POWER IN BETWEEN

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A Connective Tissue Framework for Stronger Advocacy Ecosystems in Colorado

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Ecosystem” is often evoked in progressive philanthropy and advocacy circles, but what does a healthy advocacy ecosystem actually look like?

This report attempts to answer that question, drawing on two years of deep engagement with ecosystem actors across three Colorado health equity advocacy ecosystems: the Denver Tenants ecosystem, the statewide LGBTQ+ Youth ecosystem, and the Western Slope Immigration ecosystem.

The challenges facing communities most impacted by health inequities are systemic and structural. They cannot be addressed by any single organization and require sustained, coordinated, long-term collective action across a diverse range of actors.

When advocacy ecosystems are strong, they bring more voices and leadership into advocacy efforts, adapt when political contexts shift, sustain advocacy over the long term, and build and wield diverse types of power. In Colorado, that kind of ecosystem strength remains largely aspirational. Understanding why and what it would take to change it is what this report explores.

The Connective Tissue Framework

The heart of this study is a framework for understanding what makes advocacy ecosystems strong, effective, and resilient. Most ecosystem analysis focuses on the nodes – the organizations, leaders, and actors who make up an ecosystem. This study redirects attention to what exists *between* actors: the leadership, resources, relationships, structures, and strategy that determine whether a diverse ecosystem can actually work together. We call this connective tissue. **Through this study, we identified five distinct types of connective tissue that strong advocacy ecosystems need.** The first two are foundational – they shape the strength and quality of all other types, and gaps in them ripple across the ecosystem. The last three types are equally necessary but build on that foundation.



01. Community Leadership & Accountability:

The norms, practices, and leadership that ensure ecosystems are driven by and accountable to the communities most impacted by the issues they address. Building it requires sustained investment in developing community leaders and restructuring how power operates – changes that community organizations cannot enforce alone and that require accountability mechanisms and behavior change from funders and policy organizations.



02. Resources:

The funding, staffing, and organizational resources that shape who can participate, who holds power, and whether ecosystems have what they need to act together. Resources for Colorado ecosystems are too often insufficient, directive, and inequitable – funding consistently flows toward larger, more established policy groups while community-led and rural organizations are chronically stretched thin. Colorado ecosystems need increased funding, more equitable resource distribution, and dedicated investment for ecosystem coordination work that currently falls on already-stretched people.



03. Relationships:

The trust, mutual understanding, and shared values that bind actors together and enable them to work through difficulty, disagreement, and uncertainty over the long term. Relationships across Colorado ecosystems are thinner than the work requires, driven primarily by resource scarcity and competitive funding dynamics. Actors need both dedicated spaces to build initial connections and organic opportunities to deepen relationships through shared work. Where harm has occurred, healing and repair are prerequisites.



04. Structures:

The formal systems, spaces, and mechanisms that give ecosystems consistent, reliable pathways for actors to connect, coordinate, and translate relationships into collective action. Every Colorado ecosystem has had coordination structures at some point – the challenge is that they are episodic and crisis-driven, collapsing when funding dries up, or when key individuals move on. What ecosystems need is permanent, resourced coordination infrastructure designed and governed by actors themselves.



05. Strategy:

The shared political and power analysis, priorities, and coordinated action that enable actors to leverage their collective strength toward shared advocacy goals. Strategy is the connective tissue type Colorado ecosystems are furthest from building. In ecosystems that are ready, actors described needing shared political analysis, community-grounded priorities, role clarity, and a coherent public narrative about what the ecosystem is building toward.

Takeaways

Four takeaways stand out as particularly important for practitioners and funders to sit with.

01. What this framework asks us to pay attention to.

Most ecosystem analysis focuses on the nodes – the organizations, leaders, and actors who make up an ecosystem. This study redirects attention to what exists between those actors, with direct implications for how ecosystems are assessed, supported, and built over time.

02. The importance of starting with the right foundation.

Resources and Community Leadership and Accountability are the connective tissue that shape everything else. Investing in Structures and Strategy before that foundation is strong tends to produce Structures that are fragile and Strategy that reflects institutional rather than community priorities.

03. Building connective tissue is an ongoing project.

Ecosystems are constantly evolving, shaped by shifting contexts, leadership transitions, and evolving community needs. The question is not just “have we built connective tissue?” but “are we continuing to tend it?”

04. The opportunities this study identifies cannot be seized by individual organizations alone.

The conditions keeping connective tissue weak are structural and systemic, requiring collective action at the ecosystem level and changed behavior from funders and other actors with structural power to shift those conditions.

INTRODUCTION

“Ecosystem” is a common term used in progressive philanthropy and advocacy circles. Funders talk about taking an ecosystem approach. Advocates describe themselves as ecosystem actors. Coalitions position themselves as ecosystem builders. But beneath the language, harder questions often go unasked:

What does a healthy advocacy ecosystem actually look like? What makes it strong? What does it take to build one?

This report is an attempt to answer those questions, synthesizing two years of deep engagement with ecosystem actors in Colorado who are doing the hard, daily work of advancing health equity for their communities.

For many communities and organizations, these questions are urgent. The challenges facing those most impacted by health inequities – communities of color, immigrant communities, low-income communities, LGBTQ+ communities – are systemic and significant. They cannot be addressed by any single organization and require sustained, coordinated, long-term collective action across a diverse range of actors: organizers, policy advocates, direct service providers, community leaders, funders, and government agencies. And yet, building and sustaining that kind of ecosystem strength is not well understood or resourced.



