

## 23 Lessons Learned: A Community Foundation Responds to COVID-19

*After 12 Months of COVID Response, Here's What One Rural Community Foundation has learned:*

### 1. Mobilize and Reorient Quickly with Front Line Staff, and Prepare Them

- If teams are healthy and strong, they are in a better place to respond to the needs of the community.
- As much as half of HAF+WRCF staff reoriented work assignments to support the newest appropriate intervention as we learned more about the COVID virus. Collectively the staff changed its way of doing business so internal workings were set up to support external audiences.
- Leadership and the Board of Directors looked for additional ways to support staff during the extended disaster, which included the need to adapt to working from home for most staff members. Operations and technical staff provided key support, assisting the team with a range of technical and ergonomic needs to ensure working from home was healthy and productive.

### 2. Connect to Most Vulnerable, Be Intentional With Communities of Color and Equity

- Develop active practices that ensure outreach, funding support and empowered voices in communities of color and other clusters of vulnerable people.
- In rural areas, people can be hard to connect to for many reasons: technology access, remoteness and often choice. Many are not part of formal systems. Further, as we have witnessed disaster after disaster, communities of color suffer the most—the region is further evidence of that with Native American and Latinx communities particularly hard hit with a disproportionate number of positive COVID-19 cases. The region lacks ample capacity for people whose first language is other than English. If we care about diversity

and inclusion, something must be done about equal language access at all times, but especially during an unfolding crisis.

- Natural disasters and social unrest can be expected to go hand-in-hand as long as disasters highlight inequity. The social upheaval and violence against BIPOC communities combined with COVID-19 to be co-disasters. Social justice disasters are stressors on the same level as natural disasters but must be addressed differently. In both cases, providing direct aid gave HAF+WRCF the opportunity to think more about structural support in terms of advocacy, policy change and recommendation. The work performed by the Community Response Team and highlighted in this report work played a major part in informing the Foundation's new strategic vision.

### **3. Engage Local, State and Federal Elected Officials**

- Although we have some strong and deep, long-term relationships with congressional representatives, senators and tribal chairs, we need to shift them from interpersonal relationships to systems.
- It's critical that we continue to engage local, regional, state and national partners in developing and funding solutions tailored to this unique, rural region to ensure sustainability of current efforts and those of community partners.
- HAF+WRCF are community foundations that need more diverse relationships across this rural region. There are extensive networks of them like granges, school districts, water boards and commissions that make for a quandary when relationship-building with limited staff capacity.
- Similarly, many local leaders are struggling with implementing all of the ideas and needs, given their limited resources. These struggles present opportunities to build local resources and capacity.

### **4. Maintain and Participate in Networks for Sharing, Exchanging, and Listening**

- Existing systems have played a major role in tapping knowledge, networks and infrastructure and convening them to help with COVID response. This brain trust includes nonprofit networks, leadership alumni, the League of California Community Foundations,

Northern California Grantmakers, Northcoast Grantmaking Partnership and Council of Foundations. Making explicit this knowledge also ensures initial learning is captured, so we can connect dots and leverage funding and policy.

- Mutual Aid organizations were also key partners and were able to respond to the three simultaneous disasters we experienced during the summer of 2020; COVID-19, wildfires, and the social justice crisis. Mutual aid organizations shined in their flexibility and adaptability and investing resources in them resulted in broad support of otherwise hard-to-reach communities.
- Mutual Aid organizations partnering with philanthropy can also close funding gaps where there has been historic underinvestment at the state and federal level.

## **5. Build Capacity for Both Rapid Response and Rapid Learning**

- As HAF+WRCF pivoted to providing rapid response assistance, we found that we needed ways to capture all of the data and insights we were uncovering. But we were faced with limited capacity as an organization not originally designed for crisis response. It was clear that we must build the capacity for both rapid response and rapid learning, in parallel.
- The challenge is that the infrastructure to capture internal learning is not yet set up, taxing HAF+WRCF's ability to provide support and capacity building to communities. We also recognized the value of working with community groups like Promotores de Salud community health workers, Latinx and migrant communities to build out infrastructure to help them share lessons learned and provide input. Additionally, we worked with local Black leadership to build out their networks so their voices are heard before, during and after a crisis.
- As Community Foundations and nonprofits work together to address community needs, structural problems will arise that can't be addressed in the moment. From funding gaps, to leadership capacity issues, these are things that are important to capture and keep in a 'parking lot' where they can be leveraged for future strategic planning. When structural issues and systems failures can be identified and resolved in non-emergency times, there's less need for direct aid when the next disaster strikes.

