

EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR YOUTH ORGANIZING IN CALIFORNIA

Youth Organizers' Challenge to Funders

California youth organizers call on funders to commit to broader, deeper, more flexible, and longer-term support to address the unique challenges youth and communities of color face in their organizing and youth development work. They ask funders to invest in youth, recognize their creativity and expertise, and share some power and control. They recommend building new spaces for funders and organizers to learn together and advance new creative strategies in partnership. community and in real time.

This section is part of the Developing Youth Power Series, based on a study of youth organizing groups in California that was conducted by the [CU Boulder Research Hub](#) between 2021 and 2024.

What's In This Section

California youth organizers had powerful advice for funders about how to better support their organizing work and the broader youth organizing field. We've summarized this advice into 5 major recommendations. These recommendations emphasize greater and more flexible funding that recognizes youths as experts, supports organizational needs, sustains the work over the long timeline required by the fight for social justice, and centers the unique challenges youth and communities of color face in their organizing and youth development work.

Youth organizers recognized that funders have a long history of building sustained relationships with their grantees and value regular communication between organizations and funders. They also believe that funders need a more nuanced understanding of youth organizing. They ask foundation leaders to join them in the broader struggle for justice by advancing diversity in their own organizations and by creating and humbly joining an ongoing learning community where the youth organizing field and its funding allies can learn and grow together.



Recommendations to Funders from the Field

Across our study, there were five central recommendations from organizers to funders:

1. Provide flexible and deeper investments to enable youth organizing groups to creatively meet the needs of their communities.
2. Increase funding amounts and grant timelines to match the long arc of justice.
3. Increase development capacity across the field.
4. Create opportunities for youth organizing leaders to build reciprocal ongoing relationships with philanthropy staff.
5. Diversify the people who work in philanthropy and the places and spaces philanthropy funds.



1. Provide flexible and deeper investments to enable youth organizing groups to creatively meet the needs of their communities.

Youth organizing groups are creating new strategies for what it means to be healthy and to work. Grounded in their commitments to justice, they are considering living wages, full benefits, mental health care, organizational restorative justice practices, and wellness in how they work. They recommended that funders consider how these creative youth organizing and youth development strategies can serve as lessons to the broader nonprofit sector.

Participants suggested that foundations should allow grantees to redefine indirect rates, general operating expenses, and allowable costs (food for youth, youth stipends, living wages, full benefits) for their youth organizing grantees. They emphasized the need for greater flexibility to allow for funding youth stipends, food or rent support, and other material needs of their community members.

Youth organizing groups also need flexibility to fund a wide variety of functions: basic organizational capacity, running short-term campaigns, long-term base building, sustaining youth development programs, building a leadership pipeline, and meeting the immediate material needs of youth. Leaders understand these different strategies as all part of their mission—yet they often find that grants force them to prioritize one aspect of their work over others. They are looking for flexibility to integrate and move between these different strategies. This flexibility also builds on the creativity young people bring to their work.

