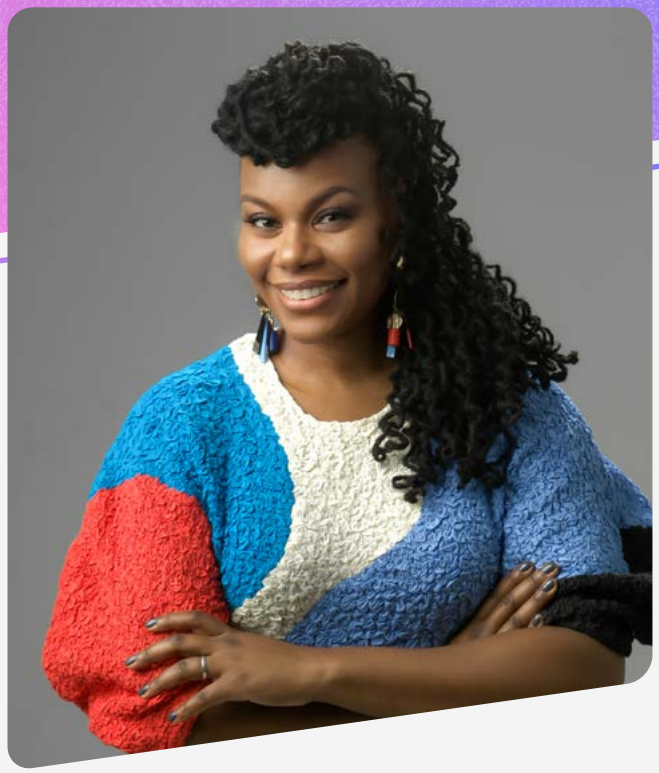
A Letter from Our CEO



Every day, people make one of the hardest decisions a person can face: whether to stay in the place they call home or leave it behind.

Some are fleeing a hurricane that has stripped everything away. Some are watching their farmland turn to dust. Some are navigating threats to their safety and their family's survival. These are the lived realities of communities across this country and around the world—and they are inseparable from the accelerating climate crisis.

We are in a moment of compounding crises—climate change, displacement, economic instability, and threats to democracy—all of which fall hardest on those who have been historically marginalized. The 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina last year is a reminder that climate displacement is not a future threat—it is a lived reality. More than one million people were displaced by that climate disaster, with many having to rebuild not just homes, but entire communities and social networks from the ground up. Black communities in the Gulf South bore the brunt of the disaster and were disproportionately excluded from recovery, forced to rebuild homes and communities elsewhere. Their story is that of the largest climate migration in America's history. We are publishing the *Place, Power, and Possibility: Climate and Migrant Justice Series* in commemoration of that anniversary because the Black experience in climate migration remains one of the most urgent and underleveraged stories in this movement. This series is one step in a longer journey toward that fuller reckoning.

People have always moved to survive changing conditions—and the right to remain, to migrate, and to return must be recognized as fundamental rights. This series holds the experiences of three groups: climate-induced domestic migrants, cross-border immigrants, and refugees and asylum seekers. We honor their distinct experiences and legal realities. And across those differences, the common ground is clear: barriers to belonging, exposure to systemic racism, state violence, and labor exploitation, and the persistent use of fear and division to undermine their solidarity. All of them carry a deeply personal story of how the climate crisis intersects with their lives and hopes for the future.

This series was co-created alongside grassroots leaders and organizations in Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco Bay Area, CA. It was built with people working at the intersections of climate resilience, migrant justice, narrative change, and community power. Reflecting the acute challenges communities are experiencing in this current moment, these guides dive deeply into how organizations are supporting immigrant and migrant communities on the frontlines of climate change.

Those who profit from division – fossil fuel companies, private prison corporations, the border security industry – want us to see migrants as a threat rather than as neighbors, coworkers, and contributors to our shared future.

Our response is collective power and strategic unification, not the erasure of difference, but the intentional organizing across it. Because when communities that have been deliberately separated find their shared ground, they become harder to divide and harder to ignore. That is the foundation this series is built on.

Place, Power, and Possibility: Climate and Migrant Justice Series is designed to support movement and power building across governance, policy, and narrative – three fronts that are intrinsically connected, and that the communities in this guide are showing us how to run all at once.

The work ahead is hard. But across this country, communities are already showing us what's possible. This resource belongs to the organizers, advocates, and everyday people showing up where climate and migrant justice meet. Because collective power, built from the ground up, is the only path forward.

Gloria Walton,
President and CEO

THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

PLACE, POWER & POSSIBILITY:
A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

Policy Advocacy
at the
Climate-Migration Nexus

THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Written By:
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This guide series is co-published with The Solutions Project and Just Solutions.

The following organizations also informed the series:

- APEN
- Catalyst Miami
- PODER
- PUSH Buffalo
- WeCount!
- Justice for Migrant Families

With special thanks to our funding partners, Democracy Fund and Unbound Philanthropy, for their generous support of this work.

OVERVIEW

Frontline communities have the power to shape policies that impact their families and communities in a time of increasingly rapid impacts brought on by climate change.

Community organizations and grassroots movements are early responders in shaping how frontline communities adapt to the compounding effects of environmental injustice, climate change, and forced migration. Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, or funder, this guide is intended to support reflection, implementation, and sustained policy strategies that strengthen climate resilience and migrant justice in tandem.

OVERVIEW

This guide is part of The Solutions Project's Place, Power & Possibility: A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

These guides advance integrated strategies across community governance, policy advocacy, and narrative change.

Each guide speaks to a distinct set of strategies and audiences while contributing to a shared vision of climate resilience rooted in equity and community power.

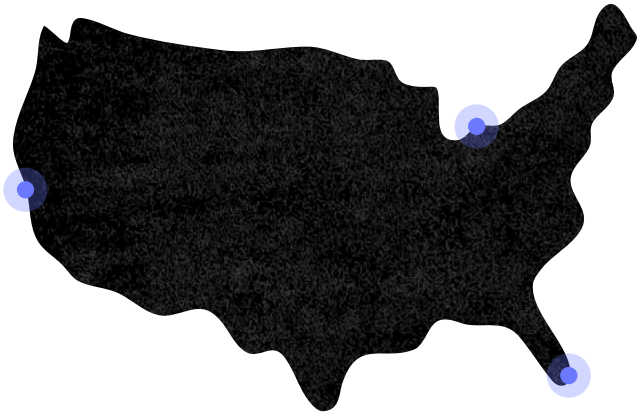
The Policy Advocacy Guide is designed to support community-based leaders, organizers, policymakers, and frontline organizations by offering frameworks, strategies, and practical tools for advancing policy solutions at the intersection of climate change and migration. It explores how issues such as housing justice, worker protections, language access, resilience infrastructure, and equitable development must be addressed to meet the migration and climate realities facing frontline communities.

Grounded in the lived experience of grassroots organizations participating in The Solutions Project's Climate + Migrant Justice cohort, this guide draws from leadership in Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco Bay Area, CA—regions navigating distinct but interconnected climate and migration dynamics. Across these regions, partners are advancing policy campaigns that respond to immediate climate impacts while building long-term structural protections for immigrant and low-income communities.

Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, or funder, this guide is intended to support reflection, implementation, and sustained policy strategies that strengthen climate resilience and migrant justice in tandem.

INTRODUCTION

POLICY ADVOCACY AT THE CLIMATE-MIGRATION NEXUS



Climate change and migration are reshaping communities—but policy systems have not kept pace.

At a time when reactionary forces threaten progress on civil rights, environmental justice, and immigrant protections, frontline organizations are advancing policy strategies that center community leadership and structural equity. This guide showsnexamples from across South Florida, upstate New York, and the San Francisco Bay Area, how grassroots movements are demonstrating that climate resilience and migrant justice can be addressed together, rather than in separate silos.

The policy advocacy guide at the nexus of climate and migrant justice draws from a cohort of organizations convened by The Solutions Project that are responding to diverse political and environmental contexts while advancing integrated policy campaigns. These efforts span housing justice, worker protections, language access, resilience infrastructure, and community-driven development—recognizing that environmental risk, displacement, and economic inequality are deeply interconnected.

Developed through The Solutions Project's Climate + Migrant Justice initiative—with support from The Democracy Fund and Unbound Philanthropy and in collaboration with Just Solutions Collective. This guide complements companion publications focused on community governance and narrative strategy. Together, the series recognizes that governance, policy, and narrative are interdependent pillars of climate and migrant justice.

Across regions, several shared lessons emerge that shape the structure of this guide. The following section explores these principles in depth, drawing from real-world campaigns and organizing strategies.

Case studies and issue spotlights will illustrate how these principles take shape in practice—highlighting campaigns related to language access, worker justice, community resilience, and housing justice.

This guide reflects direct input from regional partners including:

APEN
Oakland, CA

PODER
San Francisco, CA

WeCount!
Miami, FL

Catalyst Miami
Miami, FL

PUSH Buffalo
Buffalo, NY

Justice for Migrant Families
Buffalo, NY

Their insights offer practical lessons for climate justice and immigrant justice movements, as well as policymakers committed to building resilient and welcoming communities.

The nexus of climate and migrant justice is complex. Too often, policies focusing on immigrants or immigration fail to take into account the role of climate change and environmental degradation in migration. At the same time, strategies to address climate change often overlook the importance of preparing for forced migration as a consequence of climate impacts. Policies related to internal US climate migration are often nascent or fail to draw on learnings from the immigration experience. Communities receiving migrants too often fail to provide the tools necessary to enable meaningful economic or linguistic integration or render immigrant communities more vulnerable to adverse environmental impacts. For example, being slow to provide language access for disaster response crises, or to provide access to services without burdensome identity and immigration status requirements.

Frontline communities, including immigrant and refugee communities and those displaced domestically due to climate impacts, are living in perilous times. The current federal leadership is dismantling critical due process protections to attempt to implement a massive, militarized deportation program targeting immigrants, it has reversed entire regulatory systems that had been in place to protect communities from pollution and exploitation. This current reality brings into focus the need for new approaches that draw from both the climate and migration movements and fields of policy.

As evidenced in this guide, strategies that pursue climate and environmental justice can intentionally incorporate and address the needs of immigrants who are living in precarious conditions due to barriers created by language and immigration status. The spotlights and strategies profiled in this guide provide glimpses into a future where frontline communities have the power to shape policies that impact their families and communities in a time of increasingly rapid impacts brought on by climate change.

The organizations participating in this cohort demonstrate that effective policy advocacy at the climate and migrant justice nexus requires coordinated strategies across governance, labor, housing, and environmental systems.

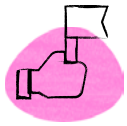
KEY INSIGHTS AND LESSONS

Climate resilience, labor protections, housing justice, immigrant rights, and environmental policy are deeply interconnected in practice, even when they are separated in traditional advocacy structures. The most effective policy campaigns at this moment are those that resonate with real people's lived experiences and advance solutions that cut across issue silos.

Whether operating in communities that are receiving new residents, experiencing climate threats, or serving as long-standing gateways for immigrant populations, the degree to which communities will be more welcoming and resilient will depend on how well communities are organized and prepared to respond. Over time, the places that thrive will be those that build durable organizing infrastructure, cross-movement collaboration, and policy strategies rooted in community leadership.

Effective work at the nexus of climate and migrant justice requires simultaneous engagement at multiple scales and across multiple strategies to advance equitable policy outcomes.

STRATEGIES AND SCALES TO ADVANCE EQUITABLE POLICY OUTCOMES



EMPOWER COMMUNITIES

Root policy demands in the leadership of impacted people and communities.

Empower communities through leadership development and organizing tools that give direct agency to community members. Examples include know-your-rights education, distributed leadership across rapid response networks, disaster preparedness training, access to legal representation, mutual aid programming, and other skills and opportunities that equip organizations to create their own baseline security.

UTILIZE CAMPAIGNS

As organizing and power building vehicles, keeping an eye on how to sustain momentum, morale, and energy.

Organizations emphasized that campaigns must address immediate material conditions (protection for individuals seeking status or worker protections, affordable and quality housing, job opportunities), create opportunities for worker/community leadership, deliver concrete wins (even small ones) to sustain morale, and build toward long-term structural change. When short-term policy fights fail, effective organizations are prepared to pivot to alternative strategies that keep the base engaged. Furthermore, they anticipate the potential for prolonged engagement in the implementation of victories, and what it may take to ensure that policy victories can be fully realized over time, despite changes in political and budget context.

EMPHASIZE SOCIAL COHESION AND CONNECTION

Boost community resilience in increasingly diverse communities in both the short and long term across increasingly diverse communities.

Engaging members to co-develop and lead their own solutions also builds connection, cohesion, and innovative policy angles. Policies and practices that bring diverse communities together, ensure quality cross-cultural interaction, and build relationships before disasters happen create the resilient fabric communities need to respond to

crises and opportunities. Such strategies also create the capacity to advance multiple strategies simultaneously. Policies that reinforce these efforts include language access ordinances, sanctuary laws that limit local collaboration with federal immigration enforcement agencies, and investments in resilient community infrastructure (both hard infrastructure, like community centers, and soft infrastructure, like block clubs and community capacity-building for mutual aid and support).

CREATE ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES

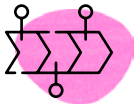
Through sustainable, cooperative programs that balance community development and voice with environmental sustainability.

Worker cooperatives, community land trusts, public banking, and local capital circulation (programs that keep money in the community) offer models for community wealth-building and climate adaptation that don't depend on extractive development. Together these distributed ownership approaches present important alternatives to extractive economic systems, and are seen as a compelling frontier for organizations involved in this cohort. Policy campaigns can play a critical role in shaping what collective strategies will be available to communities. And further investments in community governance strategies will be even more important over time (see the complementary guide on governance to learn more about models and examples).

SHIFT TO STRATEGIES AND POLICY DEMANDS

When policy pathways are blocked, use community leverage to demand corporate accountability.

