



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
OPPORTUNITY NETWORK

10th Annual Learning & Action Forum in Pittsburgh

Community foundation leaders gathered in Pittsburgh in May at the annual Learning & Action Forum marking CFON's 10th anniversary — a milestone shaped as much by celebration as by urgency. As federal policy shifts continue to reshape the ground beneath the communities they serve, more than 65 leaders came together to anchor their work, deepen their networks and learn from one another.

With support from The Heinz Endowments and hosted by The Pittsburgh Foundation, the day-and-a-half gathering explored federal funding cuts, housing, authentic community engagement, civic health and immigration enforcement, then closed with a site visit to economic mobility nonprofit Catapult Greater Pittsburgh.

Pamela Gray Payton, CFON Chair and Vice President and Chief Impact and Partnerships Officer at San Diego Foundation, opened the Forum with a clear call to action: Community foundations cannot replace government, but they can use their relationships, grantmaking, voice and convening power to respond with clarity and purpose.

“Community foundations were built for moments like this,” she said. “Not because we have all the answers — we don’t. But because we are rooted. We are trusted. We have the relationships, the flexibility and the moral authority to act when institutions fail to.”

10 years back, then onward

The Forum doubled as a 10-year retrospective on the network itself. CFON Executive Director **Amy Daly-Donovan** traced its evolution from a 2015 gathering of community foundation leaders who were inspired by Robert Putnam’s work highlighted in his book “Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis”. CFON began with an inaugural gathering of interested folks primarily focused on the youth opportunity gap. The focus has broadened to today’s 50-plus member organizations driving equity, opportunity and structural change. Along the way, CFON has incubated now standalone organizations like the Community Foundation Climate Collaborative; launched NEON, an aligned action network; and stood up issue cohorts on early childhood, access to good jobs, housing, policy & advocacy, and equitable operations.

Much of the day’s celebration centered on **Dick Ober**, the retiring CEO of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and CFON’s founder. Daly-Donovan credited him as CFON’s visionary leader and engine behind the network’s growth. Ober, in turn, shared what has changed most in his 18 years in the field.

“The evolution of more and more community foundations, from being passive redistributors of wealth through passive grantmaking and donor services, to being social change agents using all of the levers of change available to us — that, to me, is the most exciting thing happening in community philanthropy today,” Ober said.

He closed with the word he is best known for inside the network: “Onward.”

Responding to federal funding cuts

A panel moderated by **Frank Fernandez**, President and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta, turned to one of the most urgent questions facing community foundations: how to help nonprofits and residents respond to federal funding cuts without assuming or the false hope that philanthropy can replace government.

Speakers from community foundations around the country shared a common lesson: the most effective responses were not created from scratch. They grew out of existing data, relationships and tables that could be activated quickly. For instance:

- **Jason Blau**, of Marin Community Foundation, shared county-level data showing 1 in 7 Marin residents at risk, most due to cuts in state-administered programs like Medicaid and SNAP. The foundation used this data as a call to action, presenting the findings to state legislators, mayors, and county supervisors to highlight hyper-local impacts. The striking “1 in 7” metric successfully grabbed the attention of local leaders and focused the foundation's advocacy efforts on pushing for backfill funding during the California state budget season.
- **Justina Acevedo-Cross** of the Hawaii Community Foundation walked through her organization's six-part response anchored by the reestablished Hawaii Resilience Fund, a nonprofit vulnerability index built with the University of Hawaii, and a state legislative win of \$50 million in bridge funding — “the most ready deployment of \$50 million I have seen.”
- **Marissa Cohen** of the St. Louis Community Foundation described how her foundation commissioned an analysis of 39 federal funding streams to understand where cuts could destabilize the region's nonprofit safety net. The project combined quantitative analysis with stakeholder interviews, then translated the findings into a regional convening for nonprofits, funders and other partners. The convening focused on three needs that surfaced repeatedly: legal compliance, communications/storytelling and budget scenario planning. Those themes became breakout sessions where nonprofits could receive more hands-on support and begin preparing for future cuts, rather than reacting only after dollars disappeared.
- **Pamela Gray Payton** shared the successes of United for San Diego, a collaboration with The Prebys Foundation and Price Philanthropies that has raised \$32.4 million, including a \$20 million draw from San Diego Foundation's endowment and an \$8 million county contribution. The initiative has supported more than 100 nonprofits since October across housing, food security and health care access. Its work includes helping residents stay housed, supporting health care access for residents affected by funding losses and delivering fresh groceries and prepared meals.

