Rural Action Networking Statewide Rural Forum Summary
September 30, 2020

Community Resource Center convened an online forum between nonprofits, funders, and government agencies to discuss the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the intersections with top issues affecting rural communities. The topics framing the event were informed by dozens of virtual convenings and conversations held with rural partners since March 2020.

Breakout rooms were utilized to address concerns and challenges, generate solutions for their communities, and build relationships across the state. We had participation from 82 individuals from 35 different counties in the session, representing over half of the state.

We asked participants a series of questions in breakout rooms, as facilitators took notes. The topics and primary questions that were discussed included:
- Economic/Community Development – How do we lead our communities in a sustainable and transformational economic recovery that works for everyone?
- Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion – How do we define and own our sector's role in moving our communities towards justice and equity?
- Nonprofit Collaboration – How do we retain and build on the collaborations built during the pandemic to include the sharing of ideas, space, staff and other resources?
- Public/Private partnerships – How do we evolve our relationships with local businesses and government to reflect the interdependence of our sectors for the well-being of our communities?
- Technology & Access – How do we reimagine what access means for our communities accessing health care, education, and employment in the remote world?

Below, we have provided summaries of the discussion notes that were taken during the event. In addition, each section has a list of resources to help support individuals and organizations seeking to take next steps on these topics.

Economic/Community Development
How do we lead our communities in a sustainable and transformational economic recovery that works for everyone?

Barriers
- For communities addressing economic recovery, it can be unclear where to begin. Planning and preparing organizations and a community for recovery when the

biggest crisis of the moment is unknown and there are so many concerns, making the decision of how to prioritize funding and programming a challenge.

- Rural communities are preparing for the impact of the pandemic and an economic crisis to last longer than in urban areas, with a slower economic recovery.
  - There are concerns about this perpetuating existing inequalities and rural nonprofits feeling several steps behind their urban peers, including having the necessary relationships and knowledge to access available funding resources. This is particularly a concern with the larger sources of state and federal funding available such as accessing USDA Rural Development and regions specific opportunities.
- Rural organizations reported feeling the need to begin to again shift their attention to prepare for the possibility of another crisis.
- Civic engagement is challenging at this time, with rural communities seeing the impacts of the polarized political climate amplified in small town environments.

Opportunities

- Providing a community or region with metrics for determining what the most pressing challenges are for the area, will help nonprofits prioritize allocating resources, shifting programs, and building collaborations.
- In order to most effectively support nonprofits in economic and community development additional philanthropic support is necessary. Rural nonprofits would benefit from receiving money more efficiently; with increased flexibility in spending, and in multi-year general operating support. Streamlining the processes for applications and reporting and increasing funding options for nonprofit collaborations would also be beneficial to economic/community development.
- There is a need for increased federal funding as well as understanding and accessing the funding that is currently available. Rural communities expressed feeling a lack of support for weathering this crisis.
- Economic development cannot happen without support from funders and the community. It is important to recognize all the stakeholders in rebuilding including arts organizations, childcare and childcare educators, housing, agriculture and the role of shifting from energy based economies.
- Findings ways for nonprofits to partner together, and leverage each others' networks for increased community knowledge of their work. Finding ways to have strong marketing outcomes at a lower cost.

Action Items

- Nonprofit leaders should connect with leaders in the local business community to build relationships and discuss the symbiotic impact of our work. There are opportunities to have nonprofits seen for the leaders in social entrepreneurship that they are, and create a community that values both sectors as economic drivers.

- Partner with arts organizations in your communities, and leverage the many ways that these organizations serve as economic drivers. Colorado Creative Industries' Space to Create initiative has transformed many rural downtowns. Art can be utilized to address equity issues in communities through murals and public art. Many resources exist to support arts advocacy in your community.
- Rural community leaders should work to identify available funding for conducting community needs assessments to create community development/resilience plans that will help guide our work and prioritize projects. Working to take an asset based community development approach in this work.
- To help nonprofits identify funding they are eligible for in a shifting philanthropic landscape, compile funding opportunities by region, and type (C3, C6, etc.).

