

Realizing Equitable Community-based Climate and Clean Energy Investments

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ABSTRACT

The Justice40 Accelerator was created to radically reimagine the existing government resource delivery system as a restorative and reparative framework that better supports Black and historically disinvested communities of color. The Justice40 Accelerator was designed in response to the Biden-Harris Administration's Justice40 Initiative that directs a whole-of-government effort to deliver at least 40 percent of the overall benefits from Federal investments in climate and clean energy to “disadvantaged communities.” Designed and implemented through a partnership of five climate solutions-focused organizations, the Justice40 Accelerator provides comprehensive support to community-based organizations to apply for and receive federal funding, as well as additional support, to implement community-led projects. The Justice40 Accelerator’s inaugural cohort of 52 climate and environmental justice-focused organizations are demonstrating that 1) community-designed, community-led solutions are needed to address the climate crisis, 2) their community-designed projects are ready for implementation, and 3) these solutions will create sustainable jobs and thriving neighborhoods. As federal agencies, utilities, and energy professionals debate how to rapidly scale up decarbonization in an equitable manner, place-based initiatives are a viable, scalable, and necessary solution. This paper will present the Justice40 Accelerator as a national model for capacity-building and developing a pipeline of community-designed and led projects. The authors will describe the Justice40 Accelerator model, its structure and financing, its initial successes and learnings, and recommendations for how energy efficiency and climate professionals, policymakers and philanthropy can support equitable climate and clean energy investments.

Introduction

Communities at the frontlines of the climate crisis have sustainable solutions to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Over four centuries of structural racism has resulted in the inequitable distribution of government resources to local communities and unjust systems that have limited Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)-led organizations’ access to financial, technical, and capacity-building resources. Often local, state, regional, and federal government entities have limited engagement with community leaders mobilizing their neighbors to come together against the climate crisis, and they lack awareness of the solutions these communities have designed to address local climate needs. To boldly address climate change, it is imperative that there is buy in and a collaborative effort from all members of a community,

and an equitable distribution of resources to implement climate mitigation and resilience strategies.

To illuminate this point, of \$559 billion in federal contracts that small-businesses were eligible for in FY2020, only \$52 billion (9.5%) was awarded to BIPOC-owned businesses (SBA 2021). This further illustrates that there is a deep need to better resource organizations and businesses in frontline communities to become more competitive in federal, state, and local funding applications that have historically been biased towards large, white-led organizations.

The Biden-Harris Administration's commitment in January 2021 to ensure 40% of the benefits of its clean energy and climate investments flow into disadvantaged communities was a historic acknowledgement of the disproportionate impacts of climate change and the need to center equity in the decision-making process. "Executive Order 14008 of January 27, 2021, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad" (2021) broadly defined the Justice40 Initiative areas of focus to include "clean energy and energy efficiency; clean transit; affordable and sustainable housing; training and workforce development; the remediation and reduction of legacy pollution; and the development of critical clean water infrastructure."

Realizing this historic moment could open doors to deeper investment in communities facing environmental injustices and communities of color, Elevate, Groundswell, Hummingbird, Partnership for Southern Equity, and The Solutions Project created the Justice40 Accelerator with program design and implementation support from the People's Climate Innovation Center. The Justice40 Accelerator seeks to radically reimagine the existing government resource delivery system as a restorative and reparative framework that better supports Black and historically disinvested communities of color. The Justice40 Accelerator supports climate and environmental justice organizations in building their capacity, partnerships, and readiness to access government funding to implement community-designed solutions. For the benefits of the Justice40 Initiative to be realized, government, philanthropy, and better-resourced organizations must center community needs and voices, support capacity-building of frontline organizations, invest in community-driven climate solutions, and allow communities to lead.

Overview of the Justice40 Accelerator Program

Program Goals and Desired Outcomes

The goals of the Justice40 Accelerator are three-fold:

1. Support community-based organizations in building their capacity, partnerships, and readiness to access government funding to implement their community-designed solutions.
2. Utilize data to expose the reinforcing loops of structural racism built into the government contracting and procurement system.
3. Ultimately, shift government climate and energy funding programs to be equity-focused, and accessible to Black and historically disinvested communities of color.

By achieving these goals, the program will realize the following near- and long-term outcomes:

- Climate and environmental justice organizations have an increased knowledge of well-suited funding opportunities, awareness of their organizational fit and readiness for

government funding, and preparedness to apply for funding (e.g., government registrations, organizational policies, and systems).

