

# Executive Brief

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## Components of Collective Impact in Rural Communities: Strengths and Challenges

The Collective Impact Forum identifies 5 defining components of collective impact initiatives. The content of this brief draws on interviews with 7 rural collective impact organizations. These interviews revealed that rural communities are well-equipped to fulfill certain components of collective impact initiatives while others proved more challenging for rural organizations.

### Collective Impact Strengths

- Starts with a common agenda: Rural communities often share goals centered on economic development and sustaining the community.
- Mutually reinforcing activities: Rural spaces have people fulfilling many different roles, so when they are engaged with collective impact work, they are naturally reinforcing the work in other roles (e.g. school, church, city programs, family events).
- Encourages continuous communications: The tight-knit nature of rural communities is conducive to strong communication. Although rural community members do use online communication and social media, they also have a unique opportunity to share information in person and by word of mouth.

### Collective Impact Challenges

- Establishes shared measurement: Rural communities tend to have limited access to data and may also have fewer available individuals who are trained on analyzing and using data[KYI] . Additionally, because rural communities are small, their sample sizes are small. These small sample sizes are sometimes mistakenly interpreted as an indication the organization is not having a significant impact on the communities they serve.
- Has a strong backbone: Rural communities often have fewer opportunities to secure funding for a backbone organizations because of their small scale. Rural organizations may have unconventional structures for their backbone, but the flexibility can allow the backbone to better meet the needs of the community.

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### What does research show?

- Rural philanthropy must approach the idea of collective impact differently because of the smaller rural scale.
- Collective impact work in rural communities must address social capital and social isolation in addition to place-based opportunity and limited industry access.

### What are trends across organizations?

- Policy changes in rural communities typically occur locally and are harder to capture or record than state-level policies.
- There is consistent consideration of how to expand broadband access across various types of collective impact organizations.

## High-Priority Recommendations to Support Grantees

*These high priority recommendations can increase the effectiveness of grants for all organizations who receive support who receive support from local and/or national philanthropy.*

1. Accessible and Simple Grant Application Process: Rural collective impact organizations are often small and may have limited capacity for grant applications. Funding organizations can support small on-the-ground organizations by making the grant application and funding receipt process more accessible for small applicants. This could include making grant applications shorter, offering timely support to questions via email or phone, or providing a simple deadline appeal process for organizations who cannot make a deadline or missed a deadline by a short amount.
2. Support Locally-Designed Initiatives: Rural communities are vastly different from each other and require unique solutions. Collective impact looks vastly different across rural spaces, and it is crucial that funding is flexible and allows organizations to retain autonomy over how to address the needs of their community.
3. Long-Term Grants: Many organizations are unable to invest in longer-term systems change efforts because short-term funding commitments means they don't know how long their program will continue. Many initiatives take 5-10 years to reach an equilibrium and show impact. The impact of a single 10-year grant will likely be much greater and longer-lasting than multiple short-term grants. It also allows organizations to use their time more effectively. Some organizations, such as Yakima Valley Partners for Education, only have enough funding certainty to put their staff on annual contracts, which means they cannot commit to programming more than 6-8 months in advance.

## Recommendations to Support Select Grantees

*The recommendations below may be useful for some but not all rural collective impact organizations.*

1. Data Support: Data access can be uniquely challenging in rural communities, and that may make reporting to funders more difficult for organizations in rural communities. Funding organizations can offer needed support by providing funds dedicated to data collection and offering training for data analysis. Decisions about data reporting requirements should be made with consideration of the burden of data collection on grantees. It is also important to collect data that is appropriate to the development stage of the initiative. While both funders and grantees hope that initiatives will lead to improvements in outcomes, it may be most beneficial to collect information on program activities and outputs in initial stages of initiatives.
2. Funded Training: Collective impact in rural spaces often requires community members to wear different hats, making it difficult to have expertise in all of the areas in which they are working [JA1]. Interviewees explained that training in technology, data collection, data analysis, or project management systems can be helpful in improving effectiveness of their work. However, some organizations do not have the ability to purchase training sessions or programs [KY2] [SH3] [JA4].
  - a. Training Fellowships: Funders can support capacity-building by offering free training and make the training more accessible by offering stipends to those who complete the training [JA5].
  - b. Travel Stipends: Some organizations, such as Rural Schools Innovation Zone would invite other organizations to visit and see the work they are doing. Providing travel grants or stipends can allow collective impact organizations to learn and grow from each other.

3. Backbone Development: Collective impact organizations in a rural community are often small and may not have a dedicated backbone. Interviewees shared that investing in backbone roles in rural collective impact initiatives would be an effective way to support their work. This support might include developing an entire organization, providing funding for a single individual from one of the network organizations to dedicate their time to backbone work, or providing training to a variety of community members who work for organizations in the collaborative.

### **Funding Gaps and Opportunities to Support Organizations Reflecting Diversity of Rural America**

*The following recommendations are intended to guide funding organizations' decisions to ensure that their rural collective impact portfolio reflects the diversity of rural America.*

1. Support Collective Impact Initiatives in Underrepresented Geographic Regions: Rural collective impact organizations are most common in Appalachia, the West Coast, and the Midwest, with far fewer organizations serving communities in the Northeast, Southwest, Deep South, and Rocky Mountain West. Supporting existing organizations or seeding the development of organizations in underrepresented geographic regions can ensure that resources and benefits are distributed more equitably nationwide. Investments in some regions, like the Deep South and Southwest, can lead to greater resources for rural Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities.
2. Support Organizations Led by Leaders of Color: Several organizations identified the importance of having Leaders of Color to lead effectively in rural communities of color. Unfortunately, information about the racial identity of leaders of rural collective impact initiatives was limited. Funders can promote leadership diversity by collecting information about the racial identity of rural collective impact organization leaders and prioritizing funding organizations led by diverse leaders.