



Ford Institute FOR
COMMUNITY BUILDING



The Impact of Community Building on the Response of Rural Communities to COVID-19

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*rethinking the development of people

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

Community Builder from the Applegate Valley, Oregon

Introduction: A rural response to the pandemic

During the first half of 2020, communities in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County were facing the same public health crisis the rest of the world was encountering — the emergence of COVID-19. As stories began to surface 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. For over 15 years, The Ford Institute for Community Building (FICB), a department at The Ford Family Foundation based in Roseburg, Oregon, has supported 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.

FICB commissioned a brief study for [Dialogues In Action](#) to explore how previous investments in community building with 15 rural communities in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California impacted communities’ responses to the COVID-19 crisis. In June of 2020, 35 community builders participated in group interviews, and 24 responded to a survey. After an analysis of the data, three meetings were held with interviewees to interact with the emerging themes and consider responses and recommendations.

The following is a brief summary of the findings. We hope this report lifts up the work of tireless rural community builders, sparks conversation and inspires further community building. A summary of this report is also available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). An accompanying video is also available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).



Impacts of having a community building base going into the COVID-19 crisis

While the pandemic of COVID-19 was clearly unexpected and unwelcomed, the ways community builders were able to respond to the crisis in their communities proved community building's worth, accelerated progress and advanced the cause of community building. The following are example quotes of these areas of progress:

Accelerated progress

This has presented some new opportunities and has allowed for some relationships to develop that probably would have taken a lot longer if there had been no impetus.

Demonstrating value

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. This pandemic has shown that the framework really passes the test and stands up for what it says it's going to do. We were able to pivot pretty seamlessly.

Revealed the intangible benefits

You have no idea how many intangible improvements there have been in these communities that don't show up necessarily in the bigger projects.

Strengthened community resilience

I appreciate that folks have to focus on this crisis. I appreciate the rising to the occasion of a crisis and a pandemic.

Increased connections to people who are isolated

I think we are now a little more in relationship with elderly people who don't go out.

Promoted trust

The people see us as leaders now during the pandemic. We actively give priority to those who need the most help. We couldn't have done that without this work.



The community already had strong **CONNECTIONS** with its people

In many ways, the relational foundation established through community building provided community builders with the knowledge of people in their region and the aptitude to reach out to them during this time of crisis.

1 Reaching people in the community

As a result of community building, people knew more people and knew people better. Community builders have utilized the webs of relationships they had developed to serve the needs of the community during COVID-19. They knew who needed to be reached. They had the ability and confidence to connect with people during the pandemic. For example, one said,

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 Bringing people together to meet the needs

Community builders were positioned to bring people together to serve the needs of the community. They knew how to get people to work together, and they knew who to connect with whom. Their ability to leverage the relational power of the community enabled them to provide an impact far greater than they could achieve alone. For example, one said,

We saw it as our role to bring community together and find out what the needs were and talk to our funders about what the community needed. Since they understood who we were and what we were bringing, they started to involve us and ask for our help. And we became a more significant partner. Whereas before, it felt like we were trying to help people understand what we could bring. Suddenly the role changed, and now people were coming to us and asking if we could be partners with them, and could we help and support them.

3 Connecting people to others beyond their community who could help

One critical role community builders have played during the pandemic is introducing people to others beyond their community who could provide information, advice, instruction or resources. They have been able to act as a connector to the outside, introducing people to resources beyond what was locally available. In this way, they did not have to have all of what the community needed themselves. They have been able to maximize their knowledge of people and the connections beyond their region and bring that benefit to their community. For example, one said,

The fact that we had connections with the broader nonprofit and statewide community allowed us to make connections and ask for help and get answers outside of our region. And that made an enormous difference.

4 Strengthening resilience through relationships

The relationships that had been developed through community building created a sense of trust in the community, strength throughout the community and steadiness from within the community to face the crisis. Here are two examples from the interviews:

We could keep that steadiness or level-headedness because we have built these relationships.

Eso ayudó a crear las relaciones para cuando empezó la pandemia, ya más o menos los conocían a los vecinos y era un poco más fácil platicar. Cuando fueron a hacer las encuestas, había un poco más confianza para poder contestar.

(English translation: This helped create relationships, because when the pandemic started, the Promotoras already knew their neighbors and it was easier to talk. When they went to do the surveys, there was more trust for the neighbors to answer.)