Resources
- Colorado Grants Guide
  - The Colorado Grants Guide® is Colorado's leading online tool for grant funding research. This comprehensive resource guide contains over 650+ profiles of local foundations and trusts, corporations, national funders, and government agencies that support Colorado nonprofit organizations.
  - The searchable database allows grantseekers to research funders and provides critical information like giving interests, application criteria, guidelines, deadlines, and past grantee information.
  - The Colorado Grants Guide® has timely information on emergency and recovery grant funding. This grant funding tool will help you save time and find funding to support your critical work.
- El Pomar Statewide Funding Impact
  - Grantseekers can use the Statewide Funding Impact Map to discover the number and dollar amount of grants awarded by region, by county, or by foundation. This project allows you to explore funding patterns in your region. Grantmakers can research giving levels and trends across the state.
- Free Resiliency Workshop
  - Disasters - natural, manmade, industrial, or infectious - don't happen on your timeline, or respect your strategic plans. When you're reeling from a disaster and another one hits, your community can be thrown.
  - The International Economic Development Council will host a workshop focused on addressing "layered" disasters. Register for this free workshop today. Friday, October, 16, 2020 |11:00 AM - 1:00 PM MST | Register Here
- USDA Rural Development Programs
  - Committed to helping improve the economy and quality of life in rural America.
    - Offers loans, grants and loan guarantees to help create jobs and support economic development and essential services such as

housing; health care; first responder services and equipment; and water, electric and communications infrastructure.
- ■ Provides technical assistance to help communities undertake community empowerment programs.
- ■ Helps rural residents buy or rent safe, affordable housing and make health and safety repairs to their homes.
- Creative Industries Impact / Advocacy Resources for Arts & Culture Organizations
  - Data, reports, and additional resources to empower creative industries as an economic recovery asset.
- Three Simple Ways to Advocate for the Arts Report
  - National Assembly of State Arts Agencies' guide to practical ways to advocate for the arts in your community.
- Northwest RPD Regional Leadership Committee High Impact Communications Training | Thursday, October 15, 2020 | 1:00 - 3:00PM MST | Free | Register Here
  - Free training for rural nonprofits with ideas on how to increase community knowledge of your work through marketing without the high cost, including how to partner with others to get common results.

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

How do we define and own our sector's role in moving our communities towards justice and equity?

Barriers
- Foundations have different responsibilities and every foundation is different. There is not as much oversight or accountability for grantmakers as there are for grantseekers. As such, there must be a focus on what accountability would look like for grantmakers with justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).
- Foundations can start by looking at who they have funded historically, what they have funded, and the makeup of their board and staff. The people that are most affected by the solutions and decisions of philanthropy should inform efforts. Grant applications themselves need to be more user friendly and accessible to diverse groups.
- Need improvements on centering community voice in our work. This can be furthered by engaging diverse communities in dialogue and affirming a commitment to representation, such as ensuring that staff and board are representative of the community that is served. When bringing the community into decision making, we must also be aware of our power dynamics, and make space for intentional listening.
- Difficulty in determining what it looks like when justice and equity are centered.
  - How can you measure your process, and track your accountability?

- - Are we asking the right questions?
  - Are we truly supporting the communities we intend to serve?

Opportunities
- In working together, the nonprofit sector's role is to connect communities to each other and to resources and initiatives.
- There is enormous power in arts and culture organizations to be a connective glue and address JEDI issues. It is imperative to broaden the lens in which arts and culture is viewed, and think about how we can support arts and culture within our work.
- Ways to make applications more equitable include using an online format to expand access, having fewer restraints, and creating a tiered system to increase opportunities for smaller organizations to get funding. Organizations providing services to underserved populations can be prioritized.
  - What does JEDI look like for rural communities in regard to grant funding and applications?
- Organizations can be more mindful in the way they present resources, ensuring that they are relevant and that the language is inclusive.

Action Items
- Share resources and practices that are working.
- Convene a task force with state leaders, constituents, and service recipients to define state standards.
- Define as a state, what our expectations are in terms of values and commitment to JEDI work, and how we can contribute to state-wide equity work.
  - Define a common language and understanding for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
  - Develop a common evaluation tool for organizations to measure their diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
- Center the community voice in all decision making.
- When seeking community voice, go to the places where people are comfortable instead of asking people to come to you.
- Identify community champions in communities that are often marginalized.
- Start and support youth grantmaking efforts (YouthRoots is a great working model).
- "Turn up the heat" and push back on nonprofits that lack diversity in their Board of Directors and leadership.
- Increase transparency on board and staff demographics, organizations funded that are led by people of color, etc.
  - Lead conversations on alignment and parity.
- Use an equity lens to take a deeper look at grant eligibility requirements and applications processes.
- Be bold in grantmaking and repurpose funds for out-of-the-box, innovative projects.

- Invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion support and training from People of Color led organizations or firms.

