The Colorado Health Foundation™

The Space Between: How Colorado's Advocacy Ecosystems Work and How They Can Thrive

Why power building matters to The Colorado Health Foundation

The health and well-being of Coloradans and our communities is directly tied to the laws and rules that govern us. Public policies, passed at the federal, state, and local level affect the ability for people to do anything from see a doctor when they're sick to find an affordable place to live and raise a family.

For most of our country and state's history, those public policies have not reflected the priorities of Coloradans of color, rural Coloradans, and people who earn low incomes. That is changing, though, thanks in no small part to community members organizing their power to influence who our elected leaders are, and what policy priorities they support. The Foundation believes communities, not wealthy and powerful interests, should set the policy agenda, and we invest heavily in groups who build and wield power for health equity and racial justice.

Power building in Colorado doesn't exist in a vacuum—it requires organizations to develop aligned strategies, share resources and information, and collectively influence and hold decisionmakers accountable (e.g. lawmakers and their staff, state agencies, and even voters when it comes to ballot measures). That shared space, and the way organizations interact within that space, is beginning to be seen by funders not as a static grouping, but as a living ecosystem, dependent

upon multiple factors to ensure it continues to grow.

To better support these organizations and their work for a more equitable and just Colorado, the Foundation is working with researchers Katie Fox and Phoebe Bui to study some of these ecosystems and speak directly with the community members who are working tirelessly to advance health equity.

In undertaking this work, we started from the ground up. Fox and Bui interviewed and surveyed dozens of community organizers, other advocacy organization staff, and Foundation staff to learn about how Colorado's advocacy ecosystems function, what makes them successful, and what they need to thrive.

The Connective Tissue of Colorado's Advocacy Ecosystem

Out of the many advocacy ecosystems in Colorado, Fox and Bui's report, "Power in Between: A Connective Tissue Framework for Stronger Advocacy Ecosystems in Colorado," focuses on the ecosystems for Denver tenants' rights advocacy, LGBTQ+ youth, and immigration advocates on the Western Slope.

The research found the existing framework for analyzing advocacy ecosystems—centered around each group and their needs—was missing an important understanding. While previous studies of ecosystems focused on the organizations themselves and the people who make up those organizations, this one looked at what exists between them. Fox and Bui call this connective tissue, and broke it into five areas:

- Community leadership and accountability
- Resources
- Relationships
- Structures

- Strategy

While all of these are necessary to accomplish the systemic change communities are asking for, the first two stood out in the report. Relationships, structures, and strategy are also important, but when community leadership and accountability is strong and resources are abundant and equitably distributed, they positively shape the strength and quality of the other areas. Conversely, when leadership and accountability are underdeveloped and resources are scarce or inequitably distributed, relationships, structures, and strategy can suffer.

When Community Speaks, We Listen

The leaders doing the work on the ground, especially those working for grassroots organizing and base-building groups, were essential to this report. Without their contributions, we would not have been able to get such a clear picture of the state of these advocacy ecosystems.

In addition to conducting surveys with larger groups, the researchers did a deep dive with a smaller group of individuals from each advocacy ecosystem. For three two-hour sessions, participants explored the unique conditions and needs of each ecosystem, including the Foundation's role.

In keeping with the Foundation's values of equity, participants were compensated for their participation. We are grateful to everyone in the community who shared their wisdom and insights with us.

Important Takeaways for Funders

The report carries several important takeaways that funders, including CHF, should take to heart when considering how to deploy philanthropic dollars in advocacy ecosystems:

- Funders must pay attention to the space between groups and communities. Organizations and individuals do not operate without affecting one another, and funders must be mindful of how they are influencing not just the organizations they fund, but all the connective tissue that binds the organizations in the ecosystem together.
- It’s not just about the money. Funders play a critical role in developing community leadership and building trust between leaders. That trust, and the accountability the community holds and leaders within the ecosystem hold themselves to, is one of the biggest factors in whether an advocacy ecosystem can thrive.
- One-time investments can make a difference in the moment, but they don’t build long-term success. Community members consistently told us that flexible, multi-year general operating support helps stabilize organizations, whereas constantly going from one-time grant to one-time grant makes them feel like they’re fighting for survival.
- Resources also must be equitably distributed. Far too often, the money flows to organizations that are larger, more established, and are far too often not led by (or in some cases even informed by) community. Resources should be distributed to community-led organizations who are most often the groups ensuring relational and structural connective tissue are strong.
- Despite the challenges immigrant, LGBTQ+, and other advocates have been facing in recent years, community members are strong, dedicated, and in most cases doing the work of several people. Gaps in advocacy ecosystems are not due to community—they are structural, systemic failures. Funders who are serious about bringing about systemic change in society writ large must also work to undo systemic inequities within advocacy ecosystems and the larger nonprofit ecosystem.

Looking Ahead to 2027 and Beyond

After the results of the November 2026 election, many of Colorado's advocacy and power building organizations will be dealing with a different landscape, especially at the state and federal level. The people who make up the state's advocacy ecosystems, many of whom have been working tirelessly to protect their own community members, may now have more opportunities to advance the systemic change we are all fighting for.

They cannot, however, do it alone. It is incumbent on funders and practitioners who are supporting community in the movement to do more—not just to support the organizations and communities that are at the heart of transformative change, but to strengthen the connective tissue that ties them all together.

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