



# Community Foundations: Drivers of Inclusive and Meaningful Local Change

Executive Summary

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In Summer 2020, The Funders Network (TFN) engaged Estolano Advisors to examine and surface key outcomes and lessons learned from TFN's three community foundation partnership programs: (1) The Community Foundation Water Initiative; (2) Partners for Places; and (3) Philanthropic Preparedness, Resiliency and Emergency Partnership (PPREP).

From the research, which included interviews with and a survey of participating community foundations and their local partners, program investors, and TFN staff, two key takeaways emerged. First, community foundations are crucial partners in creating meaningful and sustainable change in local communities. Second, community foundation partnership models employed for the Community Foundation Water Initiative, Partners for Places, and PPREP programs have proven to be successful and powerful frameworks for regional and national foundations to engage place-based foundations in building community power and advancing inclusive community change. Building on research findings this report presents:

1. How participation in TFN's community foundation partnership programs has supported the work and role of community foundations in their local communities;
2. TFN's role in supporting community foundations in building relationships with other place-based foundations, national funders, public agencies, nonprofits, and community coalitions;
3. Benefits of community foundation partnership models towards creating sustainable and equitable communities; and
4. Opportunities for national and regional funders to leverage the power of community foundations as conduits for meaningful local investments.

## Overview: TFN's Three Community Foundation Partnership Programs

TFN's three partnership programs each model a different approach to fostering cross-sector collaboration and achieving equitable outcomes. The Community Foundation Water Initiative and PPREP are cohort programs that provide participating community foundations with technical assistance, skill building, and grant funding to develop their expertise and

capacity in the areas of water and disaster preparedness. Partners for Places, a matching grant program, is structured differently than the Community Foundation Water Initiative and PPREP. Although two recent Partners for Places funding rounds have piloted a cohort model, the program is now designed to facilitate partnerships between place-based funders, local governments, and frontline community-led groups to advance equitable sustainability goals. Each of TFN's three partnership programs is supported by one or several investors, which are typically larger foundations working at the national level and/or within a specific topic area.

## Recognizing Community Foundations as Drivers of Inclusive and Meaningful Local Change

TFN's three community foundation partnership programs offer national funders innovative opportunities to make impactful investments that advance a variety of issue areas in diverse local communities across the country. Through the partnership programs, national funders can strategically invest in on-the-ground needs to which community foundations are uniquely attuned. In addition, recognizing the vastness and complexity of issues like climate action and racial justice, it is essential to grow more organizations' capacity and bring them into the work of advancing change. TFN's programs serve as a vehicle through which national and regional funders can work with place-based philanthropy to translate their investments into localized awareness-building and action.

## Advancing Inclusive Change: Partnership Program Successes

Community foundations and their local partners have expressed tremendous gratitude for the benefits and successes they have received and experienced through their participation in each of these three programs, such as:

1. Greater understanding of, comfort with, and organizational capacity to engage in new issues;
2. Peer-to-peer learning and a network of supportive peers;
3. Forging new multi-sector relationships and deepening existing connections; and
4. Elevating community foundations as leaders and partners in advancing community goals.

### **Broadening Subject Matter Expertise.**

Participating community foundation practitioners universally recognized that having the space and resources to dive into a new topic area and build their subject matter expertise enhanced their organization's ability to be more dynamic and effective in their work. In addition, program participants honed their skills in connecting donors to their new areas of work; leveraging relationships with local media; and meaningfully engaging local communities in policy development. TFN's partnership programs have also played a role in expanding participating organizations' knowledge of issues related to race, equity, and inclusion. Participants not already engaged in racial equity work benefited from having both the opportunity to reflect on racial equity within their organization's work and the resources to then act on advancing racial equity through their programs and grantmaking.

### **Growing Community Foundations' Peer Networks.**

In all three programs, participants developed strong relationships with cohort members and now turn to these new networks of community foundation peers for assistance on a variety of topics, including those unrelated to a program's particular focus. The peer learning network that has grown among the participating organizations facilitates collective problem solving and resource sharing that allows local funders to be nimbler and more responsive in meeting local needs. Participating community foundations highlighted their new peer network as a significant value-add.

**Deepening Local Relationships.** Through the three partnership programs, community foundations have successfully established and strengthened relationships with local public agencies, nonprofit organizations, community members, and other place-based funders. With guidance and encouragement from TFN's programs, participating foundations pursued new cross-sector partners who are critical to making meaningful local change in areas like water, sustainability, and disaster preparedness and recovery.

**Building Community Power.** Bringing together their new knowledge, cross-sector partnerships, and grantmaking resources, community foundations across the three partnership programs found themselves advancing community goals in new ways. By expanding their own capacity as change agents, community foundations were growing into new roles as local leaders that built local community

capacity to engage in new advocacy areas, forged innovative partnerships to address unmet needs, identified opportunities to build community power, center racial equity, and more.

## **Behind the Scenes of Program Success**

A critical component to the success of these programs has been TFN's role as program administrators and facilitators. TFN has a long history of supporting community foundations and recognizing them as invaluable partners in creating equitable and sustainable communities. TFN's breadth of connections in the philanthropic field, subject-matter expertise, grant management capabilities, and thoughtful and deliberate approach to directing each partnership program has resulted in enriching and productive experiences for program participants.

## **Next Steps: Building a Model for the Philanthropic Field**

Community foundations are crucial partners in creating meaningful and sustainable change in local communities. The Community Foundation Water Initiative, Partners for Places, and PPREP employ successful and powerful frameworks that enhance community foundation capacity to build community power and advance inclusive local and regional change. These programs offer innovative and adaptable approaches and structures that serve as models for the broader philanthropic field to focus on community foundations as essential partners in the work of creating equitable and sustainable communities. Each of the three programs can be replicated in new ways that enhance the capacity of the philanthropic field to equitably address the many systemic issues of our time, of which climate change, sustainability, and disaster preparedness and recovery are just a few. Expanding the reach of TFN's program models will help to uplift and unlock the full power and potential of community foundations to be vehicles for local progress. In addition, these partnership programs create space for organizations and practitioners to learn and grow their work in critical areas like racial justice and equity.



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Cover image: The City of Atlanta received a grant from Partners for Places, a matching grant program that paired local funders, municipalities and frontline community-led groups, to help create an urban food forest.

Photo credit: City of Atlanta/Aglanda.org

Rear cover image: Miami-Dade County received Partners for Places funding to combat food insecurity in low-income neighborhoods.

Photo credit: Grow Roots Miami



This report was produced by Estolano Advisors for The Funders Network.

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