



## How Philanthropy Can “Go to Where the People Are”

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Lessons Learned through Building Community  
with Field Coordinators

May 2023

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## Executive Summary

Across the region that The Ford Family Foundation serves, a growing movement of community builders is leading the way for more inclusive, responsive communities that meet the needs of children, young people and families. These individuals — from city government employees to nonprofit leaders, community organizers and business owners — implement the Foundation’s Community Building Approach and draw on a network of other committed rural advocates. Humbly positioned at the epicenter of this movement are unique employees of The Ford Family Foundation: Field Coordinators.

Emerging from a long history of different strategies aimed at building rural capacity, the Field Coordinator role is unique in the field of philanthropy and the Foundation’s rural region. Field Coordinators serve as leaders and agents for change in the communities they represent — attentive listeners, keen observers, relentless asset seekers, tireless encouragers, proactive conveners, strategic delegators, committed champions and patient partners — who see and illuminate possibilities so that others might create the vision and lead the charge in rural communities.

In response to requests from peer foundations in the region and nationally, this report summarizes key findings about how the Field Coordinator strategy has evolved to shape the Foundation’s philanthropic practice and culture. Beginning with an overview of organizational history, the report then describes the Field Coordinator role in-depth, including how it is distinct from other traditional roles in philanthropy. Lessons learned from implementing this unique role follow and describe the impact of Field Coordinators on the Foundation as well as on the communities they serve. The report ends with a discussion of some ongoing questions that remain as the Field Coordinators continue to support a growing community building movement across a vast rural region, continuously meeting communities “where they are.”



“It is so inspiring to walk alongside these communities as they discover their power and shape their community. And while capacity has been built and projects accomplished, the most magical part of this work is to see potential made manifest and community pride and unity grow.”

**Director, Rural Community Building**



## Introduction

In 2015, when The Ford Family Foundation began to shift its rural community building strategy from “leadership development” to “community development,” a new staff position — Field Coordinator — played a significant role in implementing the change. Neither program officers nor grant makers, Field Coordinators are remote employees charged with extending the reach of the Foundation in the rural communities and regions where they live. In developing their craft and carrying out their responsibilities they have simultaneously informed a new generation of philanthropic practice.

The first three Field Coordinators were hired by the Rural Community Building department in June 2016. Two were graduates of the Foundation’s much-loved leadership program. The third had deep roots in Siskiyou County and extensive lived experience with non-profits there. Three others would join the team as the years unfolded. At the time of publication, one more Field Coordinator bringing lived and professional experience from an Eastern Oregon tribe has been hired, and the Foundation is recruiting to fill two more open positions.

Only six months after the first Field Coordinators reported for duty, the Foundation launched its new Learning and Knowledge Management department. From the outset, the two departments collaborated regularly on evaluation and internal learning projects, from defining outcomes for the evolving rural community building practice to documenting how the new Field Coordinator role was unfolding.

Over six years of co-learning, the entire organization has witnessed firsthand how the Field Coordinators have repeatedly adapted to

changing circumstances. The Foundation has lost two of the Field Coordinators originally involved in this research project; one left the region and the other, lamentably, has passed away. The communities the Foundation serves — indeed, our country as well — has experienced intense social change. Economic challenges, the threat of annual wildfires, and social and racial injustice remain. Meanwhile, the Foundation underwent a strategic planning process and grew significantly in size. Field Coordinators have been at the center of this change. They remain a steady presence rural communities can count on, and they have helped the Foundation improve in the process.