About the Ecosystem Study

This study was commissioned by the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF), a statewide health funder whose Advocacy priority is grounded in an ecosystem approach – the belief that a strong and equitable ecosystem of advocates is better positioned than any single institution to advance the policy and systems changes that close health equity gaps. CHF commissioned this study, building off a previous study conducted in 2019, to more deeply understand what the Colorado health equity advocacy ecosystem looks like in practice – the composition, dynamics, and conditions that enable or constrain its ability to function. The study was also an opportunity for CHF to interrogate its own assumptions about what ecosystems are, what they need, and what role a funder like CHF plays within them.

Conducted by Katie Fox and Phoebe Bui at Grassroots Solutions over two phases from 2024 to 2026, the study engaged actors across three Colorado health equity advocacy ecosystems through interviews, a survey, and ecosystem insight groups. The three ecosystems engaged were the ecosystem building the power of Denver Tenants, the statewide ecosystem supporting LGBTQ+ youth (especially BIPOC and/or trans youth), and the ecosystem supporting immigrant communities in the Western Slope. These three ecosystems were selected because they represent a range of health equity advocacy ecosystems in Colorado and vary by geography, constituency, and issue focus. Each ecosystem was sufficiently bounded to allow for a meaningful exploration of actors, dynamics, and connective tissue. We share more about our approach and methods for studying these ecosystems in the appendix of this report.

This report summarizes what CHF learned in this study and is organized to be useful to any practitioner or funder trying to understand what strong advocacy ecosystems require and what stands in the way of building them. The report begins with “Defining Advocacy Ecosystems,” which provides conceptual grounding in what advocacy ecosystems are and what they make possible. In the following section, “Connective Tissue in Advocacy Ecosystems: Framework and Types,” we introduce the framework describing the five types of connective tissue that strong ecosystems need. “Opportunities to Build, Strengthen, and Maintain Connective Tissue” applies that framework to the gap, patterns, and needs described by Colorado ecosystem actors. The report closes with a conclusion reflecting on what these findings mean for how ecosystems are supported and sustained.

DEFINING ADVOCACY ECOSYSTEMS

Advocacy ecosystems are the constellation of people, organizations, infrastructure, resources, and relationships that, together, influence, enable, or constrain advocacy efforts over time.

They are the full landscape of actors – community organizers, policy advocates, direct service providers, healthcare professionals, government agencies, funders, and impacted community members – whose work, relationships, and resources collectively shape what advocacy can accomplish in a given place or on a given issue.

When we asked Colorado actors to describe their health equity advocacy ecosystems, no one described a singular statewide ecosystem. Instead, actors named ecosystems defined by geography, community identity, and/or issue focus, such as immigrant communities on the Western Slope, LGBTQ+ youth across Colorado, and residential tenants in Denver. Who the ecosystem serves and the end it seeks to achieve are what give it its identity, its boundaries, and ultimately its purpose.



What do strong ecosystems look like and what do they make possible?

A strong advocacy ecosystem is greater than the sum of its parts. When ecosystems are strong, they can leverage the full diversity of actors, resources, skills, expertise, strategies, and relationships within them. This allows them to bring more voices and leadership into advocacy efforts; adapt and evolve when political contexts shift unpredictably; sustain advocacy over the long term; and build and wield diverse types of power across systems, institutions, and policy processes. No single organization, coalition, or table can do this alone. A strong ecosystem creates the conditions for long-term power building and wielding.

Actors described this potential vividly. One talked about the ecosystem as an engine and another described laser beams converging:

> **"In an engine, there are multiple parts that make an engine run. Similarly, ecosystems need everyone to move forward...all the cogs, all the different gears are gonna move this engine, and we're gonna need each one of them."**



> **"When you join certain lasers in a circle, it'll throw a brighter light where they all connect in the center. We're all shining our own lights towards a particular set of goals that we have, but they all intersect in the middle. And it's this brighter light that affects the public."**



In both images, diversity is the source of ecosystem power. Whether an ecosystem can fully leverage that diversity depends on the amount and nature of connection between the parts of the ecosystem. In Colorado, that kind of ecosystem strength remains largely aspirational. Understanding why and what it would take to build it is what the rest of this report explores.

CONNECTIVE TISSUE IN ADVOCACY ECOSYSTEMS: FRAMEWORK AND TYPES

The diversity that makes advocacy ecosystems powerful – different organizations, communities, strategies and tactics – can also make them fragile. Actors often described their ecosystems as “siloed,” “fragmented,” and “disconnected.” One actor described theirs as a puzzle: “everyone sees a different piece of the puzzle but aren’t seeing the whole.” What determines whether that diversity becomes collective strength or remains fragmented effort is what exists between ecosystem actors: the leadership, resources, relationships, structures, and strategy that shape how, whether, and how well those actors can work together toward shared interests. We call this connective tissue.

In advocacy ecosystems, connective tissue is what supports, binds, and gives structure to diverse actors working together toward shared interests and goals.

Strong and enabling connective tissue allows advocacy ecosystems to leverage their diversity, adapt and sustain in fluid and unpredictable policy environments, and build and wield diverse types and sources of power. This study offers a framework, grounded in what ecosystem actors across Colorado have experienced and aspire to, for understanding what strong and enabling connective tissue looks like in advocacy ecosystems. When describing aspirations for their ecosystems, actors underscored the need for five distinct types of connective tissue:



01. Community leadership and accountability



02. Resources that are abundant and equitably distributed



03. Relationships that are trusting and accountable



04. Structures that are inclusive and consistent



05. Strategy that is shared and community-driven

All five types of connective tissue are necessary, and each has a distinct function and role that no other type can fill. The first two, **Community Leadership and Accountability and Resources, are foundational.** They shape the strength and quality of all other connective tissue, and when they are weak or absent, their effects ripple across the ecosystem. The remaining three – Relationships, Structures, and Strategy – are equally necessary, but whether and to what extent ecosystems urgently need to build or strengthen them depends on the ecosystems' developmental stage, context, and the first two connective tissue types. That said, **all five are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.** Investment in one strengthens the others, and gaps in one can constrain what is possible in the rest.



