Community Foundations for Civic Health

LEARNING & ACTION IN 2025 AND DIRECTIONS FOR 2026

CFLeads
Community Foundations
Leading Change

Rhode Island Foundation

Acknowledgements

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Introduction: A National Crisis, Lived and Solved Locally

The erosion of democracy in America is obvious at the national level, but it is also evident in local polarization, mistrust, and alienation between people and their institutions. People are **lonelier than ever**, more divided, and largely disconnected from opportunities to solve problems together and inform public decision-making —even at the local level, where the opportunities to participate *should* be more accessible and more directly connected to their daily lives.

As a result, many people have lost confidence in the basic idea that Americans can talk with and not past one another, build community together, make collective decisions, and solve common problems. When people lose that sense of collective capacity locally, this **affects how they think about national institutions**[1] and a national shared identity as well.

So while it may seem difficult to focus on local civic health amid the distractions of a national election year, these questions and opportunities are in fact vital for both dealing with our crises and planning for a better future. The changes we need nationally may be best achieved locally, at scale.

Strengthening civic health and building common ground

For democracy to thrive—and for civic health to flourish—people need daily experiences of civic practice: opportunities where their voices are heard, they can contribute, and their connections deepen.

These everyday experiences can build trust, strengthen social bonds, and remind people why our political system is worth improving and defending. They build common ground by:

- Engaging people of different backgrounds and beliefs in public decision-making, in ways that allow them to share experiences, learn about issues, consider options, develop recommendations, and plan for action.
- Engaging people of different backgrounds and beliefs who want to solve problems together, and supporting their work by connecting them with resources and expertise (and celebrating their accomplishments).
- Amplifying the voices of people who aren't always heard, in ways that help others understand those views.
- Providing people with skills and tools that help them build social cohesion and work productively with people of other backgrounds and beliefs.
- Building community among people of different backgrounds and beliefs through events and experiences that are informative, fun, and kid friendly, emphasizing food, music, theater, and other cultural assets.

The path to renewal runs local

The most promising opportunities for advancing this work are the local ones. “There are real limits on how much national funders can accomplish in the Thunderdome of our national politics,” said Daniel Stid of the American Enterprise Institute. “There are some constructive things that can be done nationally, but I really think the opportunity for breakthroughs is at the community level.”

Seeding civic renewal at the local level may seem like slow work, but it isn’t. There are plenty of opportunities for people to connect and work together to solve problems.

And while the fact that people do not feel heard has steadily eroded our trust in community and country, many studies show that a few meaningful civic experiences can have a huge and rapid impact on people’s attitudes.[2, 3, 4, 5]

Foundations as catalysts

Community foundations are poised to lead this shift. As place-based institutions, they understand local dynamics intimately. Their nonpartisan status allows them to convene diverse stakeholders who might not otherwise collaborate. Most importantly, many of them are already trusted by donors, nonprofits, governments, and community members.

Community Foundations for Civic Health (CFCH) was launched in early 2025 to support this work. The CFCH Partnership comprises institutions with distinct strengths and perspectives.

CFLeads
Community Foundations Leading Change

CFLeads is the only national organization exclusively serving community foundations with a focus on community leadership. Through CFLeads, hundreds of community foundations from across the U.S. come together to strengthen their community leadership muscle, share field innovations, and tackle the key issues of our time. With over a decade of leadership in learning, networking, resource sharing, and cohort delivery, CFLeads is a trusted expert in the community foundation field and will lead the initiative.

The National Civic League is a national organization and network of local civic leaders that has inspired, supported, measured, and celebrated civic engagement since 1894. The National Civic League will provide civic health expertise and will bring its deep knowledge of civic measurement, language, and engagement.

Rhode Island Foundation

Rhode Island Foundation, established in 1916, brings strong local leadership and a proven track record of community engagement. Under the leadership of David N. Cicilline, former Member of Congress, Mayor, and Rhode Island State Representative, the Foundation serves as an advocate for the perspectives of community foundations. Rhode Island Foundation will also provide fiscal management and operations support for the regranting to community foundations element of CFCH.

The CFCH Steering Committee has been formed to help guide and advise the initiative. It is made up of leaders in the community foundation field who are knowledgeable and passionate regarding civic health. See the **CFCH Steering Committee members here.**

The goal of CFCH isn't to create a one-size-fits-all model to improve civic health, but to equip each place-based foundation with resources to create tailored strategies to meet their community's specific needs and opportunities.

2025 ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION LEADERS FROM:

168

community foundations represented by

235

community foundation leaders

45

of the 50 U.S. States

Early momentum

In 2025, CFCH convened virtual sessions and a national summit in Chicago that included more than 70 community foundation leaders. In all, CFCH engaged 168 community foundations represented by 235 CEOs, VPs, and other leadership team members of those foundations, which represents the engagement of 45 of the 50 U.S. States and more than 15% of all U.S. community foundations. These meetings revealed unprecedented enthusiasm for civic health initiatives. The depth of engagement and practical ideas generated demonstrate that there isn't just philosophical interest—community foundations are ready to move forward to strengthen civic health.

This report summarizes the learning and action that community foundations have catalyzed in 2025, covering topics like civic health practices, language, measurement, and investment. Most of the quotes in the document were gathered at the Chicago summit. The report concludes with potential directions for future work in 2026 and beyond.

What Do We Mean by Civic Health?

CIVIC HEALTH

All the ways people make decisions, solve problems, and build community together. It has gained greater prominence in part because of research showing that strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and institutions, and positive attachments between community members and the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from better physical health and higher employment rates to better resilience in the face of natural disasters.[6]

Civic health reflects the civic readiness of individuals.

CIVIC READINESS

The knowledge, beliefs, skills, and connections that people need to contribute to their communities. Civic health is also dependent on whether communities have a range of civic opportunities.

CIVIC OPPORTUNITIES

The spaces and infrastructure supported by governments, school systems, other institutions, nonprofit organizations, universities, faith communities, and grassroots groups (and by community foundations themselves) that help people learn, apply, and improve their civic readiness.

When communities exhibit **low levels of civic readiness and have few civic opportunities**, people of different backgrounds and political perspectives are less likely to communicate or work together, which exacerbates **partisan polarization**.[7] When access to civic opportunities and support for civic readiness are distributed inequitably, they **deepen economic and social inequities**.[8]

There are a broad array of ways to both increase the civic readiness of residents and create more civic opportunities. The Civic Health Wheel, adapted from the Institute for Citizens & Scholars, is a non-exhaustive illustration of the many ways that place-based entities, including community foundations, can help residents improve their civic readiness.[9] On the inside of the wheel, you will find the categories of civic opportunities, and on the outside, you will find their corresponding activities and strategies.

