



THE  
**SOLUTIONS**  
PROJECT

# THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT 2017 EVALUATION

Summary Report

**By Frontline Solutions**

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## **Acknowledgements:**

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Graphic Design by Danielle Miles; Edited by Rachel Hylton

# FOREWORD FROM SOLUTIONS PROJECT

**Dear Colleagues,**

When Solutions Project launched its program model a little more than three years ago, our grassroots grantmaking anchored an integrated strategy designed to accelerate the transition to 100% clean energy through a more inclusive, collaborative, and celebratory movement.

We knew then, as we do today, that through storytelling, grantmaking, and a strong ecosystem approach we could help clear a path to victory. For Solutions Project's grantmaking, we support equity-rooted strategies that ensure just transitions are central to the call for 100%. We invest in community-based organizations that are making renewable energy more affordable and accessible to communities hit the hardest by climate change and failed energy policies. We are resourcing those innovators most affected by dirty energy, who are increasingly winning on policy and offering dynamic stories of impact. Even as they reflect the frontlines of climate change, community organizations are often under-resourced as compared to their larger national counterparts. Yet they know the most about how to affect change in the places they live. They know the most about how to get us where we need to go, and we are trying to listen.

In some ways, this evaluation is a continuation of that listening. We wanted to hear directly from our partners and grantees about what is working and what isn't. This evaluation will guide us in our continued strategic evolution to ensure we are moving towards 100% clean energy for all, together.

Created in partnership with Frontline Solutions, the following report documents early indicators that Solutions Project is doing what we set out to do. While more funders have joined us in advancing equitable climate solutions, the number of big, multiyear investments and nimble, fast-moving dollars to grassroots organizations are still too few. We are pleased to share the results of the first evaluation of the Solutions Project's investments with the hope that our lessons learned will guide other funders as they scale investments to correct this long-standing imbalance.

Together, we can make 100% renewable energy a reality for 100% of people.

Best Regards,



Sarah Shanley Hope  
Executive Director  
The Solutions Project



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout 2017, Frontline Solutions conducted a third-party evaluation to measure the effectiveness of Solutions Project's grantmaking process as well as grantee partner satisfaction. Data was collected from Solutions Project's internal systems and through interviews with Solutions Project's grantee partners, staff, peer funders, and philanthropic trustees. Indicators were collected to measure progress in four primary areas selected by Solutions Project with Frontline's guidance. The primary findings in each of these four areas is summarized below:

## 1 Right bet, right time

Solutions Project has positioned its work at the intersection of climate change and equity strategies. Solutions Project's grantmaking covered much of the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico. Leadership, Fighter, and Ecosystem Fund giving increased from 2015 to 2017 and Fighter Fund grants resourced urgent needs in a timely fashion. Nearly half of grantee partners were led by people of color, and 26% primarily focused on an issue other than environment or climate.

## 2 Meaningful grantee/funder partnerships:

Solutions Project has cultivated strong, trusting relationships with grantee partners. Grantees felt that they could be transparent and open with Solutions Project staff and were satisfied with the application, approval, and reporting processes. However, more than one-quarter of grantees asked for better communication from Solutions Project staff at the time of grant completion. Leadership Fund Committee members have transitioned to serving as philanthropic trustees. They are eager to own more of the work, and to rely less on the leadership of staff.

## 3 Strong organizations:

Solutions Project's grantee partners have grown in impact in 2017. Despite a hostile political environment, the leadership capacity, membership, and political influence of many grantee partners increased. Grantees felt that political leaders on a state and local level were more aware of the issues highlighted by grassroots organizations than were political leaders on a national level.

## 4 Rich ecosystems:

Solutions Project staff collaborate well with peer funders and push the field of philanthropy towards equity and diversity. Staff spoke to more than 20 audiences and published more than a dozen articles. Grantee partners reported that Solutions Project has connected them to new funders and organizations.