- Frontline community-led projects are successfully applying for and receiving federal awards.
- Community leaders have the knowledge and feel empowered to make self-determined decisions not to apply for federal funding if it is not a good fit for their organization.
- The ecosystem of leaders from Black and historically disinvested communities of color is strengthened by peer collaborations and partnerships formed through the program.
- Federal agencies minimize barriers to accessing funding and center equity in their processes and involve community in decision-making when possible.
- The federal resourcing system is transforming towards reparation and restoration because organizations have access to decision-makers, who are now aware of biases and exclusionary practices inherent in the current system.

These goals and outcomes are deeply rooted in the program's core values and beliefs that climate justice is racial justice. Empowering and resourcing communities to lead is the surest way towards transformative action on clean energy, climate, and their intersection with health and economic outcomes.

Program Model

The framework for the Justice40 Accelerator draws from traditional business start-up accelerators in several ways. The selection process is competitive. The program experience is cohort-based and encourages network development. Participants receive seed capital funding, education workshops, and mentorship opportunities (Cohen 2013). However, traditional accelerators serve for-profit start-ups, have a short, three-to-six-month duration, involve an equity stake, and culminate in a “public pitch event or demo day” (Hathaway 2016). The Justice40 Accelerator is longer in duration because the technical assistance and partnership development required to successfully apply for government funding often requires a longer lead time than three or even six months. In addition to this contrast of a traditional accelerator, the Justice40 Accelerator works in service to BIPOC-led community-based organizations serving historically disinvested communities. These organizations are 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations or projects fiscally sponsored by a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Some are emerging organizations, while others are established. These leaders bring an entrepreneurial spirit and drive to implement climate and environmental justice projects in their community. All have an interest in learning more about how to access government funding to implement their projects. The Justice40 Accelerator program model is grounded in deep listening to community organizations prior to program launch, and through one-on-one discussions with each organization selected to be in the inaugural cohort. The program is designed to center and be responsive to the participants' needs and help overcome barriers to applying for federal, state, and local funding for clean energy and climate justice projects. The Justice40 Accelerator program model focuses on three key areas:

1. Delivering rich and responsive programming and technical assistance to support cohorts of community-based organizations in navigating public funding applications.

2. Mapping the barriers faced by community organizations to access federal funding using a historical approach to understand how laws and policies have been intentionally codified to marginalize Black and historically disinvested communities of color.
3. Engaging with federal officials to provide specific recommendations for how to reduce barriers and shift government climate funding programs to be equity-focused, and accessible to Black and historically disinvested communities of color

Through emergent and responsive programming, the Justice40 Accelerator provides a suite of information, wrap-around technical assistance, and financial resources, including:

- Regular information on open federal funding opportunities as well as philanthropic funding opportunities.
- Multi-part workshop series to demystify the federal funding process, develop organizational policies and processes, and write successful grant applications.
- Opportunities to engage directly with federal agency officials to learn about and provide feedback on Justice40 Initiative implementation and barriers to accessing funding.
- Cohort peer learning and relationship building opportunities.
- Program navigators to provide one-on-one tailored guidance, identify and screen grant opportunities, and connect program participants to requested technical assistance.
- Grants advisors to support proposal preparation and writing and organizational grants management processes and system development.
- Connections to values-aligned capacity building partners with deep expertise and/or the ability to serve as co-applicants to lessen the extensive financial and administrative burden required by government funding.
- \$25,000 to participate in the Justice40 Accelerator and support project pre-development.

Utilizing a geographic information system (GIS) “story map”, the Justice40 Accelerator presents an overview of the federal Justice40 Initiative, why it is important, and the historical laws and regulations that created structural barriers for BIPOC businesses and communities to successfully apply for and receive federal funding.¹ The story map uses mixed methodologies and data visualization techniques to identify the current discriminatory elements, values, and practices within the federal funding system that perpetuate inequities and need to be changed. Our research specifically calls out the systemic failure of race neutral policy, especially within the context of contracting and procurement practices.

Based on the collective organizational and community experience of the Justice40 Accelerator program leadership team and participants, the story map documents the stories and voices of community leaders’ interactions with the federal funding system and recommendations for addressing barriers. This foundational research is important to engage and educate federal agency leadership, philanthropy, and energy and climate program implementers as we try to move the needle towards a just energy transition. According to the Movement Strategy Center (2021), “a Just Transition is a set of unifying principles and practices supporting a just society that has shifted from an extractive economy to a waste-free, regenerative economy. It must be equitable and must redress past harms; and its process must be just or the outcome will not be.”