In challenging political contexts, there will be a limit to what can be possible through policy advocacy alone. Creative organizers will need to assess what power and leverage communities have available to them: if community members are afraid of taking action due to violent immigration enforcement tactics, perhaps there are ways communities can use economic pressure, like boycotts; if local governments see their ability to enact policy reforms pre-empted by state governments, perhaps there are points of leverage still available through zoning, permitting, or other policy mechanisms. Campaigns can identify and use market leverage, create and apply community benefits agreements, and build worker-driven social responsibility models that secure enforceable protections across supply chains.



POLICY INNOVATION

Keep an eye on the long horizon, understanding that policy experimentation will be necessary.

Impacts accelerate, communities need visionary thinking about cooperative ownership models, land use that accommodates periodic flooding, insurance reform, and what it means to have agency to move or stay. Creating a clearer future vision or north star can seed more transformational policy goals even when near term opportunities may feel constrained by current political context. It's helpful to remember that the solutions we need aren't likely to come from the systems and approaches that caused the problems we're confronting.

The work of these organizations offers a roadmap for others navigating similar challenges: in hostile political terrain, communities must organize with courage and creativity, building power through direct relationships with workers, wielding consumer pressure strategically, and creating local alternatives to failed systems while never ceasing to fight for the policies and protections their communities deserve.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

The strategies outlined in this guide emerge from these distinct regional contexts.

While each region faces unique conditions, the policy lessons across them reflect shared commitments to community leadership, cross-movement alignment, and structural transformation.

- **Buffalo, New York**
  Considered to be a "welcoming community" because of its location (proximity to fresh water, relatively fewer extreme weather events), organizations are learning from past natural disasters while strengthening language access and housing policy.

- **San Francisco, Bay Area**
  Considered to be a "resilient community" because it is likely to remain a major gateway for immigrants and internally displaced people who may move on to other places, climate action is being directly linked to tenant protections and anti-displacement efforts.

- **South Florida**
  Considered to be a "threatened community" because of the anticipated impacts of sea-level rise and increasingly extreme weather events, organizers are advancing worker protections and immigrant rights in a politically constrained environment.

ADVANCING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH LANGUAGE JUSTICE

POLICY SPOTLIGHT

Civic Engagement Infrastructure

Public strategies to strengthen disaster resilience and economic inclusion too often overlook the vital role of language justice - that everyone has the right to speak, participate, and be heard in the language they know best.

Without attention to language and literacy barriers, community members may be excluded from emergency warnings in times of climate emergencies. Receiving inadequate or incorrect information related to public services, employment opportunities, or educational services. For communities with large or growing immigrant populations, lack of language justice may also contribute to misunderstandings, cultural rifts, and social isolation.

New York Justice for Migrant Families is working on a county-level language access ordinance, emphasizing that true access is more than just interpretation services and translated documents. The organization asserts that language access requires "fluidity of communication" that enables social ties and community inclusion.

They are working to establish a public commitment to:

- Social interaction across racial/ethnic lines
- Economic integration via job training and language access
- Credential recognition for immigrant professionals
- Social cohesion before climate disasters strike
- Creating on-ramps for civic engagement and community participation

NYJFMF has a campaign informed by the Buffalo Blizzard in 2022 that claimed the lives of many immigrants and refugees. It stranded thousands, overwhelmed public services, and served as a reminder of how vulnerable any community can be to the impacts of climate change.

This campaign is about creating opportunities for belonging, creating connections, and building meaningful inclusion. The organization envisions language support that can enable communication with neighbors, trusted community hubs that can serve all residents (including immigrants) compassionately, job training programs that connect language learners to meaningful economic pathways, public spaces that can bring diverse communities together, and opportunities to build "durable social ties" and relationships before crises arise. Language justice is meaningful civic engagement and social cohesion, so that no one is left behind.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Language access and justice policies are also a longstanding priority of other members of the climate and migrant justice cohort. In San Francisco, PODER points to their language access ordinance, which the City strengthened in 2024. That ordinance focuses on four languages (Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese) based on population thresholds, and it is implemented by the City's Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs.

For PODER, language access is fundamental civic engagement infrastructure, critical to ensuring community members are informed and engaged irrespective of language barriers. Such measures are essential foundations for "inclusion infrastructure" for any jurisdiction experiencing or anticipating population growth from migration. These policies and approaches should be baseline elements of any climate and disaster resilience efforts.

The City's Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs Enforces the Following Provisions:

- Support for a Language Access Network of community groups that conducts spot checks on city departments
- Requires staff (not just volunteers) to fulfill language requirements, and provides additional compensation to attract bilingual staff
- Reporting requirements for all city departments

PODER's own Promotora program trains immigrant women to conduct know-your-rights workshops in Spanish at schools, churches, and community organizations, combining immigration rights education with climate justice outreach. As immigration enforcement has intensified, promotoras have courageously continued street outreach, recognizing "the community needs the information now even more than ever."

FORGING NEW PATHWAYS FOR WORKER PROTECTIONS

POLICY SPOTLIGHTS

Community Benefit Agreements

Worker Driven Social Responsibility

In Florida and other states controlled by conservative political leaders, governors and state legislatures have increasingly blocked cities and counties from passing their own labor, environmental, and social justice policies - a tactic called preemption that puts proactive reforms for migrant and environmental justice at risk.

This has forced organizations like WeCount! and Catalyst Miami, which had previously won numerous groundbreaking local policies, to pursue alternative avenues to win rights, protections and voice for their members and constituents.

The impetus to continue fighting for worker protections even as political barriers increase is a matter of literal survival for workers, and a vivid example of where climate and migrant justice converge. One construction worker dies every four days in Florida. Amidst rising heat exacerbated by climate change, agricultural workers - most of them immigrants - are up to 35 times more likely to die of heat-related illnesses than the general population. Meaningful enforcement of key occupational safety and health rules is virtually non-existent, leading to occupational accidents, illnesses, and injuries.

35x

Immigrants are more likely to die of heat-related illnesses

COMMUNITY BENEFIT AGREEMENTS

After a multi-year campaign by WeCount! called "Que Calor," which advocated for a municipal heat standard for outdoor workers in Miami-Dade, the Florida State Legislature passed HB433 to preempt local heat protection ordinances in Miami-Dade and all Florida municipalities.

In response, WeCount! pioneered a workaround by advocating for Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) with private developers on major development projects in South Florida. CBAs are legally binding agreements between community groups and project developers. Their successful advocacy with local municipal governments and private developers has established a new precedent for enacting workplace standards that Florida policymakers had previously blocked, including heat protections for construction workers. WeCount!'s campaign, "Build a Better Miami," resulted in a groundbreaking agreement with the Swerdlow Group, a major real estate developer, that will protect nearly 4,000 construction workers on the largest redevelopment project in Miami history, including the following commitments:

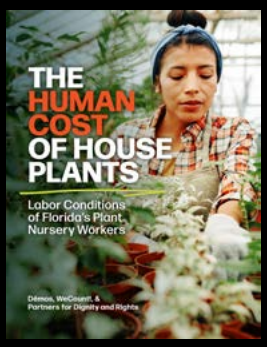
- Heat standards for construction employees, including water, shade, and rest breaks;
- An on-site cooling center with hydration stations and medical providers;
- Prevailing wages and responsible contracting standards (prohibiting contracts with contractors who have wage theft or OSHA violations in the previous 5 years); and
- Affordable housing requirements throughout the project

The CBA model accounts for the limits of preemption: while Miami-Dade County cannot directly legislate local heat protections for outdoor workers because of HB433, private developers like the Swerdlow Group can enter binding private agreements with worker organizations and labor-community coalitions, flanked by government approval processes. As one WeCount! staff member explained: developers need permits, zoning changes, and subsidies, which provides local government with leverage to incentivize these agreements.

Similarly, other non-profit organizations like Catalyst Miami have pursued CBAs to combat climate gentrification, working to ensure agreements to expand affordable housing in gentrifying communities aren't merely "for show." They strategically focus on developers who receive significant government subsidies, and their vision includes deeply affordable housing units, contributions to resilience funds for historically underinvested and high climate-risk neighborhoods, and protections against displacement.

As a tool, CBAs can be leveraged as private sector mechanisms enforceable through lawsuits and can require green building standards, quality job guarantees (union labor or strong labor protections), childcare facilities, public parks and green space. Successful campaigns to win these agreements require strong, broad coalitions (including labor unions, faith organizations, and community groups), media and communications strategies to counter propaganda and public affairs efforts used by developers, and access to legal services.

WORKER-DRIVEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY



With "Planting Justice," WeCount! is bringing the power of the internationally recognized Worker-Driven Social Responsibility (WSR) model to the houseplant sector, creating new pathways for worker protections, accountability, and climate resilience.

Worker-Driven Social Responsibility (WSR) is a model for protecting human rights in corporate supply chains that is defined by being designed, monitored, and enforced directly by the workers themselves. Inspired by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program and other WSR programs across the country and world, WeCount! is working to secure direct binding agreements with corporations and brands at the top of the houseplant industry to win industrywide protections for workers. These efforts have been made more urgent due to the growing impact of excessive heat and other climate-related impacts.

Miami-Dade County is the national epicenter of the houseplant industry, with over 1,500 registered nurseries supplying retailers across the country including the largest big-box stores and grocery chains. Plant nursery workers are primarily Mayan Indigenous, Latino, and Haitian immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Haiti, facing extreme heat exposure and labor violations. WeCount! Initiated a survey process with hundreds of plant nursery workers as a basis for developing a Code of Conduct that includes labor and human rights standards, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and protections against wage theft, gender-based violence, labor trafficking, and retaliation. A core provision of the Code of Conduct is establishing a heat illness prevention standard for all plant nursery workers, including an enforceable right to heat, safety, education, water, shade, and rest breaks.

WeCount!'s Planting Justice campaign is organizing plant nursery workers, consumers, and community allies to call on big-box stores, grocery chains, and other large corporations to adopt the Planting Justice Code of Conduct for all of their suppliers, including the plant nurseries where they source their houseplants. The protections included in the Planting Justice Code of Conduct are subject to independent monitoring and enforced through real market-based consequences, including suspension for non-compliance.

The WSR model recognizes that worker organizations like WeCount! can leverage the power of workers, consumers, and other public and private stakeholders to hold corporations accountable for the labor and human rights abuses in their supply chains. Through Planting Justice, WeCount! is showing that it's possible to protect workers from extreme heat, even when laws and regulations are blocked or rendered unenforceable in practice.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE

POLICY SPOTLIGHT

Physical and Social Infrastructure

In California, APEN was an important force in influencing the State of California to establish the Community Resilience Center Program, an innovative model for responsive, community-controlled climate adaptation infrastructure.

The strategy is rooted in a vision for building communities with the social cohesion and physical infrastructure to survive and thrive through climate and environmental impacts.

The program provides funding to communities to invest in resilience hubs - sites designed by community members, outside of traditionally siloed funding programs, allowing people to holistically define their needs for disaster response and recovery and broader resilience efforts. Resilience hubs can take places that people already know and trust like youth centers, schools, libraries, and places of worship, and turn them into spaces that can support communities. Hubs are meant to encourage local ownership and governance, providing area residents agency and decision-making over the design, priorities, and resources of the resilience hubs to address climate-related emergencies impacting their families and communities.

APEN's resilience funds are community-directed: for example, they can be invested in projects that are focused on energy efficiency and/or affordable housing and/or emergency response. Projects can be multi-year efforts, with five to ten year (or longer) timelines for ideation, design, and if necessary, construction. Funding may be tied to a community shepherding process, a structured process to accompany the community in enacting desired changes incorporating diverse participation and inclusive decision-making.

Creating the program took years, and involved many organizing and advocacy steps, including the development of pilot projects to demonstrate demand, the creation of a Community Resilience Working Group (made up of environmental justice groups) to document case studies, statewide tours that brought legislators to see community-led solutions in communities, and a sophisticated advocacy effort to secure state budget funding. APEN's legislative win to scale up community resilience hubs across California was built on years of persistent organizing, advocacy, and research in their communities as well as through coalitions and relationships built with California legislators. An ongoing challenge for the program is to

secure future funding to maintain the sustainability of the model. Funding for the Community Resilience Center Program was recently cut by half in California's last state legislative session, bringing home the importance of continued advocacy and demonstrating the impact of the program on an ongoing basis.

Community members, including refugee and immigrant members, contributed to the design of the pilots for Community Resilience Hubs, with leadership from a peer-selected steering committee of a dozen residents. For APEN, the Lincoln Recreation Center (LRC) in Oakland's Chinatown serves as an ideal example of a community resilience center. LRC is a city-run recreation center featuring volunteer-led programming, and has served as a gathering spot for new immigrants for decades. The partnership between municipal staff and community members is an important step toward building shared ownership and commitment to the project, and is critical to its vibrancy and sustainability.

APEN has successfully been awarded funding – half of which was raised by the community through foundation grants and grassroots fundraising – through engaging in organizing and advocacy efforts at the state and federal level –to include the LRC to a capital improvement plan. The revitalized LRC is set for groundbreaking in the spring of 2026. The site will be designed with intentional climate resilience principles. Today, there are buckets stationed throughout the building to catch rainwater to support harvesting of water. APEN envisions a restored LRC with solar panels and battery back-up power so that it can keep essential programming and culturally competent communications during times of crisis, including offering overnight shelter capacities in the event of disasters. But more importantly, restoring the LRC will preserve the longstanding role of the center as critical community resilience infrastructure: a site where APEN and its allies have organized emergency trainings in Cantonese, hosted events that made 5,000 emergency kits for allies across Oakland, and served as a joyful, intergenerational gathering place for people to connect and keep each other safe.

While the community resilience center program is a valuable model policy, it underscores the critical role of civil society and relationships as a precondition for community resilience.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

As emphasized by APEN's leadership, resilience centers are more than just physical infrastructure.

What is equally critical is the social infrastructure. These locations are already gathering places where there are opportunities to build connection, relationships, and social cohesion. The LRC, for example, is already a place where communities come to share information, get resources, and to support each other. And like the LRC, this creates more spaces that can serve as bases for organizing.