### The evaluation yielded recommendations for Solutions Project's grantmaking moving forward:

1. Cultivate stronger and clearer communication with grantees.
2. Expand grants team capacity.
3. Clarify messaging on the relationship between communications and grantmaking.
4. Build the grantee referral system.
5. Continue to democratize the grantmaking process.
6. Continue to serve as a relationship builder.

# INTRODUCTION

## Methodology

In 2017, Frontline Solutions conducted the first annual evaluation cycle for the Solutions Project’s investments. Data was collected from 175 grantee proposals, reporting processes, and timestamps recorded in Solutions Project’s internal systems. Frontline also conducted surveys and interviews with Solutions Project grantee partners, staff, peer funders, and philanthropic trustees.

These included:

<b>15</b> grantee partner interviews	<b>5</b> philanthropic trustee interviews
<b>5</b> peer funder interviews	Surveys with <b>5</b> staff members

### Categories of Indicators

Solutions Project and Frontline engaged in a series of four co-working sessions in 2016 to design an evaluation plan for measuring the process and impact of Solutions Project’s work. The team conceptualized the organizational evolution of the Solutions Project within a ten-year arc separated into three primary stages: building (2015-2017), improving/scaling (2018-2021), and sharing (2022-2024) the Solutions Project model. The evaluation cycle over the first stage is designed to measure the effectiveness of Solutions Project’s grantmaking process and grantee partner satisfaction.

Frontline and Solutions Project jointly selected indicators to measure progress in the four core areas of:

- 1 Right bet, right time:** Grants vary in size, speed of administration, and level of associated risk. Leaders of organizations that receive Solutions Project grants are diverse, collaborative, and geographically distributed.
- 2 Meaningful grantee/funder partnerships:** Grantees feel that they can be open and transparent with Solutions Project staff and are satisfied with the application, approval, and grantmaking process. Solutions Project’s investments move toward greater democratization.
- 3 Strong organizations:** Leadership capacity and political influence of front-line communities are increased. Locally-rooted movements are scaled and best practices or assets are shared. Compelling stories of impact are amplified.
- 4 Rich ecosystems:** Thriving ecosystems of actors are cultivated at the intersection of multiple sectors.

Frontline’s findings for each of these four core areas are presented in this report. At this early stage, which focuses on building the Solutions Project investment model, we give more weight in data collection and evaluative analysis to the first two indicator groupings.

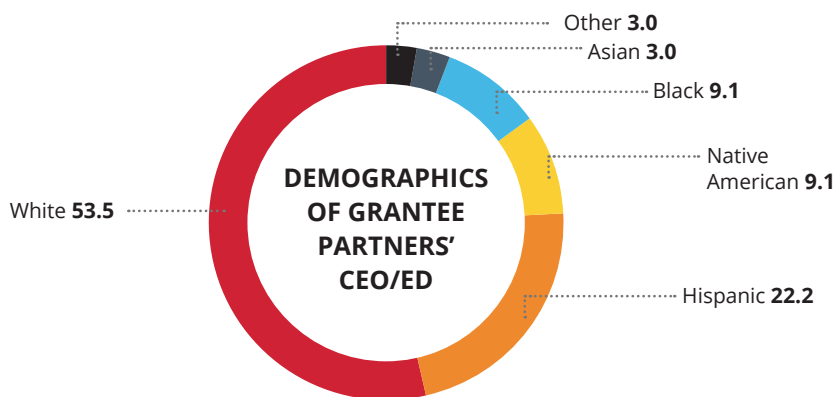


# 1 RIGHT BET, RIGHT TIME

The decisions that a funder makes about which organizations to fund, when, and in what amount reflect that funder’s values and shape its impact. Low-income communities and communities of color are most impacted by the effects of climate change and environmental abuse, and are best poised to identify opportunities and implement solutions for just transition to clean energy. Further, achieving 100% clean energy requires the collective efforts of communities and sectors beyond the conservationist environmental movement. How and when to fund is also paramount: grassroots organizations take on immense risk in moments of urgent political need. Timely resources from a nimble funder can support crucial moments for organizations to reframe public opinions, engage new leaders, and achieve policy “wins.”