One important note on how to read this framework: the five connective tissue types are grounded in what actors across three ecosystems in Colorado described wanting, needing, and aspiring to, for their advocacy ecosystems to be strong, effective, and resilient. The five types name what strong and enabling connective tissue requires, and they set the standard against which ecosystems can assess what they have, what is absent, and what they can build and strengthen.

In the case of the three Colorado ecosystems we studied – the Denver Tenants, statewide LGBTQ+ youth, and Western Slope immigration ecosystems – this framework supported us to assess what connective tissue looks like across the ecosystems, including where it is strong, absent, insufficient, or, in some cases, where it exists in a form that is actively harmful to ecosystem goals and collective work.

In this section, we define each of the connective tissue types, describing what each looks like and why it matters to strong, effective, and resilient advocacy ecosystems.



01 Community Leadership and Accountability

Who holds power and sets ecosystem priorities?

The norms, practices, and leadership that ensure ecosystems are driven by and accountable to the communities most impacted by the issues they address — where community needs and priorities shape ecosystem direction, decision-making, and strategy.

Every ecosystem has formal or informal leadership of some kind – people and organizations that set advocacy direction and agendas and shape what the ecosystem collectively pursues. Who holds leadership and power in ecosystems is foundational connective tissue. By making decisions and exerting influence, ecosystem leadership defines collective work and signals what and who is valued and centered in the ecosystems.

Across all three ecosystems, actors emphatically asserted that strong, effective, and resilient ecosystems need Community Leadership and Accountability. To them, this looks like:

Communities – not funders, policy experts, or outside consultants – setting and driving the vision, agenda, and priorities for the ecosystem.

Community leaders and community-led organizations anchoring ecosystems, holding genuine decision-making power, and being sufficiently resourced to do so.

Processes designed around community engagement, with the time and spaciousness that genuine community participation requires.

Shared norms and accountability mechanisms that keep the broader ecosystem oriented toward community priorities even as political contexts and funding environments shift.

When this connective tissue is present, communities most impacted by the issues ecosystems address are not just consulted or represented, but genuinely drive its priorities, decisions, and direction. Community Leadership and Accountability matters because advocacy is, at its core, about changing the conditions that shape people's lives. When the people whose lives are most at stake are not driving the ecosystem, advocacy ecosystems risk pursuing wins that don't actually serve impacted communities, or worse, actively harm them. As one actor put it:

> "If you have the connection without the power held by communities, then the communities are instrumentalized for the people who do ultimately have power."

That said, actors continuously emphasized that Community Leadership and Accountability is not just an ethical imperative but a strategic one. Actors shared numerous stories of how ecosystems that center funder or professional priorities over community priorities lead to advocacy work and goals that are misaligned with community needs and ultimately less useful in improving their lives. Community leadership is critical to producing policy that actually works for the people it is designed to serve.



02 Resources

How do resources shape ecosystem power and participation?

The funding, staffing, and organizational resources that shape who has the capacity to participate in ecosystem work, who holds power, and whether ecosystems have what they need to communicate, coordinate, and act together.

Resources are the material foundation that makes everything else in an ecosystem possible. One of the most important insights from this study is that resources are not simply an input into ecosystems, they are part of the fabric of ecosystems. How resources flow, who receives them, and what conditions they carry influences everything else: who leads, who can show up, what the ecosystem collectively pursues, and whether relationships and structures can be built and sustained. As one actor put it:

> **“[Everything] comes down to decisions about resources.”**

Actors were emphatic that in strong ecosystems, resources are abundant, flexible, and equitably distributed. When Resources connective tissue is strong, organizations – particularly smaller, community-led, and community-rooted ones – have what they need, not just to keep their doors open, but to participate fully in ecosystem coordination, activities, and relationship-building. In this type of resource environment, funding is flexible and multi-year, stabilizing organizations rather than keeping them in perpetual competition for scarce dollars. Resources flow toward organizations with the deepest roots in impacted communities, and dedicated funding exists for the ecosystem coordination work that is essential but rarely resourced.

When resources fall short of that, the consequences ripple across every other type of connective tissue. Scarcity pushes organizations into survival mode, where maintaining their own operations crowds out any bandwidth to invest in relationships, participate in ecosystem coordination, or build community leadership. As one actor put it:

> **"A lot of the tension between ecosystem actors comes from having to fight for the same crumbs year after year, creating a dynamic where actors with the most potential to collaborate and work in solidarity instead become the ecosystem's biggest competitors."**

Inequitable distribution tends to concentrate power in organizations furthest from impacted communities, reinforcing the very dynamics that Community Leadership and Accountability connective tissue is trying to disrupt. And resources that come with conditions that make organizations more accountable to funders than to communities quietly tilt entire ecosystems toward strategies that may not reflect community priorities.





03 Relationships

Do actors know, trust, and feel accountable to one another?

The trust, mutual understanding and respect, and shared values that bind actors together and enable them to work together effectively and over time.

Diversity is critical to ecosystem strength, effectiveness, and resilience, but it also means that ecosystems are made up of actors with different theories of change, organizational priorities, and accountability to different communities and stakeholders. Strong Relationship connective tissue is what allows diverse ecosystem actors to work together effectively and over the long-term.