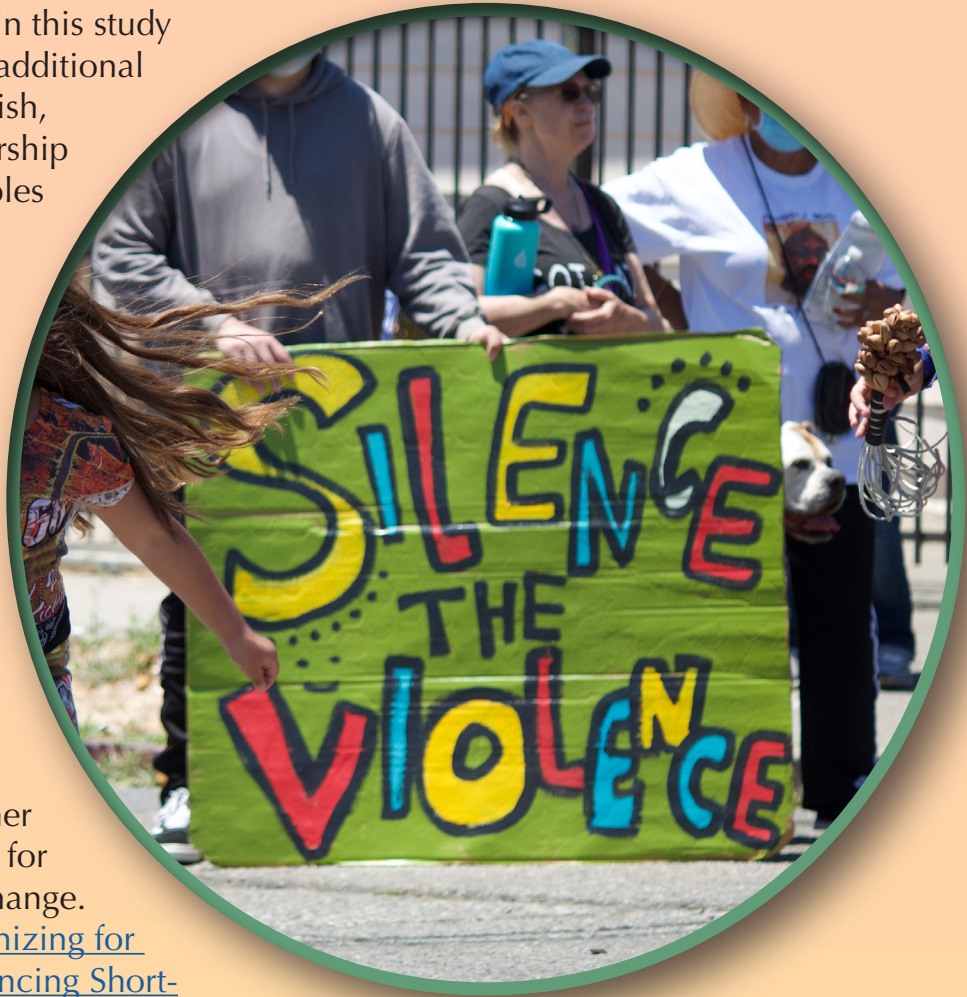
“Youth are very creative. And when we put funding that is very restricted, they’re not able to explore other creative forms to advocate for their community because they’re restricted with that funding. And so I think more funding that is open and that they can trust and give control and power to the youth to use in their own manner is something that I think will be a demand for me.”

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- Youth Organizing Leader

The young people engaged in the work of youth organizing bring integral knowledge and recommendations for the future that should be centered in the broader field of people fighting for social changes. Participants asked funders to reflect on how they can engage young people more centrally in planning and decision-making about how to build and support the field.

Youth organizing leaders in this study emphasized the need for additional funding to establish, nourish, and sustain a youth leadership pipeline that funds staff roles to cultivate college and career transitions, as well as the creation of new positions for emerging leaders. Youth organizing has long been a space for creative and innovative strategies for base-building and policy wins. Our participants suggested that funders invest in youth and consider the youth as educators who can teach funders and other adult allies new strategies for working towards social change. To learn more, read [Organizing for Youth Development](#), [Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#) and [Creating a Leadership Pipeline](#).



2. Increase funding amounts and grant timelines to match the long arc of justice.

Youth organizing leaders highlighted that organizing for social justice requires both immediate action and staying focused on their long-term mission, and it is vital for funding to match these dual commitments. Participants want to apply for larger, multi-year grants that allow them to balance their long-term missions, organizational health, and short-term deliverables. Long-term grants allow organizations to develop multi-year youth development strategies, or multi-stage policy campaigns that require building power. Larger multi-year grants also support organizational sustainability and the creative innovation mentioned in Recommendation 1.

As one participant explained, long-term investments allow youth organizing groups to address the dynamic nature of working with young people in a constantly changing world.

“I think also that... understanding and shifts...may need to be made in regards to the outline of the grant or the funding. There’s always things that can come up or shifts that happen. So just understanding that youth organizing is, it’s like its own thing. It’s its own being. It’s alive. It’s all a thing, and that thing shifts and changes. And so a demand would be the understanding that this is not a stagnant type of work, but that our work shifts. And so what the needs are for our community, or what we initially agreed upon, upon a grant, any funding, can also shift.”

Organizations, like the political and social landscape they work in, are dynamic. Our participants recommend providing longer-term funding that allows organizers to meet those changing needs. To learn more, read [Organizing for Youth Development](#), [Balancing Short-Term Goals with a Long-Term Vision](#) and [Combining Insider and Outsider Strategies](#).