“The table had been set years ago,” Gray Payton said. “It was an easy ask when we went to our partners to say, ‘Can we do this together?’”

Building trust before crisis hits

The Forum also laid out just how community foundations can build social trust long before a crisis requires it.

Araba Sapara-Grant, Senior Manager of Community Activation at Weave: The Social Fabric Project, introduced the practice of “weaving” — building meaningful relationships that create the conditions

for social trust. Fewer than half of U.S. adults say they trust most or all of their neighbors, an 8 percent drop since 2015, she said, citing Pew data.

Weave's Weaver Awards were created to recognize residents who are already building trust in their communities, often without formal titles or institutional support. Awardees receive small grants, usually between \$2,500 and \$5,000, but Sapara-Grant said the deeper value is the cohort experience: connecting weavers to one another, offering one-on-one support, increasing visibility for their work and helping those who want to grow their efforts access tools and relationships.

Weave is now shifting from running the awards itself to partnering with 25 community hosts nationwide. The shift is meant to make the work more locally led, with community foundations and other trusted local organizations adapting Weave's tools, templates, technical support, peer network and evaluation resources to fit their own communities.

Sandi Hansen and **Tyrell Ross** of the Lincoln Community Foundation in Nebraska described how their partnership with Weave fits into Prosper Lincoln 3.0, which for the first time names "connection" as a community pillar alongside housing and early childhood. Lincoln will recognize 80 weavers over four years, each with a \$4,000 stipend and support designed to help them connect, learn from one another and strengthen their community-building work.

Leigh Riley Evans, Vice President of Policy and Engagement at the Indianapolis Foundation, then introduced the foundation's Community Ambassador program — 12 ambassadors across eight neighborhoods, run in partnership with **De'Amon Harges** and The Learning Tree. Harges, who introduced himself as a "social banker," described his job as finding "the gifts, talents and dreams of everybody in life and community."

Over five years, ambassadors moved more than \$1 million in mutual aid in three months during the pandemic, helped defeat an Indianapolis ordinance criminalizing homelessness, and built a documented social network of 1,573 nodes across more than 3,100 events.

Januarie York, also with The Learning Tree, closed the session by describing Bread, a gathering she began in 2018 that uses food, storytelling and conversation to bring people together across titles, degrees and social distance. Bread, she said, is meant to create a room where people can set down status and show up with their humanity.

"Maya Angelou said people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they'll never forget how you made them feel," York said. "Bread is meant to put us all on the same stage, and eat."

Strengthening civic health

Amy McIsaac of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement shared a striking finding from PACE's 2025 Civic Language Perceptions Project, a nationally representative survey conducted with More in Common to gauge reaction to specific words and phrases used: every civic and democratic term PACE re-tested from an earlier survey became more positive in the public's view.

Her counsel: don't abandon contested terms that may have tested lower, like "democracy" or "racial equity." Instead, be intentional about pairing them with high-connection words like "community," "freedom" and "belonging."

“We do not have to give up on our values or how we talk about them in order to reach people,” Mclsaac said.

Mary Thomas and **Sarah Aguirre Origer** of CFLeads then introduced the Community Foundations for Civic Health initiative, a partnership with the Rhode Island Foundation and the National Civic League that engaged 168 community foundations in 2025. The initiative is helping community foundations define civic health more clearly, understand how it shows up in their local work and access resources to strengthen connections among residents, institutions and local leaders. They warned that weak or inequitable civic infrastructure actively deepens partisan polarization and socioeconomic inequities.

Responding to immigration crackdowns

The Forum also examined how community foundations are responding to immigration enforcement actions and the broader climate of fear facing immigrant and refugee communities.

Alfonso Wenker, Senior Vice President of Community Impact at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, walked the room through Operation Metro Surge: federal agents in masks, neighborhood patrol networks of 3,000-plus daily volunteers, and \$14 million raised in six weeks by the Immigrant Rapid Response Fund. Wenker’s foundation began scenario-planning in 2024, drew down additional endowment in 2025 for BIPOC, immigrant and LGBTQ leaders, and is launching five-year, \$100,000-per-year operating grants for partners in democracy, arts, housing and food.

“Trust is the intervention,” Wenker said. “Fund what builds it.”

He also pushed community foundations to be clearer about institutional risk. The choice, he argued, is not between taking risks and avoiding them, because communities are already absorbing risk whether institutions act or not. The real question is whether foundations will use the legal, financial and civic tools available to them when the people closest to harm cannot.

