



**THE  
COLORADO  
TRUST**

*A Health Equity Foundation*

## **Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers**

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Staff at The Colorado Trust have received a significant amount of interest, feedback, questions and concerns from people and organizations across the state since we [announced a transition](#) to a community-organizing model and approach within the [Community Partnerships](#) funding strategy.

We realize this is a significant change to one of our longstanding strategies—and a change that is somewhat rare for a private philanthropic foundation to make. This transition is the result of a year of introspection and reflection of where we have been; what we have accomplished to date; and where we see opportunities to more directly and successfully build collective power in communities across Colorado to achieve health equity.

Below are some thoughts on many of the queries we have received so far. We are committed to updating this as needed in the future, so please check back at our website. If you ever have additional questions, please [contact us](#) anytime.

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**Community organizing is woefully underfunded, in Colorado and nationwide—and only a few foundations understand and fund organizing. Why would The Colorado Trust create an organizing program that does this work in-house, rather than fund organizations that have been doing this work for years? And why should the building of an organizing infrastructure be driven by funders?**

We completely agree that funders can and should be doing more to support community organizing in our state. There has been incredible organizing work—and many resounding successes and power built as a result—over the past several decades in Colorado. That is why a significant part of this new approach to the Community Partnerships strategy is investing in capacity building, leadership and organizational development within the [existing](#) organizing field in the state. It is our hope that the organizing infrastructure can be both strengthened and expanded as a result.

It may be useful to share here the overarching goals of the Community Partnerships organizing cycle and approach:

1. Support community organizers to develop leaders in communities.
2. Support communities to take collective action to improve the conditions of their lives.
3. Support communities to create a durable, community-appropriate organization in place to build power and mobilize resources beyond the investment of The Colorado Trust—able to recruit people, develop leaders, gather information and organize the money needed to accomplish the goals.
4. Support communities to be a meaningful part of an organizing infrastructure that is being built regionally and across the state.

We know that for this work to be sustained, we must support the creation of durable, community-appropriate organizations that can build power and mobilize resources beyond the investment of The Colorado Trust. These community organizations will recruit people, develop leaders, gather information and organize the money needed to accomplish their goals.

We believe goal #4 is particularly relevant to this question. We will be supporting existing coalitions, networks and organizing efforts to achieve a shared goal. We will be providing funding to existing organizing-focused organizations through this approach. And we are committed to investing in the regional and statewide organizing infrastructure as we support communities in their work to create systems change. We know that systems change cannot happen without building power, and backing the infrastructure already in place will be crucial to accomplishing this.

Lastly, it is worth noting that all of our [core funding strategies](#) are supporting work with aspects of leadership development, political education, organizing for social change, organizational development, and creating a shared vision for systems change—all of which are possible when we support and strengthen the existing organizing infrastructure across Colorado.

### **What do you mean by a “durable, community-appropriate organization”?**

We want to help community members create lasting infrastructure and processes for building collective power at the local level. This doesn't necessarily mean creating an actual 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity, though it could, if a group determines this to be the best course of action—in other words, the look and structure of an organization should be whatever is most appropriate for them, their community and the work. Such organizations may also rely on fiscal sponsors or other arrangements.

Regardless, financial stability for these groups will be essential to their sustainability. Our role is to support community members in forming a group that will have a lasting impact on addressing injustices in their community.

### **Community organizing is distinct from community navigation or engagement because organizing shifts power. Will The Colorado Trust support shifting power by way of agitation, pushing power and confronting it—or via a “softer” version of organizing, like engagement and navigation?**

We realize the power that The Colorado Trust has as a funder, and the inherent discomfort and inequities that can cause with our partners. We also acknowledge the legal constraints inherent to 501(c)(3) foundations, in terms of being barred from engaging in direct or grassroots lobbying on specific legislation.

Yet such limitations also create a natural opportunity to partner with existing community-based organizations and other funders to achieve shared goals towards building power at the community level. Even without the shift in the Community Partnerships strategy, it was already impossible for The Colorado Trust to work towards the systemic changes needed to achieve health equity for all Coloradans without relying on partnerships and collaboration with existing community-based groups. This strategy shift is simply a way to further strengthen this work together—and, at the same time, redefine some of the longstanding power dynamics that have existed between funders and nonprofits.

**Some existing grassroots and community-based organizations struggle to have honest conversations with The Colorado Trust and other funders in the state about the impact of their funding strategies. How do we raise concerns about this shift to organizing in ways that will be heard, without harming our ability to get funding from The Colorado Trust in the future?**

We fully acknowledge that the power dynamic inherent between funders and nonprofits (including current grantees) can be challenging, stressful and, frankly, inherently unfair. This is a decades-old relationship pattern that we are working to try to mitigate on a daily basis. Sometimes, we make progress on this front; other times, we fail, and it is embarrassing to everyone in our organization when this occurs. This dynamic is a constant, unending concern of ours, and we need to and will continue working to address this imbalance.