A similar vision is guiding work in Buffalo, NY that PUSH and Justice for Migrant Families are participating in. Working across issue silos and communities, these and other organizations are raising resources for and exploring ways to develop neighborhood mobilization hubs to train tenants in self-help resilience measures – simple equipment like battery-operated radios and flashlights for when the electricity goes out, training in first aid, emergency response, and leadership. The work resembles traditional block-by-block organizing.

The heart of the work is making sure that neighbors know their neighbors so that when something happens – like the blizzard of 2022 when residents were forced to shelter in place without heat – the community will have the connections, relationships, and resources to respond to ensure that a natural disaster doesn't also become a human one. And it builds critical community muscle to both survive and thrive through natural disasters and the community relationships necessary to advocate for neighborhood needs among immigrants, refugees, and native born residents.

HOUSING JUSTICE AT THE CLIMATE AND MIGRATION NEXUS

POLICY SPOTLIGHTS

Fighting for Tenants and Safe Homes

Decarbonizing Housing

Confronting Climate Displacement

Toward a Vision for Affordable and Green Social Housing

A common thread that cuts across all three sites participating in the cohort is housing justice.

For immigrants and internally displaced migrants who may lack economic resources, encounter language barriers, risk exploitation due to immigration status, or face racial or religious discrimination - housing is a primary challenge. But they find themselves in the same search for affordable housing facing longtime residents, presenting important challenges for organizers and communities anticipating competition for limited resources. The issue of housing justice cuts in many ways.

With respect to affordability, lack of access to affordable housing in many locations across the US is forcing lower income residents, including new arrivals, into precarious shelter conditions and/or consuming more of a household's income, leading to food and other forms of insecurity. Climate impacts - including increasing insurance costs in climate-vulnerable areas - are contributing to housing costs. Higher income property owners, for example in Miami are seeking homes or safer investments in areas less vulnerable to climate impacts, like flooding or sea level rise. This includes increasing investments in communities that may have once been redlined. This is contributing to the gentrification of historically lower-income communities of color, increasing property values, displacing residents and contributing to greater competition over existing affordable housing options. And lack of affordable housing stock in cities presents both near-term and long-term challenges, especially for communities that may anticipate population growth as a result of changing climate, with new arrivals from locations in the US that are becoming less livable or disaster threatened due to climate change.

Lower income residents must also contend with the lack of tenant protections in many communities, rendering them vulnerable to displacement due to unreasonable rent increases or to arbitrary evictions. In some cases they may live in communities more vulnerable to climate impacts, like sea level rise, flooding, fire, and severe weather events, or they may live in housing structures less resilient to such events. This can include housing that is less insulated from weather (heat or cold), more exposed to toxics (both outside and inside the home), or determined to be unworthy of repair due to low property values, limits on or lack of insurance.

The lack of affordable housing is proving to be a significant challenge for new arrivals (whether displaced from another community in the US or from somewhere else in the world), and affordability is placing significant burdens on a household's ability to survive, thrive, or adapt to community conditions.

FIGHTING FOR TENANTS AND SAFE HOMES

Buffalo is an increasingly diverse community in Upstate New York considered by some to be a potential climate haven, because of its proximity to fresh water and its relative geographic position keeping it out of the path of many climate events, the 2022 blizzard notwithstanding.

As a City, Buffalo is also home to a large number of vacant properties given historic economic shifts shaped by changes in manufacturing and industry. Yet these dynamics have not prevented Buffalo from experiencing a housing affordability crisis.

PUSH Buffalo is currently campaigning to ensure local implementation of statewide policies designed to protect tenants and prevent arbitrary evictions. Requiring good cause for evictions is one way tenants can protect themselves from gentrification, as increasing demand drives the cost of housing upward. For the last couple of years, Buffalo has been one of the "hottest" real-estate markets in the country. For Buffalo's immigrant and refugee populations who are disproportionately living in rental housing and older housing stock, these protections could have increased importance.

At the same time, PUSH is also advocating to maintain funding for the state's flagship low-income energy efficiency and building electrification program, EmPower+. PUSH leads the state-funded Western NY Regional Clean Energy Hub and helps connect vulnerable households to the EmPower+ program, which provides access to whole-house insulation, air sealing, and fossil-free heating and cooling technologies which, together, enhance the "passive survivability" of Buffalo's older housing stock during extreme winter and summer weather events. During Buffalo's deadly blizzard, weatherized homes maintained temperatures 10°F warmer than un-weatherized homes during power outages. In dilapidated housing, indoor temperatures plummeted to 32°F within 12 hours. Low-income families, including many immigrants and refugees, live in the worst housing stock. Ensuring building-level resilience keeps people safe from exposure in their own homes when other infrastructure fails.

DECARBONIZING HOUSING

PODER and APEN together are working to implement the CA Equitable Building Decarbonization (EBD) at state and local levels, working to ensure equitable implementation of the California Energy Commission's (CEC) program, which they also helped to create. The organizations are working with local municipalities and other partners to leverage the program for greater implementation and wider community access.

The Program Enables:

- Funds for deferred maintenance related to health and safety concerns such as mold and lead
- Tenant protections during retrofits so people are not priced out of improved apartments
- Funds to incentivize replacement of appliances with healthier, greener equipment
- Prioritization for historically negatively impacted communities, including low-income communities and communities of color
- Prioritization of communities facing extreme heat, sea level rise, or the effects of wildfire smoke and other air quality crises (for example, refinery explosions)

CONFRONTING CLIMATE DISPLACEMENT

Catalyst Miami frames their mission as “building a Miami where people can afford to stay and live well for generations to come.” Climate gentrification has accelerated since the early 2000s, with predominantly Black communities in higher elevation areas being displaced to lower-lying, more flood-vulnerable zones. That these communities were segregated and redlined to those higher elevation areas like Liberty City in the last century, and are now being pushed out, is an especially egregious example of history repeating itself. Post-COVID migration from other states has worsened housing shortages and driven up costs.

Insurance presents a critical challenge. Miami-Dade is tied with Houston as the most uninsured county in the country. Many homeowners cannot afford flood or wind insurance after purchasing homes. The public option (known as Citizens in Florida) often rejects applicants or offers insufficient coverage. When hurricanes strike, companies like Lennar buy out entire blocks from desperate homeowners in insurance disputes, accelerating corporate consolidation and community displacement.

TOWARD A VISION FOR AFFORDABLE AND GREEN SOCIAL HOUSING

California is experiencing a housing affordability crisis that especially impacts low-income and working-class immigrant communities in the state. Many immigrants cannot afford to live near where they work and cannot access key culturally competent resources. In California, over half of residents are rent burdened, meaning that they spend over 30% of their income on housing and only 17% of residents can afford a median priced home. This is the context that motivates APEN's advocacy for solutions that lower costs and increase protections for immigrant renters and increase the production of affordable housing across the state.

+30%

Income California residents spend on housing

of California residents can afford a median priced home

17%

Affordable Housing Helps Preserve Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Cultural Districts

Many of APEN's members are seniors who live in affordable housing units in Oakland Chinatown. These affordable housing units have been critical to fight displacement of AAPI immigrants with fixed and low incomes who wouldn't be able to afford market-rate housing in the Bay Area. Affordable housing developments allow for the preservation of important Asian cultural districts. These districts allow AAPIs to access critical culturally competent resources for food, community, health, finance, and recreation.

Fighting Unaffordable Rent Increases in California

A study conducted by AAPIs for Civic Empowerment (AAPI Force) showed that four in five Asian American voters in California cited cost of housing as an extremely or very important issue to them personally in deciding how to vote. From 2020-2025, rents grew by 42% in California, far outpacing wage growth. Working-class and immigrant communities are being forced out of major economic centers limiting their job opportunities.

Green Social Housing as a vision for California

APEN is pursuing policy solutions to build toward a vision of green social housing across the state, reflecting the commitment to treating affordable, quality housing as a right. This means housing that is permanently affordable, publicly/community-owned and produced to meet a human need, democratically controlled by residents, and powered by clean energy with access to clean air and water.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

This guide spotlights a handful of promising policy initiatives and organizing campaigns at the intersection of climate and migration from six organizations in three regions of the United States. These examples underscore the importance of organizing in frontline communities, and highlight the power of solutions that come from those most impacted by climate change and forced displacement.

Their innovations and experiences are paralleled by efforts across a growing ecosystem of organizations from Florida to Alaska that are spearheading innovations in everything from new funding mechanisms taxing polluters to fund climate disaster resilience and insurance, to creating more welcoming communities, to investments in community land ownership and affordable utilities, and even internationally-focused advocacy to ensure safer migration routes between countries.

The connection between climate justice and migrant justice feels stronger than it did just one year ago. At the time of the writing of this guide (early 2026), federal agencies are surging immigration enforcement into frontline communities to arrest, detain, and deport undocumented immigrants. In doing so, they are trampling rights of free speech, religious practice, and due process, and they are enlisting a growing system of surveillance technologies, militarized law enforcement tools and warehouse-style detention centers. This is happening at the same time that the federal government is being used as a tool of deregulation to remove climate, environmental and other protections intended to protect workers, families, and communities.

Climate justice leaders in these sites and across the country have made clear that they will do what they can to protect immigrants, and work with immigrant rights organizations to protect both our democracy and the climate. For their part, immigrant-rights and immigrant-serving organizations are finding common cause with climate and environmental justice leaders. Together, they are pushing back on attacks against frontline communities, including attacks to civil rights and climate and environmental protections. This political moment, which has also been punctuated by a series of natural disasters along the way, has made clear to a growing cross section of movement leaders that this is a time to move beyond silos, building community power at scale to protect communities and advance new community-led strategies to prepare for a changed climate, including a future many communities are already experiencing.

The cross-movement organizing now underway in places ranging from Minneapolis to Charlotte, Homestead to San Francisco, and Buffalo to Honolulu reflects this commitment, as organizations contribute to the creation of rapid response networks, know your rights training, and aligned advocacy strategies.

The US is at an inflection point on both climate and migrant justice. Facing an uncertain future and amidst fear-driven policies that undermine protections for people and climate, organizers and activists across the nation are painting a radically different picture where the interplay of climate and migrant justice presents a bold and inclusive vision for our country. The vibrant and imaginative initiatives at the nexus of climate and migrant justice described in this guide present the building blocks of an alternative vision where communities are organizing to adapt, to welcome, and to transform in a world increasingly changed by climate.

PLACE, POWER & POSSIBILITY:
A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

Narrative Guide
at the
Climate-Migration Nexus

THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Written By:
Thelma Young, The Solutions Project

This guide series is co-published with The Solutions Project and Just Solutions.

The following organizations also informed the series:

- APEN
- Catalyst Miami
- PODER
- PUSH Buffalo
- WeCount!
- Justice for Migrant Families

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OVERVIEW

It is time to move from narratives rooted in crisis language and threat framing toward a justice-based approach.

This guide intends to equip communicators, advocates, and storytellers with emerging community-tested and research-backed strategies to reframe narratives around climate change and migrant justice, with the aim of shifting public discourse from fear and division toward solidarity and collective action.

Making This Shift:

- Affirms that migration is often a form of climate adaptation
- Centers the humanity and agency of people on the move
- Can expose actors profiting from border militarization
- Paints an irresistible future where communities can welcome newcomers with dignity while building climate-resilient infrastructure and social supports that allow everyone to thrive

OVERVIEW

This guide is part of The Solutions Project's Place, Power & Possibility: A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

These guides advance integrated strategies across community governance, policy advocacy, and narrative change.

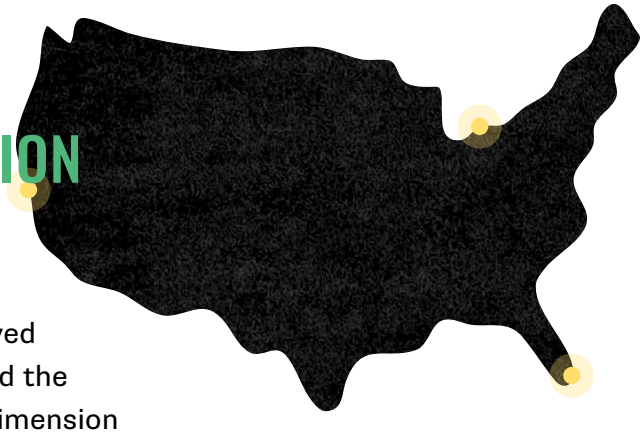
Each guide speaks to a distinct set of strategies and audiences while contributing to a shared vision of climate resilience rooted in equity and community power.

This guide is shaped by existing narrative and messaging research that has been released by other organizations, as well as by interviews with six community-based organizations that are part of the Climate + Migrant Justice cohort led by The Solutions Project. They are actively working at the intersections of these issues, have been organizing for climate justice in immigrant communities for years, and are based in Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco-Bay Area, CA.

This guide examines narratives around migration in various forms. Through place-based discussions, it dives deep into specific migration experiences across three cities with a focus on cross-border immigration, long-term immigrant communities, as well as refugee/asylum seeking communities. The literature review also considers narratives around those compelled to migrate due to the climate crisis. It is important to note that migrant experiences and contests are highly differentiated, and the climate crisis intersects with those experiences in varying ways. It is critical that narrative strategies reflect the distinct experiences of those involved. While significant connectivity bonds these stories together, there is also often a necessity to differentiate.

INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE, PLACE, AND POWER: REFRAMING CLIMATE AND MIGRATION



City-Specific Narratives and Organizing

The narrative strategies in this guide are grounded in the lived realities of three distinct cities — Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco Bay Area, CA — each representing a unique dimension of the climate and migration intersection. The conversations held with organizers reveal something that no policy brief can fully capture: The intersection of climate and migration is not an abstraction — it is already unfolding in deeply local, human ways, and the communities living it are far ahead of the broader public narrative.