¹ “A story map is a web map that has been thoughtfully created, given context, and provided with supporting information so it becomes a stand-alone resource. It integrates maps, legends, text, photos, and video and provides functionality, such as swipe, pop-ups, and time sliders, that helps users explore this content.” (Esri 2013)

Direct engagement with Biden-Harris Administration officials and other decision makers is a critical component of the Justice40 Accelerator program model. The Justice40 Accelerator brings agency officials together with program participants to uplift community voices, needs, examples of community-driven energy and climate projects, and stories of successes and frustrations in accessing government funding to illustrate the importance and urgency of change needed. Additionally, the program team provides recommendations for how to rethink the system directly to the Biden-Harris Administration and agency officials, including through public comments to ensure that they understand the barriers to access in the current system and receive recommendations for broad and lasting change.

The Justice40 Accelerator is funded entirely through philanthropic grants. A portion of these funds are allocated to provide a \$25,000 unrestricted grant to each participant for their current operations or specific project. The remaining funds cover program development and implementation expenses, including technical assistance provided at no-cost to participants.

Program Implementation

In May and June of 2021, the Justice40 Accelerator project partners hosted 19 virtual listening sessions attended by over 300 individuals from organizations across the United States. Through this national listening series, the Justice40 Accelerator leadership team heard from frontline community leaders about their organizational needs to achieve their community goals, and shared information about the Federal Justice40 Initiative. These sessions informed the design of the Justice40 Accelerator, particularly around the technical assistance and capacity building that organizations identified as a significant need to access federal resources more effectively. Following the listening sessions, the program launched an application for community organizations to participate in the Justice40 Accelerator. The application was open for five weeks, and yielded 320 applications, which demonstrates community organizations' strong desire for capacity-building support and interest in federal funding, particularly BIPOC-led organizations serving historically disinvested communities. The selection process was conducted by a seven-person external review committee managed by the People's Climate Innovation Center, an organization focused on community-driven climate resilience planning. The committee identified 116 strong applicants based on their accountability to community and their climate-focused project's ability to benefit their community. However, due to limited funding, only 52 were selected for the inaugural Justice40 Accelerator Cohort.

In September 2021 the Justice40 Accelerator launched its inaugural cohort of 52 organizations selected by an external review committee. The community-based organizations work in 23 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico. The program participants are primarily BIPOC-led organizations serving BIPOC urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities. The vast majority have small teams with inspiring visions and projects that address climate change in an intersectional way with racial justice and socioeconomic justice. These community-designed and community-led projects include sustainable affordable housing, air quality, clean energy and energy efficiency, climate resilience hubs, green infrastructure, land conservation and management, sustainable agriculture and food justice, toxins and remediation, transit, workforce development, and many combinations of these areas. Top federal agency funding of interest include Department of Energy, Economic Development Agency, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Agriculture. The cohort includes organizations that are exploring the possibility of applying for government funding, as well as organizations that have received subgrants or small federal grants and would like to pursue government funding to scale their

projects to meet the needs of their community and address climate change. Below are examples of cohort organizations' projects:

- *Power52 Foundation* will broaden its footprint and expand its programs to bring historically underserved and at-risk community members into the solar energy sector, one of the fastest-growing employment sectors in Maryland and across the country. Power52 provides job training, career coaching, life skills development, financial literacy, health and wellness awareness, and rigorous graduate services that provide employment placement assistance and retention. Power52 also follows all graduates for 12+ months offering mentoring and career pathway options to ensure new hires are not warehoused in entry level positions. Collectively, these elements ensure the success of every participant, enabling communities to improve their livelihoods and brighten their futures.
- *Green Door Initiative* is launching the Detroit Solar Manufacturing (DSM) Facility. This project will create nearly 200 solar manufacturing, solar installers, and solar maintenance jobs located in the City of Detroit. The DSM business model includes a workforce development aspect which seeks to recruit individuals with various structural barriers to employment including those formerly incarcerated reentering back into society. The project plans to identify up to 6,000 low-income households to install solar panels at no cost to the residents. Green Door Initiative was awarded the DOE Inclusive Energy Innovation Prize in May 2022, which includes funding and technical assistance.
- *Growing Up Healthy* is offering Latinx and immigrant residents living in low-income apartment complexes and mobile home parks access to weatherization and repairs to make their homes safe and affordable in the face of Minnesota's varied seasons. Their career pathways program will financially support bilingual and Latinx community members to complete post-secondary training and education in heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, plumbing, carpentry, and electricity, thus growing the number of bilingual licensed and insured home repair professionals to support residents living in mobile home parks.