The relationships that advocacy ecosystems need are what community organizers often call "public relationships."[1] These relationships are grounded in shared interest and shared struggle rather than personal affinity and are strong enough that actors can be honest with each other, hold one another accountable, and show up for one another when things get hard. In strong ecosystems, actors genuinely know and respect each other's organizational realities, constraints, strengths, and the communities they are accountable to. That depth of mutual understanding is what allows ecosystems to take risks together, challenge each other's thinking, navigate conflict without fracturing, and make collective decisions.

1 For more on public relationships, see Christens, B.D. (2010). Public relationship building in grassroots community organizing. Journal of Community Psychology.

As one actor reflected:

> **"Do you actually know and trust that person? Do you understand their capacities, where they're working, what they don't have capacity for? Because I think if we don't know those things about each other, this work isn't actually sustainable."**

Relationships are also what help create ecosystems that feel safe, secure, and even joyful. Advocacy work happens in challenging and often unpredictable environments where the stakes are high, resources are scarce, strategic decisions and actions may need to be made quickly, and wielding collective power is critical but intensive. Burnout, isolation, and overwhelm are common in advocacy and organizing work. Strong Relationships can help actors feel safe and secure – that they can take risks, ask for help, and show up for one another.

The security and moments of joy that relationships foster can help actors sustain their work over time and through difficult or hostile conditions. When the relational foundation is thin, actors retreat to their own organizational priorities rather than holding together around shared interests. A deep relational foundation is part of what allows ecosystems to endure.



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04 Structures

How do actors connect, communicate, and coordinate over time?

The formal systems, spaces, and mechanisms that act as containers for ecosystem actors to connect and coordinate.

Structures give ecosystems consistent, reliable pathways for actors to come together to share information, coordinate efforts, align strategies, and build the relationships that sustain collective work over time. Even when relationships are strong and actors share a commitment to working together, that commitment can remain aspirational without Structures. Strong Structures connective tissue is what allows ecosystems to translate relationships and shared values into concrete coordination and collaboration.

Structures can take a range of forms, including large-scale periodic convenings that bring together the full breadth of ecosystem actors; smaller, more frequent working spaces where subsets of actors can coordinate on specific issues; and geographic structures that allow actors in different regions to communicate and collaborate. It also includes the processes and systems – regular communication channels like group chats and newsletters and databases of ecosystem knowledge – that keep actors informed about each other's work and the broader landscape.

Critically, actors emphasized that Structures must be purposeful, resourced for the long-term, built to withstand turnover, and designed by ecosystem actors themselves, not imposed from outside. Facilitators and conveners need deep understanding of, and ideally lived experience with, the communities and contexts involved.

Without Structures, even the best relational foundations can struggle to turn into consistent coordination and collective action. Collaboration can remain ad hoc, temporary, and dependent on whoever has the bandwidth to drive it. Actors described coordinating bodies that once brought together hundreds of partners dwindling to just a handful when funding dried up or the individuals driving those efforts stepped down or left the field. Well-designed Structures can help ecosystems diffuse relational knowledge and coordination capacity, making them more resilient to the staff turnover that is endemic in advocacy and organizing work. And for ecosystems where relationships are still developing, structures can help build them by creating the repeated, purposeful opportunities for actors to work together and build trust.





05 Strategy

What are actors collectively working toward and how?

The shared political and power analysis, priorities, and collective action that enable ecosystem actors to work toward shared interests.

While the other four connective tissue types are largely about whether an ecosystem can function and work together, Strategy is about what the ecosystem does with that capacity. It is the connective tissue that enables ecosystems to move from coordination to collective power and to leverage their relationships, resources, structures, and community leadership toward shared advocacy priorities. Strong Strategy connective tissue means:

Ecosystem actors have developed, together, a common understanding of what change is needed and how power operates in their context.

Shared advocacy agenda, grounded in community priorities, that clarifies what the ecosystem is working toward and how different actors contribute to that.

Actors have enough clarity about each other's roles and complementary strengths to coordinate tactics rather than duplicate efforts or pull in different directions.

Strategy connective tissue tends to become more urgent as ecosystems mature. For ecosystems still building foundational connective tissue, the work of creating shared strategy may be premature. It is challenging for ecosystems to align around collective priorities if they don't yet have the relational trust to navigate disagreement, or the community leadership and accountability to ensure that strategy is genuinely grounded in community needs. But as that foundational connective tissue strengthens, the absence of shared strategy becomes a constraint. Ecosystems with strong relationships and structures but no collective direction can feel like they are spinning their wheels, unable to convert their collective strength into advocacy power.



OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD, STRENGTHEN, AND MAINTAIN CONNECTIVE TISSUE IN COLORADO ECOSYSTEMS

As we sat with the experiences and stories from the three Colorado advocacy ecosystems, the Connective Tissue framework gave us a way to ask ourselves:

What exists between ecosystem actors in Colorado and is it strong enough to enable ecosystems to self-organize and work together toward shared interests? What are the opportunities to build, strengthen, and maintain connective tissue in Colorado ecosystems?

Across the three ecosystems we studied, actors recognized that they need each other to make lasting change in Colorado communities. They want to work together more than they currently can. What is missing is connective tissue, and in most cases, actors are clear on what connective tissue their ecosystems need.

What makes these needs hard to meet is the structural and systemic conditions that keep connective tissue from being built and maintained: a funding landscape that under-resources the organizations closest to communities, policymaking processes that favor established policy groups, and entrenched norms and habits dictating whose leadership and power is valued and heeded. With that in mind, the following describes where each connective tissue type stands in Colorado ecosystems and what strengthening it would require.



01

Community Leadership and Accountability: Developing leaders and restructuring power

Across all three ecosystems, actors described a version of the same frustration: community leadership exists more in principle than in practice.

