Resourcing Our Movements

Launching a Community-Led Grantmaking Initiative

April 2023
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Cover photo: Members of Long Island Fund for Excluded Workers Coalition in Albany to advocate for the Unemployment Bridge Program, a law that would expand unemployment compensation for excluded workers.

Left: GNI members join Long Islanders and people from around the state in Albany to support parole reform at the Community Not Cages rally.
The Good Neighbors Initiative (GNI) of the Long Island Community Foundation (LICF) is the first participatory grantmaking venture in the region. Through their financial support and partnership, national and local funders designed the Good Neighbors Initiative to shift decision making power to community leaders.

GNI operates with the belief that successful regional, state, and national policy and culture change depend on the “bottom-up” leadership of grassroots groups, particularly in communities of color and other communities that are under-represented in decision making roles. Such power building work – especially in a place as racially segregated, politically fragmented, and geographically diverse as Long Island – depends on both building capacity of individual organizations, with their distinct identities and local communities, and building connections among groups that focus on a wide range of issues.

The creation of this new, people power building initiative was rooted in the legacy of local grassroots organizers facilitating regional change with statewide implications. Examples of prior work on Long Island include legislative reforms related to trans rights, environmental issues, immigrants’ rights, and the prison system. To be inclusive from the outset, GNI aimed to support Long Island’s diverse ecosystem of grassroots social justice, social service, and civic engagement groups – bringing them together to identify and address the region’s most pressing priorities. Funders invested in a participatory decision making body and a collaborative grantmaking process, with the five aims listed on Page 2.

1. To support region-wide social justice, social service, and civic engagement efforts on Long Island, with a focus on enhancing the infrastructure, leadership, and capacity of grassroots community-based organizations;

2. To increase broad-based and coordinated grassroots engagement with and leadership of local, regional, and statewide policy, and culture change, including with respect to both the passage and the implementation of progressive local and state legislation;

3. To strengthen links between grassroots groups on Long Island, their counterparts in other regions of New York, and statewide organizations and campaigns;

4. To contribute to transforming the relationship between institutional philanthropy and community organizations by shifting the power to allocate resources; and

5. To expand foundation and individual donor connections to and support for this vital work.
Through intentional and thoughtful partnership between Long Island social justice leaders and institutional funders, GNI developed a pathway to ensure that a diverse yet cohesive cross-section of voices would convene and co-lead decision making. The initiative would empower individuals and communities and create a vehicle for the most impacted residents to increase the visibility of their common issues, including at the state level.

This report covers GNI’s journey over its first two and a half years, from August 2020 through January 2023. It includes an overview of the project from early convenings to program execution, including lessons learned, challenges, and successes.

A set of national social justice funders who had grants and partnerships on Long Island recognized that the needs of organizers in the region far outweighed available resources. As a major social justice funder in the region approached its spend-down date, the Long Island Community Foundation (LICF), Unbound Philanthropy, and the J.M. Kaplan Fund initially convened a learning exchange and a series of conversations with grantees and community partners. As a community foundation, LICF was well positioned to serve as a bridge, connecting local community leaders with state and national funders. In a facilitated retreat, funders and nonprofit leaders explored Long Island’s increasing relevance to state and national work and lifted up some of its most pressing needs.

At first, the conversations were exclusively on immigration-related concerns. In early meetings with community partners, the approach became broader: participants identified the need for engagement across identity groups to address the stigmatization of immigrant communities on Long Island as a united whole. The convenings also revealed a shared desire for donors and groups working in Long Island’s distinct issue and geographic areas to develop a consistent way to come together, better coordinate their work, and build collective power. A similar goal arose in other regions of the state around the same time and was reflected in the establishment of the statewide funding network Engage New York.

In 2019, the funders involved in early Long Island discussions formed a cross-issue, region-wide collaborative and participatory grantmaking fund. The Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation awarded a seed grant with a focus on “people power building.” With additional support from several founding members, the initial fund totaled $200,000. This pooled effort complemented funders’ parallel giving to various participating organizations.