## What we learned

New to the funding scene in 2015, Solutions Project has increased in giving steadily through 2017. In just three years, the organizations’ giving has covered an immense breadth of states across the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico, with giving particularly concentrated in Florida, New York, and California to support movements for change in those states. Solutions Project funds grassroots organizations in their early stages, and approves grants rapidly in order to resource urgent needs. In 2017, 11 Fighter Fund applications were approved within six days of submission--injecting critical resources so that grantees could do the work that they know best how to do. Nearly half of the organizations that Solutions Project funded through 2017 were led by people of color, and 26% of grantee partners were organizations that primarily focus on an issue other than environment, climate, or clean energy.



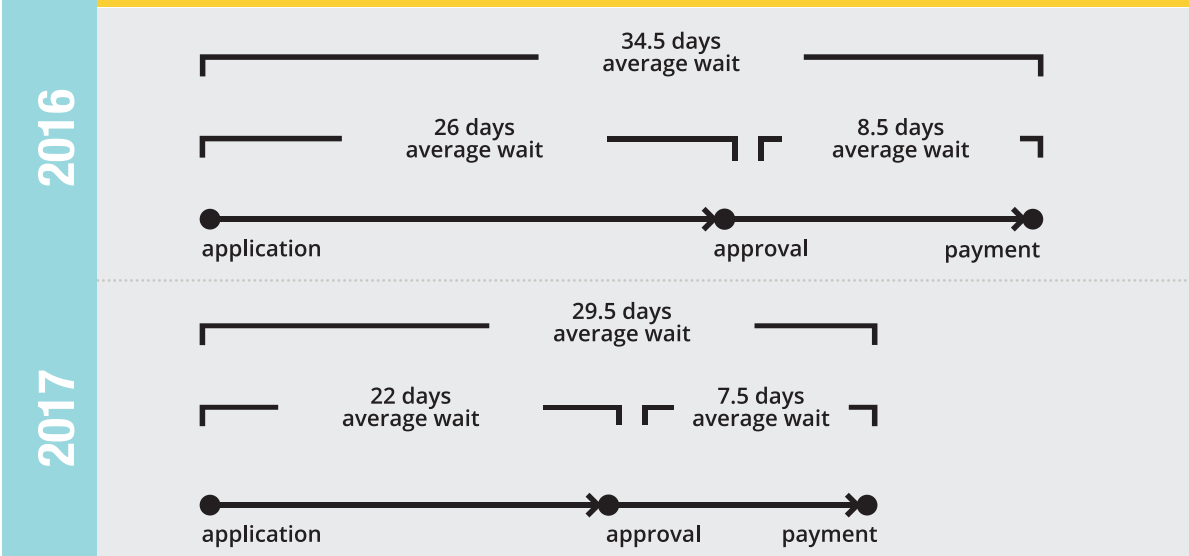
## Moving forward

Solutions Project has the opportunity to improve operations and build personnel capacity to reduce the average Fighter Fund response wait even further. Solutions Project could also employ a targeted referral strategy to increase the proportion of grantee organizations led by people of color to more than half of all grantee partners.