Actors named a pattern where communities are engaged for input, brought in to validate decisions, and treated as beneficiaries of ecosystem work rather than drivers of it. The power to set agendas, shape strategy, and direct resources tends to lie with funders, policy organizations, and large institutions rather than with the communities most affected by the issues ecosystems are working to change. As one actor put it:

> **"I can't tell you how many times we have said to policy organizations, please don't run that bill. That actually is super harmful to our [community]...And sure, you'll get a win, and you'll get to check a box and write a great grant report. But that actually isn't good."**

Communities' priorities get translated, diluted, and redirected as they move through policy processes controlled by others.

Actors across the ecosystems emphasized that building genuine Community Leadership and Accountability requires working on two things simultaneously. **The first is developing a deep bench and capacity of community leaders.** Actors described a dearth of community leaders with the capacity, resources, and recognition to hold leadership and power in ecosystems. They emphasized that developing that bench requires sustained, long-term investment, not

a single program or workshop. Actors named a range of leadership development, mentorship, fiscal sponsorship, and organizational infrastructure that reflect the specific needs and context of different communities. As one actor described, stronger community leadership means “a multiplicity of opportunities for [community members] to equip themselves with tools, experience, and education as well as the mental shift to ‘spark that leadership within themselves.’”

The second is disrupting and restructuring how power operates in ecosystems so that community leaders who do exist can lead. Actors were clear that community organizations and leaders cannot enforce this shift themselves. The power to change how power operates does not currently sit with the communities who most need it to change. External incentives, accountability mechanisms, and changed behavior from funders and policy organizations are necessary.

Actors named three types of change that would make a difference:

Internal change within policy and service organizations, moving from community-informed to community-owned models of decision-making. This means policy organizations building the internal capacity, practices, and staff development to follow community leadership.

Independent facilitation and convening – a skilled, neutral entity that can hold the ecosystem accountable to community priorities and resist pressure to compromise on who is calling the shots. Actors in one ecosystem were emphatic that this should not be a single organization given disproportionate power, but something with shared ownership across the ecosystem.

Accountability through funding. This includes funders verifying community accountability claims rather than taking them at face value, seeking recommendations from grassroots organizations before funding policy organizations, and directing resources toward community-led actors.



02

Resources: Abundance, equity, and dedicated ecosystem investment

Ask ecosystem actors what would most change their ability to work together, and the answer comes back quickly: more resources, distributed more fairly.

Across all three ecosystems, many actors are genuinely committed to collaboration but simply cannot afford it. Ecosystem relationship-building, coordination, and strategizing require time, staff, and bandwidth that most organizations (especially smaller, community-led, and rural ones) do not have. One ecosystem used the metaphor of a pool to describe this predicament:

> **"We are all doggy-paddling in the deep end, and we have one or two floaties. If someone is sinking over here, we throw them the floaty...We try to share some resources...We want to meet and work together in sync...but our resources are desperately low...To be able to effectively share resources and unite is very rare."**

The resource problem is compounded by inequity. Funding consistently flows toward larger, more established, and less community-rooted organizations, while the groups with the deepest roots in impacted communities are chronically under-resourced. Because resources shape everything – who can show up, who leads, what gets prioritized, whether relationships and structures can be sustained – inequitable resource distribution ripples through every other connective tissue type.

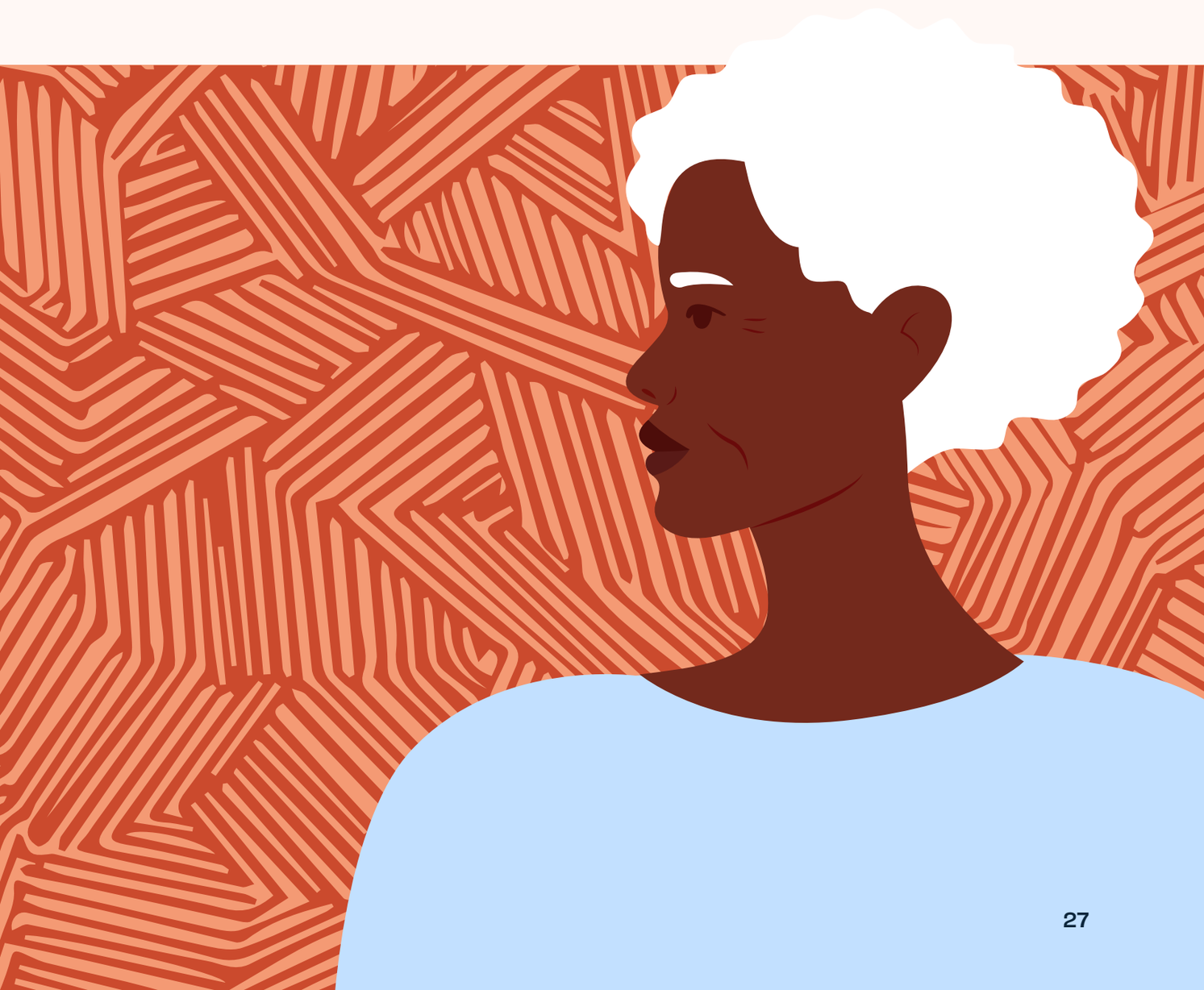
One of the most consistent and concrete findings from this study is about where the burden of connective tissue work falls. The invisible labor of holding ecosystems together lands disproportionately on the organizations and people already stretched thinnest. In the Denver Tenants ecosystem, for example, actors noted that much of this work