“Our communities are going to absorb the risk regardless of how tepid these institutions are,” Wenker said. “We have the resources to go to court. Our communities don’t.”

Jess Schmidt, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Vermont Community Foundation, said years of supporting Migrant Justice’s alert network and the Vermont Immigrant Legal Defense Fund shaped the state’s response when ICE arrived in South Burlington on March 11, 2026. ICE ultimately detained three people who were all released, and two had their charges dismissed.

Schmidt also described how temporary guardianship planning helped ensure that children would be placed in safe homes committed to family reunification if a parent was detained. In one case, a child inside the home was safely brought to a pre-arranged temporary guardian before ICE entered, rather than being detained with the parent.

“The trust that we have built with our community is one of the most important things right now that we hold,” Schmidt said.

Housing as anchoring

AJ Herrmann of Accelerator for America and facilitator of CFON's Housing Cohort, moderated a panel reflecting on the cohort experience, which ran from May 2025 through April 2026.

Matt Shomo of The Chicago Community Trust highlighted Chicago's Unblock Englewood initiative, where local resident and MacArthur Fellow Tonika Lewis Johnson used public art to surface the history and ongoing effects of exploitative land sale contracts in Englewood. Her signs outside homes helped spark conversations among residents about stolen housing wealth, deferred maintenance and community repair. That organizing has since grown into a block-level home repair effort supported by a \$2 million, three-year Trust grant.

Shomo also described Reclaiming Chicago, a community-organized initiative with a goal of building 2,000 homes on the city's South and West sides over 10 years, financed in part by a construction loan fund that recently crossed \$50 million.

Kaela Hammond of the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta described House ATL, a cross-sector coalition launched in 2018 to bring nonprofits, government agencies, private-sector partners, real estate leaders and civic actors together around affordable housing. The coalition developed 23 recommendations, organized working groups around priority areas like homeownership and community priorities, and now meets regularly to advance shared policy and systems goals. The foundation fiscally sponsors House ATL, holds permanent board seats and remains deeply engaged as both a funder and participant.

Ben Amsden of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation brought a rural lens, describing a down payment-assistance program that has moved 60 families into workforce housing and effectively turned over 120 units of housing supply.

But, Amsden added, "A new unit or a family in a unit is not the only measure of success in housing. It's okay to put wood in the stove — to keep supporting affordable housing developers, the shelter system, the transitional housing system, with unrestricted operating grants so we don't lose ground."

Economic mobility in Pittsburgh

The Forum closed with a Pittsburgh-rooted conversation on economic mobility, moderated by **Joshua Devine** of The Pittsburgh Foundation, with **Sarah Dieleman Perry** of Neighborhood Allies, **Tammy Thompson** of Catapult Greater Pittsburgh and **Jennie Zeman** of the Allegheny County Housing Authority who shared stories of their programs and impact. Earlier in the morning, attendees broke into interest area roundtables on climate & environment, donor engagement & alignment, early childhood, and operations & administration.

At the end of the conference, attendees boarded a bus to Catapult's North Highland Avenue headquarters, where its CARE model, built around a trauma-informed financial-education curriculum called The Psychology of Poverty, anchors work spanning micro-business incubation, equity protection for tangled-title and heirs'-property issues, and emergency stabilization. Participants were wowed by the innovation, energy, and impact Catapult's programs bring to the community, and enjoyed time in the gallery space featuring visual artists learning how to create viable businesses, a retail pop-up shop, and a speakeasy for performing artists honing their talents.

Looking forward

Community foundation leaders left Pittsburgh with strengthened networks, sharper tools and a clearer sense of the role only community foundations can play at this moment.

“This year’s gathering was a reminder that we are not doing this alone,” Gray Payton said. “With so many emerging challenges, simply gathering to share our experiences, ideas and support proved restorative and inspiring. The work of foundations within the CFON network is more important than it has ever been.”

Daly-Donovan thanked The Pittsburgh Foundation for hosting and reflected on the network’s 10-year arc. “The theme of this year’s Forum — Anchoring Communities — is exactly what CFON foundations are doing every day,” she said. “After 10 years, what is most clear to me is that coming together to learn from and support one another is critical as we navigate the challenges behind ensuring equity, opportunity and justice for those in our communities. What makes CFON work is that we show up for one another, are generous with our shared experiences and learning, and are motivated to continue to strengthen and accelerate our work back home.”

The 11th Annual Learning & Action Forum will be hosted by San Diego Foundation in 2027.