

To Build Shared Vision in Communities, Trust Them to Lead

Kristen Caloca and Vanessa Schnaidt

Contributors to this article include Anu Yadav, Community Codirector, WE RISE; Robin Garcia, Community Codirector, WE RISE; Danielle Brazell, Arts and Cultural Leader and Former General Manager of the Department of Cultural Affairs at the City of Los Angeles; Kaile Shilling, Nonprofit Collaboration Expert; and Andrea Jarrell, Author and Communications Strategist.

Communities are experts and leaders in change. From the COVID-19 pandemic to structural racism, community-based organizations have always stepped up to fill the gaps and forge new solutions—especially where government is unable, unwilling, or ineffective. Their longstanding trusted relationships with community members mean they understand what’s happening locally and what’s needed to make an impact.

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Yet, systemic barriers and pervasive inequity have kept grassroots organizations—often led by Black and Brown leaders—from accessing the capital and resources they need to sustain their efforts. These organizations face onerous and exclusionary processes to tap into government funding sources. Organizations that succeed in securing funding may have to contend with inequitable, burdensome contracting practices, including having to self-fund program costs, waiting months for overdue payments, and responding to outsized reporting requirements. None of these practices are healing-centered or trauma-informed for the communities that have endured harm at the hands of the government for hundreds of years.

We need a new model for cross-sector collaboration that centers healing, lived experience, and community wisdom. We need *trust-based governance* and what Nonprofit Collaboration Expert Kaile Shilling calls “collaborative impact.” Adapted here, collaborative impact recenters leadership and solutions *within communities*, paving the way for systemic change “for us, by us.”

Anchored by a spirit of possibility and an abundance mindset, trust-based governance and collaborative impact explores what’s possible when our partnerships embrace community power over preconceived prescriptions. A Los Angeles County wellbeing initiative called WE RISE exemplifies this evolution in action. Through that story, we highlight three essential pillars (infrastructure,



[WE RISE](#)

funding, and time span) for any collaborative impact project, and our lessons learned along the way.

Nothing About Us, Without Us

From 2018 to 2022, WE RISE was a prevention and early intervention initiative sponsored by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health to strengthen mental health and wellbeing among youth ages 14 to 25. Over five years, the initiative moved from public agency leadership to amplifying existing community leaders and networks, prioritizing local wisdom, and supporting the already-effective work being carried out by these trustworthy community partners.

For the first two years, the initiative’s focal point included an art exhibition accessible to the public for 10 days during Mental Health Awareness Month in May, complemented by panels, speakers, and artistic performances. Creative expression was a powerful gateway into openly discussing mental health in new ways.

We also learned critical lessons from those first two years. Community groups were consulted but not centered in the experience design. And keeping the programs in a single hub location meant they were inaccessible to many residents who live across a geographic territory larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. A new approach was essential: if communities were going to be the audience, they also needed to be the architects. As such, we implemented a collaborative impact model—an approach that centered the expertise, imagination, and creativity of the communities served.

Through the wisdom and work of more than 30 community and partner organizations, WE RISE transformed into over 200 community events and programs throughout Los Angeles County in 2022. It was simultaneously hyperlocal and more geographically diverse, designed by and for communities. In partnership with community leaders, we used a low-barrier grant application process for community groups to easily and quickly apply for funding to design and implement their own healing-centered programs and activities. We also created space for participating organizations to connect with each other, gathering and sharing their ideas and visions for the healing-centered activities they were planning.

As Elizabeth Blaney of the community group Union de Vecinos declared, “It was about people working together to transform power.”

So, what does collaborative impact look like? We offer three pillars of collaborative impact to help guide organizations that want to shift to this community-centered approach.

1: Infrastructure: Build an Ecosystem that Amplifies Community Power

There were four structural roles within the WE RISE “ecosystem” essential in this transition toward becoming community-centered: the conduit organization, the bridge, the partners, and the advocate.

The Conduit. As you strive for shared leadership among community-based organizations, organizing collaborative efforts and designing for flexibility is critical. A “conduit organization” serves this purpose. The conduit organization connects the public agency and the community organizations. The conduit supports rather than leading, directing, or providing programming. The conduit distributes the funding, elevates joint work, creates a platform that increases visibility for all contributors, and amplifies each partner’s programs as part of the shared vision. The conduit can also provide technical assistance as a source of shared knowledge, resources, and follow-up evaluation.

