

# NATIVE VOICES

## *RISING*

A Case for Funding Native-led Change



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Native Americans  
in Philanthropy

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## *RISING*

A Case for Funding Native-led Change

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## FORWARD

### ***This is a pivotal time in Native America.***

Opportunities are opening up as the result of improving economic standards, higher levels of educational attainment, and better health outcomes in certain regions; however, many of the challenges that have long faced our population still persist. For every major challenge and issue there are also efforts to make positive changes.

***Native Voices Rising*** is a joint research and re-granting project of Native Americans in Philanthropy and Common Counsel Foundation intended *to focus philanthropic attention on the need for increased investment in and sustained support for grassroots community organizing and advocacy in American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities.*

Deeper and longer-term investments in community organizing and leadership development efforts will promote self-determination and the ability to develop and seek our own vision of change. This change can lead to healthy, prosperous communities that are good for Native people and consequently the entire nation. The growing sophistication of advocacy organizations at the grass tops level such as the National Congress of American Indians combined with strengthening a *grassroots network* that could coordinate campaign efforts on the ground in urban, rural, and tribal communities is, in our opinion, essential to building effective power.

Native Voices Rising offers an ideal opportunity to learn more about Native communities and culture, establish long-term relationships, and to invest in Native advocacy and organizing. Toward this end we intend to continue identifying Native organizations doing organizing and advocacy work across the country. *We invite you to join us!* Contact Native Americans in Philanthropy if you would like to learn more. We wish to thank Open Society Foundations, and in particular Archana Sahgal, Program Officer, Equality and Opportunity Fund; Timothy Dorsey, Program Officer, Strategic Opportunities Fund; and Raquiba LaBrie, Director, Equality and Opportunity Fund for their support of this report and their partnership on the Native Voices Rising project.

As the following survey will illustrate, many grassroots groups in Native America face similar and different challenges as grassroots groups do elsewhere:

### ***Competition for Resources***

They are sometimes fighting multi-national corporations and government entities with few resources.

### ***Persistent and Enduring Challenges***

They face infrastructure restraints many others do not, e.g., roads, telecommunications.

### ***Foundation Disconnect***

Native projects are often difficult to fit into foundation program silos and it is rare that a foundation has either Native staff or trustees who can act as bridges or communication conduits.

### ***Limited Opportunities***

Few foundations fund grassroots organizing of any sort.

### ***Data Gap***

The size of the Native American population has chronically limited the collection of data and rendered Native Americans invisible.

### ***Personal Resource Exhaustion***

Activists often operating out of their homes as volunteers using their own money view grant writing as an insurmountable barrier.

### ***Administrative Overhead***

Foundation requirements often saddle potential grantees with relatively large administrative costs given the size of grants.

### ***Relationship Building***

Working with Native communities takes time, and like most relationship-building, doesn't happen overnight: patience and careful listening are necessary.

We also send our gratitude to Louis Delgado who led the research team and all the researchers that supported the production of Native Voices Rising. Last but not least, we are grateful to all the activists and organizers for their commitment to create opportunities and positive change for Native communities.

Hiriwe Turahe!

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Native American organizations face enormous challenges to their communities, their lands and environment, and their basic rights as Indigenous peoples. They face these challenges with limited support from the broad spectrum of America's philanthropic institutions. Far too many foundations simply give little to nothing at all in support of Native causes, a situation that requires corrective action designed to close the enormous gap between foundation giving and the needs of Native communities.

The low level of charitable foundation funding (.3%) going to Native causes, and the need to garner more support for Native organizing and advocacy work, in particular, prompted the Common Counsel Foundation and Native Americans in Philanthropy to jointly sponsor this research project that is focused on Native organizations which undergird the following five movements: Environmental Justice, Subsistence in Alaska, Native Engagement in the Urban Context, Media and Voter Engagement.

The organizations varied considerably in experience and the methods they use to pursue change. They fulfill many roles in their respective communities, such as: advocates, organizers, service providers, and community builders. A key role is that they serve as places where people can acquire knowledge and skills that enable them to assume leadership roles in the organization and in the community. Leadership development is essential to maintaining and advancing these movements. Most importantly, Native self-determination and sovereignty is reinforced through the work of these organizations.

*This study was designed with the following three goals:*

1. to deepen public understanding of Native organizing and advocacy practices and challenges;
2. to create a database of grassroots organizing entities in the field;
3. to encourage greater philanthropic interest and support for this work.

To accomplish these goals, three sets of data were compiled. First, Native organizations in the targeted movements were contacted to obtain basic information that could be used to write brief thumbnail sketches about their organizations that included mission statements, current organizing and advocacy efforts, and contact information. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with approximately 10 organizational leaders in each of the five movements to build a deeper understanding of how the organizations pursue their organizing and advocacy agendas, and seek change in their communities. Third, case studies of ten exemplary organizations, two in each movement, were compiled to illustrate the magnitude of the work. Representatives of 501c3 organizations, organizations using fiscal agents, and a few tribal governments and village councils participated in the study. In total, 146 organizations responded. Representatives from 49 of these organizations gave more intensive, in-depth interviews. Thumbnail sketches of all 146 organizations, the 10 case studies, as well as contextual information about each movement are contained in the full report.