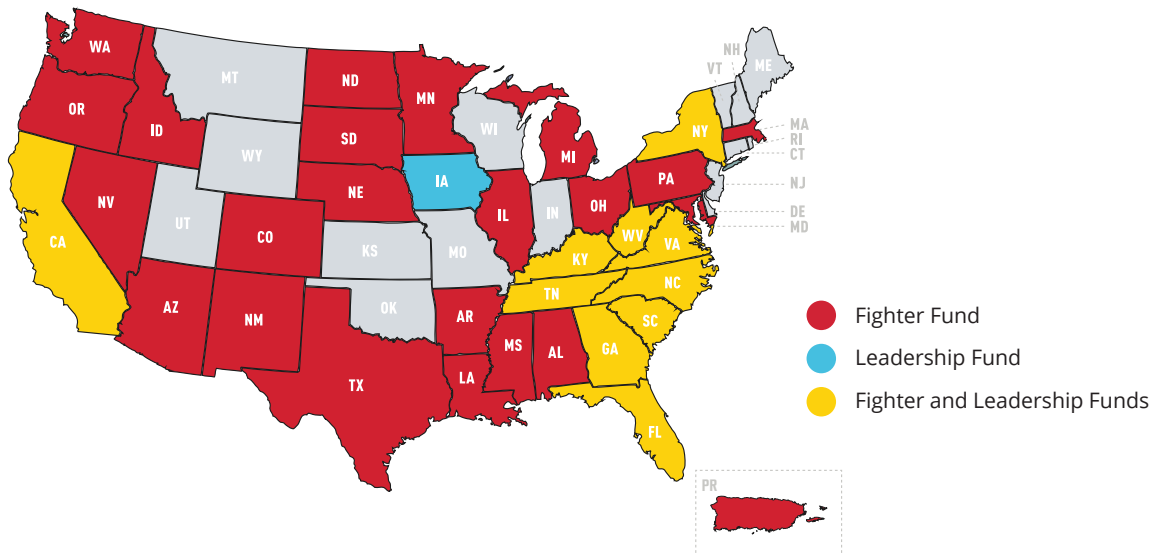
## SIZE AND NUMBER OF GRANT AWARDS

	2015	2016	2017
Fighter Fund	3 grants \$11,000 total	39 grants \$319,050 total	29 grants \$444,675 total
Leadership Fund	9 grants \$250,000 total	18 grants \$735,000 total	19 grants \$875,000 total
Ecosystem Fund	2 grants \$40,000 total	No grants	6 grants \$160,000 total

## FIGHTER FUND GRANTMAKING TIMELINE



## GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF GRANTEE ACTIVITIES





## 2

# MEANINGFUL GRANTEE/ FUNDER RELATIONSHIPS

Trust and respect from funders frees up grassroots and community organizations to drive the work required for lasting change. Strong partnerships are built on proactive communication - the emails, calls, and visits from program officers, the respect given to grantees' time through application and report processes, and the introductions made to a funder's wider network. Community-level representation in governance also reflects a funding organization's trust of grassroots organizations to drive funding decisions and strategy. Trustees are also a key element of grantee/funder relationships because they set the tone for how Solutions Project functions and makes funding decisions. Frontline interviewed trustees to ascertain their sense of influence and decision-making authority within Solutions Project.

### What we learned

Solutions Project has built strong, meaningful relationships with grantee partners. Two-thirds of grantee partners interviewed reported that they would feel comfortable reporting a negative outcome of a grant-funded activity to Solutions Project. Grantees reported that Solutions Project is trusting, honest, and respectful of their work, viewing their issues as important, relevant, and timely.

All grantees interviewed reported satisfaction with the ease and relevance of Solutions Project's grant application process and reporting requirements, the speed of their grant decision, and the payment process. All grantees also indicated that Solutions Project staff are helpful, supportive partners of their work. Beyond funding alone, grantees appreciated the stable general operations support provided by the Leadership Fund.

When asked how Solutions Project could improve as a partner, more than one-quarter of participants mentioned that they would have appreciated better follow-up communication after the completion of their grants. Several partners specifically wished that there had been more communication from Solutions Project about decisions not to re-fund. Grantees felt that more communication during follow-up would have built a greater sense of collaborative partnership.