falls on women and people of color, without dedicated funding or recognition. Across all three ecosystems, immigrant-led, BIPOC-led, and rural organizations carry responsibility for relationship-building and coordination that gets far beyond what their resources can sustain.

What actors want is not complicated: **flexible, multi-year general operating support that stabilizes organizations and lets them invest in ecosystem work rather than just survival; resources distributed toward community-led organizations; and dedicated funding for the ecosystem coordination work itself.** That last need was named emphatically across all three ecosystems.

> **"So many of us are overextended, working in silos, or reacting to policy threats — there's little time to tend to the relationships that sustain our collective work."**

Until ecosystem building and coordination are well-resourced, ecosystem actors will continue struggling to work together.





03

Relationships: Time, space, and repair

Across all three ecosystems, actors described varying levels of familiarity with each other, but even when relationships do exist, they are often too thin to sustain genuine collaboration when things get hard.

> **"I think those types of deep relationships sometimes are more important than being like, we all got into a room together for a coalition meeting. It's like, do you actually know and trust that person? Do you understand their capacities, where they're working, what they don't have capacity for? Because I think if we don't know those things about each other, this work isn't actually sustainable."**

The primary driver of shallow relationships is resource scarcity. Most ecosystem actors don't have the time and capacity to focus on relationship-building. When organizations are stretched to their operational limits, investing in relationships beyond the immediate work feels impossible. The funding environment compounds this by pitting organizations against each other for the same limited dollars, creating competitive dynamics that make solidarity difficult. High staff turnover adds another layer: when relationships live in individuals rather than organizations, they leave when people do, and ecosystems find themselves starting over relationally again and again.

In at least one ecosystem, the Relationships gap goes beyond shallowness to active harm. Historic conflicts and unresolved tensions between organizations have produced real distrust – including specific instances where the larger, better resourced organizations failed to show up for smaller, community-based ones during moments of targeted attack.

> **"When my organization was getting targeted really bad…instead of having other organizations around the state rally around us, they just ignored us, pretended like we didn't exist."**

Actors described wanting both organic and structured relationship-building. They emphasized that the deepest relationships form through working together – being in the trenches, navigating crises side by side, and showing up for each other over time. That kind of relationship cannot be manufactured through a one-time convening. But actors also named the need for intentional, dedicated spaces and opportunities to make initial connections, build awareness of each other's work and organizational realities, and create the conditions for future collaboration.

As one actor reflected, a convening held by a foundation years earlier stood out not for what was discussed but for the personal connection it sparked. That connection led to working together on panels and shared projects that deepened the relationship over time. The convening created a connection, the work that followed was what built the relationship. Where harm exists, gatherings should include intentional space for healing and repair, facilitated by people with deep knowledge of the communities and context involved.





04

Structures: Permanent, resourced, and actor-led

When actors described what they need to work together more effectively, permanent and resourced coordination structures came up in every ecosystem.

Every ecosystem had coordination structures at some point. The problem is that many structures are episodic or crisis-driven. Coordination happens around specific legislative campaigns or external threats and then recedes when the urgency passes. In two of the three ecosystems, there are few if any regular spaces for actors to come together outside of emergencies. Where coordination structures have existed in the past, they have repeatedly collapsed when the individuals holding them together moved on or when funding dried up. The result is that ecosystems keep rebuilding from scratch rather than deepening and strengthening what they have.

The specific structures ecosystems need vary, depending on their context, geography, and developmental stage. **Actors also named the need for a range of structural types rather than one catch-all space.** But several features were consistent across all three ecosystems:

Structures that are sustained over time, not tied to specific funding cycles.

Dedicated staff and resources for structures so that coordination work doesn't continue to fall on already-stretched individuals.

Geographic reach that doesn’t default to Denver, particularly for ecosystems spanning rural areas where traveling for a convening represents a significant burden.