The fund aimed to serve as a vehicle for a network of community-based organizations to build power across Long Island. Through collaborative decision-making and participatory grantmaking, community leaders would collaboratively identify particular strategies toward regional goals and resource those strategies. Bringing together their expertise and perspectives, local leadership would be poised to support Long Island’s broader ecosystem of grassroots social justice, social service, and civic engagement groups – particularly in communities of color and other communities underrepresented in decision making roles. GNI’s convenors and participants would also use the platform to raise awareness among donors and foundations and ultimately increase investment in racial and social justice efforts on Long Island.

Protesters gather outside of Southampton Town Hall in support of the Shinnecock Nation Graves Protection Warrior Society whose mission is to protect unmarked burial grounds and sacred sites across Long Island.
Learnings

The Good Neighbors Initiative’s Peer Group launched in late 2020, with nine leaders from social justice organizations across Long Island. The group was diverse in terms of identities, issue areas, types and sizes of organizations, geography, and approaches. All shared an interest in organizing for systemic change across the region.

The Long Island Community Foundation took on a role as convenor, central administrative hub, and technical assistance provider for the initiative. The foundation served as the point of contact for all funders and as lead fundraising strategist, as well as the distributor of grants to Peer Group participants and their selected grantees. LICF’s Senior Program Officer provided direct advising to the new group of new grantmakers. The foundation also contracted with a Project Manager and a Participatory Grantmaking Facilitator to offer technical assistance and guide the Peer Group’s decision making process. The facilitator played a key role in capacity building for the new initiative, supporting program design, strategic planning, and relationship building within the group.

Through the initiative’s first two and a half years, the participants took away several lessons. The five themes that follow are relevant for changemakers across Long Island as well as in other parts of the country, and for participatory grantmakers and traditional grantmakers alike.

Youth and their families of STRONG Youth “Light a Candle for Peace” during Long Island’s 2nd Annual Peace Week.

Suffolk County Police recruits receiving Transgender/Gender 101 training with Gender Equality New York. Photo by Sarah Ohlinger.

Early GNI Funders

FORD FOUNDATION, ENGAGE NEW YORK
JESSIE SMITH NOYES FOUNDATION
J. M. KAPLAN FUND
LONG ISLAND COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
UNBOUND PHILANTHROPY
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST VEATCH PROGRAM AT SHELTER ROCK
Long Island is currently experiencing rapid demographic change. The 2020 Census indicated that close to 40 percent of Long Islanders now identify as non-white and/or Latino/Hispanic, representing an increase of nearly ten percentage points from the prior census. Long Island is predicted to become a “majority minority” area a full decade prior to the rest of the country. Despite the significant BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) population, however, 90% of elected officials identify as white; elected leadership does not generally reflect the communities it serves. Due to both historic redlining and current policies, neighborhoods and schools remain fairly racially segregated. The effects of systemic racism are far-reaching in the region.

At the same time, the police departments on Long Island’s Nassau and Suffolk Counties are among the 20 largest in the nation, measured by number of officers. A significant number of New York City police officers and their families, too, reside on Long Island. Together, their presence and a widespread pro-police sentiment impact the legislative agenda and political dynamics on the island.

Often, Long Island serves as a bellwether for the issues that will face other areas of the country. For example, the influx of unaccompanied child immigrants from Central American countries and the resulting cooperation among schools, local law enforcement, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement appeared in Long Island communities relatively early. Similarly, the “Save Our Schools” campaign, a misinformation-based anti-equity effort that targets Critical Race Theory at the local school board level, is powerful in the region. And most recently, legislation nearly passed that would have granted county police officers protected class status under the county’s Human Rights Law. (After the state’s Attorney General engaged, the legislation was ultimately vetoed. Still, its initial passage through the Nassau County legislature was keenly watched across the country as a potential model for duplication.) In recent years, Long Island has received attention nationally for its white nationalist sentiments, police brutality, political polarization, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, strengthening the case for social change efforts.