Our Los Angeles-based nonprofit, [Cause Communications](#), served as this conduit, acting as a listener, responder, and on-call resource; striving to ensure that all partners were resourced equitably; and elevating the visibility of the initiative and its mental health messaging as whole.

The Bridge. The complexity of collaborative impact projects is due, in part, to the multitude of players from across sectors who bring different lenses, experiences, and expectations. That’s both the beauty and the challenge of working together. Even with an established shared goal and a desire to move away from more traditional, systemic power dynamics, a bridging role *dedicated* to advancing this shift is necessary for carrying this into action.

With WE RISE, two community codirectors, Anu Yadav and Robin Garcia, played a complementary and critical bridge role in the initiative’s structure. They were instrumental in devising a more community-driven framework while serving as a trusted bridge to the hyperlocal community-based organizations funded by WE RISE. They acted as internal advocates and provided a layer of accountability to ensure that decision-making power for all WE RISE efforts were rooted in the communities served. In their words, “The model was built on the strengths and needs of communities themselves and aimed to reflect a bottom-up community organizing approach.”

The Partners. Beyond the conduit and bridging roles, community organizations’ partnerships are essential in building connection and power. In WE RISE, there were opportunities for leaders from community-based organizations to learn about and from each other, from listening sessions and working group meetings to networking events and joint programming. As Angelica Romero, Event Producer for Esperanza Community Housing, said, “The partnerships are one of the biggest things that came out of WE RISE for us. Partnerships with many other community organizations are often not included in this type of work.”

Because large, systemic change takes time and involves outcomes and practices, partnership is part of the desired change, and more robust networks lead to greater impact. When you support peer-to-peer relationships, you support the community’s power to put forward their ideas, enabling nimbleness, outside-the-box thinking, and sustainable change.

The Advocate. Outspoken advocates within government institutions who believe in funding community power building are needed to create the political

will that makes initiatives like WE RISE possible. Collaborative impact work charts new territory by challenging current bureaucratic systems and testing new ideas. This new way of thinking requires courage and an appetite for risk because it involves shifting power from the government to communities.

Former Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health Director Dr. Jonathan E. Sherin championed WE RISE for five years through its various iterations. He trusted the conduit organization to shepherd funds effectively and the community-based partner organizations to design culturally relevant mental health prevention programming. The local governing body, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, also supported the WE RISE initiative, signaling that not only was *health and healing* a priority across the County but the *way* the initiative achieved its impact was meaningful.

2: Funding: Reimagine How Dollars Are Distributed

For collaborative impact initiatives to be community-centered, community organizations must be trusted to decide how best to use the funding provided. The values of the initiative are a helpful barometer to inform this process and determine the criteria guiding funding decisions. WE RISE used a rubric for community-centered qualifications that included community connection, history of community engagement, and the ability to work across disciplines rather than requiring vanity performance metrics or capacity-based requirements like staff or budget size. This approach focuses on the effective levers of change in grassroots work and helps redefine the ideas and organizations “worthy” of support.

Many projects that emerged from WE RISE would never have qualified for funding through the traditional government RFP procurement process. Restrictive and competitive grants, arduous contracting processes, and top-down definitions of readiness and effectiveness are barriers to entry for grassroots, community-based organizations. WE RISE sought to mitigate these systemic barriers in its efforts to expand who could access this funding opportunity and make it more equitable.

Place matters, too. As a county-wide initiative, geographic equity and community needs identified in proposals from community organizations were also considered in WE RISE funding decisions. This allowed for region-specific projects that drew on existing local strengths and resources, resulting in a broader and more creative range of solutions.

As Yadav said, “Communities know what they need.” Through WE RISE’s more accessible, inclusive, and community-centered approach to funding, community organizations were trusted to deliver on their knowledge and experience.

Sandra de la Loza of Mapache City Projects and LA Rooted said about their WE RISE-funded program, “I got a glimpse of the future I want to live in. Imagine every park in Los Angeles County offering culturally relevant arts and wellness programs grounded in local ecology and led by local community healers and artists. WE RISE allowed us to prototype such a program.”