The Justice40 Accelerator programming was delivered through three overlapping phases:

Phase 1: Information sharing and relationship building. After the program launch, the program team met with each participating organization one-on-one to understand and identify areas where federal funding opportunities could support existing or new projects. These initial conversations allowed for an unrestricted amount of information sharing and relationship-building. Additionally, the Justice40 Accelerator hosted five conversations with program participants and federal agency officials from the White House, Department of Energy (DOE), Housing and Urban Development, and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). During these conversations, program participants shared their lived experience facing barriers to access, stories of exclusionary practices, as well as recommendations that would help address the prevalent systemic racism – e.g., shifting from deficit-based to asset-based language, and the need for providing more capacity-building and predevelopment funding to reduce barriers to access. Community leaders directly expressed to agency officials that funding, not just technical assistance, is imperative to formulate projects that can successfully compete for federal resources. This information sharing and relationship-building served a critical purpose as federal agencies began developing their Justice40 Initiative plans and future funding opportunities in late

2021. The Justice40 Accelerator was now an additional conduit for agencies to outreach to and engage with frontline organizations. For example, in April 2022 Justice40 Accelerator program navigators began receiving direct outreach from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), EPA, and other funding organizations to invite Justice40 Accelerator participants to submit applications, highlighting the agencies' desire to prioritize environmental justice communities. This deeper level of agency engagement led to one-on-one discussions between agency staff and community organizations about their projects and the barriers in the current competitive grant making process.

Phase 2: Workshops and peer learning sessions. Informed by the discussions in Phase 1, the Justice40 Accelerator program team identified and tailored the content of workshops and peer learning sessions. The program team hosted a federal funding readiness workshop series focused on assessing organizational readiness to apply for funding and the application process. During these workshops, participants asked questions and engaged with subject matter experts in fields on topics such as grant research, grant writing, entity registrations, project budget development, and federal agency identification and engagement. Complementary peer learnings provided space for program participants to share experiences applying for federal funding and delve deeper into topics of interest such as the government contracting process, a topic that one program participant had deep expertise from leading a federal Procurement Technical Assistance Center.

Phase 3: Technical assistance. Building on the previous phases, program participants are offered tailored technical assistance in a myriad of relevant areas. Program Navigators serve a critical role as the main point of contact for Justice40 Accelerator participants. The focus of each Program Navigator is to provide capacity and technical assistance by completing initial tasks and facilitating connections to accessing funding, partnership building, and technical expertise. Specifically, Program Navigators identify and screen requests for proposals for key considerations, pre-requisites, and applicability to specific projects; engage with participants on relevant opportunities to facilitate connections to specific technical assistance providers; and support the development of and review organizational federal grant management systems and policies. The Justice40 Accelerator technical assistance provider network includes a range of expertise and services, but most critical are four BIPOC women-led grants advising firms that work directly with program participants submitting grant applications. These grants advisors provide support writing the application narrative using technical language desired by agency officials; assembling all supporting analysis and documents, such as federal indirect cost analysis, detailed project budgets and technical GIS mapping; and/or reviewing the full application for copy editing, comprehension and completeness.

Knowing that the administrative burden of governmental funding is significant, interested organizations are engaging with values-aligned capacity building partner organizations. These larger, experienced organizations are willing to serve as the prime/lead applicant on government funding applications to relieve the administrative burden and enable the community-based organizations to focus on implementation; assist the community-based organization in building relationships and connections at the local, state, and federal level as applicable; share subject matter expertise; and provide mentorship on capacity building and lessons learned to enhance the likelihood of the project successfully receiving funding in the future. One example of this partnership is the Gulf Coast Sustainable Growers Alliance (GCSGA) who teamed with Community Connections, Inc. (CCI) of Hattiesburg, MS, who has provided capacity building

guidance for nonprofit and for profit companies in South Mississippi, to work on EDA and USDA federal funding applications. Ya-Sin Shabazz, the GCSGA lead engaged on the Justice 40 Accelerator stated, “CCI’s proven success and expertise will greatly advance our efforts. CCI’s guidance has been instrumental to building capacity for non-profits and we look forward to working with Dr. Ali and the CCI team”.