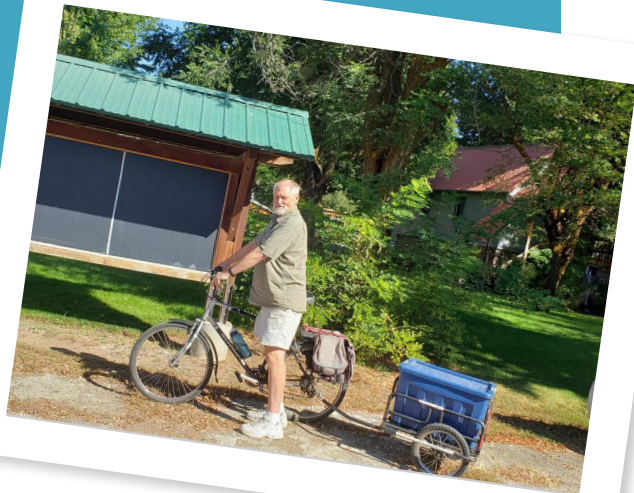
## Data Collection

Research methods have evolved alongside the emerging strategy associated with the Field Coordinator position. The methods have embraced an exploratory research and developmental evaluation approach. Most of the data are qualitative, collected over the past six years in a variety of settings and formats that include but are not limited to:

- Individual interviews with Foundation staff (past and present) and community partners, including those in field-based roles that preceded Field Coordinators
- Focus groups with key rural residents and collaborators
- Field Coordinator activity logs that tracked, categorized and summarized how those in the role spent their time over a one-year period (February 2017-2018)
- Instrument development, such as the Field Coordinator Practice Profile (Appendix A), to help articulate and summarize critical activities and attributes of the new role
- Facilitated group reflections for sense-making

Field Coordinators themselves have been key partners in the sense-making process, along with the leaders of the Rural Community Building department.





## Preparing the Way for Field Coordinators

The Ford Family Foundation’s Ford Institute Leadership Program provided training for more than 6,000 rural residents across the Foundation’s territory in the early 2000s. This effort centered on a strong partnership with a rural intermediary organization, Rural Development Initiatives. As the investment approached the decade mark, staff saw the Foundation’s need for some form of field staff. Over a period of nearly six years, multiple models had been proposed and attempted. Each one helped illuminate what the Foundation would ultimately need in the Field Coordinator role.

As early as 2010, staff proposed the concept of Circuit Riders. This position would have been Foundation employees who lived in rural places, helping deliver leadership curriculum and offering the perspective of the Foundation’s program officers locally. Foundation leadership was not warm to the idea at the time, so the Rural Community Building department proposed and received approval for the idea of Ford Community Fellows. Fellows were rural residents “practicing the art of community building.” They received a stipend but were not employees. The Fellows championed their communities and Foundation staff collaborated closely with them, but the effort was part-time, and Fellows could not work directly on behalf of the Foundation because they were not employees.

With Foundation leadership still uncertain about field-based staff, Community Coaches were the next and final predecessor to Field Coordinators. Coaches were consultants who would build relationships, highlight assets and help communities

take their work to the next level. They could live anywhere in Oregon or Siskiyou County, rural or urban, and work in any rural community. There were two main drawbacks. Rural residents gave strong feedback that Community Coaches needed to live, work and play in the areas they served, not be based anywhere in the region. In addition, the word “coach” had a patronizing connotation, suggesting that these people somehow knew more than those they served. This was not the right message. Just prior to launch, the program was disbanded because it didn’t seem to fit where the Foundation was heading. Meanwhile, Board support, leadership appetite and staff capacity were aligning around readiness for field-based employees.

The time had come to attempt a Field Coordinator strategy. Staff carefully considered how to name the position. The term “coordinator” felt more descriptive of the envisioned relationship between these new Foundation employees and rural communities. It suggested being part of the community and not somehow separate from other residents. It was also more politically neutral, especially compared to other possible titles, such as “community organizer” or “field organizer.” When leaders of the Rural Community Building department brought a proposal and detailed the history described here to the Foundation’s Board of Directors in late 2015, the Board approved the first Field Coordinator positions.



## Understanding the Role

Because the Field Coordinator role is so unlike most positions in philanthropy, it helps to be clear about what Field Coordinators are not. First and foremost, they are not program officers. Second, they are not charged with leading efforts in communities, at least not in the traditional sense. However, Field Coordinators are unique “leaders” and agents for change in the communities they serve – attentive listeners, keen observers, relentless asset seekers, tireless encouragers, proactive conveners, strategic delegators, committed champions and patient partners – who see and illuminate possibilities so that others might create the vision and lead the charge in rural communities. They are the Foundation’s “ground truthers,” ensuring that programmatic strategies never stray too far from the realities in rural communities. Because they are embedded in rural places, they position the organization to respond quickly and authentically when needs arise, as historically transpired in 2020.