Resources

- [Colorado Statewide Youth Development Plan (SYDP) Dashboards](#)
  - Understanding and implementing approaches that address the overlapping root causes of violence (risk factors) and promote factors that increase resilience (protective factors) can help all of us more effectively and efficiently use limited resources. The SYDP dashboards aim to help us collectively design solutions that are more effective for our communities.
- [Equity in the Center, Awake to Woke to Work](#)
  - Ground yourself in the process of building a Race Equity Culture. Explore the levers that drive change and the stages that mark transformation using the Race Equity Cycle. In collaboration with over 120 experts in the fields of DEI and race equity, we provide insights, tactics, and best practices to shift organizational culture and operationalize equity.
  - From discussion - a good instrument for nonprofits to assess where they are with regard to diversity, equity, an inclusion in senior leadership, managers, boards, community, learning environment, data, and organizational culture.
- [Emergent Fund](#)
  - Contact - info@emergentfund.net
  - The Emergent Fund was established immediately after the 2016 election to help move quick resources with no strings attached to communities that were and continue to be under attack by federal policies and priorities – immigrants, women, Muslim and Arab-American communities, Black people, Indigenous communities, LGBTQ communities, and all people of color. These communities need increased capacity so that they can respond, act nimbly, and develop new strategies in this new period. The Fund focuses on grassroots organizing and power building in communities of color who are facing injustice based on racial, ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination. We provide resources to defend against the ongoing crisis, and to develop innovative strategies to transform our country.
- [YouthRoots](#)
  - Unleashing the power of youth to change the world. YouthRoots believes it's up to today's teens to solve tomorrow's problems. We catalyze this natural energy and passion of youth by providing a holistic leadership curriculum that uses the philanthropic process to teach youth how to communicate, make decisions, foster their passions, and align their strengths. We develop thriving young adults and authentic leaders.

Nonprofit Collaboration

How do we retain and build on the collaborations built during the pandemic to include the sharing of ideas, space, staff and other resources?

Barriers
- There is a fear of becoming irrelevant after having conversations around nonprofit collaboration. Sometimes, this stems from the idea that nonprofit collaboration may lead to merging, and merging means the loss of an organizational identity.
- An individual's passion can be a barrier to doing things differently, as they may believe their nonprofit's working model is best practice and be less flexible to change.
- There are many nonprofits in the community that are working in silos, i.e. there is not a robust understanding of what is already happening in the community, and overlaps in resources or services create redundancy. However, it is important to note that some redundancy is important to create a strong network of resources and support services.
- Collaboration requires capacity, and many nonprofits are already so busy. Multiple partners can be intimidating and require hard, tedious work. Historically, community foundations have convened collaborative opportunities, but now, they do not necessarily have the capacity to do so.
- Nonprofit leaders can be reluctant to collaborate because they feel they have tried it before and it hasn't worked.
    - When should collaborations turn into merging? Generally, this occurs when there is significant overlap that should become one organization. There is often resistance to the merger from a place of fear, pride, and ego - how do we make it okay for nonprofits to merge instead of starting a new nonprofit?
- Nonprofits are made to compete for limited grant resources, this scarcity mentality has pitted organization against organization, creating barriers to collaboration.
- Lack of knowledge of who to reach out to, to even begin conversations towards partnerships. Needing to do a better job at getting the word out about programs - especially nonprofits based in metro areas, but also serving rural areas.
- Unintentionally maintaining positions of power and privilege.
    - Older, more established organizations should use their power to support emerging nonprofits (resources, funding, network, etc.).

Opportunities
- Working collaboratively to secure funding. For this to be successful, it is important that organizations understand the benefits for working as a partnership and that it is not a competition. This includes, a marriage of resources, sharing admin costs, staff, vans, etc.

- Supporting new innovative approaches and challenging ourselves to think differently.
- Hearing positive stories about merging to encourage other nonprofits to merge instead of doing the same work.
- Although there is power in collaboration and being mindful about where your power is, it is important to ensure that the power dynamic is true and fair.

Resources
- [Mergers, Collaborations, and Strategic Alliances](#) | National Council of Nonprofits
- [Nonprofit Mergers that Work](#) | Stanford Social Innovation Review
- [5 Tips for Nonprofit Collaborations](#) | National Council of Nonprofits

Action Items
- Telling the stories of successful collaborations and merging of nonprofits.
- Sharing of resources (costs/staff); sharing of overhead and space.
- Changing funding strategies to put trust in the community on how to spend their dollars, creates an environment more conducive to nonprofit collaboration.
- Funding capacity building - the necessary work needed to convene partners, build collaborations, and improve collective outcomes. Identify who can be conveners in our communities, and make the time for everyone to collaborate.
- Being aware of power dynamics in nonprofit collaborations - especially those in the collaboration that have more "power."
- Being more proactive about convening like minded organizations.