Through focus groups with six community-based organizations at the heart of this work, The Solutions Project identified place-specific dynamics that shape how communities experience, communicate, and create care. In Miami —a city simultaneously threatened by rising seas and stringent immigration policies and rhetoric —Catalyst Miami and WeCount! have found that direct, personal connection is a reliable way to shift narratives, anchoring organizing in the stories of neighbors and families. In Buffalo, framed as a "welcoming community" with a long, layered history of arrival, PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families are weaving together the stories of Congolese and Ecuadorian newcomers with those of Indigenous people, Black descendants of the Great Migration, and multi-generational immigrant families. These stories build a cross-racial solidarity rooted in resilience and shared futures. And in the Bay Area, a resilient community facing compounding pressures of gentrification and climate precarity, APEN and PODER emphasize collective resistance. They are lifting up immigrant and refugee communities as the architects of their own solutions. Together, these three cities offer a powerful, place-based foundation for understanding what narrative change looks like when it is built from the ground up. Across all three cities, one insight rang clear: The stories that shift people are not statistics or crisis projections, but the visceral, specific, human ones — a neighbor detained, a roof that needs fixing, a community that already knows how to create home in the face of upheaval. What these cities teach us, collectively, is that the climate and migration movements are not parallel tracks waiting to converge. They are already one story, being lived right now by the same people.

The following organizations have been a part of this engagement:

Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN)
Oakland, CA

PODER
San Francisco, CA

WeCount!
Miami, FL

Catalyst Miami
Miami, FL

PUSH Buffalo
Buffalo, NY

Justice for Migrant Families
Buffalo, NY

These are key narrative insights based on ongoing efforts from these groups actively involved at the intersection of climate and migration.

EFFECTIVE PLACE-BASED NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Insights from Buffalo NY, Miami FL and Bay Area, CA

How Are These Grassroots Groups Effectively Shifting Narratives Around Climate And Migration?

MIAMI (Catalyst Miami and WeCount!)

Center Immigrant Knowledge as Solutions, Not Just Problems

One staff member shared a concrete example: Bringing Colombian community members to commissioner meetings as expert speakers to demonstrate that advanced waste management systems *are* possible, because they'd lived it. WeCount! added the framing of immigrants as "second responders" to climate disasters. The narrative strategy is to position immigrants as active holders of climate solutions — mutual aid systems, reconstruction expertise — rather than victims or burdens.

Direct Connection as the Most Powerful Tool

WeCount! emphasized that "the only thing that [they] have heard that shifts any kind of narrative is the direct connection."
The visceral impact of seeing mothers and working families detained—"that was my neighbor" — has been most effective at shifting perspectives in general organizing. The personal, local connection breaks through abstraction. The organization noted facts alone don't work because people can be "faced with facts and still not challenge their perspective of the world."
However, WeCount! mentioned how people are already "tapped out emotionally" — even those who deeply care about climate and immigration — and that "getting inundated with stories is just not helpful." The distinction WeCount! draws was important: Direct connection works when it moves people toward action, not just awareness. What people want is not more narrative, but results — something concrete to do.

Maintaining Strong Immigrant Identity Across Generations

Miami organizers noted that immigrant identity remains "very much still tied" regardless of generation. People actively identify as "Bahamian or Haitian" across multiple generations, alongside multiple other identities including "Black" and "American," making shared identity a powerful organizing principle.

BAY AREA (APEN and PODER)

Emphasize Stories of Collective Resistance, Not Just Problems

APEN emphasized showing "stories of people collectively resisting and building something different successfully." In places like Richmond and Wilmington in Southern CA, community organizers don't need to convince people Chevron* is bad — they need to show "it's possible to do something about it." *Note: Chevron's refinery in Richmond, CA has a long history of causing local pollution and health issues.

Define a Clear Protagonist and Antagonist

The most successful campaigns have a "clear protagonist and opposition." This clarity helps people understand the problem and who they're fighting alongside.

Use Hyperlocal "Neighbor" Language

Using language like "protecting our neighbors" creates belonging that transcends immigration status. "Regardless of how you got here, you live on the same block. And we protect each other." This hyperlocal framing creates solidarity across differences.

Leverage Peer-to-Peer Trust Networks

Information is most trusted when it comes "directly from someone else in their community, ideally someone who is their age or a little bit older." They train community members to train others on "know-your-rights" information. PODER also has community trainers called promotoros that educate local neighbors about health and climate issues.

BUFFALO, NY (PUSH Buffalo and Justice for Migrant Families)

Create Welcoming Spaces with Cultural Practices

PUSH Buffalo described opening previously closed membership meetings and "offering food" as a key tactic. The organization creates platforms for people to share their own stories directly. Both organizations stressed that welcoming isn't just symbolic — it involves resourcing one another, connecting people to services, and building deep relationships across immigration status lines. PUSH Buffalo described it as a simultaneous "public and private message." Organizers and community members are "publicly" creating safer spaces, while "privately" having the relationships and connections to actually shelter and protect people when needed.

Connect Migration Stories Across Time

Justice for Migrant Families highlighted the power of connecting Congolese and Ecuadorian community stories with those of Indigenous people and multi-generational Buffalo residents. This includes Black descendents of the Great Migration from the South and descendents from Ireland, Germany, or Italy who have maintained cultural identities in Buffalo that can strengthen cross-racial solidarity. This creates "resilience and hope" that "allows us to dream more and to ideate about what solutions can be."

Making Invisible Connections Visible

Justice for Migrant Families emphasized that climate and migration are "so tightly woven" that the challenge is helping people "unpick all of the threaded knots" to see root causes, particularly around oil extraction in places like Congo and Ecuador. Sometimes extra public education is needed to help people connect the dots on issues and understand how they are rooted in capitalist extraction. One specific example is the way the U.S. and other powers enter countries, extract resources, and create the instability that then forces people to move. She described this as "interwoven," with extraction at the source.

GAPS AND CHALLENGES

The Climate-Migration Connection Still Isn't Landing with Communities Themselves

All organizations across the three cities described versions of the same gap: even people directly displaced by climate conditions don't identify their migration as climate-related. In Miami, WeCount! said that most community members "don't make the connection between I'm migrating for climate."They identify their own migration as economic or political, even when drought or hurricanes were the underlying drivers. In Buffalo, JFMF described how Ecuadorian Indigenous community members whose land was made unlivable don't unpack the climate-related root causes of their migration journeys. They just say "I'm Ecuadorian" and put their head down.

The Broader Narrative Ecosystem is Dominated by Negative Framing of Migration— and There's No Counter-Infrastructure

WeCount! in Miami named this directly: "The other side's narrative tactics are working...the fearmongering." Flashy deportation imagery, raids, the Everglades Concentration Camp — those who oppose immigration are setting the terms. In the Bay Area, APEN identified something even more structural: The communications infrastructure to reach immigrant and refugee communities has been "decimated." Corporate-owned media is full of misinformation; trusted community channels barely exist. "We can develop all the amazing messaging we want and it's not very useful if it doesn't reach people." And many of the communities they're trying to reach are "really hard to reach through comms channels."

Government Failure Has Created Deep Distrust That Bleeds Into the Climate Conversation

In Miami, WeCount! pointed to a "long trajectory of corruption, misuse of funds, overuse of promises" on climate infrastructure (city projects aimed at mitigating climate change or providing adaptations). For example, a transit expansion promised over a decade-and-a-half ago still hasn't materialized. That broken trust makes it hard to mobilize people around climate solutions when the institutions promising those solutions have repeatedly failed. In the Bay Area, APEN gave a concrete example of state disaster response that was completely disconnected from community reality. Emergency shelters placed 20 minutes away from communities where most people don't own cars. That's why APEN has been building community resilience hubs — places people already know and trust like youth centers, schools, libraries, and places of worship. These spaces can now support communities through disasters. The state "wouldn't have known what was needed if people weren't already filling in the gaps themselves." The challenge isn't just messaging — it's that the government is an unreliable actor whose interventions often reinforce, rather than reduce harm.

The Climate and Immigrant Justice Movements Haven't Fully Found Each Other Yet — and The Narrative Intersection is Challenging

A quieter but real challenge across all three cities is that climate justice and immigrant justice still largely operate as separate ecosystems, even within organizations that work on both issues. In Buffalo, the connections are viscerally real. For example, climate fueled extreme winter storms are decimating people's roofs. The best roofers are Ecuadorians living in Buffalo. However, the ability to fix people's roofs is limited because of threats of ICE. This exasperating conundrum has not been developed into a coherent narrative yet. PUSH Buffalo described wanting to develop that storytelling "over time." The intersection is felt and lived, but not yet consistently named or communicated in a way that builds broader solidarity.

WHAT'S NEEDED

These gaps point directly to what needs to be built. Across all three cities, organizers named **five consistent priorities** for strengthening narrative work at the intersection of climate and migration:

1 Trusted, Community-Owned Communications Infrastructure — Not Just Better Messaging

The most structural need named across the transcripts came from APEN in the Bay Area: "We can develop all the amazing messaging we want and it's not very useful if it doesn't reach people." The problem isn't necessarily narrative quality — it's distribution. Much corporate-owned media is full of misinformation, trusted community channels have been decimated, and many immigrant and refugee communities are nearly impossible to reach through conventional communications. What is needed is investment in community-controlled communications infrastructure. Local creators, WhatsApp, text networks, and peer-to-peer channels can help bridge the gap.

2 Stories That Move People Toward Action, Not Just Awareness

In Miami, Catalyst Miami was direct: People are "tapped out emotionally" and "getting inundated with stories is just not helpful." What's missing is the pairing of the story with a clear next step. WeCount! framed the aspiration: narratives that connect climate, housing, healthcare, and migration as one system and show that "we currently have the resources and tools to make a difference today." In Buffalo, PUSH Buffalo named a specific need: developing storytelling around why people chose to invest their lives in Buffalo's climate future — not the harm narrative, but the transformation narrative. That storytelling infrastructure doesn't yet exist and needs to be built intentionally.

3 Narrative That Connects The Climate and Immigrant Justice Movements

All three cities are doing climate justice work and immigrant justice work, but the connective messaging and narrative tissue between them is underdeveloped. This gap showed up differently in each city, but the underlying pattern was consistent: Organizations are living the intersection every day in their work, yet the language and narrative frames that would make that intersection legible to the public — and even to their own members — haven't fully been built. In Miami, Catalyst Miami flagged a specific narrative gap: The story of Florida going underwater and what domestic climate migration will look like for native-born Americans "isn't being had enough." Additionally, that conversation could be a bridge between communities who don't yet see themselves as part of the same story.

4 Platforms and Spaces for Communities To Do Their Own Visioning — Not Just Crisis Response

In the Bay Area, PODER described a future-focused process that asked community members: Who are your people? What do you need to build? What do you need to interrupt? PODER said it was "overwhelmingly fruitful" and that staff "really appreciated the opportunity," but noted "people aren't used to hearing those questions." The hunger for that kind of visioning space exists, but it's rare. In Buffalo, PUSH Buffalo described this in practice through food programs and open membership meetings. The organization identified a visioning space as something that needs to grow and be resourced, not just sustained at its current scale. The need is for spaces where communities can "dream forward" on issues including migration and climate and not just respond to crises. These spaces must also generate the stories that feed broader narrative campaigns.

5 Careful Framing That Affirms Migration Without Accidentally Reinforcing the Idea That It Needs to be Fixed or Stopped.

This came up most explicitly in Miami. Catalyst Miami described wrestling with how to connect climate and migration without implying "that if we fix the climate crisis, there won't be immigration" — or, that immigration is somehow a problem to solve. WeCount's dream message was simple: "Migration is part of human nature. We have always migrated." What's needed is a narrative that holds both truths simultaneously — that climate is making displacement more urgent and unjust, and that migration itself is not the problem. That framing is still being worked out in practice, and organizers said they need more space to develop it without being rushed into campaign-ready language before the thinking is done.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several organizations have done commendable work pulling together insights and narrative strategies.

These key resources inform this guide:

A Core Narrative for Immigration Messaging
The Opportunity Agenda

Remain. Migrate. Return. What Hurricane Katrina Teaches Us About Climate Migration
Taproot Earth

Climate-Migrant Justice Solidarity Communications Toolkit
National Partnership for New Americans

2025 Narrative Guide for Immigrant Futures
Narrative Initiative

A Future for All of Us
The Butterfly Lab

Countering Dangerous Narratives in Dangerous Times
Climate and Migration Coalition (UK)

MAJOR THEMES

Values-driven messaging over fear-based narratives is the most dominant theme. The guides consistently emphasize leading with shared values like community, dignity, belonging, and interdependence rather than responding to threat-based framing. These reports warn that fear or threat-based language about migrants fleeing climate disasters can inadvertently delay meaningful action and falsely position militarized borders as a necessary security measure. Communicators should avoid crisis language like "mass migration," "waves," or "surge." Instead, communicators should frame migration as a climate adaptation and solution, while asserting human rights. National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) suggests a three-part structure: lead with shared identity and values, name the "villains" who profit from division (fossil fuel companies, private prison corporations, border security industry), and offer concrete visions for a better future.

The impetus to continue fighting for worker protections even as political barriers increase is a matter of literal survival for workers, and a vivid example of where climate and migrant justice converge. One construction worker dies every four days in Florida. Amidst rising heat exacerbated by climate change, agricultural workers - most of them immigrants - are up to 35 times more likely to die of heat-related illnesses than the general population. Meaningful enforcement of key occupational safety and health rules is virtually non-existent, leading to occupational accidents, illnesses, and injuries.

Personal Stories Create Empathy While Statistics Create Fear

NPNA suggests that "personal stories of climate displaced people create empathy,"[1] while "statistics and unreliable predictions of future migration create fear."Narrative testing shows that messages focused on future predictions drive audiences toward anti-migrant policies. The literature further suggests that condensing people's individual lives into numbers — particularly large numbers — is a form of dehumanisation and othering. The storytelling guidance emphasizes joy and agency over only depicting harm, using people-first language, and having immigrants tell their own stories rather than being "spoken for."