# Major Findings

**The major findings and the recommendations to funders presented below were derived from the in-depth interviews.**

## *Focus*

The focus of the organizing and advocacy work varied considerably across movements, but focused on efforts to inform and enhance public policies and practices impacting the field, such as: promoting laws to provide greater environmental protections; gaining management control over food resources; ensuring racial equity in government programs; extending broadband into rural communities; and guaranteeing full access to the vote. In addition, direct services were often provided and were cited as supporting and being a part of the overall organizing effort.

## *Context*

The three major reasons community action was pursued are:

1. being under-or-poorly served by governmental bodies, programs or larger systems that impact the community;
2. lack of access to and/or protection of their homelands;
3. a negative cultural impact due to existing conditions and how larger systems impact the community.

## *Methods Utilized*

The six primary methods implemented are:

1. Collaboration that involves partnering with other organizations, tribes and agencies seeking common interests, including multi-racial coalitions;
2. Communications that enlist the increasingly popular social media, along with conventional methods such as newsletters, telephone and community meetings;
3. Direct Action that incorporates multiple approaches including nonviolent demonstrations, lobbying, litigation, petition drives, public testimony, and accessing the media;
4. Leadership Development sought through in-house formal training programs, external training programs, conferences, informal coaching, and traditional processes imbedded in tribal social structures;
5. Storytelling that is promoted through the media via radio, film and video production;
6. Research that gathers and generates new information through surveys, needs assessments, oral history, and monitoring existing conditions.



## ***Native Culture***

Being embedded in the community, having a presence, having relationships and knowledge of cultural protocols and ways of doing things are among the most important attributes an organizer must have to be effective in Native communities. In addition, using a consensus decision-making model, incorporating inter-generational approaches in organizing, and including Native cultural values in the training of organizers is desirable.

## ***Impact***

Changes in public policies and practices have ultimately impacted conditions in the community and among individuals and families, such as greater economic opportunity, preservation of natural food resources, increased access to health care, better informed and educated citizenry, and the continuation and renewal of cultural practices. In addition, community members have gained a greater sense of empowerment and ability to make change.

## ***Challenges to the Work***

The lack of adequate funding and the corresponding low organizational capacity present the most pressing challenges, followed by community politics, historical trauma, expansive geographical areas that, in some cases, lack adequate road infrastructure, and a lack of meaningful data about the issues.

## ***Funding Challenges***

Lack of organizational capacity to effectively seek and secure funding is a significant problem, along with the general lack of understanding in foundations about Native issues and peoples. Other issues are the small population compared to other racial/ethnic groups; lack of data to make the case for funding; little funding available for organizing; the misperception that gaming has made all Natives wealthy and that gaming tribes can address all the needs; large non-Native organizations get preference over small grassroots Native organizations; voting work is not supported between national election cycles; government regulations hinder tribal access to media funds; and heavy, frequently unsupported administrative costs associated with managing multiple grant sources.

## ***Funding Sources***

Funding was derived from nine different types of sources, including foundations, government, individuals and tribes. However, two-thirds of the organizations reported securing funds from only one or two types. This is likely due to limited organizational capacity to diversify funding bases more broadly.

## *Recommendations to Funders*

Below are 17 recommendations to increase foundation effectiveness related to organizing and advocacy within the five movement fields. Recommendations listed in the Grants category focus on grant structures and the targeting of grant funds. Recommendations listed under Operations are those things a foundation should incorporate related to grants management processes and decision-making.

### *Grants*

1. Provide increased funding for Native organizing.
2. Provide more general operating and capacity-building support.
3. Make long-term multi-year funding commitments.
4. Fund grassroots Native organizations directly.
5. Invest in leadership development.
6. Support Native intermediaries that are solidly grounded in Native movements.
7. Support income-generating activities such as social enterprises.
8. Support development of the telecommunications/media infrastructure.
9. Provide on-going operating support to voter engagement organizations beyond national election cycles in order to sustain progress and momentum.
10. Incorporate interdisciplinary grant approaches that draw funds from multiple foundation program categories to support organizations and projects conducting work at the intersection of those programs, e.g., culture and environment.

### *Operations*

11. Listen and learn about Native communities, including issues, needs, and aspirations.
12. Be more responsive than directive; find common interests.
13. Communicate information about grant programs more broadly in the Native world.
14. Conduct research on needs in the field in partnership with Native organizations.
15. Look beyond the small population numbers as compared to other racial/ethnic groups.
16. Bring Natives into the foundation as staff, board members and resource people, involving them in shaping and implementing foundation programs.
17. Small grant funders should pool funds to streamline the grants application process and reporting requirements.

***For Full Report visit:***  
***[www.nativephilanthropy.org](http://www.nativephilanthropy.org)***



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