Designed and governed by ecosystem actors themselves, with facilitators and coordinators who have deep knowledge of and lived experience in the communities involved.

Actors were emphatic on this last point: structures imposed from outside or facilitated by people without that grounding tend to feel extractive and burdensome rather than generative.





05

Strategy: Shared analysis, aligned priorities, and role clarity

Of the five connective tissue types, Strategy is the one Colorado ecosystems are furthest from building.

Across the ecosystems, there is limited shared political analysis, few processes for developing collective advocacy priorities, and little coordination about how different actors' contributions fit together. What passes for shared strategy tends to be reactive. Actors mobilize around specific threats or emergent opportunities, then disperse when the urgency passes. Without shared strategy, connective efforts become tactical rather than strategic – mobilizers turn people out for competing agendas, conveners gather actors without collective purpose, and the ecosystem's collective power is wielded less effectively.

That said, actors are aware of their strategy needs. In two of the three ecosystems, actors are clear that building shared strategy is not yet the most urgent need – first they need to stabilize resources, develop community leadership, and build the relational foundation that makes genuine strategic alignment possible.

They note that it's hard to develop collective priorities if actors don't yet trust each other enough to navigate disagreement, or if the community leaders who should be driving strategy don't yet have the power or resources to do so.

Strategy without that foundation tends to reflect the priorities of whoever holds the most institutional power, which is precisely the dynamic ecosystems want to disrupt. In the third ecosystem, where a stronger relational foundation exists, actors described real readiness and appetite to move toward more proactive, aligned strategy and named its absence as one of the ecosystem's most significant constraints.

Where ecosystems are ready to build Strategy connective tissue, actors described needing four things:

Community-grounded advocacy priorities that clarify what the ecosystem is collectively working toward, rooted in what impacted communities actually need rather than what funders will support or what policy organizations can move.

A collectively developed political and power analysis – a shared understanding of how power operates in their context and who the relevant decision-makers and opponents are.

Clarity about role differentiation – which actors are best positioned to do what, and how different contributions fit together into a coherent collective effort.

A shared narrative about the ecosystem – a coherent, affirmative public story about who the ecosystem is, what it stands for, and what it is building toward – that gives actors a common identity to rally around and communicate outward.



CONCLUSION

Two years of listening to ecosystem actors in Colorado has deepened our understanding of what it takes for advocacy ecosystems to be strong, effective, and resilient. The connective tissue framework at the heart of this report is our attempt to give that understanding a useful shape. Four takeaways stand out as particularly important for practitioners and funders to sit with.

01. This framework asks us to pay attention to what exists between ecosystem actors.

Most ecosystem analyses focus on the nodes - the organizations, leaders, and individuals who make up an ecosystem. This study redirects attention to what exists between those actors: the leadership, resources, relationships, structures, and strategy that determine whether a diverse ecosystem can work together. That shift in focus has direct implications for how ecosystems are assessed, supported, built, and maintained over time.

02. The importance of a foundation of community leadership and resources.

A finding that runs through this study is that Community Leadership and Accountability and Resources connective tissue are foundational – they shape the quality and direction of every other type of connective tissue. Yet funders and ecosystem supporters often move too quickly toward investing in Structures and Strategy before ensuring that foundational connective tissue is strong. Structures built on skewed power dynamics, weak relationships, and scarce resources tend to be episodic and fragile. Strategy developed without genuine community leadership tends to reflect institutional priorities rather than community ones. The framework emphasizes the importance of a strong community and resource foundation.

03. Connective tissue is not a project with an end date. It is ongoing, dynamic work that requires consistent attention and investment.

Ecosystems are not static. They are constantly being shaped by shifting political contexts, changing funding environments, leadership transitions, and the evolving needs and priorities of the communities they serve. Building strong, effective, and resilient ecosystems is never complete – it requires sustained, intentional investment across all five connective tissue types over time. For practitioners and funders alike, the question is not just “have we built connective tissue?” but “are we continuing to tend it?”

04. The gaps this study documents are the product of structural and systemic conditions.

The funding environments, policymaking processes, and entrenched norms and values an ecosystem operates within are things that no single organization can change on its own. Addressing them requires collective action at the ecosystem level, with support from funders and actors with structural power to shift those conditions.

This report is the first in a series of products from this study. In the months ahead, we will be sharing deeper analysis of specific aspects of what we found, including a closer examination of how funders and other powerful ecosystem actors can use their resources, relationships, and positional power to support the connective tissue that ecosystems need. We hope this report provides a useful foundation for those conversations and a framework that practitioners, funders, and ecosystem actors can carry into their own work.

Appendix

Approach and Methods for the Ecosystem Study

In April 2024, CHF hired Katie Fox and Phoebe Bui to conduct a study of the health equity advocacy ecosystem in Colorado. This study was meant to build on the 2019 ecosystem study to further deepen CHF's knowledge of and responsiveness to the health equity advocacy ecosystem in Colorado. This study had two phases:

Phase 1 (April 2024 - January 2025): Develop foundational information on Colorado ecosystems through interviews with 10 CHF staff and 20 Colorado organizers and advocates. Katie and Phoebe worked with CHF staff to identify ecosystem actors who "traditionally, historically, or structurally had less power to influence the passage of state policy," and met one or more of the following characteristics:

- BIPOC-led or -centered
- Serves low-income communities
- Serves rural communities
- Conducts local-level advocacy
- Utilizes approaches other than traditional policy advocacy (e.g., community organizing, legal advocacy)
- Has limited opportunities for initiating their own formalized learning projects

Interviews were conducted by Katie and Phoebe, recorded, transcribed using Speechpad and then coded in DeDoose using a structured coding scheme. All interviewees were provided with $150 honoraria for their time and participation.

