policy updates. An example of a higher-effort and higher-cost option would have been hosting monthly calls for community members to share progress implementing their advocacy plans. In general, staff should develop comprehensive off-boarding strategies that account for varied levels of interest in continuing project-related work or advocacy.

One of the most precious outcomes of an effort to engage the community is welcoming more people into the movement for a more just world.

Tip: Some general services that staff should always offer community members include acting as a reference on applications and submitting letters of recommendation.

- 9 Celebrate community members' growth and accomplishments.** Under the stress of advancing a long-term project or advocacy effort, nonprofit staff can forget to celebrate community members' accomplishments—both within the context of the project and in their personal lives. Recognizing growth in community members' skills can bolster their confidence, reinforcing the idea that they are capable leaders. In CDPP, CLASP staff also carved out space for members of the Core Collective to celebrate life events or accomplishments unrelated to the project, such as graduation.



FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY

National nonprofits dedicated to community engagement connect community members to channels of systemic power, often with the financial support of foundations. This financial dependency on foundations creates a power dynamic where nonprofit staff may feel pressure to align their priorities with the preferences of foundations to secure continued support. In practice, the larger power dynamic at play between nonprofits and foundations impacts the staff's relationship to community members. Staff may prioritize the approval of the funder over community members' needs. This section outlines changes to standard practices within philanthropy that could subvert the power dynamic between nonprofits and foundations. Centering trust and flexibility in the relationship between foundations and nonprofit staff can improve the staff's ability to build secure relationships with community members and quickly incorporate community-driven changes to the project or advocacy effort. These recommendations align with **trust-based philanthropy**, an approach to giving that centers collaboration rather than compliance.

- 1 Expand average grant periods for projects or advocacy efforts that involve community engagement to 3+ years, including at least one year for planning with no deliverables.** It's rare for nonprofits to receive multi-year grants to pursue projects or advocacy efforts. Instead, most grants are for one year, with the potential for renewal. Short grant periods limit the ability of nonprofit staff to develop secure relationships with community members and rush the trust-building process. Recruitment and onboarding alone can take up to six months. A project or advocacy effort that centers working relationships with community members also requires significant time for co-planning. In short, a project or advocacy effort with a one year grant period cannot commit to co-creation. For CDPP, the funder provided a two-year grant period with the first year dedicated solely to planning without deliverables. This planning year allowed staff to recruit and onboard the Core Collective, as well as co-design the goals, methods, and vision of CDPP. CLASP staff were able to build strong relationships with community members, but staff would have needed an additional year of funding to support community members in implementing their advocacy plans. Normalizing longer grant periods can allow nonprofit staff to prioritize relationship-building in all projects and advocacy efforts.
- 2 Allow community-driven changes to the grant proposal's original goals and products.** When nonprofit staff draft a grant proposal that involves community engagement, they have a rough idea of the project's goals, but community members have likely not had an opportunity to influence the staff's conceptualization of the project. Staff often do not engage with community members while writing a grant proposal because the nonprofit is seeking resources to pay community members for

their labor. To compensate for this lack of community input, staff dedicated to co-creation may try to keep the proposal open-ended to be shaped by community members. Projects or advocacy efforts that meaningfully engage with community members may transform over the grant period. The original grant proposal may not reflect the true interests of community members who join, leading to unpredicted changes in the project's scope or goals. Funders should permit grant proposals to have high-level descriptions of projected goals and activities so that staff can adapt over time to community members' interest, instead requesting more details about how nonprofit staff plan to engage community members throughout the project or advocacy effort. Soon after community members join, staff should seek to understand their motivations and hopes for the project or advocacy effort, compare them to the original proposal, and report any important deviations to the funder. Funders should minimize the amount of administrative labor required to request approval for community-driven changes to the original grant proposal.

- 3 Minimize reporting requirements.** Many grant agreements require nonprofit staff to submit interim reports on the project or advocacy effort. In direct engagement efforts, staff can struggle to submit timely progress reports while also tending to their relationships with community members. Community engagement demands significant staff capacity and time. To ensure that staff can prioritize relationship management, funders should avoid elaborate or frequent reporting requirements. For CDPP, all interim reports were conducted on video call: the grant officer prepared a series of questions, took notes, and drafted a report to be reviewed by CLASP staff. Accepting progress reports verbally, rather than through writing, enabled CLASP staff to focus on community engagement.

Example: The grant officer for CDPP met with CLASP staff every six months to learn about CDPP's progress. The grant officer then drafted a report based on her notes, which was reviewed for accuracy by CLASP staff.

- 4 Value relationship-building between local, state, and national organizations.** Even in projects or advocacy efforts that involve community engagement, the nonprofit seeking financial support tends to be funded to produce some deliverable or advance a policy change. Relationship-building is, at best, a secondary goal. Yet meaningful partnerships between local, state, and national organizations dedicated to community engagement serve as the bedrock of all successful efforts to change policy. Both new and well-established partnerships between community-based and national nonprofits should be seen as worthy investments in and of themselves. By reframing relationship-building as a primary goal of projects or advocacy efforts, foundations can encourage

nonprofits to prioritize trust-building within their working relationships with state and local organizations, ultimately financing a movement that can reliably and sustainably engage community members.

5 Measure success in community-driven ways. Nonprofits depend heavily on foundations to finance projects and advocacy efforts. Therefore, nonprofit staff often see continued funding as the primary marker of success. Failure is the nonrenewal of a grant because a funder's expectations were not met or because the funder shifted their priorities. Instead of success being defined by the funder, nonprofit staff should be encouraged to measure success according to community members' definitions. Defining success for a project or advocacy effort can begin soon after community members have been recruited and onboarded. Once community members understand the general scope of the project or advocacy effort, staff and community members can work together to determine goals, create a shared definition of success, and set metrics for measuring whether the goals have been achieved. Not all successes are quantifiable, so staff may need to get creative with data collection and analysis. For example, one of the primary goals for CDPP was ensuring that the staff's approach to community engagement disrupted power dynamics rooted in systemic injustice. Staff collected data on this goal by asking each member of the Core Collective if they felt power dynamics had been subverted, during one-on-one interviews at the end of the grant period. Another goal was directly developing trust-filled relationships with community members. In addition to participating in data collection and analysis, community members should be offered opportunities to lead in evaluating the project or advocacy effort.

Tip: Treat timelines that aren't tied to external events (e.g., elections) as a loose order of events, not an indicator of success. Projects or advocacy efforts can still be successful even if they are late.

CONCLUSION

Every organization dedicated to advancing economic or racial justice through policymaking must invest time, resources, and labor into strong partnerships with community members. Engaging people who are impacted by a specific issue or policy leads to more effective policy change. But what benefit can national advocacy organizations like CLASP bring into the lives of community members? Can community engagement led by a national nonprofit truly be meaningful? Through CDPP, CLASP staff were able to assess the merit of a national nonprofit practicing direct, place-based community engagement. CLASP staff found that direct connections to national nonprofits can provide community members with professional development opportunities, access to people in positions of systemic power, and resources to sustain their advocacy. With enough preparation and intention, staff leading engagement efforts can create valuable experiences for community members. That value, however, can be stunted by institutional norms within nonprofits and philanthropy. Starting with the recommendations in this report, philanthropy and national nonprofits can begin to normalize meaningful community engagement and, in turn, achieve policy change that is sustainable and just.