Efforts by local activists to both resist harmful practices and elect value-aligned candidates have expanded in recent decades. While a range of programs and issue campaigns have been successful, these are frequently siloed by topic and geography. Issue-specific coalitions have formed, but tend to be under-resourced or hit other barriers. Further complicating social justice efforts, the island is fragmented into 120 local municipalities, which hinders region-wide policy solutions. In this context, there was an opportunity for a unified, collective, movement-building strategy to bring together disparate efforts.

Having reviewed options, the Good Neighbors Initiative’s early designers selected a participatory grantmaking model. Collectively, they held the belief that philanthropy that is truly responsive to and led by community members must move toward participatory grantmaking in the coming years.
GNI's structure is informed by the practices of initiatives like the North Star Fund’s Community Funding Committees, Amplify Fund, PA is Ready!, and the Brooklyn Community Foundation’s participatory grant making structures.

In co-creating GNI, participatory grantmakers – called Peer Group members – and institutional funders modeled what it looks like to extend power, to work in partnership as grantmakers, and to trust, explore, and build with leaders on the ground. Long Island Community Foundation worked to ensure community-based organizations would be empowered to lead change. Based in a region of national relevance socially and politically, GNI was well situated to test out a community empowerment approach through the way it distributes resources – through the how of grantmaking.

The first step for this regional changemaking mechanism was to form the Peer Group — a collection of diverse, multi-racial local leaders. In 2020, Long Island Community Foundation and its funder partners undertook a rigorous selection process to identify the initial members. Reviewers ensured that group members’ interests spanned issue areas and that their identities were representative of the region’s racial, geographic, and gender diversity. Nine grassroots organizations were selected for this multiyear effort.

While the group of visionary and collaborative social justice leaders included some prior relationships, no existing table or coalition covered such a breadth of like-minded organizations in the region.

To launch the Peer Group’s efforts, the institutional funders offered guidance on steps and made themselves available as a resource. Overall, they positioned the Peer Group as the leaders and decision makers, with very few requirements or guardrails on their process or grant decisions. The slate was blank. The institutional funders and facilitator offered this suggested strategy process for the peers to modify and shape:

- Identify the scope of existing organizing, civic engagement, and leadership development work on Long Island;
- Select specific outcomes to focus on and specific strategies in support of those outcomes (e.g. through a theory of change or logic model);
- Determine priority organizational capacity and power building activities; and
- Make grant decisions to support these goals and strategies.

Throughout the process, the Peer Group shared updates with the institutional funders on its work. Funders were able to offer ideas, resources, and introductions, as partners working alongside the group. Two years later, as the effort took shape and continued to grow, Unbound Philanthropy and Long Island Community Foundation made a targeted investment in the Good Neighbors Initiative’s long-term sustainability planning.

Peer Group members led the GNI strategy development, with the support and collaboration of LICF Senior Program Officer, Sol Marie Alfonso Jones.

**FOUNDING GNI PEER GROUP MEMBERS**

- CHOICE FOR ALL
- GENDER EQUALITY NEW YORK
- LONG ISLAND JOBS WITH JUSTICE
- LONG ISLAND PROGRESSIVE COALITION
- NEW HOUR FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN
- PADOQUOHAN MEDICINE LODGE / SHINNECOCK NATION GRAVES PROTECTION WARRIOR SOCIETY
- SEPA MUJER
- STRONG YOUTH
- WOMEN’S DIVERSITY NETWORK
LEARNINGS

BUILDING TRUST AND EMPOWERMENT

Since most Peer Group members were Executive Directors of local nonprofit organizations, they were very familiar with the granting process as a grantee, but did not have the experience of being a grantor. Many reported experiencing a mindset shift during the initiative’s planning phase.

This change in responsibility and perspective meant it was essential to facilitate an ongoing relationship between the Good Neighbors institutional funders and the Peer Group members. The Peer Group members frequently indicated that time spent with the funders was extremely valuable in supporting their goals.

The GNI Peer Group convened with the institutional funders of the Good Neighbors Initiative several times in its first two years. These meetings facilitated open dialogues also provided an opportunity for these two groups of social justice leaders. Their times in its first two years. These meetings facilitated an ongoing dialogue between institutional funders and the Peer Group members, frequently indicating that time spent with the funders was extremely valuable in supporting their goals.