Emphasize And Build Solidarity Between Climate and Migrant Justice Movements

There is a need to build solidarity across frontline communities facing threats from both the climate crisis and law enforcement as an essential strategy to countering authoritarianism. Climate change is accelerating all major forms of global displacement, making migrant justice an essential part of climate justice. Many people currently seeking safety in the US have faced climate impacts in their countries of origin. The rise of far-right forces presents challenges, and some climate advocates are tempted to argue climate action can help control migration. However, the literature review warns this approach is strategically and morally flawed. Instead, defeating authoritarianism requires

> "Defeating authoritarianism requires deep solidarity that articulates just how interwoven our struggles and shared interest is.
>
> — NPNA Climate-Migrant Justice Solidarity Communications Toolkit

Narrative Power and Cultural Change as Key Strategies

Cultural change precedes social change, and narrative drives policy. The goal is not merely to shift dominant narratives but to win tangible policy results. For example, making pro-immigrant values feel like common sense to a majority and then defending that ground. Achieving this requires narrative immersion — people encountering aligned stories from multiple sources, forms, and messengers across time. This is something no single campaign or message can accomplish alone. Climate and migrant justice movements therefore need shared narrative networks to align organizations across different issues and constituencies, and robust ecosystems of collaborators working across short- and long-term timelines. Artists and cultural workers are a particularly underused resource in this effort, and funders are urged to invest in artist-led projects and create dedicated spaces for experimentation, because breakthrough narrative work requires the freedom to take creative risks.

> "Narrative power is the ability to change the norms and rules our society lives by.
>
> — Narrative power defined by Rashad Robinson, Butterfly Lab Year One Findings + Narrative Toolkit

[1] NPNA Climate-Migrant Justice Solidarity Communications Toolkit

SUGGESTED MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

These guidelines are for **communicators**, **storytellers**, **educators**, **organizers**, **journalists**, and **anyone** working at the intersection of climate and migrant justice. They draw on the research literature and the direct experiences of our cohort partners in Buffalo, Miami, and the Bay Area.

Use People-First Language That Emphasizes Humanity, Relationships, and Agency

Labels like “migrants,” “refugees,” or “asylum seekers” reduce complex people to bureaucratic categories. Instead, use familial language — fathers, mothers, neighbors, community members — and language that centers courage and agency. Say “people making brave choices to rebuild their lives,” not “people fleeing.” Name who is responsible for the conditions people are fleeing, rather than letting the harm appear to have no author.

✓ “Our neighbors are making brave choices to find safety and rebuild their lives after losing so much because of conflict created by [name of responsible party].”

✗ “Refugees are fleeing violence.”

Never Repeat Harmful Frames, Even To Negate Them

When you repeat a myth to refute it, audiences remember the myth. Avoid phrases like “no human being is illegal,” “not a security threat,” or “not a criminal” — all of which reinforce the very frames you’re trying to dismantle. Assert the positive instead.

✓ **“Families have the right to seek asylum — it is the foundation of human dignity.”**

✗ “It is NOT illegal to seek asylum.”

Lead with Values, Not Policy Details

People respond to what they care about deeply — dignity, community, shared responsibility, opportunity — more than to policy mechanics or economic arguments. Transactional framing (“immigrants contribute $X to GDP”) reinforces the burden frame.

Connect any policy to the values it upholds and the future it creates. Communicators should still make necessary call to actions to drive policy changes.

✓ **“We deserve communities where everyone can live without fear and families stay together. Call your representative to reform Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.”**

✗ “We need to reform Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.”

Avoid Crisis Language That Feeds Threat Narratives

Terms like “mass migration,” “waves,” “surge,” “flood,” and “border crisis” dehumanize people by depicting them as natural disasters and push audiences toward authoritarian responses. Use specific, human-centered language instead.

✓ **“As climate impacts intensify, more families will need support to adapt, whether they stay or move.”**

✗ “The climate crisis will trigger unprecedented waves of mass migration.”

Frame Migration as a Solution and a Form of Climate Adaptation

Migration is not a problem to be prevented — it is a legitimate human response to changing conditions, and one community has always practiced. Our cohort and the broader literature consistently confirm that framing climate action as a tool for “preventing migration” is both morally wrong and strategically harmful.

✓ **“Climate resilience means supporting communities to adapt where they are AND creating safe pathways for those who need to move.”**

✗ “We need climate action to prevent mass migration.”

Assert Human Rights — Don't Debate Them

Rather than defending against attacks, assert what's right. Lead with rights declarations, not rebuttals. Note that in authoritarian contexts, rights-based frameworks alone have limits — as our cohort partners in Buffalo and Miami have experienced firsthand. Grounding rights in concrete, local values and relationships matters.

✓ **"Every person deserves dignity and safety, regardless of where they were born."**

✗ "Seeking asylum is not illegal, and immigrants are not criminals."

Use an Active Voice to Name who is Responsible

Passive constructions obscure accountability and leave a vacuum the opposition fills with scapegoats. Name the politicians, corporations, and industries making harmful choices (the fossil fuel companies that caused the climate crisis, the private contractors profiting from detention, the officials choosing to separate families).

✓ **"This administration has chosen to separate families. A policy that serves no one except private detention contractors."**

✗ "Families are being separated at the border."

Universalize Movement as a Human Experience — Carefully

Connect migration to universal human experience. However, avoid "this could happen to you" framing, which provokes self-preservation rather than solidarity. It also obscures the deep inequalities that make some communities far more vulnerable than others.

✓ **"Throughout human history, people have moved to find safety and opportunity — it's how our ancestors built the communities we cherish today."**

✗ "You could be a refugee too if climate change gets bad enough."

Tell Personal Stories. Avoid Large Numbers.

Statistics and future projections create fear. Personal stories create empathy. Large numbers are also a form of dehumanization. When the Miami cohort talks about what actually shifts people's views, it comes back to this every time: "The only thing we've heard that shifts any kind of narrative is the direct connection." If data is needed, wrap it in values-based framing — never lead with it.

✓ **"Beatriz, a mother of two young boys, and her family faced an impossible choice when rising sea levels made their town unlivable..."**

✗ "Climate change could displace 1 billion people this century."

REPORTING SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

These principles are about **accurate**, **effective journalism**

REPORTING TIPS

1. **Ask:** "What's most important about this story to you? What gets overlooked?"
2. **Ask:** "What would you want celebrated in this story?"
3. **Ask:** "Who else should I talk to?"
4. **Take time** to build relationships. Frontline communities have often been misrepresented.
5. **Listen** for complexity, abundance, and joy—not just trauma.
6. **Position** community members as the experts and leaders they are, not victims.

COMMON PITFALLS

1. **"Both-Sides" False Balance** when one side dehumanizes people.
2. **Extractive Interviewing** where sources are "tapped" for quotes without relationship-building.
3. **Savior Narratives** where white-led orgs are heroes saving Black or Brown people.
4. **Techno-Solutionism** focusing only on technology, not community-led solutions.
5. **Doom Framing** with no paths forward.
6. **Poverty Porn** focusing only on suffering without joy, complexity, or agency.
7. **Tokenization** including one person of color to check a box.
8. **ANY "Illegal" Language**, even in negation.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

This guide has been built from the ground up — from the research, from the lived experiences of frontline organizations in Buffalo, Miami, and the Bay Area, and from the broader body of work that the immigrant and climate justice movements have produced over years of narrative experimentation and organizing. Taken together, these materials show we are at an inflection point, and the narratives we choose right now will shape what becomes possible.

The Opportunities are Real
Across every source we examined, a consistent set of openings emerged. Stories of joy, agency, and collective resistance — not just harm and crisis — are proven to move even skeptical audiences. The intersections of climate and migration are no longer abstract; in Miami, Buffalo, and the Bay Area, communities are already living them, and their experiences offer compelling and credible narratives available to the movement. Cultural moments, from community dinners to public art to faith celebrations, offer powerful entry points that reach people where policy language cannot. And the appetite for a bigger, more connected narrative ecosystem — one that links community organizers, artists, journalists, and funders around shared values — has never been greater.

The Challenges are Significant
Rights-based frameworks are proving insufficient in a moment when rights themselves are being openly violated. Communities are emotionally exhausted by crisis-only storytelling with no visible path forward. The communications infrastructure that immigrant communities depend on has been decimated, replaced by platforms that spread misinformation faster than trust can be built. And the diversity within migrant communities — Central American Indigenous families, Congolese refugees, Southeast Asian elders, undocumented workers, domestic climate migrants — means there is no single story, no single messenger, no single channel that reaches everyone. Any guide that pretends otherwise will fail the people it's meant to serve.

There is also a structural challenge: Narrative work remains underfunded, undervalued, and often treated as secondary to policy and legal work, even though the research is clear that without narrative power, policy wins are temporary. Artists and cultural workers remain dramatically underused across the movement.

NEXT STEPS

For organizations and communicators putting this guide into practice, we suggest focusing on the following:

- **Invest in Story Infrastructure, Not Just Stories.** Identify the trusted channels — WhatsApp networks, audio-visual formats, peer-to-peer communication, multilingual media — through which your community actually exchanges information, and build there. A powerful story that reaches no one changes nothing.

- **Center the Storytellers Who Are Closest to the Experience.** Make space for immigrants and migrants to tell their own stories, in their own languages and forms. Engage immigrant-led groups and artists as full partners, not sources to be quoted or represented.

- **Shift from Crisis to Vision.** Move toward content that models the future you want to see — neighbors protecting neighbors, communities building climate-resilient infrastructure together, people with full agency making decisions about their own lives. Testing consistently shows that this future-facing, values-rooted content outperforms fear-based crisis framing, even with "law-and-order" audiences.

- **Name the Villains.** Vague system-blaming is less effective than clear storytelling that identifies who is profiting from militarized borders, from climate inaction, from the exploitation of undocumented workers. Audiences respond to stories with protagonists and antagonists — give them both.

- **Build Across Movements, Not Just Within Them.** The climate and migrant justice movements share common adversaries, common values, and increasingly common constituencies. The full potential of this intersection has not yet been realized. Sustained investment in cross-movement narrative alignment — between organizations, between cities, between funders — is one of the highest-leverage actions available. There also needs to be further deepening work at the intersections including around domestic U.S. climate migration as an underserved reality requiring deeper narrative attention.

- **Think in Years, Not Campaigns.** Narrative change is cumulative. The organizations and funders that have made the biggest impact have committed to multi-year efforts, with dedicated space for experimentation, failure, and iteration. Short-term messaging campaigns, however well-crafted, cannot substitute for long-term narrative ecosystem building.

The work documented in this guide — from the focus groups in Miami to the organizing spaces in Buffalo to the multilingual zines produced in the Bay Area — represents something worth protecting and growing. As climate impacts continue to displace families and reshape communities, this work becomes not just timely but essential — because climate resilience is inseparable from migrant justice. The people at the center of these stories are not waiting for perfect narratives. They are building resilience, demanding dignity, and creating the future right now.

PLACE, POWER & POSSIBILITY:
A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

Governance
at the
Climate-Migration Nexus

THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Written By:
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This guide series is co-published with
The Solutions Project and Just Solutions.

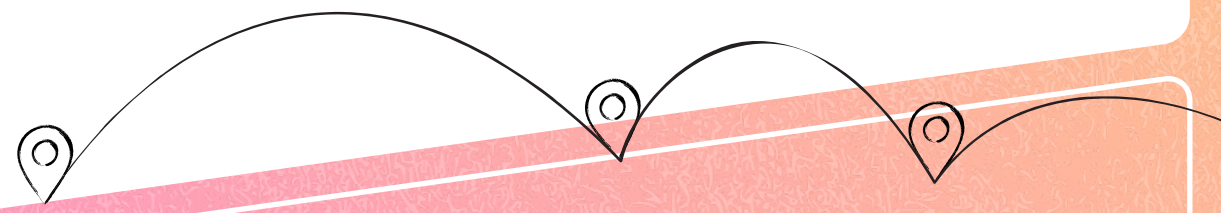
The following organizations also informed the series:

- APEN
- Catalyst Miami
- PODER
- PUSH Buffalo
- WeCount!
- Justice for Migrant Families

With special thanks to our funding partners, Democracy Fund and Unbound Philanthropy, for their generous support of this work.

OVERVIEW

Community governance refers to decision-making structures that give residents and frontline communities meaningful power over the issues that shape their lives.



This guide is designed to support community-based leaders, organizers, policymakers, and frontline organizations by offering frameworks, strategies, and practical tools for implementing and strengthening participatory governance.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is a living resource, not a linear manual. It is designed to meet you where you are, whether you are just beginning to build community governance structures, deepening existing practices, or looking for language and models to bring to policymakers and funders. There is no single right place to start. Use what's useful. Leave what isn't. Come back to it as your work evolves.

If You Are a Community Organizer or Grassroots Leader
Start with *Key Concepts in Community Governance* to ground yourself in shared language, then move to *Core Practices for Place-Based Community Governance* to see how organizations like yours are putting these ideas to work. The decision-making tools in *How Decisions Get Made* are immediately practical and can be adapted for your next meeting or campaign. The tensions listed there are worth reading with your team, they name the hard parts honestly and can open productive conversations about how your organization navigates them.

If You are a Policymaker or Policy Advocate
Start with the Introduction, then turn to *What Governance Requires to Succeed* for concrete policy and funding recommendations. The models in *Practical Models for Shifting Power,* community land trusts, participatory budgeting, proportional representation are documented with real-world examples you can cite and adapt.

Using This Guide With Your Team
Some sections work well as shared reading before a planning meeting, particularly *How Decisions Get Made* on decision-making tensions and *Governance as Practice, Vision, and Joy* on the long view. The tools and templates at the end are meant to be picked up and adapted directly for your context.

When something feels abstract, look for the quotes and field examples.
They are the heart of this document, and often say more than any definition can.
And when the work feels heavy, return to *Governance as Practice, Vision, and Joy.*
It's a reminder of why any of this is worth doing.