A voluntary, regenerative multimodal feedback process with the inaugural cohort of program participants is incorporated into the program implementation to inform successes, needed changes, and future programming. Methods of collecting feedback include a mid-program survey, regular check-ins with participants to ensure needs are being met in a high-quality manner by technical assistance providers, and a planned end of program reflection process. During each interaction, Program Navigators create space for reflection and document any data received for future program evaluation purposes and real time program adjustments. Building on and refining the program based on these learnings from this inaugural program year, the Justice40 Accelerator will launch a second cohort in mid-2022. The second cohort will consist of 45-50 organizations selected from the final round candidates of the original external review process. Learnings from the current program will shape the design and technical assistance for future cohorts and ensure that the Justice40 Accelerator offerings and structure are continuously improving.

Initial Successes

Based on the initial phase of the voluntary, regenerative multimodal feedback process, Justice40 Accelerator program participants are reporting that the experience has been valuable to expand their network of both national and community-based organizations doing similar work; learn about funding opportunities, how to ready their organizations to apply, the application process to; meet agency officials and track the federal Justice40 Initiative. Thirty-two participants have applied for funding and 11 have received federal or state funding during their Justice40 Accelerator experience, including Blacks in Green (BIG) described below. One of the biggest takeaways during the initial one-on-one conversations held with each participating organization is that not every organization is ready to apply for and manage a federal grant. Therefore, support is provided to develop readiness for all types of funding. It is estimate that roughly 75% of organizations will possess the strong ability to apply for, receive, and manage a federal grant by the end of their participation in the Accelerator. As of June 2022, nineteen organizations are accessing grants advising technical assistance to submit applications and ten organizations are formally engaging with capacity building partner organizations. Other organizations have a deeper understanding of the pathway to readiness and have shifted their focus to building capacity before applying for federal funding.

BIG is developing a Sustainable Square Mile on the South Side of Chicago to usher in a new era of neighborhood resiliency and community health. The comprehensive community-based project includes affordable, sustainable housing; green infrastructure; regenerative gardens; renewable energy; and green restoration of Emmett Till’s boyhood home. BIG received an EPA Environmental Justice (EJ) Small Grants award in 2021 for its lead-free water program. BIG will continue to explore future opportunities for funding to realize their full vision.

Learnings

Barriers to Applying for Government Funding

The federal government grant resource, Grants.gov, describes the grant process in three phases. Community-based organizations experience barriers at each step in the process. During the pre-award phase, identifying and applying for federal, state, and local funding requires significant staff time and financial resources; a deep understanding of the program goals, eligibility, and application requirements; and administrative policies, processes, and procedures. The award phase brings challenges of understanding how to negotiate with the federal government and cover costs to start implementation prior to the reimbursement schedule under federal awards. If organizations do not have the resources to establish proper systems and processes for financial reporting and audits, the post-award phase can be burdensome and, in many cases, inflict harm. Organizations not able to fully comply with the oversight requirements may have to return expended funding to the government after the grant is complete (NIH 2021). While there are no cited sources documenting the percentage of federal dollars that are returned each year, its importance is evidenced by the frequency of mention in virtually all grant application guidelines for submission, as well as formal resolutions to grant agreements and awardee must sign. Many cohort organizations have reflected that these barriers to entry and post-award concerns produce a post-traumatic stress reaction and reticence to respond to future notices of funding.

Many of these barriers and others evolved out of a long history of legislation, oversight, and policies designed to limit access to public funding by Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other communities of color. While the Justice40 Accelerator helps organizations navigate some of these hurdles, significant barriers to access remain. One such barrier is that federal grants often require matching funds or a cost-share, the percentage of the project cost that the applicant must cover to receive funding. Eligibility is also a substantial obstacle. Numerous federal funding opportunities only flow to states and/or municipalities. This presents a challenge for nonprofits that do not have political capital or relationships with state and local officials. The eligibility criteria for federal funding for Indigenous communities is particularly limiting for one Justice40 Accelerator program participant that is a state-recognized, but not federally recognized, Indigenous nation. Without federal recognition, this community is restricted in the funding that they can access. Other barriers include limited resources for capacity-building, which “reinforces long-term disinvestment” (Cooper and Sanchez 2020). The WHEJAC (2021a) recommends “transformative investments must be made in capacity building, technical assistance, and consultation, and creating a user-friendly federal process for the administration of funding and other support.”