Any individual or group—whether a grantee, partner, stakeholder or otherwise—can [submit feedback](#) (with or without attribution) via our website. We read every single email that we receive, and we route it to the appropriate staff member for consideration and response.

Additionally, our evaluations of our core funding strategies always include the opportunity for grantees in a given strategy to provide honest feedback on The Colorado Trust’s role, with or without attribution. One of the several reasons we contract with external evaluators is to provide the opportunity for “fearless feedback.” You will find many examples of such feedback and opinions on our role as funders in the [evaluation reports](#) we publish on our funding strategies.

Still, we want to encourage anyone from grantee or non-grantee organizations to provide us input at any time. The Colorado Trust staff working in the Community Partnerships strategy has extensive experience in community organizing, power-building initiatives and other work, all from the grantee perspective. As a staff, we routinely engage in critical dialogue about how we are showing up in this work as a funder. We are well aware that we can always find room for improvement on this front.

**How is The Colorado Trust defining and/or approaching its new community organizing model?**

The new model, called the Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle, is rooted in the belief that communities historically left out of decision-making spaces are the best ones to build power to create the systemic change necessary to achieve health equity.

Through leveraging The Colorado Trust’s funding and capacity-building resources, teams of residents will implement a grassroots organizing approach that builds community leadership, allows them to take collective action, develops team organization and supports the organizing infrastructure being built across the state.

**What is your new organizing model based on? Did you invent it yourselves?**

The Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle is based on many different organizing models. We researched and evaluated different approaches and created a version that we believe will work best for our communities and overall goals for the strategy. Organizing is a decades-long tradition, and one that has existed in Colorado for a long time. We also needed to tailor the model within the context and reality of being a private foundation. Here is a [graphic](#) overviewing the Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle.

**With this model in mind: Are you prioritizing direct-action organizing? Beyond direct-action organizing, are you including advocacy, self-help, direct services or education?**

We support communities to take collective action to change the policies, procedures, practices and living environments in and across places, organizations, institutions and systems. There are a variety of actions that communities can take, and ways to direct funds, to advance their goals:

- Community building: Building relationships and expanding the base of the support network and network of influence in the community
- Direct service: Doing something for the community, such as making grants to nonprofits to help groups address an issue people are concerned about, or provide a needed good or service that is currently unavailable or inadequate
- Self-help action: Communities working towards supporting themselves, including making the decision about how this is best achieved
- Education: Learning about an issue (e.g., forums, workshops)
- Advocacy: Speaking on behalf of self and/or others
- Direct actions: Persuading a target to move with a specific engagement, request, confrontation or demand; and shifting existing power structures.

**How long will the organizing cycle take?**

The length of an organizing cycle is largely dependent on what specific goals and actions a community wants to take. While the overarching problem or challenge that the community is working to address might remain consistent through multiple “rotations” of the cycle, the actions that the community takes to address specific issues might differ.

The hope is that this cycle gives community groups the flexibility to work at their own pace to address issues that they see in their community, in the way that they want. Long story short: We want and need the communities we are working with to make these decisions in collaboration with us.

**What is The Colorado Trust’s desired outcomes that it wants to achieve with this process and model?**

The fundamental goal of the Community Partnerships strategy is to build collective power in communities to advance health equity. We use community organizing as the central approach to accomplish this. Through community participation in the Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle, we hope to see shorter-term outcomes that include:

- A sense of belonging, including common experiences, better relationships, and an ability to influence decisions in community.
- Shared understanding of community problems and how to make change.
- Community actions that are led by residents.

We believe this will lead to increased community capacity to organize around issues in general, so that people who did not have the ability to influence decisions and make community change now have the collective power to do so.

In the long term, our desired outcomes for the CPOC model are to see:

- Communities most impacted by community-level equity issues have influence and control over the decisions that affect them.

- Resident priorities be addressed.
- Changes in policies, procedures and practices in and across organizations and systems that reflect resident priorities.
- Relationships, networks, knowledge and skills developed, sustained and used to improve community.

We are tracking progress toward these outcomes in an evaluation of the strategy.

### **How does the role of a Colorado Trust community organizer fit into communities building their organizing structure?**

We use community organizing to execute our work and build a community's collective power to advance health equity. The community organizer will work specifically with community teams to support their leadership and development.

Leadership development is ongoing throughout the Community Partnerships Organizing Cycle. Community organizers support participating leaders through training, coaching and facilitating opportunities for peer learning. By acting to address issues, they are gaining the experience to grow into powerful organizers with the ability to develop others.