Phase 2 (February 2025 - May 2025): Deep dive into "Connective Tissue" and CHF support in three Colorado ecosystems through a mixed methods case study, utilizing interviews with CHF staff and surveys and group conversations with Colorado organizers and advocates.

In Spring 2025, Katie and Phoebe worked with CHF staff to identify three ecosystems as our Phase 2 cases, bounded by geography, community/identity group, and/or specific issue. They included:

- **Denver Tenants' Ecosystem:** Comprised of individuals and organizations building the leadership and collective power of residential tenants in the Denver metropolitan area and bringing together racial, economic, and housing justice to advance and defend tenants' rights.[1]

1 Particularly moderate to very low-income tenants, as defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Appendix

- **LGBTQ+ Youth Ecosystem:** Comprised of individuals and organizations protecting, providing, and expanding access to gender-affirming* care, resources, and community spaces for queer/LGBTQIAS+ youth (particularly BIPOC and/or trans youth) living in Colorado.[2]

- **Western Slope Immigration Ecosystem**: Comprised of individuals and organizations serving immigrant communities and protecting and advancing immigrant rights, particularly around citizenship, legal status, deportation, and civic engagement in the Western Slope*.[3]

After selecting each ecosystem/case, Katie and Phoebe developed a snowball survey to disseminate to each of the ecosystems. The survey had 39 substantive questions across five sections: 1) About You and Your Organization, 2) Perceptions of the Ecosystem(s), 3) Perceptions of Connective Roles, 4) Colorado Health Foundation Support for Connective Roles, and 5) Final Reflections. Of the 129 individuals and organizations emailed, 65 (50%) responded. All respondents received an honorarium of $100.

After analyzing the survey data, Katie and Phoebe invited 7-8 individuals/ organizations from each ecosystem to participate in "Ecosystem Insight Groups." Across the three groups, we had 22 total participants. We selected participants based on the following criteria:

- They completed the Ecosystem Survey

- Other ecosystem actors identified them as playing important connective roles in their ecosystem

- Their survey responses indicated strong insight about ecosystem dynamics and conditions

- They have a familiarity with CHF and its role in their ecosystem

We met with each of the three Ecosystem Insight Groups for six hours across three sessions in January and February 2026 (three two-hour sessions) and an additional two-hour sensemaking session in April 2026. We chose to conduct a series of conversations versus a single session, because we knew the complexity and sensitivity of the questions we had would require space for relationship building and emergence in the conversations. The sessions focused on unpacking the survey insights, exploring the unique conditions and needs of each ecosystem, and discussing CHF's role in ecosystem(s). All group participants received $150 for every hour of engagement, totaling $1,350 for nine total hours of scheduling, pre-work,

2 By gender-affirming care, we are referring to social gender-affirming care (e.g., the name you go by, the pronouns you use), legal gender-affirming care (e.g., having identity documents such as a driver's license that align with your gender identity), and medical gender-affirming care (e.g., puberty blockers, hormone therapy).

3 By Western Slope, we are referring to Garfield, Rio, Blanco, Moffat, Grand, Eagle, Pitkin, Mesa, Delta, Montrose, Gunnison, Lake, Ouray, Routt, Summit, and San Miguel counties.

and session attendance. The analysis presented in this report draws upon data across both phases of the Ecosystem Study.

About the CHF Advocacy Priority

The Colorado Health Foundation has chosen priority areas that it believes can drive health equity and racial justice for people throughout Colorado. These priority areas include Adult Recovery, Advocacy, Affordable Housing, Capacity Building, Community Solutions, Economic Opportunity, Locally Focused Work, Primary Care, and Thriving Young People.

CHF sees its Advocacy priority as a critical way to support and highlight the voices of Coloradans who have been historically, systemically excluded from opportunities to influence public policy or engage with policymakers on issues they care most about, which will contribute to policy outcomes that improve and advance health equity. Central to CHF's Advocacy theory of change is the assumption that a strong ecosystem of actors working towards health equity is better equipped than a single institution or coalition to develop, adopt, implement, and enforce shifts in public policy and discourse that can close health equity gaps.

About Katie/Phoebe

Katie Fox and Phoebe Bui have been working with the CHF since Spring 2024, previously as employees of Grassroots Solutions, and now as independent consultants.

Katie Fox (she/her) is the Founder of Katie Fox Consulting, LLC, based in Silver Spring, Maryland. Katie brings over 20 years of experience in community organizing, advocacy, philanthropy, and learning and evaluation consulting. Since her early years organizing and mobilizing communities around environmental and corporate campaigns, Katie has made it her career's mission to get more and better support to community organizing and grassroots power building. Through learning partnerships, evaluation, coaching, writing, and presentations, Katie galvanizes and guides the philanthropic and evaluation sectors to better understand, value, and support grassroots work. Since 2018, Katie has created and shared field-building resources on community organizing, community power building, movement-building, and base building.

Phoebe Bui (they/them) is the Founder of Bui Consulting, LLC, based in Bethesda, Maryland. Phoebe brings over 10 years of experience in community organizing, social research, and learning and evaluation consulting. Their portfolio includes monitoring, evaluation and learning, organizational capacity assessments, strategic advising, and facilitation in nonprofit, philanthropic, and movement spaces. Phoebe is committed to ameliorating inequities in research processes and empowering partners to leverage evaluation to realize transformative change they want to see in the world. They also operate from a commitment to reflexivity, collaboration, and mutual reciprocity in all partnerships.

STRONG EFFECTIVE RESILIENT

A Connective Tissue Framework for Stronger Advocacy Ecosystems in Colorado