5 Working together for a community cause

Community builders developed the capacity of communities to respond to the crisis in a cooperative and caring way, even despite political or religious differences. People who disagreed with each other were able to join hands in an effort to meet the needs of their neighbors in the community. This ability did not appear to be solely the result of FICB community building, but was a capacity strengthened through FICB community building work. For example, one said,

We are learning about how you can still accomplish things even though you don't agree across political or religious divides. In a crisis, they will put differences aside. If they knew you, then they cared for you. If you know your neighbors you take care of each other. I think that was pointed out to me more by Ford Family than other situations I've been in.

The community had the **CAPACITY** to respond

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

1 Capacity to respond quickly and strategically

Community builders were able to move quickly in action. They responded to needs rapidly. They were able to mobilize themselves and others more broadly to serve the needs of the community. For example, one said,

We definitely saw a much quicker uptake, with much less resistance or hesitancy or self consciousness or anything. So that things, resources and information move pretty quickly as a result of that.

2 Capacity to organizing the community

The habits of community building established ways of gathering and organizing the community. These capacities have served communities well in response to the pandemic. For example, one said,

Most of the groups were wondering, 'What do we do?' And when we have that kind of call, we could say, 'Here's a really clear path and three things that you can choose from that will support you.'

3 Capacity to resource the community

One of the most critical needs of communities during the pandemic has been access to trusted resources — information, advice, and skills. Many communities have been able to either provide these resources to the community or connect the community to others who were able to offer the needed resources. For example, one said,

A lot of the local businesses were using us as a way to let people know their status, whether they were open or not, what they were doing and how they were supporting the community.

4 Capacity to activate care for the community

Rural communities are filled with people who care about the community. During the pandemic, it has helped to have community builders who could direct the care of people in productive ways and provide roles for people to fill and steps for people to take. For example, one said,

We have little pockets of networks of do-gooders. We were able to have a little infrastructure that they could plug into.

5 Capacity to mobilize volunteers

One of the essential catalysts of progress in community building is the ability of the community to mobilize people who desire to serve the community. During the pandemic, community builders have been able to maximize the energy of volunteers to provide care for the welfare of others. For example, one said,

We established a mutual aid network and even though we haven't had to use it much, it's there. We worked out the details and how it might function and now it's in place for whatever we might need it for. And we have a list of volunteers who want to help people and we know their capacities to do that.

6 Capacity to draw others to community building

During the pandemic, community builders were able to invite others into the community building cause, partly because they had been developing capacity to involve people prior to the pandemic. This capacity has given them the ability to move quickly and effectively to draw people into service to the community. For example, one said,

We're building a culture of sharing and helping each other learn. And I don't think that we necessarily would have been able to punch that as quickly as we had if the COVID hadn't happened. Compared to pre-COVID we are now getting people to participate in broader things beyond their organization to help them and help others and the community around.

7 Capacity to engage people

The capacity of communities to engage people — to understand what they need and what makes them respond — had been developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was leveraged during the pandemic to diagnose where there was need in the community and determine how to meet those needs. For example, one said,

It would be important for people we know to support others in whatever way we can. But I wouldn't have. That was totally out of my wheelhouse of knowledge until we had built the network of social capital.

8 Capacity for resilience

As a result of community building, many communities experienced a strength of resiliency during the pandemic. Communities have been able to keep going even amidst crisis. Part of this is attributed by interviewees to the natural hardiness and resourcefulness of rural residents. However, the interviewees from this study also described an additional level of strength, perseverance and focus as a result of community building. For example, one said,

We had done the pre-work but did not know how it would impact us in crisis. One thing we learned was that we still had things going so we could continue that focus and not get all caught up in the drama of the day.

9 Capacity to be a credible and trusted source of information

During the pandemic, people have wanted a dependable, credible place to go, voice to hear and person to trust. As a result of community building, people in communities were able to access a credible source and a trusted group of people. For example, one said,

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.

10 Capacity to embody community building principles

As significant as any capacity, this study revealed that people involved in community building through FICB have embraced the principles of community building and are embodying those in their lives and work in the community. These principles have been clearly exhibited in their response to the pandemic. For example, one said,

When we first started doing the practices of community building, we were at stage one, and then at stage two, going slowly with each one. And now we're kind of spinning all the time. We're in all of them all the time now.

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

Community builders were able to put into action innumerable steps to serve and strengthen their communities during the pandemic. The following is a brief list of areas of actions and examples of what it looked like:

Networking

- Mutual aid network
- Mobilizing volunteers
- Information sharing through resource list

Food Security

- Direct emergency funds for food pantry
- Emergency food distribution
- Distributed garden containers
- Support of small farms

Tech Support

- Zoom and Facebook Live training
- Social media connections
- Website resource pages

Strategy Training

- Crisis response
- Leadership development skills
- Cultivate creative thinking
- Anti-racist training

Investment in Local Businesses

- Gift card drive
- Resource round-up emails
- Website with information on local businesses

Support Local Families

- Activities and events for children
- Mutual aid helpline
- Book give-aways
- Student aid (meals, resources)

Communication

- Sharing pandemic and community information through social media
- COVID-19 resource lists
- Community groups via virtual meetings
- Promoting local businesses online and through social media

These examples are only a partial list of the many tangible actions taken by community builders to serve their communities during the time of the pandemic.