Community organizers will also support community members to develop a durable, community-appropriate organization to build power for the long term. Community teams will create structure to make it possible for others to join and take meaningful action, as well as to mobilize and manage resources.

### **What happens when a resident group working with The Colorado Trust prioritizes issues or campaigns that are already the focus of existing groups or organizations?**

Inherent to our model and approach to this work is connecting existing entities and efforts with the community groups with which we work. Building a durable, community-appropriate organization will necessitate an analysis of existing partners, networks, coalitions and more. Lastly, as previously stated, we have made a commitment to investing in the existing statewide organizing infrastructure to achieve systems change. We absolutely must support efforts that bring people and groups together on shared issues.

### **What happens when The Colorado Trust and existing organizing groups work in the same geographical place—especially rural places, with fewer people overall—even if they focus on different issues?**

Systems-level change is going to require many groups working together. We want Colorado Trust staff and the community members with whom we work to build a robust understanding of existing organizing efforts and groups. We will need to perform due diligence to make sure we are not displacing or overlapping with other organizing work, but rather supporting it wherever and however possible. We want to add value to the organizing infrastructure that has existed and succeeded for so many years already in Colorado.

We encourage you to reach out to the community partner in your region of the state for more information—they would be happy to discuss this with you. You can find the community partner closest to you by using the interactive map on the [Community Partnerships strategy page](#) of our website.

## **Will The Colorado Trust's organizers be accountable to communities, or The Colorado Trust?**

This question suggests accountability to only one or the other is possible. We firmly believe both are possible—and, in fact, essential to the success of this effort. We acknowledge that this is a challenging and complex issue, and we actively discuss it among our colleagues and in communities. Staff working in communities are always looking to better understand how power shows up in our work. There are also times where we must seek approval at various points from Colorado Trust staff members or our trustees. Additionally, we must meet the legal requirements inherent to private foundations. Accountability within this work and strategy is something we continue to examine, explore, aspire to and improve.

## **Why did this change in approach happen? Other Colorado Trust grantees are already involved with community organizing; why weren't they consulted when the foundation was planning this shift in approach?**

We understand that this shift in approach to the Community Partnerships strategy has had impacts and unintended consequences for grantees in our other funding strategies. We could have and should have done a better job of informing current grantees of a change in approach in the Community Partnerships strategy that stands to impact how they carry out their work.

The Colorado Trust values being a learning organization, and adapting and evolving our funding strategies in an iterative manner based on such learnings. Our evaluation of the Community Partnerships strategy, as well as community member feedback, indicated that over the first 5 years of this strategy, we created capacity and built power, especially (though not entirely) at the individual level.

Our learnings taught us that it is necessary to evolve the strategy into one centered on *collective* power building, using defined cycles of planning and action. We believe this will result more explicitly in lasting, sustainable systemic change and improved health equity outcomes. A community organizing approach will also enable us to deploy resources towards action that will allow community members to see wins from their efforts throughout the process.

One major takeaway from our learnings is that asking community members to commit to building long-term plans via a phased approach did not allow for action on issues as they arose, in the way community organizing intends. As we now know: When our communities see and feel the fruits of even small labors, power is built and systems can begin to change.

Lastly, at both the staff and board level, there has been an understanding and commitment for several years now to have our funding strategies more closely align with one another. We firmly believe that having common areas of goals and tactics across multiple funding strategies—especially [Community Partnerships](#) and [Building and Bridging Power](#)—will lead to better outcomes and more success for the people and groups doing the work. Our Grants department staff continue to work together, and will continue to work with grantees, to find ways to operationalize this alignment, share goals and fully realize a sustained, statewide organizing structure.

## **How did The Colorado Trust determine the salaries for the community organizer positions?**

Community organizing can be an exceedingly taxing and intense effort, both mentally and emotionally. We believe it is essential to pay our community organizers salaries that reflect this

commitment and reality, and that are competitive with similar positions in Colorado and across the country. We remain incredibly grateful that we have the resources available to accomplish this.

All position salaries at The Colorado Trust are benchmarked against both regional and national positions with similar responsibilities at similar organizations. Given the relative lack of private foundations with staff community organizer positions, the benchmarking effort examined positions with the most comparable duties and responsibilities, including program officers, program associates and several others. The Colorado Trust uses professional salary-survey consultants to complete this analysis.

In posting a position and its salary range, we do not adjust the salary ranges based on whether the staff member is living and working in Denver or elsewhere in the state. Attempting to adjust salaries ourselves based on cost-of-living differences between the metro area and other communities in Colorado is not just difficult; it could be prone to bias and subjectivity. Providing the same salary benchmarks to all of our employees, regardless of where in Colorado they reside, remains the most equitable approach.