The continued work within the Peer Group... is a consistent place of learning and growing together. We hold space for one another, we listen, we consider, and we are dedicated to moving our mission forward.”

– Bianca Collins, Peer Group member

GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT SCALE

| Endorsement | Agreement with reservations | Abstain | Stand aside | Formal disagreement, but willing to go with the majority | Formal disagreement, with request to be absolved of responsibility for implementation | Block
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<td>“Like it!”</td>
<td>“Basically, I like it.”</td>
<td>“I have no opinion”</td>
<td>“I don’t like this, but I don’t want to hold up the group.”</td>
<td>“I want my disagreement noted in writing, but I’ll support the decision.”</td>
<td>“I won’t stop anyone else, but I don’t want to be involved in implementing.”</td>
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This is the COMMUNITY AT WORK Gradients of Agreement Scale®. This scale makes it easier for participants to be honest. Using it, members can register less than whole-hearted support without fearing that their statement will be interpreted as a veto.

Developed by Sam Kaner and colleagues, Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 3rd Ed. (©Wiley 2014) Used with permission.

LEARNINGS

COMING TO ALIGNMENT

During its first years, the Peer Group met biweekly, with occasional full-day virtual retreats. The Peer Group’s first steps towards building alignment included creating group agreements, values in practice, and decision making protocols.

With these key rules of engagement in hand, the group then moved on to create a mission statement, which served as the group’s North Star when considering grantmaking strategies and approaches. When developing its core Values in Practice and its mission statement, the Peer Group included GNI’s institutional funders in its decision making.

Early Peer Group sessions also included coming to alignment on an internal decision making method for all process and strategy decisions.

The group identified a consensus method, borrowing from the “Gradients of Agreement Scale” (developed by Sam Kaner, Duane Berger, and colleagues). Finally, the peers created a Conflict of Interest policy, incorporating ideas from peer initiatives. The policy included an annual disclosure form to document members’ and their immediate families’ affiliations, as well as a recusal process for any member directly – or, in some cases, indirectly – involved in a grant proposal. These agreements formed the groundwork for future deliberations on goals, strategies, and grantmaking approaches. Creating them also contributed to building trust and helped address any potential concerns about Peer Group decisions made in a single organization’s self-interest.

Peer Group members shared that, during this phase, the Participatory Grantmaking consultant's facilitation helped the Peer Group create space to envision, break down barriers, take risks, and make unified decisions. Support with program development, project management, and strategic planning were essential to the success of this phase.

Learnings

Social Impact Studios facilitates supporting the GNI Collaborative and its narrative change efforts.
To develop its theory of change and grant-making strategy, the Peer Group engaged in facilitator-guided visioning exercises, brainstorming, polls, and discussions about grant-making outcomes, strategies, and pathways. Through this alignment and consensus building process, the Peer Group ultimately decided on a two-phase plan for participatory grant-making that transforms narrative and facilitates grassroots leadership through a Collaborative. Throughout this iterative process, the Peer Group members took significant leadership roles internally, often facilitating components and presenting options to their fellow community grantmakers. The process of developing a strategy included the following steps:

- Exploring definitions of key concepts such as “power building” and “organizing”
- Sharing the respective goals, accomplishments, approaches, and challenges of each of their organizations
- Envisioning what progress looks like in 50+ years
- Mapping the regional social justice landscape, including coalitions with which Peer Group members were actively connected, and identifying gaps
- Engaging in Q&A in a grantmaking information session with LICF staff
- Engaging in a participatory grantmaking information session with two initiatives from other regions
- Brainstorming potential strategies and tactics
- Exploring the merits of multiple approaches to grantmaking, e.g. a single, focused “big play” versus a flexible call for micro-grant proposals
- Developing a theory of change, which depicts how current assets and high-priority strategies and tactics lead to interim outcomes, long-term outcomes, and ultimately vision
- Selecting two top strategies and weaving them together in a hybrid concept.