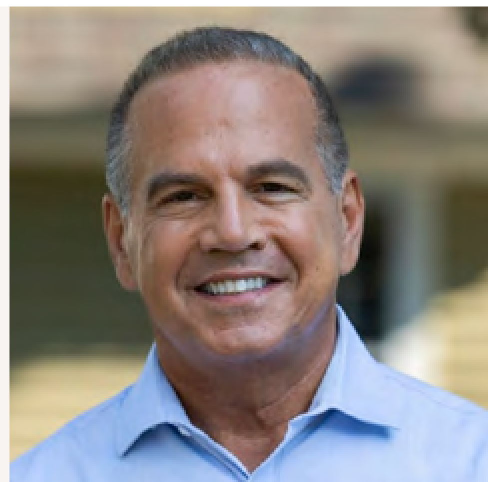
At the Chicago summit, two stories helped capture the meaning and importance of civic health. Dr. Jonathan Collins, a political science professor at Columbia University, told participants that he thinks about civic health as:

> *Whether or not we as a society have 'any given day' strength. When you have to move a couch ... you have to have somebody you can call to help you move the couch. You have to be strong enough to move your part of that couch. And you also want to be somebody that people can call on when they need to move a couch.*
>
> **DR. JONATHAN COLLINS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICS AND EDUCATION, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

For Collins, the "couch" can be confronting climate change, or providing adequate child care, or some other civic challenge. "On any given day, there's going to be a new problem that our communities face," Collins said. "And we have to be, as a society, strong enough to pick up those challenges."

David Cicilline, the president of the Rhode Island Foundation, talked about the decline of civic health in the context of running for office, canvassing door-to-door to ask people for their votes:

> *Years ago, everyone answered their door. But over time, with every election, fewer and fewer people answer their door. I could actually see people home—I see them in the window, I hear the TV. They just are not going to open the door to someone they don't know. It's one little anecdote about that decline in a willingness to just open your door and have a conversation.*
>
> **DAVID CICILLINE, PRESIDENT, RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION**



Dr. Daniel Stid of the American Enterprise Institute put this decline in historical terms. He pointed out that the meeting was occurring near Hull House, the original settlement house established by Jane Addams that became a hallmark of the Progressive Era.

> **"In a time of great disruption, people in that era from the 1890s to 1920s succeeded by building up these associations that brought residents together around shared concerns."**
>
> DR. DANIEL STID, SENIOR FELLOW, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Nurturing civic health includes a broad array of activities and interactions, and the leaders of "Community Foundations for Civic Health" are clear that this breadth both reflects the realities of what is happening in our communities and is key to the success of the initiative. The conversations in Chicago and elsewhere have focused on helping community foundations take stock of this wide-ranging work, find the best language to describe it, measure it effectively, attract more investment in it, and advance it through shared, proactive civic health planning.

The spectrum of engagement, from thick to thin

Effective civic health strategies recognize that communities need different types of engagement opportunities that serve different purposes and reach different populations. Civic participation exists on a spectrum from "thick" to "thin" engagement, and healthy communities need both kinds of opportunities.

THICK ENGAGEMENT

Thick engagement refers to intensive, sustained participation that requires significant time and commitment—citizen assemblies that meet over many weeks, participatory budgeting processes in which residents research and deliberate about spending priorities, and neighborhood planning processes that involve multiple rounds of discussion. These experiences can be transformative for participants and help build civic skills and relationships across differences, while giving people genuine ways to provide input on important decisions. However, these thick opportunities are more difficult to scale because they demand so much from both organizers and participants.

THIN ENGAGEMENT

Thin engagement refers to lighter-touch opportunities that are more accessible and scalable, such as responding to an online survey, 'liking' a cause on social media, contributing to a crowdfunding campaign, or attending a single community meeting. Demetrias Wolverton describes the Kalamazoo Community Foundation's approach:

> *We wanted to make sure we had a strategy to engage values, align residents, and reach urban and rural communities, and the effective way to do that with the dollars that we had was to launch a digital media campaign. I know to a lot of people, social media has become polarizing. But we really want to step into that arena and make sure that we were providing accurate, neutral education around voting, and we've had success with that.*
>
> DEMETRIAS WOLVERTON, CHIEF PEOPLE & PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER, KALAMAZOO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

These "thin" activities may not transform participants' civic identities or give them deep influence, but they create entry points, maintain connections, and can engage far more people than more intensive "thick" processes.

Community foundations and other civic health planners should provide opportunities on both ends of this spectrum rather than choosing one approach over the other.

Civic Health Practices: What Are Community Foundations Doing, and Why?

Community foundations are extending their work to support civic health for a whole range of reasons. In some cases, they are trying to build bridges between different groups of people so that they can act on the things they have in common. As Jillian Youngblood, Executive Director of Civic Genius, observed, "There are dozens and dozens of specific policy proposals, on every topic you can think of, where large majorities of Americans actually agree—but that agreement is not visible."

In other cases, leaders are trying to address long-standing inequities—including ones that were created or exacerbated by the past decisions of the foundations themselves. Ian Bautista, Senior Director of Civic Engagement at the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, describes this motivation at his institution:

We wanted to acknowledge our role in having been part of the system that created structural inequities, exploitation, and unfair practices and results in our community. That's a degree of introspection that I was proud of as I came to the foundation that we were open about what we had done, what we hadn't done, and then how we could move forward to do better.

IAN BAUTISTA, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE GREATER MILWAUKEE FOUNDATION

A third motivation stems from observing the episodic nature of civic engagement in American life. For many people, "being engaged" means voting every two or four years, with little meaningful participation in between. This creates what Demetrias Wolverton, Chief Strategy & Communications Officer of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, calls a feast-or-famine dynamic: "During election years, there's this movement of funds, and then during nonelection years we see a stall out on the access to those dollars and resources."