4. Create opportunities for youth organizing leaders to build reciprocal ongoing relationships with philanthropy staff.

Funder and organization community of practice

Youth organizing leaders in California recommend creating an ongoing learning community where leaders from foundations and from the youth organizing field could engage in genuine, reciprocal learning. Such a space would allow learning to happen in all directions—among funders, among youth organizers, and between the two communities. An ongoing learning community would also center the reality that working with youth and working in the struggle for social justice are extremely dynamic and evolving. The hope is that such a space would support the field and philanthropy in advancing new creative strategies in community and in real time.

A learning community could also create the space for program officers to develop a “more nuanced understanding of youth organizing,” as described by one participant:

“I think for funders to think about how are they funding, not just to reach their deliverables, but . . . to understand why we do the youth organizing, why we do the base building. And how is their funding helping us keep our community engaged, involved? How is their funding uplifting the struggles and also the assets and leadership of our community, and specifically youth?”

One participant explained that it would be critical for funders—not just youth organizers—to come to a learning space, “prepared, ready to commit to things so that we don’t walk away empty.” This means engaging with youth organizers with intellectual humility, trust, and sharing control and power. One participant offered this explanation:

“We don’t bring all of this to say that “we want this,” and then funders are like, “Okay. We hear you.” But you hear us and what? So having space for us to maybe not only to share but to get to a space of what are next steps, what are commitments that we can—that y’all are willing to let us know that we can anticipate these things or know that we will see these things in the future.”



Leaders felt that to effectively serve youth organizing, they should be building on their relationship with funders to create pathways where the interests of both the foundation and the organization are being met. A community of practice to learn from one another also includes being accountable to each other. One organizer emphasized how this knowledge sharing is deeply important to the health of the youth organizing field.

“Building that political relationship with funders is really important. And I think for me my demand for funders is that they also organize within their foundations to continue sharing their learnings of how they’re understanding youth organizing, because there is a limit if we can only move one funder, one program officer. I think there is so much more work to do to organize philanthropy and to really resource this field, and I think it’s not enough for youth or funders and program officers to just learn. I think they need to do that organizing within their institutions, within philanthropy to build—bring in more money—and also move other funders who historically have not even thought about youth organizing.”

A learning space can help the field and philanthropy learn in real time, but also can create a space to expand the number of foundations and program officers that understand the unique and valuable role of youth organizing in the overall struggle for justice.

To learn more read [Addressing the Social, Political and Economic Climate](#) and [Understanding the California Funding Context](#).

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a green sprig of rosemary. In the background, a person is wearing a grey baseball jersey with the word 'GARY' in blue letters. The scene is outdoors with a wooden fence and greenery visible.

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- Youth Organizing Leader

5. Diversify the people who work in philanthropy and the places and spaces philanthropy funds.

Participants called for increased demographic and geographic diversity in philanthropy, while also recognizing the challenges that foundations—like most organizations—face in achieving diversity in their board members and program staff in a world that is systemically unequal. Yet, participants were still clear that “funders need to do organizing within their own organizations.”

One youth organizer described the difference organizers feel when they work with program officers from communities that face similar challenges:

“I think there needs to be more generational wisdom on their board and within their staff and also people of color in—just in different areas of the work and with lived experience or regional, rural, immigration, whatever it is. . . . There just needs to be more diversity within the foundation staff and board itself. I see that as really limiting kind of the priorities and the strategies for how they lead the work or make those investments.”

This organizer recognized that while program officers may be able to conceptualize the communities they work with, that is not the same as having lived experiences.

A different participant noted that foundations could bring diversity to California grantmaking if they “decentralize decision-making power and empower community funding boards made up of impacted people that make decisions in terms of who gets grants and how much and when.”

Participants also expressed the need to diversify the kind of youth organizing groups that receive grants. Participants in both well-established, well-funded Los Angeles and Bay Area groups and those working outside the large metro areas or in smaller or newer organizations agreed on this need.

“There needs to be a focus, an intentional focus on supporting and resourcing youth organizing in specific, either regions that are systemically and historically under-resourced and organizations that have been systemically and historically under-resourced and really providing deeper and longer-term investment for those organizations or regions.”

Participants were clear that funding a diverse youth organizing movement across California requires attention to diversity across race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, local political climate, region, as well as organizational age, size, mission, and strategies. To learn more read [Addressing the Social, Political and Economic Climate](#) and [Understanding the California Funding Context](#).

LOVE

PEACE



UNITY

HEALING

Julia