**“They made a decision to not fund us for another cycle. It would have been helpful for them to help us to understand if we were going in the wrong direction or give feedback during that process.”**

- Grantee Partner



**“[Solutions Project] took a risk on us in our development stage when we weren’t super powerful yet.”**

- Grantee Partner

All trustees interviewed felt that they have influence over the agenda and decisions of the funds. When asked what they feel is going well, clear themes emerged:

- Trustees enjoy and respect other trustees, and their experience with Solutions Project has given them valuable perspective for their own work.
- Solutions Project staff are flexible and accommodating with regard to trustees’ schedules and prepare trustees well for organized, high-impact meetings.
- Trustees are pleased with recent steps to further democratize the grantmaking process, including their transition to becoming trustees.
- Solutions Project’s funding strategy has become clearer and more effective for supporting state-level movements.

More than half of grantee partners interviewed had referred other organizations to apply for grants from Solutions Project. Forty percent of trustees had personally referred organizations to apply for grants from Solutions Project. While this is a significant start for Solutions Project’s early years, there is an opportunity to increase the proportion of trustees and grantees referring new applicants.

### **Moving forward**

Solutions Project’s partnerships with grantee partners could be further strengthened by providing clearer communication with grantees, particularly at the beginning and end of the grant period. Solutions Project also has the opportunity to strengthen its referral system by clarifying Solutions Project’s target grantee pool and communicating these funding priorities to current and past grantee partners.

**“The group is genuinely a great group of people. I left energized from the end-of-year meeting.”**

- Trustee



### 3

## STRONG ORGANIZATIONS

As Solutions Project progresses along its organizational lifecycle towards scaling and improving its model, Solutions Project's impact will hinge on its ability to support organizations that capitalize on movement moments, engage and influence policymakers, and build leaders for the 100% clean energy movement. Due to the time needed for partnerships and investments to mature and show impact, the Strong Organizations indicator was curtailed in this first evaluation of Solutions Project's investments, but will become a focus of later evaluation years. For 2017, Frontline asked grantee partners about their capacity, wins, and needs to gather a baseline understanding of their work and impact.

### What we learned

Grantees partners indicated that 2017 was a difficult year as the new presidential administration rescinded prior advances in just energy transition. However, grantees found opportunities to reflect, change course, and build momentum in the wake of the 2016 elections. Several reported increased political participation and public interest in climate change throughout the past year. Grantee partners succeeded in building important partnerships across the aisle on both national and state levels. **They reported that local and state political leaders were more highly aware of their focus issues (at 53.5% and 60%, respectively) than national political leaders (46.7%).**

Grantee partners inserted climate issues within public policy debate on jobs and economic opportunity, diversifying the audiences interested in just transition. They were featured in major national and international news platforms such as The Washington Post and The Guardian, as well as local newspapers. In many cases, these placements were supported by the Solutions Project communications team. Several grantees reported a desire to build their communications capacity and expressed interest in more widely available technical support from Solutions Project.

The majority of grantee partners developed leadership capacity through workshops, trainings, and hands-on campaigns, although a few explained that their time and resources are too tight to devote to leadership development. Several grantees were supported by Solutions Project to send members to conferences or summits, which led to diversified and expanded leadership within their organizations.

### Moving Forward

Solutions Project has an opportunity to expand and further integrate communications support for grantees to both meet their goals and shape the broader narrative of the movement.

**"We are seeing extreme weather events across the country, and folks are looking for ways to plug in."**

- Grantee Partner

## 4

## RICH ECOSYSTEM

100% clean energy for 100% of the people will only be achieved in the context of an equity-centered movement thriving at the state level and across the country. Thriving ecosystems of actors must be cultivated at the intersection of multiple sectors, and local organizations must have better pathways to achieving their goals. Within such an environment, locally-rooted movements will be scaled, and community organizations and funders will share best practices and assets. The “rich ecosystem” grouping of indicators will be emphasized more heavily in later evaluation years. For 2017, Frontline spoke to staff, grantee partners, and peer funders to ascertain Solutions Project’s influence on peer funders and grantee’s sense of connection to a broader movement.