The community already had a **CULTURE** of care and commitment to serve

Community building has developed cultural features within communities that have contributed to community strength, resilience, and commitment serving them well during the pandemic. Among the elements of culture revealed through the community interviews are the following, including representative quotes from the interviewees.

Community self-assurance - I think people kind of stand up. We've got a good number of people who volunteer. I'm pretty impressed.

Community care - All of this brought us closer to finding and taking care of the people.

Community excitement - It's people feeling grateful for other people caring and doing things. And I think that this is maybe hard for people from the outside just to see. But we also see in these meetings that we are going to in around that those people are telling us stories about how they're so excited about what we've done and what's going on.

Community power - We were walking around like las chicas poderosas (super women) in the community.

Community adaptability - I think of those moments of remembering why we're here, and that we can squish through the gaps and the hole under the door and whatever.

Community authenticity - I just say I want to take vulnerability. That's what I want to take forward, greater vulnerability. And that's something that came straight from Ford.

Community vision - I'm starting to see the results of what we learned to do with the West Valley visioning project. The communities are starting to come together.

Community confidence - The culture that's been created around the teams and around the program has allowed the team the authority to do what they deem is right. It allowed us not to hesitate not to question whether this was the right move or not.

Community courage - I didn't have any fear about... should I do this? It was just, of course, why wouldn't I use this resource that we have to draw people in.

Community resourcefulness - Con el apoyo de este grupo, ahora sabemos que podemos seguir adelante, buscando los medios. (With the support of this group, now we know that we can advance ourselves, searching for our own solutions.)

Community consideration - Everyone is on high alert for making connections. I can't do this by myself. We can each connect with a few people and then suddenly we have this powerhouse team and we're designing a dozen websites.

Community sacrifice for others - We've also seen in the community a lot more people helping people with the pandemic. And people are calling their neighbors and grocery shopping for their neighbors and just checking in and seeing what they need. It's just the community getting together to help each other, which has been really good to see.



The challenges to responding to the pandemic

Despite the powerful effects of community building during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data reveal the presence of significant challenges that at time have thwarted the efforts of communities. Among the most significant challenges are the following, including representative quotes from the interviewees:

Challenging contexts

- **Pre-existing hardship** - I do believe, especially families with children who are young...there are some pretty dire circumstances for some families in the first place.
- **People experiencing vulnerabilities** - The elderly, and people with young families too. They need attention also.

Lack of access to resources

- **Lack of access to services** - There are a number of families who are already in very difficult living circumstances and we just don't have the services.
- **Lack of access to social services** - There are various social services that people have to go a long way to access.

Difficulties of inclusion

- **Difficulty of getting to people who are yet unreached** - We're getting together more but still there are those people that are very hard to reach. It's still hard to reach people.
- **Involving communities of color** - I think there are the opportunities that we may be missing because we don't have good ambassadors for some of the communities of color, which exist in our region but are not real visible at least to me.
- **Facing issues of racial inequity** - [The current elevation of issues of racial injustice] has really shined a light and a magnifying glass on some problems and cracks that have been really hurting people and are hard to talk about.
- **Political divisions** - The current experience of cultural and political disunity is inhibiting the ability of community builders to make progress on collective aims.

Barriers to connectivity

- **Barriers to connectivity** - We have connectivity issues because a lot of those places barely have cell phone service.
- **Gaps in internet service and skills** - We've seen gaps in internet service in particular with students and the older adult population. And it's not even just access; there is a huge skill gap.

Communicating to people

- **Reaching those in need** - We know that there's a lot of people in our community that have lost their jobs and they're struggling and they could have been in crisis to begin before this all started on and if they weren't, they might be now. How do we get the word out to them about the food bank?
- **Unawareness of services** - I just don't think that people know enough about it to be able to take advantage of it.
- **Communicating to the hard to reach** - One of the greatest challenges was, and probably still is, the ability to reach people with information because not everybody receives information in the same way.

- **People who are not visible** - One of my concerns is that there are still community members that we don't have a relationship with that might be in need, and we don't even know it.

