

Impact of Rural Community Building on a COVID-19 Response

August 2020



"The community building that we had already started became the foundation for the work that was to come."

During the first half of 2020, communities in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County were facing the same crisis as the rest of the world – the emergence of COVID-19. As stories surfaced about how community builders were responding courageously and creatively to the pandemic in communities, a question began to take shape:

How has community building enabled rural communities to respond to the pandemic?

Many communities in the region utilize a community building approach where they “work together to make things better.” For many years communities have built a community building foundation whereby they **connect** in an inclusive way; have and build **capacity** to get work done; take strategic **community-led action**; and develop a **culture** of unity, hope and resiliency. And for over 15 years, The Ford Institute for Community Building (FICB), a department at The Ford Family Foundation based in Roseburg, Oregon, has been supporting rural communities in these efforts. FICB and communities wanted to explore the impacts these previous efforts and investments have made on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early June 2020, 15 rural communities, FICB and [Dialogues in Action](#) partnered to explore this question through interview and analysis. Below is what we learned. We hope this report lifts up the work of tireless rural community builders, sparks conversation and inspires further community building.

“Nothing is more important than community building in times of need.”

Community Builder, Applegate Valley

View a 5-minute video with the voices of rural community builder at learn.tfff.org/CBandCovid



Four impacts of having a community building base during the COVID-19 crisis

1 The community already had strong **CONNECTIONS** with a wide range of people

A foundation of relationships formed through community building provided community builders with the knowledge of people in their region and beyond and the aptitude to reach out to them during this crisis.

"We knew people. We literally knew people and had contact information. And we could just reach out really quickly. And because we had built those bridges, people were responsive. Because we had done all of this outreach, we would hear back from people so we could make those connections and get things moving to help people."

2 The community had the **CAPACITY** to respond

In many ways, community building work established skills, abilities, habits and community aptitude that has served the community well during the crisis and has helped it respond strategically and effectively.

"We were really hoping that we could become a trusted space, that if an emergency happened, we could get information out to people and people aren't doubting it as much. I think we were really working on that over the year, to have a trusted place that had information and people knew who to call. When this happened, people trusted us more. This is huge."

3 The community was able to **TAKE ACTION** in the face of crisis

Communities activated networks like the Mutual Aid Network in Applegate, mobilized food distribution like the food teams with captains in Hornbook, set up website pages in multiple communities, encouraged support for local business like the effort of C4C in Sisters, and provided technical support like the Zoom trainings in Illinois Valley.

"All of the work and energy that has come from Ford Institute for Community Building led up to a really good place to be able to pivot into this sort of action. It was just a framework. And people were working on it, having no idea that this big emergency was going to happen and that it was going to be utilized in the way that it has."

4 The community already had a **CULTURE** of care and commitment

Community building has fostered a culture where people are confident to act, care for others, experience a sense of shared power, and show courage, resourcefulness and self-sacrifice. This contributed to community strength, resilience and mutual commitment.

"Con el apoyo de este grupo, ahora sabemos que podemos seguir adelante, encontrando nuestras propias soluciones." ("With the support of this group, now we know that we can move forward, searching for our own solutions.")

Seven recommendations for communities moving forward

Based on the data, below are recommendations on how rural communities and allies can set a foundation for being nimble and responsive to community needs during times of crisis.

- 1 Learn and practice community building principles.** Communities that knew [community building principles and practices](#) [see diagram] and had reflected on their own community building process were able to respond quickly to the needs of the community.
- 2 Have a personal experience with community building.** Communities that had community building modeled to them were able to embody and multiply it to others in the community.
- 3 Develop structure, systems and processes.** Communities that had developed a community backbone organization or infrastructure where strategies of community building were in place were able to move quickly to adapt to needs during the pandemic.
- 4 Practice multiple ways of engaging the community.** Communities that had multiple ways of engaging the community were able to be more active and comprehensive in their response.
- 5 Identify as and interact with other community builders.** Communities that had identified community builders and that were connected to community builders from other rural communities were able to hold steady during the pandemic, know what to do and continue the course despite the unknowns.
- 6 Make and attract long-term investments in community building.** Communities who have been at community building longer seemed to have better resiliency, trust and poise in the face of the pandemic than those just starting their community building journey.
- 7 Practice profound inclusion.** Communities where inclusion had been valued and practiced had the trust of the community, knowledge of people throughout the community and ways to communicate to the whole community.



Feel free to share this report with others and to use it as a conversation starter for action. A [full report](#) is available along with a [Spanish summary version](#) and [video](#).

To learn more and engage:

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