### What we learned

Grantee partners are working actively to expand their own networks, engaging a vast array of new partners in 2017. **Several noted that Solutions Project has gone above and beyond the support of most funders by making connections on their behalf and facilitating meetings with potential new funders and like-minded organizations.** Two-third of organizations reported that they feel very connected to a movement beyond their organizations’ individual work.

In 2017, Solutions Project staff served as panelists, speakers, and presenters on equitable transition to renewable energy, the financing of community solar energy, funding in the South, and supporting grassroots movements. Staff spoke to a wide array of more than 20 funder, community, and policymaking audiences. Solutions Project staff were also active in writing more than a dozen blogs, op-eds, and thought pieces on rapid response grantmaking, funding in the South, funding of social justice work, and transition to clean energy.

Peer funders were united in their feedback that Solutions Project regularly shares relevant information about potential grantees with other funders. Almost all of the peer funders interviewed had learned about organizations, campaigns, or strategies from Solutions Project. Solutions Project staff are seen as knowledgeable on specific geographic areas, including Standing Rock, Florida, Appalachia, and the Southeast. Staff have advocated for diversity and equity in mainstream funding circles, and Solutions Project’s communications strategy has influenced how peer funders think about their own communications.

### Moving forward

While Solutions Project is known as a connector among peer funders and grantee partners alike, there is an opportunity to create additional spaces for the portfolio of grantees to connect and share strategies, in addition to supporting convenings in the broader ecosystem.

**“Our conversations with Solutions have led to a deepened shared analysis.”**

- Peer Funder



# INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings and data summarized above, Frontline and Solutions Project developed the following strategic insights related to Solutions Project's grantmaking in 2017 as well as recommendations for moving forward:

- 1. Cultivate stronger and clearer communication with grantees, particularly at the beginning and end of the grant period.** Online information about Solutions Project's grants should be rewritten for greater clarity about the funding strategy. As the current grant period comes to a close, staff should initiate conversations with individual grantees about longevity of relationship and potential grant renewal or close-out. Staff should also create a protocol for the decline process—delineating what level of information should be provided to help build relationships with organizations who are not a good fit for funding.
- 2. Expand Solutions Project's grants team capacity.** Solutions Project should improve operations and data collection systems through updates to Salesforce. Solutions Project leadership should consider investing in additional personnel capacity to support more robust communication and partnership with grantees. Together, these measures have the potential to reduce the average number of days between application, approval, and payment, and create a stronger sense of partnership with grantees.
- 3. Clarify messaging on the relationship between Solutions Project's Inspire and Invest strategies.** Grantee partners and funders perceive that Solutions Project has expertise in communications that could potentially support their own work. Solutions Project leadership and staff should better explain their model as an intermediary that integrates communications and grantmaking strategies along an arch of change. Solutions Project should also explore which aspects of their communications knowledge may be helpful and appropriate to share with stakeholders.

- 4. Build Solutions Project's grantee referral network.** Solutions Project should continue to solicit referrals from current and past grantees, peer funders, and trustees. However, staff should clarify Solutions Project's target grantee pool (communities of color-led, frontline community-led, multi-issue, grassroots, in-line with state level strategy, etc.). A more targeted referral strategy has the potential to increase the proportion of grantee partners led by people of color to more than 50% of all grantees.
  
- 5. Continue to democratize the grantmaking process, which involves diffusing the power center of Solutions Project's grantmaking.** As a body that is led by representatives from Solutions Project's grantee partners as well as recognized philanthropic leaders, the trustees should take on an increasing leadership role within the organization, along with the Board of Directors.
  
- 6. Continue to serve as a relationship builder,** connecting grantee partners to each other, introducing them to new potential funders, and sharing knowledge about organizations and regional movements with peer funders. Continue to invite grantees to events in their state or region, and consider hosting statewide or national grantee partners convenings.



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