## 6. Create Emergency Governance and Decision-Making Procedures

- Before another crisis strikes, run different scenarios for emergency decision-making: for example, would an earthquake scenario work with your organization's current governance structure? Would it work if power is out for five consecutive days? Would it work during a major flood that disconnects major transportation and technology systems? Be prepared to move to streamlined administrative processes, administrative controls, and financial payment processes so you can grant emergency dollars even when systems are down.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, HAF+WRCF quickly realized its organizational by-laws and governance structures were unready for a disaster. They were based on in-person meetings, large quorums, structured committee processes, and paper-based documentation. A set of recommendations to the BOD to operate with delegated decision-making to the CEO and the Executive Committee passed quickly, and, going forward, will be automatically enforced anytime there is a federal, state or county declared emergency. This kind of work will pay dividends.

- The Foundation also acknowledges that the emergency governance structure has been in place for over a year, whereas many natural disasters are much shorter in duration. The foundation is looking at ways to build in checkpoints for future disasters to re-evaluate the need to activate emergency governance structures for an extended period of time. However, HAF has been steadfast in remaining in 'emergency mode' until there are clear signs for public health officials that the pandemic is over.

## 7. Seek and Prioritize Unrestricted Funding and Ask Funders and Donors for Flexibility

- Be confident with letting donors and funders know that's what you need. What we've heard from groups within the region is that unrestricted and general operating support is the best way to support grantees. It's consistent with a national trend to give without creating hurdles. Now and in the future, we are working toward meeting the need for unrestricted granting with the highest level of accountability and transparency to donors and funders. These responsibilities remain utmost in the mind as we engage in rapid response grantmaking that necessitates flexibility.
- Get together key staff and board involved with donors, sponsors and funders and ensure

an agreement seeking unrestricted funding for the immediate term (no less than six months in a major emergency).

- If your organization is doing the other items on this list well, you will be positioned to best know and respond to what communities need and be able to act without encumbrances. If operating in an emergency response with a clear compass for ethics and accountability, organizations closest to the front lines will likely make best use of any resources donated.
- Those closest to distribution of local funds require the discretion, flexibility, and speed to do it. That said, fundraisers should be conscious of including stipulations that new funds can be used for disaster response should the need arise.

## **8. Listen to Grantees: They Know What They Need**

- Organizations will quickly adapt and move forward powerful strategies when they need to evolve, particularly in a crisis. Those nonprofits, grassroots organizations and communities on the ground know best what their needs are. They are deeply connected with communities and know how to prioritize; they understand best how to get to people who are the most vulnerable.
- Frontline organizations are the most connected with how to use their resources at any given time, given the scarcity model under which they are used to operating. The trouble is, they will often ask for less than what they need and will accept less than what they asked.
- Rather than dictating to these small groups about what they need, provide them with general operation support to keep the lights on at this time, listen and help them do what they need to do, and simplify the bureaucracy and paperwork. Along these lines, be open to new grantees like grassroots organizations, small organizations, and unexpected partners. Allow them to be flexible and support their emergent leaders.

## 9. Be Vigilant About Reconnecting & Shifting Capacity as Circumstances Evolve

- The COVID-19 pandemic is so unlike anything we have ever seen. It has constantly changed our plans and activities. Initially, we identified groups of vulnerable communities to connect with in the early weeks of the pandemic. Most of the need at the time was focused on serving urgent sustenance and medical needs.
- Our outreach was expansive, and though it stretched our capacity, we hoped the pandemic would come under control. Obviously that was inaccurate, and as time dragged on, our outreach began to surface new and different needs such as homeschooling, rental assistance, and mental health support for isolation.
- Further, organizations that did not need support at day 30 were in financial distress when we called three months later. Many were overly stressed managing current commitments, including our own CRT.
- We recognize this unprecedented and constantly changing situation necessitates working with new and existing partners to continually rediagnose needs and to be vigilant about shifting our capacity. We cannot rely on a false sense of how a “normal” disaster cycle works—one that strikes quickly and ends relatively quickly. We are now faced with multiple health, social and economic disasters, and must be constantly reengaging and reconnecting in an evolving reality.
- The foundation also found it useful to identify those small organizations who could play the biggest role in the disaster response, and considering groups like this as front-line organizations. There might be some surprises. For example, a Hmong cultural organization became an effective ally in sharing critical medical information to this community.
- Regardless of who you partner with and how, be sure to communicate the changes you are facing in light of your disaster response and how that will affect your funding and partnerships.