### What is a Field Coordinator?

Field Coordinators are place-based positions that represent The Ford Family Foundation across its departments in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, California, to support the Foundation’s work at local and regional levels. Field Coordinators help rural residents see possibility and take the lead to build their community’s future. This work is done through supporting community listening, engagement, planning, action, celebration and reflection. Field Coordinators build trusting relationships with community members to support long-term, sustainable community improvement and help connect residents to resources from The Ford Family Foundation and other sources. — Original Field Coordinator job description (2016)



## Community Building is in Our DNA

The Field Coordinator strategy is based on an organizational ethos The Ford Family Foundation holds dear: relationships truly are our most precious asset. Although the minority of the state’s population lives in rural areas, Oregon’s rural geography is vast and diverse. The needs of small and geographically isolated communities (places the USDA calls “frontier and remote”) compared to those along the interstate corridor are distinct; the coast differs from the high desert; small towns in the mountains do not have the same economies as those in the valleys. Field Coordinators bring the depth of lived experience and hold the relationships in rural areas that is needed for a foundation of this size to affect local conditions and systems change.

This same approach is reflected in programmatic work across the Foundation. Program staff in the Children, Youth and Families department nurture long-term relationships that are key to investments in early childhood education; the flagship scholarship programs hold at their core personal connections with each of the over 200 Scholars who join the Ford Family community annually; and staff at all levels are encouraged to engage in the community where they live as stakeholders in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County’s future.

In addition to forming and maintaining personal and professional relationships, the tenets below undergird both the Field Coordinator strategy and the Foundation’s approach to philanthropy in our region.



## Rural Community Building Approach

### Enfoque en Desarrollo Comunitario Rural





### ***Follow the lead of the community.***

The Field Coordinator role supports rural communities to take ownership of processes and solutions to locally identified issues. Field Coordinators “actively wait” for the right time to intervene; they resist leading but gently encourage and nudge local leaders. Moving at the pace of the community both maximizes the Foundation’s impact in the region and ensures sustainability of local efforts in the long-term. This keeps the community’s priorities at the center of projects rather than tilting toward the Foundation’s objectives or strategic priorities. Flexibility and “walking alongside” rather than leading efforts in communities is critical to success.

### ***Insist on profound inclusivity.***

At times following the lead of the community is complicated by local or national politics and discourse, disagreements within communities about paths forward and more. Holding tightly to profound inclusion, a key principle of the Community Building Approach, means that a Field Coordinator always seeks to keep relationships intact and bring excluded or unheard voices into the conversation. Field Coordinators use holistic, whole-person strategies to build relationships

with and among community members. One Field Coordinator known for her “party with a purpose” approach shared that she sees her role as “carving out space and opportunities for people to engage as their authentic selves.” One example is suggesting a lively venue for a planning meeting: Rather than a board room after business hours, she takes the “meeting” to a local park. “Kids can play on the swings, and food is provided — I can make that work!”

### ***Lead with relationships, not money.***

Rather than engaging through the lens of monetary investment, Field Coordinators look for any opportunity where residents of a community can simply come together. Distributing money is often required for this — providing child care services, buying a meal, renting a community space — but it is not the goal. In fact, it is by design that the Field Coordinators are not program officers. This provides some layer of protection in their dual role as community members and employees of the Foundation. Program staff making grants have the benefit of turning to Field Coordinators for insider knowledge of local dynamics and organizational capacity. Likewise, Field Coordinators can refer funding opportunities to program staff.

### ***Embrace community priorities as the Field Coordinators’ priorities.***

Because community energy for action can focus on many different issues or needs, Field Coordinators are not bound by a particular programmatic focus as a program officer traditionally would be. They cast a wider net, supporting those who build community generally. “Place” serves as the organizing principle. Recently with the Foundation’s adoption of a new ten-year strategic plan, Field Coordinators have leaned into community projects aligned with intended focus areas that prioritize children and families. When they follow the lead of the community as mentioned above, they look for places where the Foundation’s resources might add value to existing assets and what the community wants to achieve.