Community foundations as whole-system thinkers

Underlying many foundations' civic health work is a rejection of simplistic reform proposals. Daniel Stid of the American Enterprise Institute highlights what makes community foundations uniquely positioned for this work:

> *"A unique superpower of community foundations is that you are holding space for the community, you are holistic in your thinking about the range of challenges facing it. As someone who spent many years as a funder in the democracy space, I can tell you there is no shortage of people presuming 'if-only' solutions: if only we had nonpartisan redistricting, or public financing of campaigns, or something else. These are all good things, but none of them is a silver bullet.*
>
> **DR. DANIEL STID, SENIOR FELLOW, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE**

A community foundation's comprehensive view of its community allows it to see civic health not as a single technical problem to be solved but as an ecosystem to be nurtured. Community foundations understand that voting rights, public meeting processes, local journalism, civic education, neighborhood connections, and inclusive decision-making all interrelate. This holistic perspective positions them to support multifaceted approaches rather than betting everything on a single reform.

Community foundations as trusted conveners

Dr. Martin Carcasson, Founder and Director of the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, has spent two decades facilitating public dialogue, and he identifies the convening power of community foundations as a critical ingredient:

The number one insight from my work for twenty years—we've run over five hundred meetings in the community—is that communities need **trusted bridging institutions.**[10] They need conveners and connectors and collaborators and catalysts to help us have the conversations we need to have. And community foundations are really well situated to do that work.

MARTÍN CARCASSON, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION AT COLORADO STATE

This convening capacity derives from several characteristics that distinguish community foundations from other institutions. Unlike government agencies, they're not perceived as partisan political actors. Unlike advocacy organizations, they're not associated with a particular ideological position. Unlike corporate entities, they're not seeking profit. Their missions center on the needs of their community as a whole rather than a particular constituency or cause.

Community foundations as independent parties

Youngblood emphasizes how this trusted position proves especially valuable when organizing inclusive civic processes like citizen assemblies:

> *It's hard to find people in a community who feel unbiased and trustworthy to everyone in the community. But community foundations do that. [They] work really hard at truly walking that nonpartisan line, truly being a trusted convener in the community. I think that holding that space is a real place where community foundations can play a role.*
>
> JILLIAN YOUNGBLOOD. DIRECTOR, DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, NATIONAL CIVIC LEAGUE

The community foundation's convening power extends beyond simply getting people into a room. They often possess deep knowledge of their communities and sustain relationships with populations who are systematically excluded from traditional civic processes. As Youngblood notes, when organizing civic assemblies that use random selection to ensure representative participation, "doing outreach through a place like the community foundation is really critical because they know how to reach all of your 'hard-to-reach' folks and know where they are."

Community foundations as relationship builders

Dr. Melissa Newman, Executive Director of Press Forward Blue Grass at the Blue Grass Community Foundation, frames this capacity as a form of capital: "Of the things that we are doing as an organization is to come to our communities with the power of convening, introductions, and social capital." This social capital—the web of relationships, trust, and mutual obligation that enables collective action—represents a crucial asset for civic health work. Community foundations lend their credibility and relationships to make engagement possible for people who might otherwise be excluded by bureaucratic institutions or processes.

Community foundations as innovators

Beyond creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, some community foundations are working to fundamentally reimagine how communities are empowered to make decisions. This reimagining involves both the creation of new participatory mechanisms and the renovation of existing institutions to make them more accessible and responsive.

Richard Young, whose organization CivicLex partners with the Blue Grass Community Foundation in Lexington, Kentucky, describes the scale of their engagement work:

We bring together residents to meet each other who might be different—thousands of residents over the past eight years. That's led to new civic associations and new organizations that are working to impact policy in a variety of different directions in our community. And we've reimagined how a number of decisions in our community are made, particularly processes.

RICHARD YOUNG, FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CIVICLEX

The impacts extend beyond individual policy outcomes to structural changes in governance. Young notes that his community is preparing "to organize a civic assembly to revise our city charter, to better incorporate residents in decision-making." This work represents a shift from one-off engagement events to the embedding of participatory processes within its fundamental infrastructure.

Community foundations as complementary collaborators

Relationships between community foundations and public institutions such as local governments, school systems, hospitals, libraries, and universities are evolving with respect to these emergent contexts. Rather than operating in parallel spheres, they're developing complementary roles: The community foundation creates broader arenas and safe spaces for discussion, while public institutions open up opportunities for action and change. This partnership allows for a division of labor where foundations can take risks, experiment with new formats, and build trust in ways that might be difficult for government agencies, while those agencies can translate public input into policy and implementation.

Community foundations as civic reformers

Reimagining decision-making doesn't always require the creation of new infrastructure. Sometimes it means making existing civic spaces more welcoming and functional. Dr. Collins, whose research examines public participation, points to school board meetings as an example: "The typical school board meeting now is very bureaucratic. There's a lot of buzzwords, there are a lot of acronyms, and they are spaces that are just not inviting and engaging."

Collins' research demonstrates that small changes can produce significant results and offers an exemplary analogy to a classroom experience:

What I find in my research is that when you make just very subtle tweaks to the meeting space to just make them more accessible, give people more opportunities to not only speak, but also to then receive some sort of response, their trust in the board increases. So does their propensity to participate in the future, and the kinds of things that they say to the board become more solution[s]-oriented.

It's just like a class, right? Do you really like going to the class where you never get to raise your hand and say something to the professor? It's not like a discussion-based class where you can raise your hand, ask questions, and get a response from the professor. You'll like that better, especially if the professor tells you you're smart. I think our civic spaces should be like that, where we bring in people, and we give them an opportunity to speak and be heard and, you know, let them know that they're brilliant.

DR. JONATHAN COLLINS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICS AND EDUCATION, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Other areas of concentration

Beyond working to engage people directly in decision-making and problem-solving, community foundations support a whole array of programs that enhance civic health. Organizations that advance arts-based strategies, civic journalism, civic tech, and youth leadership development are often already supported by their local community foundations, and in many cases have long-standing reputations in their local communities.

CIVIC HEALTH AND THE ARTS

Supporting organizations that use arts and culture as vehicles for civic engagement allows foundations to reach audiences who might not respond to traditional civic programming. Arts-based approaches can make complex issues more accessible, create emotional resonance that motivates participation, and bring together people around shared creative experiences rather than contentious policy debates. These strategies recognize that civic health isn't just about rational deliberation—it also involves emotional connection, cultural expression, and shared experiences of beauty.