## **10. Be Brave and Spend**

- Our most vulnerable communities and residents urgently need resources in a crisis. Those who are able to address that need quickly and robustly have a responsibility to respond. Foundations often juggle notions of scarcity versus charity in an unusual balance of their dual duty of long-term endowment security against spending.
- The HAF Board of Directors evaluated these responsibilities carefully, and bravely decided to do our best to meet this extraordinary need. They increased HAF's endowment payout from 4.5% to 5% for the fiscal year, an anticipated additional \$500,000 to our region. They also voted to rapidly deploy up to \$2 million in local loans. They also approved discretionary funds to be redeployed to the response and recovery of our region. As former Board Chair Kathryn Lobato said: "At a time when the normal instinct is to hold tight to one's investment, we felt this move was important to our region and why we're here." This kind of courage has incredible dividends including signaling to our peers and other foundations that we believe in our community's capacity to rebound better and reinvest in the future.

## **11. Rural Organizations Sustained by Event Fundraising, Volunteers and In-Kind Support Must Rethink Sustainability and More Durable Funding**

- The fragility of a system over-reliant upon its volunteers, nonprofits, and artists "donating" time, money, and goods for fundraisers has become abundantly clear during the pandemic. In particular, those organizations providing first-responder services such as volunteer fire departments or those providing safety net services need durable funding and the capacity to focus on their mission, not the next fundraising event.
- Since we don't know the next disaster on our horizon, or how long the duration we need to address this pandemic, it's important to do something now. For some organizations, that may be advocating for renewed public funding, such as with fire departments. For other organizations, that could be taking bold steps to consolidate back-end infrastructure to reduce overhead and to promote collaboration, rather than organizations building-out individual and redundant infrastructure.
- Sharing services will require initial operational funding and facilitating cooperation among organizations that are fiercely independent. But this time is particularly crucial as donors are shifting their focus areas and tightening their resources, and with fewer fundraising

dollars to go around, consolidating human resources, legal support, accounting, and other common back-office services will be vital to sustain the many mission-driven organizations deeply relied on in rural areas.

- Furthermore, federal and state governments have historically avoided partnering with small nonprofit organizations run by volunteers. However, in many cases, these organizations have deeper and more meaningful relationships with their communities than any level of government. These nonprofit networks are complex, and educating state and federal officials can help them see where funding is needed. Community Foundations are uniquely situated to help build a robust relationship among federal and state agencies and the nonprofit organizations partnering with under-tapped communities in rural and remote regions such as ours.

## **12. Safety Nets are More Fragile Than We Thought and “Essential Workers” Don’t Have a Choice**

- There are gaps in almost every system in the region—first responders arriving to scenarios with several different emergencies to triage, police addressing social services, migrant workers’ food or housing, working parents without child care and response, minimum-wage grocery store staff conflict-managing customer hostility—just to name a few.
- These gaps are not new, but this pandemic has made them greater without much capacity to address them effectively and efficiently. We also need to rethink safety-net funding for those who have informal incomes. For example, artists in our region are crucial to both the economy and culture, yet their ability to thrive when there is a crisis is very fragile. There is much to learn from other communities about setting up these kinds of systems before the next disaster strikes.
- This pandemic might allow us to reorganize and consider opportunities to develop policies such as living wages, public benefits and business taxes to support essential nonprofits that provide safety nets during times of crisis or when government funding is at an impasse.



### **13. The “Backbone” is Essential. Guide Cooperation Investments in Coordination**

- We’ve learned that the ability for organizations to share resources, and cooperate on specific projects necessitates that there is a compensated coordinator among them. The ideal coordinator is someone with the ability to administer meetings, problem-solve, organize partners and oversee routine tasks and accountability. This coordinator also researches policy, ensures communication flow and facilitates agreements. This “orchestrator of collaboration” is often overlooked, but the value this individual provides is tremendous.
- If we are to set our sights on a goal that requires public-private-nonprofit cooperation, this coordinator is an essential function we need to develop and collectively support for our mutual good. Community foundations often play a critical role in getting this service off the ground in regions around the country. In our rural region spread so thin and with many actors moving in independent directions, this function will be vital to our future.