Sometimes Field Coordinators can help a community recognize assets it did not know it had or make connections to people and resources it might not have accessed otherwise. Because Field Coordinators sit at both Foundation and community tables, they have a vantage point on opportunities that might otherwise go unrecognized. As one colleague shares:

“In the communities I serve, I act as a connector that bridges and closes gaps. When we support capacity building in marginalized communities, it’s often at a very early stage, almost a discovery phase. In communities that have been historically marginalized, it can be hard for people to see their value or community talents. We open up opportunities so that communities can recognize their assets and the type of resources they need. Then we bring hope — and, critically, resources — that enable the community to take action on its own.”

**Field Coordinator**

## Lessons Learned

The relationship-driven Field Coordinator role has become an essential tool toward The Ford Family Foundation’s mission to serve the rural communities of Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The role grounds the Foundation’s strategy, while allowing it to operate responsively to community needs. While some ongoing questions are listed at the end of this report, the successes associated with Field Coordinator strategy warrant continued investment, further study and even future expansion aligned with the Foundation’s strategic goals and needs and opportunities across our rural region.

The impact of Field Coordinators is both internal and external, as the lessons learned below help illustrate. The first five lessons focus primarily on the benefits and challenges of Field Coordinators with respect to communities and community building efforts. The last four highlight how implementation of the Field Coordinator role has changed the Foundation and contributed to its deepening impact.

### **Lesson 1: To start, Field Coordinators build on their individual strengths and community connections.**

Each iteration of the Field Coordinator role unfolds slightly differently depending on community conditions as well as the staff member’s experience and expertise. All leverage existing relationships and forge new ones based on the Foundation’s footprint in the region and their own connections, interests and skills. While this initially created some concern in terms of consistency and replicability, we have concluded that the benefits in the long-run far outweigh the challenges, especially now that core practices for all Field Coordinators have been articulated. See Appendix A.



## **Lesson 2: The core attributes of Field Coordinators provide unique contributions to local community building movements.**

Accessibility, ability to listen and lived experience in the community are essential characteristics of any Field Coordinator role. Field Coordinators must be patient and attentive as the community finds its way, something we call “active waiting.” In addition, community members must see Field Coordinators as neutral, never taking sides, and dedicated to the whole community’s success. As described in the section below, this can be especially difficult in a context experiencing community polarization.

“Listening to communities has been my most important skill — never stop listening! And the ability to partner with other Field Coordinators that bring new skills and experience to the communities I serve provides an extra layer of support. This is more than just a job — it’s a way of life. The relationships and trust we have with communities feel more like family.”

**Field Coordinator**

## **Lesson 3: Field Coordinators help communities feel authentically seen and heard by the Foundation.**

Rural residents who collaborate with Field Coordinators consistently report their appreciation for having an employee of the Foundation in their midst. This added value shows itself in both tangible and intangible ways. Residents feel pride in their community and hope for its future. Peer funders and partners also rely heavily on the perspective of our Field Coordinators for real-time, on-the-ground learning and information.

“Sometimes just knowing that The Ford Family Foundation is in their corner and showing up as a co-learner is all that is needed for the community to take a first brave step.”

**Field Coordinator**

## **Lesson 4: Living into the role locally requires a careful balancing act.**

Field Coordinators provide access to the Foundation, but they don’t “write checks.” They facilitate conversations and help identify next steps, but they must always resist the urge to lead or own the work. Even community members recognize the tension Field Coordinators must balance as outside insiders. This is a skill that can take Field Coordinators quite a while to develop, especially depending on their prior professional experience and positionality in the community.

## **Lesson 5: “In perpetuity” takes on new meaning in a bounded geography.**

The Ford Family Foundation exists in perpetuity to serve a targeted rural region in which it is also embedded. When circumstances fluctuate in ways that might cause a more distant funder to “back out,” The Ford Family Foundation, especially the Field Coordinators, must remain in relationship and navigate local complexities as they unfold. This is not an easy feat. While not being able to easily “walk away” could be considered a potential risk in the strategy, the fact that the Foundation is “all in” is part of what builds trust and leads to positive outcomes over the long haul.