CIVIC HEALTH AND LOCAL JOURNALISM

The collapse of local journalism represents a critical threat to civic health. When communities lack reliable sources of information about local government, school boards, and public issues, citizens can't participate meaningfully even if they want to. Some community foundations are responding by supporting new models of civic journalism that fill these gaps. Richard Young describes CivicLex's approach: "CivicLex has a local newsroom that's covered over a thousand public meetings. Our reporting has been used by residents in our community to change dozens of policies, to shift how policies are formed." Much of this work is being supported through the national Press Forward funding initiative.

This isn't journalism for its own sake, but journalism designed to enable civic action. By covering meetings that commercial media ignore, explaining complex issues in accessible ways, and providing information that residents can actually use to engage in decision-making, civic journalism becomes infrastructure that supports all other forms of civic participation.

CIVIC HEALTH AND TECHNOLOGY

Daniel Stid points to Vermont's Front Porch Forum as an example of how technology can support civic connection when platforms are designed to foster comity rather than enmity: "Front Porch Forum is thoughtfully curated, facilitated by humans rather than algorithms. There's a 24-hour waiting period between when you send something in and when it's posted or it's moderated, and there are limits on how much you can post each day."

Such user experience design choices create friction that might seem counterproductive in a world obsessed with seamless, instant communication, but that friction serves a purpose—it slows down strong reactions, creates space for moderation, and prevents the dynamics that make most social media platforms conducive to enmity and discord. The result is a remarkably robust level of local use. According to Stid, 240,000 of 270,000 households in Vermont are taking advantage of the Front Porch Forum.

Stid sees Front Porch as a model for using technology to fortify rather than corrode the fabric of local civic life, which could, as he says, "relocalize or denationalize our politics." Relocalizing our political participation could mitigate the pernicious effects of national polarization by channeling communal energy to the places where it counts the most.

CIVIC HEALTH AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Investing in programs that cultivate the leadership skills of young people serves both immediate and long-term goals. In the near term, youth bring energy, fresh perspectives, and different networks to civic work. Over the long term, civic habits and skills developed during formative years can last a lifetime. For example, CivicLex supports civics education in public schools, which has enabled the growth of new student-driven initiatives like newspapers and clubs.

These types of programs help students take concrete action in their communities, developing both skills and the sense of efficacy that makes **continued engagement more likely**.[11] When students start newspapers or clubs or advocate for policy changes, they experience themselves as capable civic actors—they can experience a real sense of agency that may influence their trajectory as a leader in their community for decades.

MULTICHANNEL PLANNING

As civic health work has proliferated, community foundations have become more clear about the need to reject single-solution thinking. David Cicilline of Rhode Island Foundation articulates this clearly: "As community foundation leaders, we need to recognize that there's not a single civic health initiative, no single thing that, if we just do this, we'll fix our community. We know that it's a million little things." Some community foundation leaders are drawn to this multifaceted approach because they know civic dysfunction doesn't have a single cause. It emerges from multiple reinforcing factors: economic inequality, residential segregation, flawed institutional design, media fragmentation, social atomization, historical grievances, and more. Addressing it requires multiple complementary strategies working across different domains.

The challenge for the willing is to develop what amounts to a multichannel plan—a portfolio of approaches that includes different types of engagement (thick and thin), addresses different dimensions of civic life (information, relationships, decision-making processes), and reaches different populations through different entry points.

Community foundations are among the few organizations that have the capacity, mandate, and resources to develop and sustain such comprehensive approaches.

BUILDING NEW CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Richard Young describes CivicLex as "a new type of civic infrastructure," an organization whose work centers on "helping people understand and get involved in local issues in our community; helping people connect with their neighbors; and reimagining how our community makes decisions." Just as physical infrastructure—roads, water systems, electrical grids—enables economic activity and daily life, civic infrastructure enables democratic participation and collective action. It includes the institutions, processes, spaces, and relationships that allow people to come together, make decisions, solve problems, and govern themselves.

For much of American history, civic infrastructure benefited from a rich ecosystem of membership organizations, labor unions, religious congregations, civic clubs, and local media. This ecosystem has largely collapsed[12] over recent decades, leaving communities without the structures that once connected citizens to each other and to decision-making processes.

Young frames CivicLex's work as rebuilding this infrastructure:

> *All of our work is focused around the intersection of the public and the institutions in our community, so that people feel represented in decision-making and feel like they have a sense of agency. We think that this has huge ramifications, not just obviously for the civic health of our community, but for all things in our community. Every outcome in our community is downstream of how we make decisions.*

As community foundations across the country experiment with different approaches to supporting civic health, they're not just helping their local communities. They're also generating knowledge, models, and proof points that can inform democratic renewal efforts nationally. They're demonstrating that civic infrastructure can be rebuilt, that communities can learn to govern themselves better, that these civic opportunities build bridges between different groups of people, and that community foundations can play a meaningful role in supporting the democratic processes on which all their other work depends.

The Language of Civic Health

Community foundations are navigating a minefield when it comes to how they talk about their work.

Some of the words that once felt safe and clear now carry unexpected weight. Some terms inspire, others alienate, and still others simply confuse. Shannon Green of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) observes that: "We want to communicate and champion the work that we're doing, but we don't want to step in it. And it seems like every word we choose is freighted with all of this meaning."

This linguistic minefield reflects a broader crisis in how we communicate about civic life in polarized times. But recent research, including **reports by PACE**[13], and the experiences of community foundation leaders, reveal that the solution isn't to retreat into silence or bland neutrality. Rather, the moment requires a more sophisticated understanding of how language connects and divides, how meanings shift across audiences, and why clear choice of words within one's own circles matters as much as it does when reaching out to those with different viewpoints and opinions.

The enduring power of “community”

Amid all the uncertainty about language in this space, one word stands out as nearly universally resonant: community. The PACE research tested civic terms among diverse American audiences and found that “community” consistently ranks at the top. “Community is the only word of all 21 terms tested that is #1 across all of those groups,” Green explains. “In terms of political signals, in terms of age, in terms of urban or rural, ‘community’ is a word that you can all rely on and lean on and feel comfortable and confident in doing that.”

This finding carries particular significance for community foundations, whose very name anchors them in this powerful concept. While other institutions may struggle to find common ground with diverse constituencies, community foundations possess this #1 claim: an identity rooted in the one term that brings people together rather than driving them apart. Community foundations must treat their association with “community” not as a given but as a valuable resource to be protected and leveraged strategically.