Program Design & Implementation

Listening and learning how to best serve the needs of the cohort is how the team shaped the Justice40 Accelerator program and will continue to do so. In Fall of 2021, the program team hosted one-on-one conversations with each participating organization and a series of informal convenings with the broader cohort designed to understand needs as well as support relationship building across the cohort. These one-on-one conversations revealed a significant need for program navigators and federal grant advisors to monitor open solicitations; screen funding notices for organizational fit and readiness; find complementary partners; support grant writing,

reviewing, and compiling of supplemental documentation; and identify and implement organizational policies and systems critical to successful government grant management. In response, the program team hired two full-time program navigators and four women of color led grants advising firms.

During the informal convenings, program participants expressed a strong interest and value in peer-to-peer learning and collaboration opportunities as well as a powerful desire to use their collective voice to provide feedback to the federal government. In response, the program team incorporated peer learning sessions into the programming and created one-of-a-kind opportunities for the cohort to engage directly with federal agency officials in candid, closed-press conversations.

The broader political context has evolved over the past year as legislation such as the Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act passed but Build Back Better stalled. To adapt, the program team and participants broadened the focus of potential funding sources to include state and local government and philanthropic sources. This pivot and these learnings to-date have reinforced that the transformation of the federal funding process and reparation of historically marginalized communities is a process that will not be solved in one political cycle. Federal, state, and local municipality openness to and capacity for community relationship-building and partnership is imperative as well as support for capacity-building and technical expertise. To this end, the program team will continue to regularly capture additional learnings throughout program implementation to evolve the model in creative and responsive ways for current and future cohorts of participants.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Energy Efficiency and Climate Professionals

With Justice40 Initiative as a catalyst, energy and climate professionals (e.g., researchers, program designers and implementers, advocates) can leverage this opportunity to re-evaluate their approaches to better center community and equity. Specifically, they can become stronger partners and supporters of resourcing historically disinvested communities to lead in increasing energy and water efficiency, decarbonizing buildings, installing local renewable energy, advocating for sustainable affordable housing, policy changes, and many others important ways to address climate change. They are well positioned to empower community leaders and members to lead the design and implementation of these solutions through authentic community engagement and support for community-driven processes and decision-making. Justice40 Accelerator participants have voiced that a gap exists where community collaboration with local jurisdictions should be. Energy and climate organizations can provide access to technical assistance, resources, and relationships with key political or government administrative officials, agencies, and philanthropy, as well as leverage social and political capital to increase the visibility of community-led projects. When energy and climate professionals are in a position to design programs intended to serve marginalized communities, it is imperative to involve communities in the design process, minimize barriers to access, and serve as an advocate for structural changes that have led to the systemic inequities experienced.

Engage communities authentically and build non-extractive, trust-based relationships.

Working with community-based organizations in a mutually beneficial, non-extractive manner requires recognition of power dynamics (Cooper and Sanchez 2020), values-alignment, deep

listening to the needs of the community, willingness to center the community's goals, desire to develop a bottom-up, not pre-conceived top-down, solution, and time. Regularly showing up in support of community-based organizations at community events and meetings, deeply listening, and providing technical assistance when requested helps build trusted relationships.

Support community-driven planning processes and decision-making to develop solutions that meet the needs of the community. *The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership* (González 2020) provides a clear process for how community engagement needs to evolve to be more equitable and shift from informing, consulting, or involving to collaborating and ultimately deferring to communities. Energy and climate professionals can collaborate with communities through formal partnerships with memorandums of understanding, collaborative decision-making, and co-design and co-implementation of solutions. Going one step further to deferring to communities involves supporting community-driven planning and governance, participatory action research, and cooperative models.

Leverage social and political capital to uplift community voices and share power, resources, relationships, and expertise while honoring the lived experience of community members and leaders. Energy and climate professionals can invite grassroots leaders into spaces that have not always been accessible or accepting and help to shift power to communities. Energy and climate organizations can uplift community voices and help shift the narrative to focus on communities' assets instead of deficits when engaging policymakers, philanthropy, and other practitioners. The Justice40 Accelerator is serving as model for facilitating connections with larger, well-resourced organizations willing to serve as the prime/lead applicant on government funding applications and subgrant or contract funding to community-based organizations to reduce the administrative burden and enable the community-based organizations to focus on implementation.² Well-resourced organizations can also assist the community-based organization in building relationships and connections at the local, state, and federal level as applicable; share subject matter expertise; and/or provide mentorship on capacity building and lessons learned to enhance the likelihood of the project successfully receiving funding and being implemented. However, it is critical that relationships are not top-down nor competitive (Cooper and Sanchez 2020) and are based on deep respect for community members lived experience.