## **Lesson 6: Being placed-based employees of the Foundation matters.**

Community members share that the relationships they have built with Field Coordinators give them a sense of having a direct connection to the Foundation, an organization that might otherwise be “out of reach.” Likewise, Field Coordinators are seen as an extension of the Foundation into their community, suggesting particular interest in their local circumstances. This raises questions explored below about how the Foundation selects communities that benefit from Field Coordinators.

“I travel from community to community with a figurative pick and shovel to uncover local ‘pockets’ of energy. I break bread with residents to learn about their culture, history, the old ways and the new ways. I listen to their stories. I ask about their needs, issues, challenges, hopes and plans. Then, I connect them to our peer network of community builders, the grid of philanthropy and the public sector to find resources that will fit their vision and plans. I earn their trust by remaining present, engaged and committed.”

**Field Coordinator**

## **Lesson 7: Professional development and supports for Field Coordinators may vary from those provided for other types of staff roles.**

As the Foundation’s first “remote workers,” Field Coordinators had distinct needs as employees from the outset. As with all employees, they were given a Foundation credit card. Field Coordinators are encouraged to use it to remove barriers and facilitate community building, such as buying meals, printing materials or arranging child care for community meetings. It took some time to “right-size” the discretionary resources Field

Coordinators could have at their disposal. Early professional development included shadowing each other and troubleshooting common community building situations together as a team.

## **Lesson 8: Field Coordinators’ insider knowledge of local context informs Foundation-wide strategy.**

When Field Coordinators participate in Foundation staff meetings and review grants from their region, their colleagues count on them to provide provocative insights and candid feedback based on their lived rural realities. In the field of philanthropy, it is challenging to receive this kind of honest and critical input from beneficiaries. Field Coordinators tell it like it is. Likewise, it can be hard for Field Coordinators to be impartial to Foundation decisions that clearly impact the communities they know and love. However, they are true professionals and continuously take on this balancing act.

## **Lesson 9: Being a Field Coordinator necessitates cross-departmental work and representation.**

As Field Coordinators work in community, they see immediately how particular issues cut across the Foundation’s programmatic work. For example, many rural communities are working to improve access to affordable, high-quality child care. This is a challenge that requires the work of multiple departments, something Field Coordinators were experiencing firsthand from the beginning. They were among the first to see the opportunity for departments to better work together as they heard from parents looking for care, employers losing workers due to child care challenges and child care business owners struggling to make ends meet. “Child care” is now a named woven strategy at the Foundation, due in part to the wisdom of Field Coordinators.

As The Ford Family Foundation recently developed its 10-year strategic plan, the influence of the Field Coordinators on the organization was readily apparent. The concept of “weaving” the work of departments and programs (connecting across programmatic departments and removing

content silos), a central component of the new strategy, began in many respects with the Field Coordinators who couldn't help but operate holistically as they engaged with their communities. This is because rural residents see Field Coordinators not as representatives of particular programs or departments but as employees of the Foundation as a whole. As a result, Field Coordinators must respond to the full range of inquiries from residents. When do scholarship applications open? Which grants are currently available for early childhood programs? Are there economic development resources? Are there new data reports available? When should I apply for a Good Neighbor grant? From the outset of their roles, Field Coordinators saw opportunities for better connecting and integrating the Foundation's work because they needed to speak to its entirety. Their ongoing learning and regular collaboration with program staff helped the rest of the organization see the value of this kind of synergy, readying the Foundation for a new way of working.



## Questions for the Future

Despite the layered successes associated with the Field Coordinator strategy, significant questions and potential challenges remain – many associated with equitably covering geography or defining the limits of the Foundation's responsive ethos. These questions often manifest themselves as tensions in the life of the organization, its staff and the rural communities in which they live. The following warrant consideration as the Foundation expands the number of Field Coordinators on staff and implements its ten-year strategic plan.