Strategies for Regional, Cross-Issue, Multiracial Power Building

Mission

Through participatory grantmaking, GNI will strengthen grassroots, intersectional power building, Long Island-wide. Power building will address systemic oppressions and foster collective influence on local and statewide policy and/or culture change.

Vision

Across Long Island, grassroots, intersectional power building is strong consistently shaped by community leaders. Policy and culture are consistently shaped by community leaders.

Long Term Outcomes

Workers and community members—who are informed and activated—determine the conditions of their lives and labor. Intersectional, cross-issue, multi-racial collaboratives are consistently working in partnership together.
In mid-2022, the Peer Group rolled out its narrative change and leadership development grantmaking strategy. Through closed Requests for Proposals, members selected a project manager, a communications consultant, and a cohort of Collaborative members to drive a two-phase process. The Collaborative members’ organizations received stipends to compensate them for staff time spent working together on the initiative.

The first phase is the development of a regionally shared narrative that represents the diversity of Long Island’s residents. Collectively developed by the 17-member Collaborative, which includes and extends beyond the Peer Group, the shared narrative will serve as a mirror of the demographics of Long Island. Working together, the Collaborative can use this collective narrative and new partnerships with one another to strengthen the regional response when emergent issues arise. Through the Collaborative, the Peer Group further widened the involvement of community leaders often at the margins of decision making.

In the second phase of work, the Peer Group and Collaborative will address the lack of a cohesive social justice leadership development program in the region. The final shared narrative will be used to inform a new leadership development initiative, the messaging will ultimately be applied in practice by new local organizers and community leaders. The leadership development phase will employ a “train the trainer” model, continuing to expand the reach of the GNI throughout the region.

The work of the Collaborative and parallel grantmaking are ongoing as of early 2023; the Peer Group’s strategy continues to unfold.

Long Island is ready for the Peer Group’s vision! Throughout [early 2023], hearing the contributions and sentiments of the Collaborative has reassured me we are prepared to embrace a cross-issue approach to organizing and movement building... It is apparent there is an understanding... We all bring relevant lived and work experiences; we’re all part of the same larger efforts.

- Rahsmia Zatar, Peer Group member

GOOD NEIGHBORS INITIATIVE: GRANTMAKING THEORY OF CHANGE

**purpose**
To strengthen grassroots, intersectional power building. Long Island-wide. Power building will address systemic oppressions and foster collective influence on local and statewide policy and culture change.

**values**
Community at the center: We center community in all work we do and center marginalized voices, especially. We work in community as neighbors.

Multiple truths: We seek to understand a range of perspectives and to consider different possible paths to the shared goal.

Partnership: We all bring relevant lived and work experiences; we’re all part of the same larger efforts.

Empathy and healing: We are people first; we create space to attend to each other’s wellness and growth.

**current conditions**
- Social justice movements on LI are fragmented, siloed.
- Community leadership lacks connections to resources, training.
- Many nonprofit organizations and their boards have limited capacity and insufficient access to redistributing.
- The LI political environment persists social police and structural violence are pervasive.
- BPOC communities, trans, and other historically and currently marginalized groups are underrepresented in positions of power, including elected office.

**strategies**
- Changing the narrative: building a shared regional history and collaborative narrative.
- • Strengthening organizing and developing community leadership
- • Supporting community members in self-realization of their power
- • Public education

**intermediary outcomes**
- Voters are informed/have new perspectives
- Community members have info, tools, networks to run for office
- There are more community leaders
- Leaders are better equipped
- • Increased knowledge of political system
- • Within LJ spans, awareness of others’ issues
- • Within LJ spans, awareness of community leaders role
- • Increased knowledge of political system
- • Voters are critical of power structures and empowered to confront
- • Communities are demanding more from elected leaders through voting and accountability
- • Community members are demanding more from elected leaders through voting and accountability
- • Intermediary outcomes

**outcomes**
- Workers and community members who are informed and activated determine the conditions of their lives and labor
- Intermediary outcomes enable collaborative communities are consistently working in partnership together

**vision**
- Across Long Island, grassroots, intersectional power building is strong
- Policy and culture and consistently shape community leaders

...
PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING INITIATIVES: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Through its launch and first two years, the Good Neighbors Initiative’s participants uncovered key design questions for similar participatory grant-making initiatives to consider:

Institutional funders’ involvement in participatory grantmaking meetings:
The Peer Group found value in LICF’s Senior Program Officer’s participation in its deliberations. The group also benefited from open dialogue on power dynamics and opportunities to hold closed sessions. In the future, the participatory grantmakers may consider including additional institutional funders in some of their strategy sessions.