OVERVIEW

This guide is part of The Solutions Project's Place, Power & Possibility: A Climate + Migrant Justice Guide Series

These guides advance integrated strategies across community governance, policy advocacy, and narrative change.

Together, the series reflects a comprehensive approach to strengthening community power and advancing equitable climate and migrant justice solutions.

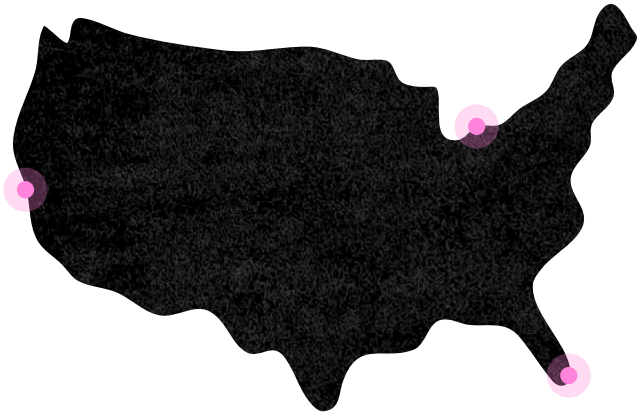
This Community Governance Guide curates governance insights, tools, and practical steps for neighbors to have more agency in place-based policy decisions. The guide highlights ways of working and models that bring community members together—across neighborhoods, cities, and regions—to coordinate, collaborate, and implement actions that grow community power and self-determination.

In the context of overlapping climate, political, and economic crises, this adaptive approach is essential to reducing harm while building long-term resilience. As such, its lessons can apply to community development projects, disaster resilience, recovery efforts, migration, displacement, and overall movement building.

Grounded in the lived experience of grassroots organizations participating in The Solutions Project's Climate + Migrant Justice cohort, this guide draws from leadership in Buffalo, NY; Miami, FL; and the San Francisco Bay Area, CA—U.S. regions navigating distinct but interconnected climate and migration dynamics. Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, or funder, this guide is intended to support reflection, implementation, and long-term power-building strategies rooted in community-determined decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

POWER, PLACE, AND PURPOSE



Climate change and migration cannot be addressed through policy fixes or infrastructure alone—they require a fundamental shift in who holds decision-making power over the systems shaping community futures.

Across Buffalo, Miami, and the San Francisco Bay Area, frontline organizations are demonstrating that durable climate resilience depends on decision-making ("governance") structures that center residents, workers, and immigrant communities. Traditional top-down models are proving insufficient in a world defined by rapid environmental shifts and systemic inequity. These organizations' work shows how governance can and must move beyond symbolic participation toward collective decision-making and shared accountability in order to deliver meaningful and equitable outcomes.

Developed as part of The Solutions Project's Climate + Migrant Justice initiative—with support from The Democracy Fund and Unbound Philanthropy and in collaboration with Just Solutions Collective. This guide complements companion documents focused on policy advocacy and narrative strategy. Together, the series recognizes that governance, policy, and narrative are interconnected pillars of climate and migrant justice.

Additionally, this guide surfaces a trans-local perspective in grassroots governance strategies, a way of seeing and acting that connects rooted local struggles to broader multi-regional and national movements. While every community is unique, they face shared systemic challenges. A trans-local perspective recognizes these shared conditions and fosters the exchange of strategies, solidarity, and learning across geographic boundaries.

Ultimately, this guide offers a roadmap for community governance grounded in equity, collective power, and long-term resilience. Ensuring that those most impacted by climate change and displacement have meaningful authority over the systems shaping their futures.

This guide reflects direct input from grassroots partners, gathered through focus groups and shared learning spaces:

APEN
Oakland, CA

PODER
San Francisco, CA

WeCount!
Miami, FL

Catalyst Miami
Miami, FL

PUSH Buffalo
Buffalo, NY

Justice for Migrant Families
Buffalo, NY

The work of these organizations advances governance, resilience, and movement-building across their respective regions.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

This approach is rooted in the lived experience of practitioners who view governance not as an academic exercise, but as a routine practice of justice, accountability, and self-determination.

The Shared Tenets of Community Governance Elevated by The Partners in This Cohort Include:

COMMUNITY AS RELATIONSHIP

Community is defined not just by geography, but by mutual support. Whether PUSH Buffalo's focus on collective problem-solving or PODER's "everyone eats" ethos, governance must center the most marginalized; for example, low-income residents, immigrants, and workers in precarious industries.

DESIGNING AND GOVERNING WITH COMMUNITY

The practice of designing, producing, and governing with community—not just on behalf of it. These principles of co-design are not add-ons, but are foundational to any effort that aims to be truly place-based and community rooted. When you design on *behalf of* a community, you are essentially guessing at their lived experience through the lens of your own expertise. When you design and govern *with* them, you are acknowledging that the community members are the primary experts on their own lives.

TRUST AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Place-based work is only as strong as the trust that supports it. Community governance requires intentional relationship-building and proactive steps to enable full participation. When people see their fingerprints on the design and their voices reflected in governance structures, they develop a sense of ownership and agency. Practices such as providing childcare, language access, stipends, and culturally competent engagement help ensure that participation is inclusive rather than extractive.

VALUING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Those closest to the problem hold the best solutions. Effective governance embeds Indigenous and intergenerational wisdom into ecological stewardship and urban design.

STRATEGIES

SHIFTING THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWER

The strategies detailed in this guide reflect a spectrum of community governance practices aligned to the tenets above. They represent a shift from being community-informed to being community-owned by inverting traditional hierarchies.

This Shift is Being Led by Organizations Through:

STRUCTURAL REIMAGINING

Radically tilting traditional decision-making models. Examples include WeCount!, where the board is 100% member-led with proportional representation for workers, and Catalyst Miami, which transitioned to a board split 50/50 between program participants and institutional partners.

ACTION TEAMS

Creating opportunities where community members don't just participate — they do the work and lead the work. This includes creating "sweat equity pathways," where community members contribute sustained time, labor, and leadership to organizing efforts—such as leading campaign strategy, stewarding community land projects, or managing local initiatives—and, in doing so, move into formal governance and decision-making roles. One example is APEN's regional teams, who guide state budget campaigns.

ALTERNATIVE OWNERSHIP

Taking things people truly need—like homes and energy—out of the hands of investors who profit from them, and putting them under community control so they stay affordable. Vehicles for this include Community Landbanks, Community Land Trusts or worker-driven cooperatives to ensure permanent affordability.

These structural shifts reflect a deeper understanding shared across the cohort:

**Governance is not a fixed model or institutional design.
It is an evolving practice shaped through
relationships, experimentation, and community leadership.**

GOVERNANCE AS A LIVING PRACTICE

True governance is often messy. It involves navigating the tensions between democracy and speed, or services and organizing.

This guide does not offer a rigid template; instead, it outlines a set of flexible practices that communities can adapt to support long-term power-building.

Ultimately, community governance is about creating a "democracy that feels like home." It is a commitment rooted in Indigenous knowledge to thinking seven generations back and seven generations forward, ensuring that as we build resilient infrastructure, we are also building the joy, grace, and collective agency necessary to sustain it.

KEY CONCEPTS IN COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

COMMUNITY

Community is defined as relationships of mutual support rather than geography or demographics alone. PODER's principle that "everyone eats" captures the ethos of each one teach one, co-leadership distributed non-hierarchically amongst the organization's base. This model-could include formal or informal membership, as well as decision making structures that center the most marginalized. PUSH Buffalo emphasizes collective problem-solving around shared interests. Justice for Migrant Families highlights displacement as a defining experience for many community members, requiring governance structures that can adapt as people move between cities, workplaces, and housing situations. In practice, this means building organizing spaces where participants can shift between affinity groups, stay connected even when they relocate, and continue contributing to collective decision-making.

Across all six organizations in this cohort, there is a shared prioritization of frontline communities: low- and moderate-income (LMI) residents, representing roughly 80% of the community base, Black, Asian and Latinx immigrants, predominantly women, and workers in low-wage and unstable employment.. Many organizations describe themselves as "connectors and conveners" (Catalyst Miami), bridging grassroots power with entities like government, universities, and broader coalitions.

COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

A participatory framework in which local communities hold meaningful decision-making power over the issues that directly impact them. This approach centers frontline leadership, uplifts local knowledge, and moves away from extractive, top-down systems toward practices rooted in justice, accountability, and self-determination. Community governance is how communities shape, manage, and sustain solutions on their own terms — grounded in equity and collective agency.

COLLECTIVE POWER

Collective power is the capacity of communities to shape, influence, and transform decision-making processes across institutions, sectors, and systems. It reflects the outcome of sustained community governance—moving from symbolic participation to authentic power-sharing and structural change.

Organizations, such as the ones profiled in this guide, are building collective power by rooting decision-making in community priorities, embracing shared leadership models, and advancing principles such as community-controlled resources and collective ownership of solutions. In this guide, we also define this work as ‘power-building’.

> “People don’t want to be **symbolic decision makers.**

> **We know what we need,** where we live.
>
> – PUSH Buffalo

VALUING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Social ecology advocates for a reconstructive approach that fosters a non-exploitative relationship between humanity and the natural world. Local communities possess unique and essential knowledge of their own social ecological systems and must embed and leverage it to achieve effective and sustainable outcomes. Indigenous knowledge passed down through oral traditions, stories, songs, and intergenerational teachings is especially central to conveying cultural values and ecological stewardship.

TRUST

This work labor intensive and essential. Trust takes years to build and can be broken in minutes. Governance requires shared power, dynamic communication, and engagement that meets people where they are. Effective practices include multi-channel communication (digital and in-person), cultural competence, language access, and material support for community leaders such as stipends, food, childcare, and interpretation. These are baseline conditions for inclusive decision-making.

COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

The following practices are models of governance that illustrate the many dimensions of how community governance is operationalized, and represented across the cohort of organizations that participated in this project:

Mutual Aid
Focusing on a voluntary, reciprocal exchange of resources and services for community support, built on solidarity rather than charity. It involves horizontal, grassroots organizing where people meet each other's needs, such as food, supplies, transportation, and care. It shifts the focus from delivering services to cultivating interdependence.

Community-Owned
Tangible assets are held and governed by community members. For example, through worker cooperatives, community land trusts, or real estate cooperatives.

Community-Controlled
Spaces or resources are shaped by community priorities and decision-making processes, even when legal ownership may sit elsewhere. Examples include public parks, resilience hubs, or repurposed vacant lots managed through community leadership.

Community-Determined
Community members shape and govern the systems that guide their own development; for example, through worker-driven models, community-identified development projects, or youth-led design processes such as those used in the development of resilience hubs like the RYSE Climate & Liberation Center in Richmond, California.

Community-Accountable
Ensuring responsiveness to the community base through feedback integration, accountability mechanisms for elected officials, and refusing what organizers often call "dirty money"—funding or partnerships tied to actors whose practices harm frontline communities or conflict with community values.

Community-Designed
A participatory approach that centers residents as co-creators in the development of policies, programs, and spaces—for example, co-designing affordable housing that includes clinics and childcare, using design charrettes to shape neighborhood plans, or establishing advisory boards with real decision-making power.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES THAT SHIFT POWER

With shared values established, we now turn to how governance takes shape structurally within organizations.

INVERTING TRADITIONAL HIERARCHIES

The following examples illustrate how cohort organizations are reimagining organizational governance through Board composition, leadership pathways, and communication systems that invert traditional hierarchies and make power more relational, accountable, and community-centered.

Inverting traditional hierarchies means shifting power from the top (executives, board members, or experts) to the base (front-line workers, community members, and those with lived experience). In this model, those most impacted by a decision become the primary architects of that decision, while the traditional leaders pivot into a role of support and resource facilitation. For example:

PUSH Buffalo's board bylaws require that 80% of members identify as low-income and come from the communities the organization serves, with 75% residing in the organization's core organizing neighborhood.

WeCount! operates with a 100% member-led Board and uses proportional representation; for example, if agriculture workers make up 30% of the membership, they hold 30% of board seats. This ensures that workers govern based on lived experience.

Catalyst Miami is transitioning from a traditional board model that was historically composed of bankers and funders to one that reflects a 50/50 split between program participants and institutional partners. This shift demonstrates how established organizations can move toward deeper community control.

ACTION TEAMS AS GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS

Several organizations utilize action teams as participatory governance structures to engage communities.

These teams require sweat equity—that is, meaningful and sustained involvement in concrete projects such as farm work, bike repair, or campaign planning—prior to assuming decision-making roles. Through this process, community members move from participation into leadership, gaining the experience and trust needed to shape organizational strategy and governance decisions.

PODER's action teams include *Pueblote* (housing), *Urban Campesine/x* (urban farming), and *Bicis El Pueblo* (bike access). For example, the teams at Hummingbird Farm, led by PODER and their Urban Campesine/x collective, direct campaigns by leveraging community organizing to reclaim underutilized public land for environmental and economic justice. Program design is shaped through a bottom-up approach that prioritizes intergenerational leadership, cultural heritage, and the specific needs of immigrant families in San Francisco's Excelsior district. PODER treats its farm as a revolutionary commons where solidarity-based economic models and collective decision-making take center stage. This governance practice is deeply rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, integrating ancestral wisdom with regenerative agricultural techniques to build climate resiliency and community well-being.

APEN supports multiple regional action teams through which community members guide strategy, influence decisions, and take collective action. For example, the Community Resilience Action Team steers resilience hub development, attends city council meetings, and engages in state budget campaigns at the Capitol in Sacramento.

PUSH Buffalo's Climate Justice and Housing Justice campaign committees function as action teams where directly impacted members and residents come together each month to learn, strategize, and plan key campaign actions and activities together as a group.

DECENTRALIZED COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Decentralized Communications Networks are systems where information exchange and decision-making power are distributed across a wide array of participants rather than being filtered through a single, central authority or hub.

In the context of community work and land-based governance, these networks function as the "nervous system" for collective action.