### **14. Leverage the Expertise of Funders, Not Just Money**

- Sharing research and expertise amongst peers has been key to making decisions that are quick and well informed. As we learned about the legal structures of direct relief to individuals, or in effective modes to ensure the safety of undocumented peoples, or in what kinds of gaps in funding to expect from federal sources we sought ways to share this information with funders and peer organizations. Networking organizations like the League of California Community Foundations are invaluable partners in information sharing during times of crisis.

### **15. Engage With and Boost Local Media; Share Information and Stories**

- While some civic infrastructure can be strengthened through philanthropy, much of the work of disaster response is up to the behavior of residents and their public officials. To act responsibly, people need accurate, helpful, up-to-date information. This is as true in a pandemic as it is in an election cycle.
- Further, in rural regions, our newspapers and radio stations are lifelines to many and provide essential local context. Social media has transformed many local news

organizations and undermined the integrity of information and in critical moments has promoted disinformation that may harm individuals during disasters. Therefore, continuing to invest in good information systems across all mediums gives the community critical tools to understand, participate and elevate voices toward a common public safety. Our Foundation has developed creative ways to support media outlets facing lost revenues, especially from lost advertising. With the creation of the *Community Voices Coalition*, the Foundation partnered with regional print and radio outlets to promote local journalism and enable them to feature stories of vulnerable people that may not otherwise be covered. Other ideas include helping youth and multilingual opinion pieces or social media stories to support accessibility. And yes: pay for local advertising or fund nonprofit paid ads to sustain crucial revenue sources in the moments they too are essential service providers.

## 16. Rural Leadership is Extraordinary, But Rural Redundancy is Rare

- Rural leadership often asks one person to play several critical roles in a community, no matter what the compensation—if there is any compensation at all. When that rural, multi-talented leader is sick or injured, the system starts to falter and the community falters. When just a few rural leaders are simultaneously unavailable, the system can break entirely, leaving rural communities at risk and the remaining heroic few exhausted and burdened beyond capacity.
- In the months we spent closely interacting with nonprofit organizations throughout our region, we found burnout among leadership staff was a common affliction and leaders who also focused on self-care were better able to work for their communities.
- These vibrant leaders and their communities require planned, targeted support to build out rural leadership before another crisis strikes which will involve minimizing the dependency on the few and increasing the capacity of others.
- In the months and years ahead, we will need to identify and mentor new talent, support training for emerging leaders and younger constituents who can govern and lead boards. We will need to reduce barriers to exclusive systems of power and decision-making, too. Further, for those who are burdened with multiple roles, we need to help them with intentional hand offs. In our tight-knit rural places that may feel personal and create a sense of loss of purpose or control. For our rural regions to thrive in a very different future,

a new form of rural leadership must emerge and we need to facilitate the change with courage and transfer.

- However it was clear the Foundation has a role in bolstering the pipeline of people who lead in these organizations. Networking among nonprofits can help accomplish this, as well as the Foundation providing infrastructure to growing organizations that need help with capacity. While the Foundation can't provide this service to all nonprofits in our 10,000 square mile service region, we did find partnering with specific key agencies was essential to prevent the collapse of support networks in some of our rural communities.

## **17. Take Risks, Accept Mistakes; Learn Quickly and Do It Again**

- When a new challenge presents itself during a pandemic, like a power outage, or like a flood blocking the main road, we must pause and sort out how to deal with it.
- The road you take may be different and unplanned, and there will be new obstacles further down the road. Dead ends will be encountered, and turning back will be difficult and time consuming. But, if an organization's leadership shares a culture of taking risks, trying new approaches, accepting mistakes and learning from failure as a part of its leadership role, then ultimately the organization will get to the best destination.

## **18. Listen. Be empathetic. Be present for People in Crisis**

- People in a crisis often find it difficult to express their needs. Just listening and making sure people know they are understood and heard makes a big difference. It fills a basic need—often we need to listen between the lines to determine need. Listen through the experience to find the need. People in trauma may not be as clear as they might be otherwise.
- Our Foundation funded meals for emergency room workers, hired a facilitator to bring together nonprofit leaders for mutual support, and even supported a meditation coach for our staff, partners and community leaders. Some of the greatest things we have heard over and over from frontline leaders have been: 'Thank you for letting me open up,' 'No one had asked me how I was doing in weeks,' 'I just need to talk, to feel supported,' 'I'm refreshed to go on now.'

- Listening with intent helps make connections among organizations that are discovered through the Community Response Team's outreach work. Also take time to debrief your own internal staff on how outreach work is going, this helps remove silos and promote internal collaboration.