When and how to expand who’s at the grantmaking table:
The initial Peer Group represented nine organizations; LICF recognized that not all issue areas or identity groups were included at that point. As of early 2023, there are six organizations in this leadership role, with a plan for the Peer Group to select three more later in the year.

Participation and accountability: The Peer Group created internal guidelines on expectations for participation in its learning and decision-making process. Their guidelines included plans for internal check-ins and peer accountability.

Conclusion

As the Good Neighbors Initiative continues its implementation phase with the Collaborative, the narrative project, and a leadership development program in development, members have found it helpful to reflect upon the process to date. GNI has experienced a great deal of progress towards its goals – including supporting grassroots, social justice efforts; increasing connections among previously siloed organizations; and ensuring that community leaders have the power to make collective decisions that affect their region. It continues to work towards some, such as strengthening the links to state-wide organization and campaigns. The initiative has regional and state-level ties, so on-the-ground relationships and infrastructure are in place to contribute to policy change in municipalities, the two counties, and in coordination with partners across the state.

“Big play” grantmaking versus spreading out resources among various ideas:
In participatory grantmaking, just like in traditional grantmaking, decision makers have the option to divide resources among a number of small organizations and projects or to “go big” on one or two efforts. After deliberating on these scenarios, the Peer Group chose to invest its resources in a consolidated way on a single initiative, for amplified, coordinated impact. And they went further: they decided that their organizations would directly engage in the design and implementation of the funded initiative. With other organizations, they created a broader coalition that they both funded and participated in.

Open RFPs versus proposals by invitation:
Like many traditional funders, the Peer Group wrestled with whether to invite proposals from any organization in the community, to narrow eligibility in particular ways, or to invite proposals from a select set of organizations. When selecting a limited number of Collaborative members for a balanced group, the downside of making the opportunity completely open was requiring a time investment from many organizations and the likelihood of a high declination rate. To cast a wide net, Peer Group members relied on its extended network and word of mouth. In the upcoming phase of implementation, leadership development programming will be open to a wider array of community members.

Institutional funders and outside advisors’ roles:
Early in the process, GNI funders considered convening an additional advisory committee, including researchers and other community partners, but decided not to pursue this structure in the first three years. In the future, the group may explore external advisor models.

STRONG Youth joins community groups in Islip, NY (Suffolk County) to denounce police violence and demand comprehensive police reforms.

“"We are modeling on a small scale, as the Peer Group, what we hope to accomplish on a big scale through the GNI Narrative and Leadership Development Project, and even bigger scale across the region... We are building our collective influence through this process and internally transforming the culture in which we operate together. This is a critical step in growing our capacity.”

- Ani Halasz, Peer Group member
Now that GNI has clearly identified grantmaking strategies, priorities, and plans, partners will be equipped to share how the participatory grant-making initiative is contributing to systemic change in the region, change that can potentially be replicated elsewhere or connected to other campaigns. The initiative is actively focusing on sustainability planning to ensure a long-term trajectory with lasting impact. Most importantly, the initiative is on track to amplify the diverse voices of the region through a shared, powerful message and to foster the development of an expanded base of grassroots leaders who can carry this message forward.

Creating a joint narrative for Long Island is so important to addressing our mission and achieving our collective goals. People like to divide us and we are taking the power in our hands by keeping community at the center and coming together to create something for Long Island.”

– Shanequa Levin, Peer Group member

The Long Island Community Foundation and the Good Neighbors Initiative are grateful for the partnership of these institutions: the Engage New York, the Ford Foundation, Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation, J.M. Kaplan Fund, Unbound Philanthropy, and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.