One example of such a system in action is how Justice for Migrant Families uses a decentralized, multilingual communications structure grounded in overlapping affinity circles organized by language and culture. Trusted staff and volunteers serve as connectors across these circles, ensuring coordination with enforcing hierarchy. This model accommodates varied work schedules and includes detained community members in decision-making whenever possible. Weekly staff meetings rotate facilitation duties, and use collective tools to assess whether decisions are high or low stakes, allowing for broader input at appropriate levels.

For example, when urgent decisions or information must be shared across the network, trusted connectors relay updates between language and affinity circles, ensuring that members working different schedules or navigating immigration constraints can still participate in collective decision-making.

HOW DECISIONS GET MADE

Community governance is not just about who is at the table; it's about how decisions are made and whose voices carry weight.

DECISION-MAKING TOOLS IN PRACTICE

The following tools and tensions illustrate what democratic decision-making looks like in practice, drawn from the cohort organizations, including both intentional strategies and the hard choices that come with real-time organizing.

FIST TO FIVE VOTING

Fist to Five Voting is a visual method to gauge agreement, used by PUSH, PODER, and APEN. It is a technique for quickly getting feedback or gauging consensus during a meeting. The leader makes a statement, then asks everyone to show their level of agreement with the statement by holding up a number of fingers, from 5 for wild enthusiasm (jazz hands) down to a clenched fist for vehement opposition.

VALUES FILTERS

Applying organizational principles to decision-making. For example, PUSH created a Community Advisory Board to guide contractor selection, project naming, community benefit goals, and development of the governance structure for their Community Solar Project. The Value filters (usually no more than 5-7 values) are a series of criteria that the community sets. When selecting contractors, project goals, etc., the filters whittle down the pool of finalists leading to decision points that meet the community's requirements.

SURVEY → RANKING → PRIORITIZATION → PIPELINES

WeCount! surveyed 323 nursery workers, identified 25 workplace rights, and then had workers rank them to determine priorities for collective action. Catalyst Miami uses a similar process.

MATRIX EVALUATIONS

A framework used by Catalyst Miami to weigh political feasibility against community benefit when assessing strategies. Matrix evaluations in community decision-making are structured tools, such as weighted decision matrices, prioritization grids, and stakeholder analyses, used to compare options against criteria like cost, impact, and feasibility.

COMMUNITY CONGRESSES

An annual board member engagement process, employed by PUSH Buffalo, that funnels dialogue and design charrettes into actionable community priorities. Examples include identifying vacant properties for potential affordable housing development or identifying derelict vacant lots in the neighborhood that can be transformed into rain or pollinator gardens. In addition, issues such as streetlights not working can be turned into mini community organizing campaigns.

COMMUNITY VISIONING

APEN utilized a community visioning process with their base to develop a long-term vision around resilience and justice. Community members honed these visions over the course of 10 workshops across Oakland, Richmond, and Los Angeles.

KEY TENSIONS IN PRACTICE

Practicing community governance is not easy. No matter how good the tools, structures and the people practicing them, there will always be tensions or competing demands when doing this work. Sometimes the tensions can be solved but oftentimes all you can do is manage them.

Key Tensions Surfaced by The Grassroots Partners:

Democracy vs. Speed	Fast-moving campaigns often require rapid decisions, while genuine democratic processes—particularly those rooted in Indigenous practices—require time for dialogue, relationship-building, and consensus. Many organizations navigate this by establishing community agreements that distinguish between high and low stakes decisions and clarify who makes them.
Services vs. Organizing	When government institutions fail to meet basic community needs, grassroots organizations often step in to fill gaps in service delivery. While necessary, this can strain organizational capacity and pull energy away from long-term organizing and power-building.
Representation vs. Presence	Speaking on behalf of community members is not the same as ensuring their direct participation in decision-making spaces. While representation may sometimes be necessary, organizations strive to create conditions where community members can be present and exercise power themselves.
Symbolic vs. Real Power	When outcomes are predetermined, consultation becomes performative. Organizations strive to create meaningful participation by defining decision-making parameters with openness to community input.
Exclusion from Formal Voting Systems	Several cohort organizations organize with members excluded from formal democratic processes. Proposed strategies include: • Ensuring community representatives in decision-making spaces where policies are debated or finalized, even when community members themselves are excluded from formal voting systems • Encouraging eligible voters to act in alignment with the interests of those who cannot vote, including in their own household • Holding elected officials and non-voters accountable to all residents • Creating other community voting and decision-making processes

Perfection vs. Progress	As one cohort member stated, *"execution is where good ideas go to die."* Even well-designed plans can stall under capacity constraints. Organizations balance ambition with practical implementation by effectively communicating realistic expectations with their community.
Documentation vs. Doing	Capturing history, including decisions made and lessons learned is critical, yet often deprioritized when community needs are urgent. Even low-tech, community-rooted documentation approaches require labor and intention to execute.
Practiced Resilience vs. Institutional Crisis Response	Community organizations often balance two parallel responsibilities: building long-term resilience through practices such as mutual aid and community land stewardship, while also pushing governments and institutions to fulfill their responsibilities during crises. Whether responding to immigration enforcement, climate disasters, or state violence, organizations must prepare communities to withstand immediate threats while continuing to build durable systems of care and protection.
Time Scale Crisis vs. Long Arc	Groups must respond to immediate crises while sustaining long-term work. This includes integrating cycles of rest and joy for members and staff as necessary counterbalance to urgency culture.
External Stakeholder Process vs. Implementation Realities	Institutions like state legislatures often move quickly through decision-making, while the implementation of those decisions is generally prolonged. Community groups must navigate both speeds simultaneously.
Traditional Organizing vs. Innovation	Face-to-face organizing remains vital, but current realities in many communities (increased call screening, changing communication habits, and the presence of immigration enforcement) require organizations to continually adapt outreach and engagement strategies.
Political Threats vs. Shrinking Resources	At a time of escalating threats, resources are increasingly scarce. Philanthropy, public funding, and donor support are also under pressure while entities often acting against frontline community interests—a such as big tech and fossil fuel interests—remain well resourced.

WHAT GOVERNANCE REQUIRES TO SUCCEED

POLICY AND REGULATORY CHANGES

While much of this guide focuses on internal practices, community governance doesn't happen in a vacuum.

It requires external conditions that support it—from public policy to flexible funding. This section names the broader shifts that organizations say are necessary to make community governance viable, scalable, and sustainable.

Establish and enforce community benefit agreements that reflect local priorities and lived experience. A community benefit agreement (CBA) is a legally binding contract between community groups and a developer that ensures a development project provides specific, negotiated benefits to the local neighborhood. These benefits can include affordable housing, green space, or local hiring. Strong CBAs also include clear enforcement provisions so that community commitments remain binding if developers fail to meet agreed-upon benefits.

Create long-term institutional commitments to land stewardship and community-based governance. Community Land Trusts (CLTs), for example, remove land from speculative markets through long-term ground leases—often lasting 99 years—ensuring that affordability and local oversight endure across generations. Similar approaches can be seen in Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs), where stewardship is grounded in Indigenous leadership and governance systems that treat ecosystems as living relationships rather than extractable resources. When paired with long-term financing strategies such as Project Finance for Permanence (PFP), these models can help sustain stewardship and community governance across generations and anchor for collective care.

Implement targeted hiring mandates, participatory budgeting, and language access policies at county and state levels.

Advance utility reform that enables community-scale renewable energy and meaningful energy affordability.

Promote transparent government spending and democratic structures for community control over public resources.

INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY INNOVATION

Resource communities to build alternative governance models, especially in places where no precedent exists.

Support intentional experimentation and resourcing to fail forward, recognizing that transformation requires risk.

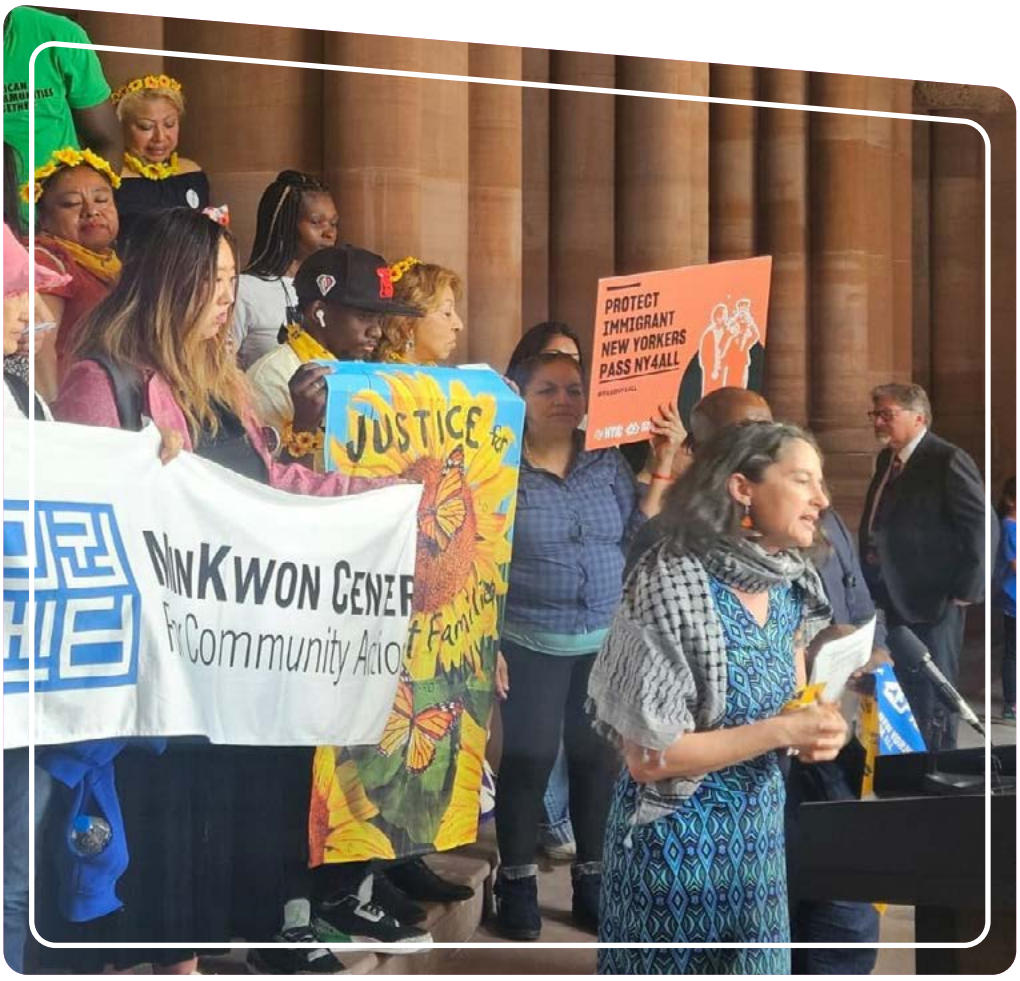
Prioritize funding for community-led infrastructure and program design, with flexible timelines and deliverables that honor the iterative nature of grassroots innovation.

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE SUPPORT

Invest in models of community ownership, such as co-ops and land trusts, over extractive capital systems.

Provide tax incentives for cooperatives and establish revenue-sharing structures that center community wealth. Increase access to land acquisition for affordable housing.

Make data visualization tools available in multiple languages to support inclusive participation.



INTERNAL CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Ensure staff and member leaders have training in facilitation, decision-making frameworks, and conflict resolution to uphold d emocratic values in practice.

Provide resources for language interpretation, childcare, and stipends that recognize the labor of community leadership.

Establish multiple touchpoints in relationships with funders, institutions, and stakeholders to prevent single points of failure. A rupture with one individual should not lead to the collapse of entire organizational relationships.

Integrate cycles of rest and ease into organizational workplans. Sustained democratic practice requires breath, time to reflect, reset, and reimagine. We must make room for joy and collective care alongside struggle and strategy.

CORE PRACTICES FOR PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

While earlier sections describe the principles and structures of community governance, this section focuses on the core practices that make it possible in day-to-day organizing and decision-making.

Across the cohort organizations, several shared methods consistently appear as the operational foundation of place-based governance.

These practices—ranging from popular education to co-design and co-production—serve as the building blocks that allow communities to move from participation to real decision-making power.

Based on the practices of our cohort members, the following dimensions emerge as core practices that support effective place-based governance:

POPULAR EDUCATION

Popular education is a philosophy and methodology of teaching focused on social change, empowerment, and critical consciousness, often described as education for the people. Rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, it breaks down hierarchical, teacher-student roles, instead using horizontal, participatory methods that value the learner's own experiences to challenge inequality and oppression. Everyone is both a teacher and a learner. Governance models are grounded in popular education principles because the work is always evolving to meet the needs of the people. Building across generations and racial identities, constantly learning and reimagining together.

CO-GOVERNANCE

A model of shared leadership and decision-making where institutional power is shifted from a centralized authority to a collaborative partnership between diverse stakeholders. It moves beyond simple consultation toward a revolutionary space where communities and technical experts work as equals to manage resources, shape policies, and steward practices. Those most impacted are centered in organizing, policy development, advocacy, and community development. It is fundamentally understood that those closest to the problem hold the best solutions. Governance structures integrate popular education principles to ensure the process remains iterative, flexible, and people-driven.

CO-DESIGN

Is a highly participatory approach to creative problem-solving that treats end-users and stakeholders as equal partners and experts in the design process. It is rooted in the belief that those who will be most affected by a project, policy, or space should be the ones to lead its development. Co-design recognizes that community members are the experts in their own lives, and solutions. The role of experts is to work alongside them, offering technical expertise and resources to execute their vision.

This ensures those most affected by outcomes, the ultimate stakeholders and end-users, are empowered to drive the design of collective goals and positioned as the primary decision-makers from the start.

CO-PRODUCTION

Is a collaborative framework where service providers and community members work together as equal partners to design, deliver, and evaluate projects or services. Co-production moves beyond traditional service delivery by recognizing that the people most impacted by a system possess the vital knowledge and agency needed to make that system effective. Co-production models work hand-in-hand with community members to embed capacity and skill building directly into grassroots neighborhoods.