Design and implement energy programs with communities and centering community needs. Centering community needs and engagement in program design and implementation is imperative. By engaging in a community-driven planning process to co-design and co-implement programs, energy and climate professionals can maximize benefits and minimize barriers to access. For example, the Income Qualified North Advisory Committee in northern Illinois and Income Qualified South Advisory Committee launched 2018 served as a forum for utilities, implementers, and community-based organizations to assist in the design of energy efficiency programs (Income Qualified North EE Advisory Committee 2022; Income Qualified South Advisory Committee 2020). Justice40 Accelerator cohort organization, BIG participated

² Per 2 CFR 200.331 (2021), a subrecipient must adhere to "applicable Federal program requirements specified in the Federal award" while a contractor "is not subject to compliance requirements of the Federal program." An organization may choose to be a subrecipient to be involved in the decision-making of the use of funding instead of a contractor that only provides good and services (2 CFR 200.331 2021). However, the administrative burden on subrecipient is lower than the prime, subject to reporting and compliance for the entire award.

alongside CLEAResult and Ameren and ComEd. The community input and learnings gathered through this collaborative engagement process informed how utilities and implementers needed to adjust their marketing efforts to be trust-based and delivered in partnership with community-based organizations (Okiro and Rincon 2019).

Recommendations for Policymakers

With the historic Biden-Harris Administration acknowledgement of the disproportionate impacts of climate change and the need to center equity in the implementation of solutions, policymakers have the opportunity to change the way that government operates. The Justice40 Initiative prompted federal agencies to solicit requests for information to deepen their understanding of the barriers to accessing their programs. With this knowledge, agencies should take (and some are taking) tactical steps to address those barriers. It is important for state and local agencies to take similar steps to more deeply understand the barriers that they need to address in order to make their programs and funding more accessible to historically disinvested communities. It is also critical for policymakers to actively engage with communities to understand their vision for their community, solutions for change, and desired support from government. Recognizing that government has a long history of harming communities of color through housing, education, economic, and environmental policies that drove disinvestment and displacement, this historic moment is an opportunity to shift the paradigm. Federal, state, and local agencies can build relationships with communities, support community-driven planning and decision-making, address administrative burdens limiting access to resources and technical assistance, and create bespoke funding opportunities for community-based organization to realize their vision and scale their solutions for energy justice and climate equity.

Build authentic, on-going relationships and partnerships with organizations in communities, leveraging regional office leadership. Navigating agency departments, programs, and staff is challenging for community-based organizations leaving many with no idea of who to contact for questions, funding opportunities, or technical assistance. Government agencies need to create clear points of contact to assist and respond to questions. The WHEJAC (2021b) recommended “Federal agencies should establish outreach offices to promote awareness of federal program funding opportunities ... [and] employ staff to provide application support and to answer questions about funding requirements. For instance, each agency could hire adequate community liaison staff to help support and monitor applications, or it could pair capacity-building grants for smaller, locally led organizations with resources such as program staff able to assist EJ organizations to apply for the benefits.” NFWF is beginning this process by outreaching to Justice40 Accelerator participants to raise awareness of funding opportunities. NFWF also deployed their internal staff to provide technical assistance to applicants. Equally important is long-term, stable funding for outreach and community liaison staff and initiatives. Engaging community leaders and members where they are physically located – “places of worship, community centers, schools, local businesses, and neighborhood events” – is important (NAACP 2022). Authentic relationships will facilitate better information-sharing, access to opportunities, and a sense of accountability.

Deepen community engagement to move towards community driven planning and decision-making. “All investments should incorporate a community driven, community-controlled approach so that communities most directly impact benefit as intended...[and] community

accountability in development and implementation is an important “justice” making element that must be included” (WHEJAC 2021b). *The Spectrum for Community Engagement to Ownership* (González 2020) is an available and valuable resource for policymakers to shift community engagement from informing to collaborating and deferring to community leaders. National Association of State Energy Officials’ report *Designing Equity-Focused Stakeholder Engagement to Inform State Energy Office Programs and Policies* provides examples of how State Energy Offices have shifted towards more equitable community engagement practices (Koewler et al. 2020). In applying this approach, the Minnesota State Energy Office committed to “actively participating in community-driven cluster meetings of weatherization and energy assistance community action programs, tribal nations and the state” (Koewler et al. 2020). NAACP (2022) also provides a toolkit *Guidelines for Equitable Community Involvement in Building & Development Projects and Policies* to support policymakers.