Tactical language about bridging and resistance

Not all civic language carries the same emotional or political valence. The PACE research reveals a spectrum that extends from “bridge-y” terms that resonate positively—and thus allow connection to the widest possible audience—to “equity” language that signals alignment with particular justice-oriented movements.

Bridge-y language typically emphasizes shared values, common ground, and inclusive processes. It aims to create a space where people with different perspectives can come together. Equity language, by contrast, signals solidarity with specific causes and communities, often those experiencing marginalization or injustice. It can energize supporters and make clear commitments, but it has lower positive resonance with people who identify as politically conservative.

The strategic question isn't which type of language is superior—it's which is appropriate for a given situation, audience, and goal. Both have their place, and should be used tactically, according to the issue and situation, and should not supersede the #1 claim to community. As Green notes, the advice PACE is giving is not to abandon any particular words, like democracy, that may not connect with all audiences: "It's just to be very thoughtful about the words that you're using, who you're using them with, and why."

Calibrating for specific audiences doesn't mean abandoning authenticity. As one community foundation leader notes: "I think sometimes people have concerns that you lose authenticity when you calibrate. And it's a tricky thing, but you can do both. You can keep your voice while making sure that you are trying to speak to different kinds of people."

“Say all the words”

In the rush to navigate political minefields and reach across divides, organizations often overlook a critical vulnerability: the assumption that people who share their general perspective actually understand what they’re talking about. Kayce Ataiyero, Chief External Affairs Officer at the Joyce Foundation, argues that “we don’t often do a good job of talking to allies and making sure that we have a shared understanding of what we mean when we say certain things.”

This oversight has definite consequences. When a foundation’s board members, staff, donors, and community partners all use the same terminology but attach different meanings to it, the organization lacks the internal coherence necessary for taking effective actions. Strategic decisions become confused because participants think they’re discussing the same thing when they’re actually talking past each other. External messaging becomes muddled because different voices from within the organization unconsciously contradict each other.

Some civic terms fail not because they’re divisive but because people don’t really know what they mean. The PACE research found that words like “civic engagement” register as neutral for many people—not because these concepts are controversial but because people simply don’t understand what they mean. “It’s not necessarily that people hate this word or have a negative perception,” Green explains:

> *A lot of people just don’t really understand what it means. So they’re neither negative nor positive. It’s just neutral. So I think what that says to us is that we need to define it. We need to be clear about what we mean when we’re talking about civic engagement and give people context.*
>
> **SHANNON GREEN, PRESIDENT & CEO, PHILANTHROPY FOR ACTIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (PACE)**

The word “democracy” presents a particularly complex case. It’s neither neutral nor consistently polarizing; instead, it’s vague. As Green notes:

> “ *Democracy holds a lot of different meanings for a lot of different people, and this has been tested over and over again. When I say democracy, I might mean something expansive in terms of minority rights within a majoritarian system, pluralism, political processes, accountability, rule of law. Someone else might just think, ‘oh, democracy, elections, I do that.’ So democracy is just a very vague word to a lot of people.*

Addressing these linguistic challenges doesn’t mean abandoning complex or contested terms. Rather, it requires what Ataiyero calls “saying all the words”—a practice of embracing radical clarity that refuses to let important concepts remain vague or assumed. “Don’t let people define the language that you’re using in a way that flattens it or misinterprets it,” Ataiyero advises. “Say all the words. Be clear. When I’m saying equity, this is what I mean… these are my values. Just get a lot more specific rather than assuming that everybody is understanding what you mean when you use these words.”

Isaiah Oliver, President of the Community Foundation of Northeast Florida, said his thinking was informed by his experience working in Flint, Michigan, during the city’s water crisis. “During a water crisis, ‘trust’ means something different to residents, than it does with elected officials that are making decisions.” Any particular meaning of trust was both context-specific and dependent on who was using the term, and with whom.

Testing, listening, and staying curious

Language isn’t static. Terms that resonate today may ring hollow tomorrow. Words that once seemed neutral can become politically charged overnight. This constant semantic evolution creates a challenge for organizations trying to communicate clearly. In Chicago, Oliver asked, “How do you avoid stepping into something today that’s shifting real time or evolving real time while we’re trying to navigate it?”

Green's answer to his question emphasizes curiosity over certainty:

> *If you are trying to connect with a different audience, the number one tip I can suggest is: Be curious. Ask questions that start from a place of 'what does this mean to you?' Shift your communications from a mindset of 'I'm here to convince you of something' to 'I'm here because I genuinely want to connect with you.' And then think about the language that you use accordingly.*

This approach requires community foundations to regularly test their language outside their circles rather than assuming they know how their words land with any particular external audience. It means creating feedback loops that surface confusion, resistance, or misinterpretation before a misunderstanding becomes a crisis. It means treating every conversation as an opportunity to learn how language is being received and understood.

The testing process shouldn't be limited to formal research or focus groups. Organizations can build language testing into everyday practice by simply paying attention to how people respond to their words. When someone looks confused, rather than pushing forward, pause and ask them what they're hearing. When someone interprets a statement in an unexpected way, explore that interpretation rather than correcting it.

Convening and facilitating to achieve clarity

Not all important communication happens on public platforms or in mass media. Ataiyero points out that "it could just be pulling folks across from different perspectives into a room to have a conversation. Facilitate it so there can be some safety and some mutual sort of shared understanding."

Many community foundations already serve as conveners, creating spaces where difficult conversations can happen away from the glare of media attention and social media scrutiny. In these quieter settings, people have more freedom to ask basic questions, admit confusion, and work toward genuine understanding without fear of public judgment or viral misinterpretation.

The convening role community foundations can play comes with its own linguistic complexity. A skilled facilitator must foster shared understanding not just about issues but about language itself. They must surface differences in how people interpret key terms. They can help groups develop working definitions that everyone can commit to, at least within a particular conversation. They model the practice of saying all the words—demonstrating that clarity and specificity strengthen rather than weaken dialogue.

In a time when every conversation feels fraught and every word seems loaded, the temptation is to retreat into vagueness or silence. The better path is toward radical clarity—saying all the words, defining our terms, testing our assumptions, and continuously listening to how our language lands. This isn't just about better communication. It's about building a shared understanding that strengthens civic health.

Measuring Civic Health

Community foundations investing in civic health strategies face a complex question: How do you know if your investment is working? Unlike traditional philanthropic work in which outcomes can be easily counted—meals served, homes built, students tutored—civic health improvements often feel intangible. How do you measure whether people trust each other more, feel more connected to their community, or whether decision-making processes have become more inclusive?