Infrastructure is needed

- **Lack of infrastructure to reach everyone** - It's a small community, and there's no internet cafes or anything. They don't have that or they never had it or people live far enough out where [internet communication] won't work.
- **Lack of physical space** - This is our largest capacity problem. We don't have a place for people to access social services and meet with people.

Greater people capacity needed

- **More people to help** - I think there is a capacity gap in the sense of people. We've got the pipe right, but it needs to be wider. There needs to be more folks those first few weeks. It was just so much. It was a tsunami. We needed about 15 more people on this boat.
- **Lack of coordination with government** - I do think that interaction with the government and policymaking to help each other out and have that governmental backing is very important.



How the partnership with FICB helped communities respond to the pandemic

Support from FICB staff

The data clearly show the impact of the presence of and support of FICB staff. It was important that they were close by, in touch, reaching out and providing personal and responsive support to community builders.

Long-term investment and responsiveness of funding

The commitment, flexibility and responsiveness of the funding from the Foundation allowed community builders to take action on the things that mattered most to the community without having to be burdened by the customary restrictions of traditional, short-term, project-based funding models.

Capacity building in community building principles

One of the clearest insights from the interviews is the value of the learning and practicing community building principles. Community builders understood and practiced the principles of community building. They were skilled. They exercised good community building form as they responded to the pandemic. The principles of FICB were embedded in their perspectives and approaches. This greatly increased their effectiveness.

Identification with other community builders

The experience of having an identity as a community builder and being associated with other rural community builders contributed to the ability of people to be steady during the pandemic, know what to do, continue the course despite the unknowns and have confidence in their abilities.

Learning together

Community builders experience the staff of FICB as partners and accountability in learning. This partnership encourages them to hold a posture of curiosity and responsiveness to the community. Being co-learners with FICB strengthens their ability to listen, reflect and strive to understand the needs of the community and determine how to respond.



Seven recommendations for communities moving forward

The data reveal seven factors making communities stronger, nimbler and more capable to meet the needs of people in the community during the pandemic:

1 Learn and practice community building principles. Communities that knew [community building principles](#) and had reflected on their own community building process were well positioned to respond to the needs of the community. They had connections, capacity and a culture that allowed them to take action quickly and effectively.

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. They had a feel for how to respond well to others because they had experienced it for themselves.

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 those to the needs of the pandemic. They were able to adjust and pivot, using what was already working and had been developed in the past to activate for this time of need.

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. They were able to utilize a breadth and variety of channels to meet the various needs of the community during the time of crisis.

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. Community building takes time. The communities who have been at it longer seemed to have better resiliency than those just starting their community building journey. They had years of community trust to draw on. They had experience facing difficulties using community building approaches. They had presence, poise and capacity to do something meaningful for the community.

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. The practice of profound inclusion helped people reach those who are hard to reach and gave them knowledge and skills to find and connect with people who are often overlooked during a crisis.



Five recommendations for community building service providers and funders

In reflecting on the findings, community builders and FICB staff identified responses for the future:

1 Increase the personal support for community builders during times of emergency response.

The personal support community builders experienced during the pandemic by FICB staff and community builders from other communities proved to be remarkably valuable and appreciated. Some still express a desire for greater attention to be given to providing support networks during times like this.

2 Maximize the learning between and among communities about emergency response practices.

The findings of this study reveal an array of productive insights emerging from this time and context of community building that could be used for further training, inspiration and recommendations going forward. This could be accomplished through learning exchanges, case studies or intentional conversations designed for communities to learn from each other.

3 Mobilize broad-based response to fill gaps in rural systems.

Many of the challenges facing rural community builders are significant and systemic, requiring a regional response and substantial investment of resources and public will. The challenges of having local access to social services, health services or internet services, for example, significantly confound the ability of a rural community to respond to a crisis. In response, communities would benefit from organized advocacy for infrastructure upgrades and services to communities.

4 Consider long-term investments in rural community building.

We have seen that community building is long-term work, and it is most impactful when supported with long-term investments. Supporting communities as they develop connections, capacity, community-led action and a community building culture pays off in everyday community work and during crises.

5 Demonstrate the value of community building for emergency response.

The data strongly confirm the value of community building in building resilience, stability and responsiveness in rural communities to respond to crises and emergencies. Communicating the results of this study could encourage more attention, investment and appreciation for community building in the future.

Conclusion

The study reveals an array of productive insights emerging from this time and context of community building that acknowledges and honors residents for taking the lead and working together to make things better in their communities.

"The people see us as leaders now during the pandemic. We actively give priority to those who need the most help. We couldn't have done that without this work."

It also reaffirms and inspires the work of FICB staff as community building practitioners that coach and mentor the rural communities they serve.

Thank you to...

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