Eliminate cost share requirements for nonprofits serving historically disinvested communities and address other administrative barriers. “Many federal grant programs require some degree of cost-sharing without exemptions for low-income communities” (Equitable and Just National Climate Forum 2021). There is a precedent for waiving matching funding requirements in certain circumstances as seen in Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Sustainable Agricultural Systems FY2022 Request for Applications (USDA 2022) and by the Federal Emergency Management Assistance Public Assistance Program during the COVID-19 pandemic (FEMA 2021). Additionally, agencies need to streamline grant applications to make them more accessible, including removing and/or defining government jargon; simplifying language, forms, and supplemental documentation; and scrutinize the purpose of each requirement to determine if it necessary (Kelly, C. and M. Reta 2021).

Create capacity-building, technical assistance, and funding opportunities tailored specifically for community-based organizations. It is important to keep in mind that communities need both technical assistance and significant funding. Government agencies need to create specific programs and funding opportunities for nonprofits in historically disinvested communities that offer deeper resources. The U.S. EPA Environmental Justice Small Grants Program should be expanded “to offer much larger EJ grants over multiple years to maximize the benefits to communities” (Equitable and Just National Climate Forum 2021). Agencies are funding energy and climate professionals in partnership with community organizations to outreach and provide technical assistance as seen in the EPA Environmental Finance Center Grant Program Request for Applications (Funding Opportunity Number: EPA-I-OW-OWM-22-01). Not only do these opportunities strive to provide technical assistance, they create an opportunity for front line organizations to serve as the experts providing this assistance.

Recommendations for Philanthropy

Organizations working at the frontlines of environmental injustices, in communities suffering significant energy burdens, are ready to decarbonize and scale climate solutions. To scale this work, philanthropy plays a critical role. However, funders must realize that transformative work is a long game that will not be solved in one political or grant cycle. Success must be defined by the community, not by the funder. For example, even in a program focused on readying organizations for government funding, the Justice40 Accelerator leadership team realized there is important power and progress in community organizations receiving valuable information about the federal funding process that in turn allowed them to make self-determined

decisions that better serve their communities. For example, the Village SF intentionally decided to limit federal funding in their \$123 million project budget to 8% due to the administrative burden. Another organization have decided it is better for their organization not to apply for federal funding at this point given their current capacity and systems. With these considerations at the forefront, philanthropic funders can bring visibility to community-driven projects, invest in frontline organizations' capacity building and technical assistance, and mobilize dollars for project predevelopment and non-federal match to implement community-led climate solutions.

Increase visibility of community-driven projects. Philanthropy can raise the visibility of community-based organizations and their projects by supporting grantees with communications, media, and storytelling to enable communities to tell their own stories and own their narrative.

Invest in organizational capacity-building and technical assistance. Frontline community-based organizations need philanthropic investments to build up their staff and organizational processes and systems to apply for and administer government grants. Importantly, “philanthropic partners have a role to play in partnering with impacted communities to balance uneven power dynamics and ensure adequate resourcing of essential community capacities” (González 2020). Organizations also need technical assistance to navigating public funding applications, including one-on-one support to identify and screen funding opportunities and expert grant advising and writing.

Provide project predevelopment and match funding. Projects require diverse investment to bring community-driven ideas to fruition. Furthermore, non-federal matching funding is a common requirement and barrier for community-based organizations when applying for government funding. Philanthropy should create pools of non-federal predevelopment matching grant funds for grantees to meet the requirements to access government funding. More private funding is necessary to underwrite the perceived risk of federal dollars being deployed by frontline communities. By deepening support for frontline community organizations, philanthropy can uplift organizations and demonstrate strong community-designed and led climate solutions are ready for direct public investment.

Conclusion

The broader political context has evolved since the Executive Order 14008 was signed. Unknowns remain, including how much direct public investment will flow from the federal government to address climate change and to what extent state and local government agencies implement the goals of the Justice40 Initiative. The learnings from the Justice40 Accelerator have deepened our understanding of this critical work and our recognition that a transformative long game will not be solved in one political cycle. The Justice40 Accelerator is addressing centuries old inequities in resource distribution and access to federal, state, and local funding. It is one program model among several. Engaging and positioning community-based organizations to successfully navigate the funding system requires information, resources, and a broad set of partnerships. By providing tailored technical and financial assistance and partnership to support frontline organizations applying for and receiving government funding, the organizations will be better equipped to implement energy and climate solutions and create lasting change in their communities.

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