

# Strengthening Action for Justice in Southern Oregon

## Solutions for Philanthropy and Community Collaboration

An unprecedented national political climate has caused significant shifts in the priorities and challenges of community organizations leading social justice work. In addition to the barriers rural advocacy and direct service groups have faced for years now, the added urgency of these past two years calls for renewed collaboration in Southern Oregon.

On July 19, 2018, philanthropic and community-based organizations came together for a dialogue in rural Oregon to take stock of these changes. It provided an opportunity for community groups, including several organizations involved in MRG's Capacity-Building Cohort (a partnership with Meyer Memorial Trust), to voice emerging challenges - in programming, operations, and advocacy; for philanthropy to share what they are learning; and for both groups to identify some concrete ways to move forward. We explored strategies for how to best invest in community capacity, address Southern Oregon's leading issues, and learn about successful initiatives currently underway.

### Organizing & Movement Building Challenges

Through an initial survey and further discussion, participants identified the leading challenge to organizing and movement building work. The most common themes were:

- **Safety:** For both organizers and community members, safety was one of the greatest concerns. For immigrants, refugees, and people of color, not feeling safe in public spaces has increasingly had an overall impact on community members' and organizers' stress levels and overall health.

*"Many groups in rural Oregon doing important work are small and new, started by young people, or people without a ton of experience. They need capacity support including trainings, coaching, and help setting up basic things like finances, management systems, etc."*  
Hannah Sohl, Executive Director,  
Rogue Climate

#### Defining our communities

Participants defined the communities they serve in Southern Oregon as:

- Latinx
- LGBTQ ++
- People of color
- Older/low income
- Low income
- Small businesses
- People with disabilities
- Housing insecure
- Parents
- Rural youth

- **Transportation:** Getting to and from events has put added strain on organizing efforts, requiring additional coordination and limiting community building opportunities.

- **Organizing infrastructure in the region:** Some regions, such as Klamath Falls, have strong community leaders, but no movement building organizations to invest in. Additionally, there are lot of professional development needs for organizers, including trainings, recruitment, financial planning, etc in addition to an overall need for organizers in the region.

- **Geographic challenges:** Rural organizing is resource heavy and time-consuming because these efforts require additional staff time and organizing funds to successfully meet people where they are at.
- **Lack of community space:** There is not enough free or low-cost, physical community and/or collaborative spaces where people can come together, build community, and feel safe.
- **Organizational challenges:** Organizers also voiced the challenges of heavy workloads, the reality of “burnout,” and the stress of organizing in a region where hate group activity is on the rise. Additionally, many of the organizations in the room were not able to offer healthcare to their staff. In addition to general funding challenges, these factors limit organizations’ ability to improve organizational and staff health.

How do we define organizing?

Organizing is work that enables individuals and communities to harness their existing resources into the power they need to change political, social, and economic structures that uphold systems of oppression and divide us. Organizing activities include a combination of leadership development, base building, and collective action and are often characterized as grassroots mobilization.

**Challenges in Funding**

Philanthropic groups voiced challenges with old funding models that limit flexibility in spending and over-complicate grant processes, creating additional barriers to small community-based organizations. Additionally,

*"I've been doing this work since I was 15 and I've never been more concerned. White nationalist militias openly host their meetings at the public library and will stalk our organizers at events, taking photos of us and writing down our license plates. It is incredibly stressful that they feel empowered to do these things."*

*Evan Gaudry, Lotus Rising Project*

rural arms of

statewide philanthropic organizations reflected on how Portland-centric thinking causes rural challenges to be overlooked. This was particularly true for groups where large donor bases were located in Portland.

**What makes Southern Oregon Unique?**

Southern Oregon has seen a rise in hate groups, including white nationalist-identified groups, spurring a heightened urgency for action. Despite the limited resources available, this has inspired some innovative, cross-organizational support. Groups have made an intentional

effort to share resources and tightly coordinate communications for rapid mobilization. Ongoing collaborations have helped groups develop a strong and shared commitment to community organizing and movement building. This has, in turn, helped groups to better understand the interconnectedness of their work and the importance of supporting each other.

*"Community organizations should be given more of an opportunity to decide what works best in their areas. With support we can accomplish our goals that we set out to advance equity and justice in our region."*

*Virginia Camberos, Director of Unite Oregon's Rogue Valley Chapter*

# Solutions

There was clear alignment and agreement in the group on a few key solutions. They provide suggested parameters for how funding can be invested differently. The group was asked to identify which ideas had the most support. These recommendations are listed below.

## **1. INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A NEXT GENERATION OF ORGANIZERS**

Building a co-op under a shared services model could meet a few of the challenges raised earlier. Here, groups could have access to insurance, healthcare, and other needs that organizations currently do not have the capacity to provide individually.

## **2. A STRONGER SAFETY NETWORK**

A coordinated investment in de-escalation and safety trainings would benefit all organizations at the table. Having the resources to also bring in American Civil Liberties Union staff to serve as observers and assist in Know your Rights trainings related to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Additional resources are needed for both digital, physical security. This includes improved resources, such as walkie-talkies, to communicate during threatening situations.

## **3. COMMUNITY BUILDING SPACE TO SUPPORT SHARED RESOURCES**

Groups need a physical space to convene, share resources, including a sound system for rallies and events, and strengthen their working partnerships. A community building would also provide the opportunity to offer community members an additional, safer space to convene.

## **4. ORGANIZER TRAININGS**

Organizers require resources that are specifically aimed at developing trainings. While many of the individual organizations have begun to develop these out of necessity, it has often been for little or no money. Currently, there needs to be a focused investment in: Digital Security, basic organizational development, issue-based trainings, policy development, Know Your Rights trainings, and Leadership development and Volunteer engagement.

## **5. A RURAL ORGANIZING ADVISORY GROUP**

Creating a table for funders and social justice organizing groups to come together more frequently will help advance a lot of the solutions presented here. It also provides a space to build Southern Oregon's capacity independent of larger urban areas. Finally, it could also be a space to invest in communications and visibility of issues unique to Southern Oregon.

## **7. FUNDING COLLABORATIVE**

Finally, participants also explored the possibility of a funders' collaborative: A group of philanthropic organizations focused on identifying shared values and collaborative solutions

with a commitment to coordinating approaches and complementary strategies in southern Oregon.

## Next Steps

As the political climate threatens to further divide communities, we have an opportunity to build upon the innovation and resiliency of community-based organizations in Southern Oregon. In addition to clarity about the challenges, this recent convening demonstrated that there is also consensus on the solutions needed to push Southern Oregon into an independent and stronger region.

MRG invites groups to a next conversation, which is tentatively scheduled for early 2019. Please contact: [katielsawicki@gmail.com](mailto:katielsawicki@gmail.com) if you would like to be added to the mailing list regarding Strengthening Action for Justice philanthropy-community dialogues.

Many thanks to participating organizations:

- Indivisible
- Racial Equity Coalition
- Rogue Climate
- The Collins Foundation
- The Oregon Community Foundation
- Unite Oregon-Rogue Valley
- Community Alliance of Tenants
- MRG Foundation
- Social Justice Fund
- Rogue Action Center
- Lotus Rising Project
- Josephine County Democrats LGBT Caucus
- AARP Southern Oregon Chapter