**Geography:** Every community could benefit from a Field Coordinator, but it would be impossible to staff at that level. So which areas in the region should have Field Coordinators? And why? How many Field Coordinators would be ideal, especially in relationship with other community-based strategies?

**Transparency:** A related question: How should the Foundation share information about Field Coordinators with the public, especially with other communities? Currently, the Foundation shares very little about the Field Coordinators – how we hire, where we locate them or our rationale for their assignment. In truth, this has happened through a unique convergence of opportunity and need. It's not easy to envision a purely strategic approach to hiring Field Coordinators, but the Foundation seeks to move in that direction. The people who tend to know about Field Coordinators as a resource are those who already work with them.

**Content Expertise:** While we have a strong sense of the community building skills that Field Coordinators need, there are more questions about what additional content background is most helpful. Should Field Coordinator content expertise align with the Foundation's named strategic priorities? Should they receive on-the-job training in particular content, such as mediation or conflict resolution?

**Cultural Communities:** Communities are not always geographic. With "profound inclusion" at the center of the Rural Community Building Approach, how can the Foundation ensure that

Field Coordinators represent the diversity of rural spaces with respect to communities and groups that might be under-represented or overlooked? For example, the Foundation now has significant experience working with Latinx communities statewide, but are there other groups or communities that would be appropriate to work with in this manner? As an example, multiple rural residents raised questions about how the Foundation works with tribal communities over the course of this research.

**Insider/Outsider:** Field Coordinators hold allegiance to both the communities in which they live and the Foundation for which they work. How can they best be supported in holding those tensions by their Foundation colleagues?

**Power Dynamics:** Field Coordinators live the realities of rural inequities and philanthropy’s potential to make a difference. They do not have direct power over grantmaking and other financial resources, but they are correctly perceived as having direct access to the Foundation. Managing these power dynamics is always true for philanthropic staff, but Field Coordinators must hold and navigate this dynamic tangibly every day.

**Social Division:** The last few years have presented historic levels of social complexity and political division. Field Coordinators find themselves in the thick of it on a regular basis. How do Field Coordinators project neutrality when the community finds itself divided? What does it mean to be “neutral” in situations of injustice? What additional skills might help them play a constructive role in such situations? Is this a realistic expectation?

**Vulnerability:** Working so directly in rural communities, including the Foundation’s hometown, exposes the Foundation to new questions and potential criticism. Where the Foundation points its resources like time, attention and money has power. Which community meetings do Foundation staff attend? Who do they meet with? Who don’t they meet with? How far are they willing to push the community, and what does that communicate to residents about the Foundation’s values? As the Foundation increasingly embraces

its role as a rural advocate, how can it continue to be perceived as “neutral”? New vulnerabilities and the possibility for disagreement and criticism surfaces as we chart the course. How does the Foundation best manage the potential reputational risk and these new dynamics?

**Succession:** Field Coordinators are not plug and play positions. The Foundation cannot simply replace one with another. Each Field Coordinator needs to operate in a way that will leave capacity behind with or without another Field Coordinator in that particular geography. How can the Foundation best prepare for such transitions organizationally and in communities?

## Closing Thoughts

Over the last several years, implementation of the Field Coordinator role has increasingly distinguished The Ford Family Foundation among its peers as an organization that not only believes in the power of rural communities to build the future they want to see, but also trusts communities to know what is right for their place and people. Many see the organization as modeling and leading “trust-based philanthropy” without the label. The Field Coordinator strategy is a key reason for that. Without the Field Coordinators, it is unlikely that the Foundation would have been able to lead a statewide response to community challenges, such as the historic wildfires of 2020 or the COVID-19 pandemic. With success comes new questions, potential vulnerabilities as well as infinite possibilities.

“What I can tell you is that this makes a huge difference for the communities we work with. They see the Foundation as a friend and partner because of this role.”

**Field Coordinator**



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## Appendix A: Field Coordinator Practice Profile

The Field Coordinator Practice Profile is an example of an early outcome of the exploratory evaluation partnership between Learning and Knowledge Management and the Rural Community Building departments. This diagram on the following page was developed to make explicit the essential functions of the Field Coordinator role at various time points in the community building trajectory.





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