In this way, restructuring approaches to funding can catalyze communities to reimagine their future and stay energetic about change. It supports the creation of “[dream spaces](#)” where healing is led and owned by communities.

3: Time Span: Take the Long View to Strengthen Impact

There are no shortcuts when it comes to systemic change. Building trust and momentum within any collaborative impact initiative takes time. Weaving long-range thinking into an initiative’s strategy from the outset is a powerful and more ethical way to set up success.

Here are two tips for laying the foundation for change over time:

First, think in terms of generations.

Cross-sector collaboration provides a powerful way to address the most urgent issues facing society and our communities. The opportunity is even bigger when we consider how to take advantage of the present moment to build a better future.

In the case of WE RISE, it was no accident that the initiative focused on young people. In Los Angeles County and across the country, youth mental health has reached crisis levels; young people need access to more support and healing resources. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a rare public health advisory in late 2021 reinforcing this call to action. One only needs to look to the latest headlines about mass violence to understand the unrelenting barrage of trauma our communities continue to face.

For WE RISE, reaching, educating, and mobilizing youth is a strategy both for direct action and long-term systems change. Prioritizing the mental health and wellbeing of youth today is an investment in generational healing. It is an investment in opportunities for sustainable and lasting shifts in attitudes and behaviors about mental health.

We see glimmers of this potential already. According to an independent evaluation by RAND in 2022, one in three Los Angeles

County youth ages 14 to 25 were exposed to some aspect of WE RISE. Youth exposed to WE RISE were more likely to say they can help change how their family, friends, and community talk about and deal with mental health issues. They were more likely to feel mobilized to address mental health challenges and barriers to receiving treatment. They were also more likely to agree that they feel seen and can be themselves.

Second, make sustainable funding mandatory. Prevalent across initiatives that involve public agencies and community-based organizations, including WE RISE, there remains a tension between the way community groups operate and the expectations of government funders. Community Codirectors Garcia and Yadav shared,

On one hand, community groups are often focused on work that takes place over decades, nurturing relationships of trust with a commitment to transformational change. On the other, publicly funded projects must . . . deliver tangible results within set timelines and scopes of work.

A shift toward multiyear funding by public agencies, prioritizing relationship building, and listening to communities would ease that tension and accelerate impact. Being able to rely on and plan for consistent, year-over-year support would allow community organizations to focus on sustainable solutions for their communities and have sufficient planning time between funding and execution—a major challenge for WE RISE partners in 2022.

We see momentum—and impact—building with this approach in other community-driven initiatives, particularly those supported by philanthropic

institutions. From the [California Black Freedom Fund](#) to the [Latino Power Fund](#), long-term investments are not only prioritized; they are woven into the very structure of the initiative.

The Opportunity Ahead

In recent years, the social sector has acknowledged and begun to unravel outdated and harmful approaches to investing in communities. The [Trust-Based Philanthropy Project](#) and other efforts to shift power back to communities demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of restructuring philanthropic frameworks. Change in the public sector has come more slowly. At a time when [trust is at an all-time low](#), partnerships between government institutions and the communities they serve continue to be laden with cumbersome processes and antiquated requirements. Even well-intentioned programs that engage communities often do so on the institution's own terms, leaving little room for new approaches to take root.

The collaborative impact approach puts community at the center, amplifies the leadership of those already creating change locally, and trades government prescriptions for community power. As Dr. Sherin has reflected on WE RISE,

Change needs us to put our respective guards down across the public and private sectors, amongst our advocates and administrators, and between our elected officials and the diverse communities they serve. While pushing for different ways of “doing business” can feel risky to us all, our biggest risk resides in ignoring the hearts, minds, and voices of the people we serve.

When community-based organizations are trusted to lead, they can build “[durable agency](#),” fully embodying their influence

and decision-making authority in ways that strengthen their capacity and resources in the long term.

For all collaborative impact initiatives, we trust that such a future is possible.

**We recognize the inherent tension in representatives from the “conduit organization” serving as the primary authors of an article about community power. This approach enabled us to take the long view of the initiative across a five-year timespan and provide a more holistic account of the dynamics at play. Community voices are emphasized throughout the article in an effort to ensure the article is aligned with the initiative's values.*