These practices are not optional. They are foundational. Place-based work cannot succeed without meaningful participation from directly impacted people across all phases of design, production, and governance.

Co-Production Models:

- Integrate workforce development into organizing strategies
- Ensure shared ownership over processes and infrastructure
- Support long-term sustainability and self-determination

Co-Created Outcome Examples:

Programs and Policy Campaigns

Spatial Design and Urban Design

Restorative Practices

Workforce Development

PRACTICED EXAMPLES

DESIGNING AND GOVERNING WITH COMMUNITY FROM THE FIELD

APEN
Richmond youth determined what got built and what gets powered during emergencies at the RYSE Climate & Liberation community center and resilience hub. They prioritized art spaces and music rooms as being as essential as phone charging stations, emphasizing that "in an emergency, people need to decompress, express themselves, and connect with each other". They interviewed the solar developer to ensure they were values-aligned, and supported state advocacy campaigns to help other communities get the resources needed to build resilience hubs.

PODER
Over a 17-20 year campaign, community members fought for and won 100% affordable housing, a community park, and a clinic. Members also took educational tours to the Central Valley to understand other communities' struggles and returned as stronger advocates.

Catalyst Miami
Community members met directly with Republican lawmakers to revise harmful medical debt legislation. Sustained dialogue led to real policy shifts, and the community is now developing proactive bills based on those relationships.

WeCount!
Their worker-driven social responsibility model, inspired by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), ensures that lived experience experts define workplace conditions.

PUSH Buffalo
After four years of deep engagement with more than 2,000 stakeholders, PUSH reimagined an 80,000 sq. ft. abandoned school building, purchased from the city, into a vibrant, mixed-use community hub.

Features Include:

- 30 affordable senior housing units *(designed with elders)*
- A pocket park *(designed with children)*
- The first low-income community solar project in NYS
- A green campus built by residents trained and employed through PUSH's worker-centered Community Hiring Hall workforce program

"Locked arm in arm"

COHORT MEMBER REACTIONS

HOW THE PRACTICES IN ACTION LOOK AND FEEL LIKE

"Movement and rushing water"

"A warm hug"

"Home"

PRACTICAL MODELS FOR SHIFTING POWER

With these governance practices in place, communities also develop structural mechanisms that institutionalize community power.

The following models—from land trusts to participatory budgeting—show how governance moves beyond organizing practice into durable systems that shape land, housing, and public decision-making. These are not theoretical models. They are blueprints grounded in decades of organizing, experimentation, and

CORE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF RESOURCES

Self-Determination
Communities exercise meaningful decision-making power over the development and use of resources, a critical reversal for those historically deprived of such control.

Common Good
Assets are stewarded for long-term collective benefit, preventing speculation and displacement while aligning with shared values such as trust, justice and cooperation.

Democratic Governance
Decision-making power is distributed through inclusive, participatory processes that involve residents, local, and community representatives.

Community Ownership of Resources: Examples

The goal of community ownership is to decouple essential resources such as land and housing from the volatile speculative market and place them under permanent community control. This ensures lasting affordability and self-determination.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs)

MECHANISM:
A non-profit organization acquires and holds land permanently. Residents purchase homes at an affordable price, and resale price is governed by a long-term ground lease (often 99 years). This structure provides homeownership opportunities while preserving affordability for every future buyer.

Example	Location	Key Impact
Champlain Housing Trust (CHT)	Burlington, VT	One of the largest CLTs in the country. Formed with municipal support, it now stewards thousands of permanently affordable ownership and rental units.
Dudley Neighbors Inc. (DNI)	Boston, MA	Established by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. The city granted DNI limited eminent domain authority over vacant land. This unique power allowed the organization to acquire necessary parcels to build permanently affordable housing and community facilities, effectively battling displacement and blight.
New Communities, Inc.	Southwest, GA	Founded in 1969 by civil rights organizers. Widely considered the first modern CLT in the United States, it pioneered the model to combine collective land ownership with individual homes for self sufficiency and economic empowerment.

Tenant and Community Opportunity to Purchase Acts (TOPA/COPA)

MECHANISM:
Legal frameworks that give tenants or designated community organizations the right of first refusal when a property is being sold, offering a proactive tool to prevent displacement.

Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA)	Washington, D.C.	Enacted over 40 years ago, D.C.'s TOPA is the most comprehensive example of this type of framework. It has been used to preserve or create over 16,000 affordable units (2006-2020) by allowing tenants to purchase their building as a co-op or assign their rights to an affordable housing developer.
Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA)	San Francisco, CA	COPA grants qualified community organizations the first right to purchase multi-unit residential buildings to convert them into permanently affordable housing.
Northwest Side Preservation Ordinance (Pilot)	Chicago, IL	This pilot program, approved in 2024, operates as a TOPA for a specific district. It allows renters to organize and purchase their apartment building when it is sold, serving as a direct anti-displacement measure.

**PUSH Buffalo established a CDC development arm in 2009, the Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company (BNSC), with its own landbank. This allowed the organization to buy up vacant land and vacant properties to turn them into green affordable housing, commercial spaces, urban farms and pollinator gardens. They successfully built a concentration of affordability in a 40-square block area that stopped mass displacement in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. PUSH's current housing project, Climate and Community Homes, is transforming six 2-family houses on Buffalo's West Side into all-electric, affordable homes for first-time homebuyers. Deed restrictions on the land will ensure the properties remain permanently affordable.*

Powerful Models for Electoral Governance

These models redistribute political power away from concentrated interests and toward community members—enhancing transparency, accountability, and participation in decision-making.

Participatory Budgeting (PB)

MECHANISM:
Residents directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget (often capital funds for infrastructure).

Example	Location	Key Impact
The People's Money (PBNYC)	New York, NY	One of the largest-scale PB programs in the U.S. The City Council allocates millions in discretionary funding annually (e.g., $1 million per district) for residents to brainstorm and vote on specific projects for schools, parks, and libraries.
Durham, North Carolina	Durham, NC	The city successfully engaged a high volume of residents, with participation that matched the city's racial composition, demonstrating the model's capacity to bring new and diverse voices into civic processes.
Phoenix Union High School District	Phoenix, AZ	Launched the first high school district PB process in the nation, empowering students, staff, and parents to allocate a portion of the School Safety Officer budget to non-police community safety and wellness initiatives.

Proportional Representation (PR) Systems

MECHANISM:
Electoral systems like Single Transferable Vote (STV) ensure that a group's share of elected seats is roughly proportional to its share of the vote, preventing a simple majority from dominating governance.

Proportional RCV (STV)	Cambridge, MA	Used since 1941 to elect the City Council and School Committee. It ensures that minority political factions, neighborhood interests, and marginalized groups win seats in proportion to their voting strength, fostering a more diverse and representative government.
Proportional RCV	Portland, OR	Adopted in 2022 and scheduled for first use in 2024 for City Council elections. This move is part of a charter reform designed to increase representation and make the council more accountable to neighborhood and minority interests.
Proportional RCV	Eastpointe, MI	Used as a successful voting rights remedy to address historical underrepresentation of the African American community on the City Council, leading to better proportional representation.

By normalizing community control, governance models do more than disrupt unjust systems; they cultivate the conditions to build wealth, protect vulnerable residents from displacement, and foster a strong, resilient social fabric based on shared ecological stewardship and collective well-being.

GOVERNANCE AS PRACTICE, VISION, AND JOY

Finally, at the heart of this work is a vision that transcends structure.

Governance reflects the joy, humanity, and long-term commitment of communities building toward something bigger than any single campaign or program.

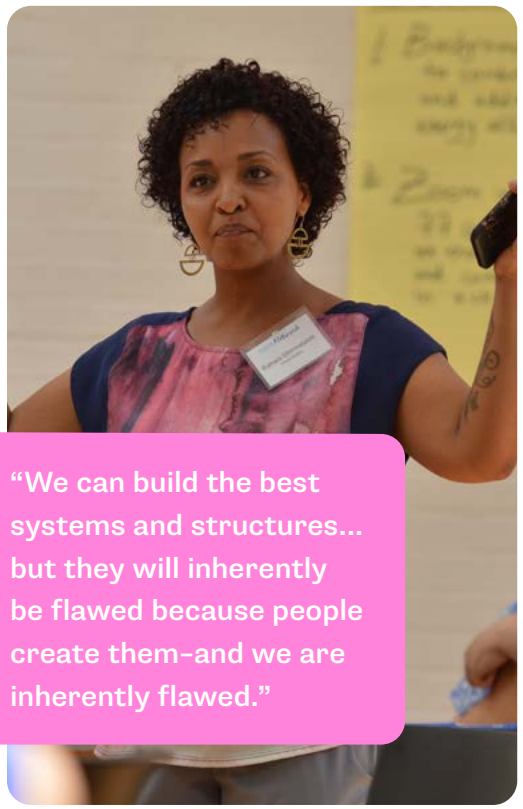
These closing reflections by the partner organizations speak to what that feels like when it's real.

Joy and Resilience as Governance Necessity

One PUSH meeting opened with music—elders started dancing, then everyone joined for a spontaneous dance party before productive discussion. Moving in the spirit of community requires responding to the need for joy. It requires breaking from "stiff, square, colonial" models of governance and instead centering practices that affirm life, culture, and connection.

Grace and Humanity in Systems

Governance rooted in community must account for human complexity. Organizations are called to humanize their processes, embedding grace into accountability structures. This means acknowledging imperfection, holding space for growth, while continuously striving for improvement.



"We can build the best systems and structures... but they will inherently be flawed because people create them–and we are inherently flawed."

The organizations reflected in this guide represent decades of sustained work, most for more than 20 years.

The Long View
Community governance isn't achieved quickly. It requires commitment to iteration, adaptation, and trust-building. It requires learning from failure, celebrating wins, and intentionally passing knowledge across generations.

It reflects Indigenous frameworks, such as the principle of thinking seven generations back and seven generations forward, governance rooted in legacy and future-making.

The Ultimate Vision: "Everyone Eats"
This is the heart of the vision: a governance model that ensures every community member is sustained, starting with the most vulnerable. Democracy that feels like home. Like family. Like the collective power to build the world we need.

GOVERNANCE AT THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE AND MIGRATION

As climate change reshapes where people live and how communities adapt, governance systems must evolve alongside these realities. Communities are navigating a complex landscape of climate disruption, migration, and economic uncertainty—often all at once. In this context, participatory governance becomes more than a democratic ideal; it becomes a practical tool for ensuring that those most affected by these changes have a meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

Across the regions highlighted in this guide, grassroots organizations are demonstrating that governance innovation is already emerging from the communities closest to these challenges. Migrant and immigrant communities bring traditions of mutual aid, collective care, and translocal organizing that strengthen resilience across borders and neighborhoods. Indigenous knowledge offers deeply rooted models of land stewardship and governance that recognize the long-term relationship between people, place, and future generations. Together, these practices point toward governance systems that are more adaptive, more democratic, and better equipped to respond to the intertwined realities of climate disruption and human mobility.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Governance is not just a set of tools; it is an evolving practice rooted in community wisdom, experimentation, and care. The templates and prompts shared here are meant to support the real work of navigating complexity, making decisions together, and building structures that reflect community values. As with all governance practices, these materials are strongest when used with intention, humility, and the freedom to adapt as needs shift.

May these tools support you in building, testing, revising, and celebrating the ways your community governs itself with clarity, courage, and care.

TOOLS, TIPS, AND TEMPLATES FOR PRACTICE

To support ongoing experimentation, this final section offers a set of tools, prompts and tips for documentation, reflection, and adaptation. These are not templates to be applied wholesale. They are designed to be shaped by your context and your community.

FOCUS AND FORMAT

HOW TO BEGIN

Status	Item	Goal/Action	Avoids
	Process Documentation	Does this document focus on how we do things rather than rigid rules? *Examples:* *How to facilitate, how to make a decision*	Overly formalized structures, rigid policies
	Contextualized Examples	Is there at least one real-life example showing the tool/process in action?	Decontextualized tools
	Adaptation Notes	Does the example include notes on: what was adapted, what worked, and what didn't?	One-size-fits-all prescriptions
	Multiple Models	Does the document offer more than one model for comparison? *Examples:* *2 ways to facilitate a meeting, 3 decision methods*	One-size-fits-all prescriptions
	Iterative Note	Is there a prominent note stating that this structure is experimental, likely to shift, and requires constant adaptation?	Assumption of fixed structures

PRIORITY CONTENT AREAS

WHAT NEEDS DOCUMENTATION NOW

Goal/Action	**Tool Goal** *(What should this guide accomplish?)*
Conflict & Trust	Relationship-building protocols for maintaining trust through conflict.
Decision-Making	A democratic decision-making guide that works under compressed timelines.
Inclusion	Clear language access and cultural competency standards (practical steps, not just statements).
Accountability	Restorative practice guidelines for addressing harm and moving forward.
Structure	Compensation frameworks and Board composition models (for adaptation).
Partnerships	Flexible coalition governance agreements and/or protocols for working with partners.
Communication	Communication channel design guidelines for reaching and engaging different communities.

THING'S TO AVOID

REVIEW AND PITFALLS

Status	Item	Review Question	Avoids
	Accessibility	Can a new volunteer or non-professional read this and understand exactly how to apply it to their campaign/group?	Assumption professionalization = effectiveness
	Simplicity	Does this tool use the simplest, most accessible language possible? Are terms defined?	Overly formalized structures
	Applicability	Can people easily see applying this to their specific circumstances? *If not, add more context/examples*	Decontextualized tools

TIPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Start Small
Focus on drafting one item from the Priority Content Areas using the Section 1 checklist.

Use Live Documents
Use shared digital documents that are clearly labeled DRAFT or EXPERIMENTAL and encourage collaborative feedback from users to facilitate the iterative process.

Clarify The Why
For every tool or resource, clearly state the context and campaign goal that led to its creation.

Track Versions
Always include the creation date and version number to support the documentation over time and track changes.