## **19. Support and Build Cultural Infrastructure Before Disaster Strikes**

- When local communities have cultural infrastructure they are able to be stronger and more resilient during a disaster. Communities that have a strong, shared cultural value of caring for one another are infinitely more durable and self-reliant in disaster. Supporting those cultural values between disasters and making space for culturally appropriate responses during disasters is a key to leveraging that durability.
- We found that local Hmong, Lao, Native and Latinx neighbors had systems of community care that were created from distinct cultural values and relationships. Each was strengthened by a unique cultural tradition. Tribal governments were far ahead of all other levels of government on public safety, being among the first to declare a state of emergency, establish rent relief, coordinate food distribution, and more. In another example, a strong community of Laotian dance troupes has been active in our region for many years. That cultural infrastructure and set of relationships was quickly mobilized to establish a food support and distribution system, one that nourished the community with their traditional foods.
- Empowering grassroots leaders through their traditions, cultures and languages is the fastest, safest and healthiest way to support them. Investing in community cultural connections and building trust in non-emergency times realizes multiple dividends during the difficult times.

## **20. Support Civic and Smart Public Policy for the Future**

- Our democratic and civic process has never been easy. But it is our duty to understand and use our voices to promote public policies that are not merely the best for each one of us as individuals, or even the best for us in neighborhoods. Being civic-minded means considering the next few generations and the many disasters they may inherit because we may not have acted, or acted thoughtfully, or acted on behalf of all. There are many ways to participate, all include voting, some include advocacy, others include helping to design

policies and participating in committees.

- Whatever your mode, we must all recognize that disasters are becoming more frequent, deadly and costly. They are impacting jobs and housing security, and they are creating a disproportionate death toll in communities of color and very low-income neighborhoods. Future generations will need to pay financial and human tolls in future disasters. Our rural communities need to come together and sensibly discuss the future they will leave in legacy to the region. Being civic-minded is not partisan, but an evaluation and enactment of thoughtful public policy. Particularly for the most marginalized: those likely to be the highest casualty toll during the next disaster.

## **21. See the connections. Stitch Together the Solutions**

- As a community Foundation supporting many different organizations, we are often at the center of connecting issues and service providers, and it often requires us stepping back from frenetic emergency response to see the larger picture.
- Being able to take a broad perspective is a superpower and we can all wear capes. The role is not just to listen to individual voices, but to hear all of the different voices and try to diagnose the heart of the problem and where best interventions can be made, or where people can be connected to work on common challenges together.
- For example, we found strong relationships between food security, housing vulnerability and substance abuse, and helping to connect those dots to make a couple common interventions at once reduces cost, time and human effort. It also helps minimize the vulnerability of the recipient significantly.

## **22. Rural is Not “Monoculture”**

- There is a common misconception among those who live outside rural areas that there is a sameness to our regions. For example, our region’s service area is the size of the state of Massachusetts but with a population of around 200,000. Furthermore, major infrastructure gaps such as broadband or fiber-optic cable access, mean that children are unable to participate in remote learning, which is a vastly different context than the well-connected rural areas of Massachusetts.

- The San Francisco Bay Area, the urban area closest to our region, possesses abundant clustered resources and skilled capacity from which to draw, and residents of proximate rural areas along interstate freeways can regularly access that capacity and skill in efficient ways. But owing to our remoteness, highway conditions, and economic resources, our region regularly does not have this same access.
- In yet another example, each of our 20 sovereign tribal nations, more than anywhere in California, require distinct legal relationships involving federal treaties that relate to state and local services, as well as relationships with the private sector.
- By taking time to understand the distinct microcultures and economies that define rural areas, state and national partners, philanthropies and institutions can better understand how to be most helpful in supporting our different regions.
- We also observed that our region is engaged in cross cultural communication and intersectionality as a way of bridging our capacity gaps. We can see strong examples of groups like the NAACP, undocumented and the AA&PI communities working side-by-side and the cross pollination of ideas with backgrounds in feminism and racial justice.

### **23. Be Good Neighbors**

- Reach beyond easy. Relationships with the region to the south, Mendocino County, have resulted in their getting significant financial support and building their knowledge of native communities. The relationship east of Trinity has provided support to the Shasta community and its investments. The relationship to the north to Curry County has supported a small, rural, geographically isolated region in Oregon that might not otherwise receive funding and support. We don't believe the territory ends at county lines. The Foundation, and specifically through programs like the Native Cultures Fund and the Equity Alliance, are there to do the hard work of helping people in need and being good neighbors for the duration.