The answers to these questions about metrics matter enormously, not just for accountability but for learning and improvement. Done well, civic health measurement becomes more than data collection—it becomes part of the civic work itself, engaging community members as co-creators of knowledge rather than merely subjects of study.

Why measurement matters

Civic health work often produces outcomes that feel obvious to those involved. When you've facilitated a dialogue where people found common ground or watched young people gain confidence as civic actors, these experiences carry their own evidence of value. Why reduce them to numbers and charts?

Dr. Jonathan Collins of Columbia University argues that this should be an ongoing function: "If we are continually collecting and sharing those metrics and therefore have knowledge accumulating around a thing...this is how we progress." Continuous measurement reveals patterns—which approaches work best in which contexts, how effects change over time, what factors predict success or failure.

Cameron Hickey of the National Conference on Citizenship emphasizes the accountability dimension:

If we don't measure well, we're lighting a lot of money on fire. I think that it's critically important at a moment in time when we are seeing so much less money into this field and so much greater need, that measurement be a critical component of how we think about how we responsibly invest.

CAMERON HICKEY, CEO, NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CITIZENSHIP

The connections between civic health and other indicators make measurement both more important and more complicated. Cameron Hickey describes these correlations: "One of the things we know is that there are very strong correlations between civic health and all of these other outcomes—it is strongly correlated with better quality of education, better health outcomes generally, being more resilient in crises, etc." The causal mechanisms aren't always clear, but the pattern suggests civic health may be foundational infrastructure supporting everything else a community wants to achieve.

Measuring opportunity, not just participation

The 2023 Mapping Civic Measurement report from the Institute for Citizens and Scholars found that most of the measurement tools and studies focus on the civic readiness of individuals. These metrics matter but tell only part of a community's civic health story.

Dr. Joe Hoereth, Director of the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement at the University of Illinois–Chicago, argues for taking a more comprehensive approach that includes rates of voting and volunteering, but also assesses "the presence and capacity of mediating institutions—the organizations that create opportunities for engagement."

Measuring opportunity means taking stock of the organizations and networks that create pathways for civic engagement. Are there trusted conveners? Do local media outlets provide needed information? Do public decision-making processes actually allow for genuine public participation? Assessing these institutions also means evaluating the accessibility of the opportunities they provide: Are public meetings scheduled when working people can attend? Is information provided in languages community members speak?

A comprehensive strategy for assessment captures the dynamic between people and institutions, evaluating whether and how residents participate (demand) as well as what kinds of quality opportunities exist (supply).

Perhaps the most important insight to lift up is that how you measure matters as much as what you measure. The process can either reinforce extractive, top-down dynamics or model the collaborative, inclusive values that civic health work aims to cultivate.

Measurement as civic engagement

The principles that guide civic measurement can and should mirror the overarching tenets of civic health: inclusion rather than extraction, participation rather than passivity, transparency rather than gatekeeping data, learning rather than mere accountability, and hope rather than resignation.

Dr. Hoereth argues that these principles make research more ethical as well as more effective:

> *It is significant when members of the community are participants in the research, not just the subjects of the research. Then there's actually a dynamic engagement with them as co-researchers, as opposed to just responding to surveys or being participants in an experiment. You're not just being extractive or exploitative of those communities — you're allowing them to invest in not just the outcomes of the work, but the research itself.*
>
> DR. JOSEPH HOERETH, DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE FOR POLICY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO

When community members become co-researchers, research questions become more relevant, data collection becomes more effective, interpretation becomes richer, findings are more likely to be used, and the process itself builds civic capacity. This participatory approach requires foundations to be transparent and to share some of the power, but it aligns means with ends—using democratic, inclusive processes to assess democratic, inclusive work.

Designing a comprehensive measurement strategy

Effective civic measurement not only requires sharing authority, it requires multiple methods to capture different dimensions of a complex phenomenon.

A comprehensive strategy could involve some combination of quantitative surveys capturing broad patterns; qualitative interviews exploring the "why" behind numbers; administrative data from various sources; network analysis mapping relationships between organizations; observational research assessing quality of participation; and participatory action research where community members help design studies and interpret findings. The specific methodological mix will depend on resources, priorities, and context. What matters most is intentionality—choosing methods that align with your questions, involving community voice, and committing to actually using what you learn.

Dr. Hoereth offers pragmatic advice for community foundations that lack the internal capacity to design their own research plan: "I'm sure all of you have a university or college in your community where you could reach out to folks. Believe it or not, most of them are nerds like us, sitting around waiting for somebody to ask them to measure something real!"

Sharing and using results

Data collection means little if findings don't reach those who need them. Effective civic health measurement requires commitment to sharing results prominently and discussing them widely.

Transparency and accountability create shared understanding of community challenges, build collective ownership of civic health, and can motivate action. The format through which sharing takes place matters—dense reports work for some audiences but alienate others. Effective communication requires multiple formats: infographics, community forums, and media coverage, as well as data dashboards tracking indicators.

The willingness to discuss results matters as much as the sharing itself. When a foundation simply releases data, it provides information. When it convenes stakeholders to interpret findings together and develop responses, it catalyzes collective learning and action. The measurement becomes a platform for the civic work itself.

The meta-message: Improvement is possible

When a foundation surveys residents about civic engagement or trust in institutions, it sends a message: These things matter, they can be assessed, and they can be changed. The act of measurement conveys that civic health is not fixed but something communities can actively improve. Matt Leighninger of the National Civic League explains how measurement itself can be a civic health intervention: “By asking [people] questions about their communities and their institutions, you’re also reinforcing the idea that those things can be improved.”

Community foundations pursuing civic health work are still figuring out how to measure what matters most. The field lacks consensus on established metrics and proven methodologies. But this uncertainty creates opportunity—to develop measurement approaches that align with civic values, to engage communities as partners in generating knowledge, and to demonstrate through the measurement process itself the collaborative, inclusive dynamics that civic health work aims to cultivate.

Investing in Civic Health

Community foundations face a fundamental challenge:
How do you convince donors to invest in something as abstract as strengthening civic health?

The answer emerging from innovative foundations across the country is surprisingly simple—you don't start by asking for money. You start by creating experiences that help people discover why civic health matters.

The pattern repeats itself among donors: Engagement leads to investment. Direct experience with civic health work—seeing neighbors come together across differences, watching young people develop into community leaders, witnessing how better processes produce better outcomes—is what convinces people to invest in it.