Public/Private Partnerships

How do we evolve our relationships with local businesses and government to reflect the interdependence of our sectors for the well-being of our communities?

Barriers
- The new conditions posed by COVID-19, including the inability to meet face to face, and people moving into/outside of rural areas, has created challenges for nonprofits building partnerships with the public sector.
- A combination of the loss of board members and counties not thinking they need help have made it harder to develop relationships with funders and not knowing where to access funds.
- New nonprofits and older nonprofits have different needs when developing public/private partnerships. While all nonprofits want to ensure that the time being put into developing relationships is worth it, more developed nonprofits with strong government and business sector relationships might be overlooked and seen as already well established, so they don't need support. Whereas newer nonprofits might have a harder time figuring out how to access partnerships.

- State of politics; the country and our communities are currently in a particularly polarizing environment, this tension and the politicization of community issues that used to be non-partisan has posed a barrier to public/private partnerships.

Opportunities
- As nonprofits build relationships with funders, some opportunities to enhance the partnerships include:
  - Understanding that $500 isn't going to have massive impact for many.
  - Allowing organizations to spend funds (especially small) as best they see fit.
  - Having funders be more engaged in nonprofit events and meetings.
  - For nonprofits to be more creative with funding that is available, including COVID-19 funding.
- An opportunity for improved partnerships between public and private institutions is focusing on collaboration amongst nonprofits and focusing on how to work together to build partnership and apply for funding.
- Find ways as we emerge from the pandemic to continue to utilize and improve upon the innovative solutions that have been generated during the immediate response.
- Having funders or statewide capacity building organizations highlight nonprofits that are overwhelmed serving their communities for what they are doing and how they are making an impact, and what would happen if these organizations were not doing the work.

Resources
- [A Framework for Learning about Cross-Sector Collaboration](#) | Independent Sector
- [The Intersector Toolkit: Tools for Cross-Sector Collaboration](#) | The Intersector Project
  - A flexible handbook that guides practitioners' thinking on when and how to implement a specific tool, regardless of the practitioners' sector affiliations.
- [Model Partnerships for Impact Synopsis](#) | Independent Sector
  - Report seeking to add to the depth of knowledge needed to move grantee/funder power dynamics in a more productive direction.

Technology & Access

How do we reimagine what access means for our communities accessing health care, education, and employment in a remote world?

Barriers
- Technology access is paramount to accessing resources, and central to issues of equity. For example, nonprofits serving seniors highlighted that a lack of technology literacy compounds the effects of social isolation on the mental health of seniors.
- Lack of clear solutions for remote technology support, such as guides to walk individuals through tools like Zoom.
- Difficulty providing remote services in rural communities.

- Difficulty adapting remote services to meet the needs of those who are vision or hearing impaired.

Opportunities
- Innovations focused on adapting services or creating new partnerships to meet people where they are at remotely, and connect them with the resources they need.
- For those that are vision-impaired, Amazon Echo Dots have been used to help navigate tasks and nurture interaction. These devices are voice controlled and can also be connected to landlines for ease of use.
- Within the health care sector, there are tools for telemedicine that could be adapted (remote accessed and pre-programmed) to be navigable for folks without technology literacy.

Action Items
- Ideate on ways to provide technology client-centered support to diverse individuals who may be isolated as a result of the pandemic.
- Adapt remote-in programs that allow remote control of computers to assist individuals in accessing technology resources.
- Conduct focus groups with tech savvy individuals to find new ways for virtual engagement (i.e. taking museum tours through the Google Arts & Culture App).
- Identify individuals who could benefit from products, such as an Echo Dot or tablet, that can assist them with accessing technology and virtual resources.
- Identify the technology needs of individuals, and ways we can reach those in need.
- Identify partnerships with organizations, such as those in art and culture, to provide opportunities for virtual engagement and interaction (podcasts, performances, etc.).

Resources
- Senior Planet - Have a Tech Question? Give Us a Call!
    - Contact: Membership@SeniorPlanet.org
    - Local Tech Help Hotline (Colorado): 303-218-7320
- PCs for People - Technology for Individuals and Nonprofits
    - Contact: denver@pcsforpeople.org
    - Through electronic reuse PCs for People provides the opportunity for all low-income individuals and nonprofits to benefit from the life changing impact of computers and mobile internet.
- Tech Soup
    - TechSoup offers a range of services to help your nonprofit better implement and manage your technology. From emergency tech support to strategic planning to fully managed IT services, our offerings are designed to meet the needs of all types of organizations.