"Civic health is ultimately an expression of community leadership — and rebuilding the civic fabric of our communities is one of the most important investments a community foundation can make. It demands a systems thinking orientation, because when we strengthen our communities' civic fabric, all of our other investments become more impactful and more durable. At CFLeads, we are committed to this work for the long term.

MARY L. THOMAS, PRESIDENT & CEO, CFLEADS

Rethinking the value proposition

For decades, community foundations provided a straightforward service: efficient vehicles for charitable giving. Then commercial firms began offering donor-advised funds with lower fees. Nancy Van Milligen, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, remembers seeing the writing on the wall: "When Lucy Bernholz wrote On the Brink of New Promise in 2005, she warned us against relying on donor-advised funds. Instead, your real value is community leadership and community knowledge."

Immediately, this new understanding shaped the Community Foundation's strategy. Rather than lead with fundraising appeals, the Foundation led with community engagement, creating processes where residents could shape their community's future together. In 2005, CFGD kicked off its first significant community engagement initiative: Envision 2010."We asked the community to come together and give us their ten best ideas for Dubuque's future," Van Milligen says. The community rallied around the ideas and worked together to implement them by 2010. The effort was so successful that the Foundation organized Envision 2030 last year, and groups are now in the process of implementing 10 new ideas.

Stuart Comstock-Gay, CEO of Delaware Community Foundation, describes changing the ways that staff members interact with donors: "When I got to this foundation, the tradition was to meet with a donor and ask, 'Who do you want to give the money to?' I said no, don't ask that question. Ask people what they care about, because that's really going to get to their heart."

This question about priorities leads naturally toward civic health work. When donors talk about what animates their giving,
they often express fundamentally civic concerns: wanting their community to feel more connected, worrying about divisions, wishing young people had more opportunities to lead. These point toward civic health investments even when donors don't use that language.

The power of community connection

Community foundations' most fundamental asset remains their association with the whole notion of "community." Nancy Van Milligen shares a story illustrating this emotional power. Ryan, Iowa—population 400—raised a $500,000 civic health endowment. When she thanked the farmer who made the final gift of $35,000 worth of grain, he started to tear up:

> *I think you all know my wife's not been well. We were up at the Mayo Clinic, we were driving home, we came around the corner and all of our fields were lit up, there were combines bringing in all of our crops. The driveway was filled with pickup trucks, tables, [and] beverages. People brought dinner. This is not a gift from me. My community is such a gift to us and that is why I did it.*

The farmer's gift wasn't motivated by tax benefits or specific programs. It was motivated by gratitude—his community showed up for him in crisis by harvesting his crops, and he wanted to ensure that support would be there for others. He saw his contribution as part of an ongoing cycle of mutual support.

For donors motivated by this kind of community commitment, investments in civic health make intuitive sense. If what you value is the community's capacity to show up for each other and solve problems together, then supporting the infrastructure and relationships that make that possible becomes an obvious priority.

Providing legitimacy and social capital

Community foundations play another crucial role: They legitimize and support community advocates who might not otherwise reach potential investors. Richard Young of CivicLex feels that the Blue Grass Community Foundation played this role for CivicLex, his civic engagement organization in Lexington, Kentucky. "The thing that has been more helpful than anything," he says, "is the social capital that Bluegrass Community Foundation has leveraged, to bring us deeper into the fold. We would not exist without it."

The community foundation's endorsement signaled to other funders that CivicLex was trustworthy and doing important work. This proved especially valuable for civic health work, which often doesn't fit conventional philanthropic frameworks.

The relationship scaled over time. After CivicLex expanded to provide civic education to every high school student in Lexington, "a donor approached the community foundation about wanting to make that program something that could be around for a really long time. And that gift ended up becoming a million-dollar endowment to make it the first locally endowed, locally held civic education program in the nation."

Van Milligen sees her foundation's work as weaving a pattern that builds social capital to attract financial capital:

Community engagement is how we work. The process is the product. By convening people, releasing the data, and elevating community-led solutions, we build the social capital that makes financial capital possible.

NANCY VAN MILLIGEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER DUBUQUE

This pattern has sometimes led to unexpected results, Van Milligen says:

The day we announced the Envision 2010 ideas, a donor called our board chair and said, 'I want to get involved.' After discussing ways that the donor's contribution could have the most significant benefit to the community, the donor created a $1.2 million endowment to fund one of the top 10 ideas: a federally qualified community health center. That gift was critical to establishing the health center, which has grown tremendously and now serves tens of thousands of residents.

NANCY VAN MILLIGEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER DUBUQUE

The donor didn't give because of a fundraising pitch, but because the engagement process helped them see a community need, provided evidence that the community was ready to act, and implicated the community foundation as an effective vehicle for transforming the collective vision into reality.

Endowments as civic infrastructure

The trend toward endowed civic health initiatives represents a significant development for community foundations. Richard Young's civic education program, with its million-dollar endowment, Van Milligen's forty-community initiative creating local endowments—these aren't one-time grants but permanent sources of support.

When Greater Dubuque Community Foundation partnered with Community Heart & Soul, a 12- to 18-month structured engagement process, Van Milligen added a crucial innovation to the program's life cycle: "I realized, oh my gosh, we're getting all these people together. They're excited. They're moving their community forward. So we started adding community philanthropy to the end of the process." The results were remarkable:

A donor offered $4 million to strengthen 40 rural communities — if we had a plan. We created a $100,000 challenge grant for each: $25,000 at key benchmarks, $75,000 to match what they raised. I was nervous it wasn't enough. But those farmers weren't going to leave money on the table. They raised $375,000, creating $450,000 endowments — and something harder to measure: new leaders, real hope, and more cohesive communities.

NANCY VAN MILLIGEN, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER DUBUQUE

The math behind the strategy merits attention: A single donor's $4 million enables 40 communities to go through an engagement process. Each community then raises $450,000—totaling $18 million in new endowment capital generated by communities themselves. The initial investment catalyzes a 4.5:1 multiplier. And that $18 million will generate ongoing returns supporting community work in perpetuity.

This strategy works because by the time communities face the fundraising challenge, they've been through 12–18 months of engagement. They've identified shared priorities, built relationships, and created action plans. Raising the endowment isn't an abstract exercise—it's the logical next step for sustaining work they've already begun and relationships they've already built.

Endowments enable the long-term perspective this work demands while providing stability that allows organizations to focus on impact rather than constantly chasing funding. They signal that this work is foundational, not optional. And they democratize civic health funding—communities can resource their own civic infrastructure through local philanthropy rather than waiting for national foundations to prioritize their local issues.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Community foundations across the nation are already piloting innovative approaches to fostering civic health. From investing in facilitated community dialogues that bring together ideologically diverse residents to supporting collaborative problem-solving initiatives that engage government, business, and nonprofit sectors, these efforts are producing measurable results in community cohesion and collective efficacy. They build on core work in youth leadership, the arts, public spaces, service and volunteerism, civic journalism, and other important priorities to improve civic health for all.

For national funders and philanthropic partners, Community Foundations for Civic Health (CFCH) presents a powerful opportunity to invest in the civic health work of community foundations at a time when demand from the field is strong and momentum is growing. For community foundations, CFCH is an invitation to deepen their leadership roles and leverage their trusted positions to strengthen democracy at the local level. Civic health work isn't separate from their existing priorities—it's the stable ground that makes all other community improvement efforts more effective. Whether addressing challenges related to housing, education, economic mobility, or health, success depends on a community's ability to work collectively across differences. And **when people feel confident about solving local problems, they are more likely to feel confident about national problem-solving and national institutions**.[14]

One of the arguments about how Americans should respond to our national democratic crisis is that we should "**block, bridge, and build**."[15] Civic health work clearly involves bridging and building—but to the extent that it builds the relationships necessary for people to stand up for one another, in the long term, it supports blocking as well.

Aside from the potential for local investment to improve the national picture, this work also has direct effects on residents' quality of life. Communities with strong civic health—where residents actively participate, institutions earn trust, and people work across differences—consistently outperform others on key metrics. They weather economic downturns better, respond more effectively to crises, and make faster progress on persistent challenges like education gaps and public safety.

Recommendations for advancing the work

In 2026, CFCH established that there are a number of crucial ways in which community foundations could be supported in their efforts to strengthen civic health.

TAILORED PROGRAMMING TO SUPPORT PEER LEARNING

Community foundations want tools and skill-building opportunities to help them engage confidently in civic health planning, strategy design, and action. This peer learning could incorporate some or all of the following experiences:

- **Virtual Learning Series:** A set of virtual calls and workshops addressing specific key topics along a learning arc.
- **Deep Dive Cohort(s):** one-to-two-year, team-based peer-learning experience with in-person meetings and expert content.
- **Regional Convenings:** Regional gatherings and learning opportunities, likely in conjunction with state and regional Philanthropy Infrastructure Organizations conferences.
- **Civic Health Summit:** A one-to two-day summit featuring exemplars in the field, focused on peer learning, ecosystem learning, celebrating progress, and coordinating efforts with other actors in the civic health field.

- **Webinars and Workshops:** Virtual sessions featuring content experts, networking, and resource sharing.

GRANT INVESTMENTS

Community foundations continually reiterate the need for an infusion of funding into the field through matching and regranting opportunities. That grant strategy design could support the following:

- **Planning Grants:** Funding for community foundations to work with fellow local civic health stakeholders to do field scans and develop their civic health strategies.
- **Catalytic Grants:** Matching grants to directly support civic health initiatives, awarded through an open RFP and/or associated with acceptance into Civic Health Cohorts, Learning Series, etc.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO SUPPORT LOCAL PLANNING

Community foundations and their local allies can plan more effectively when they take stock of their local civic landscapes, gather qualitative and quantitative data about civic health, share and discuss the results of that measurement with the community, form stronger partnerships with other local organizations, pilot engagement activities, and decide with their partners what kinds of strategies to pursue as part of a local civic health plan.

CURATING AND CUSTOMIZING RESOURCES

The field of actors who are working to and have resources, frameworks, and/or approaches to strengthening civic health and building common ground is varied and rich. However, in the course of 2025, CFCH learned that community foundations have very little or no knowledge of this ecosystem of actors, experts, and practitioners, and are therefore not working with them or accessing their frameworks, expertise, or approaches. CFCH can help understand the variety of strategies they may pursue and the resources, frameworks, approaches, and expertise best situated to help them. Civic health action guides, like the one produced by the Rhode Island Foundation and the National Civic League, can be valuable tools for this civic health planning.

SUPPORT FOR LOCAL CIVIC HEALTH MEASUREMENT

Civic measurement tools and technical assistance can help community foundations identify key measures of success, implement best practices, and understand how to evolve their strategies.

- A civic measurement advisory group, representing community foundations, researchers, and other local leaders, can help support local measurement efforts.
- This advisory group could produce a report summarizing the timeline/recent history of civic measurement and all the different aspects, including the work on UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Civic Health Index, the Civic Information Index, the Belonging Barometer, and other local research. Other products could include a final measurement report, new or combined tools, and local civic dashboards.

NETWORK BUILDING

In addition to peer learning, convenings and communication that span the field of community foundations, and philanthropy generally, we encourage more funders to focus on strengthening civic health. This unified, sector-wide culture of civic health work, nurtured at events like the Council on Foundations' Building Together conference, can help foster collaboration and grow field-wide momentum.

STORYTELLING AND AMPLIFICATION

Within and beyond philanthropy, compelling stories of civic health in action can inspire local and national collaborations. These kinds of communications—highlighting successful models, championing local leaders, and showcasing the impacts of civic health work—can help overcome Americans' sense of pessimism and resignation over the state of our democracy.

PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

While community foundations can play a central role, many other organizations—from governments and school systems to neighborhood groups and service clubs—can be critical players in support of civic health. Reaching out through the National Civic League and other networks that represent and convene these groups can legitimize civic health planning and encourage collaboration. Events like the National Civic League's All-America City Awards can recognize and inspire local civic leaders across the country.

The challenges facing American democracy are real, but they are not insurmountable. Communities that invest in civic health create the conditions for progress on every other issue they care about. They build the trust, connections, and collaborative capacity needed to tackle complex problems effectively. Community foundations have always been in the business of building stronger communities. Today, that means leading boldly in civic health.

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Support this work

We invite fellow philanthropic organizations, funders, and partners across sectors to join us. By working together to strengthen civic health, we can ensure that our communities are not only more resilient but also more equitable, inclusive, and capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century. To learn more about supporting this work, please **follow this link** or contact **civichealth@cfleads.org**.

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