

LATINO COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN:

California Case Studies and
Recommendations for
Local Governments

June 2022



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the Latino Community Foundation*

INTRODUCTION

In the words of the Latino Community Foundation's Vice President of Policy, Christian Arana, the American Rescue Plan, President Biden's \$1.9 trillion plan intended to help communities recover from the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a story about whether or not government works of, by, and for the people.

In this case study, we set out to determine whether and how federal resources reached the communities they were sent to aid. This study is intended to promote transparency and accountability on the parts of city and county governments when spending the American Rescue Plan's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, and encourage local government leaders to engage in inclusive practices that positively impact Latino communities in California.

In particular, we hope that this study will be a useful tool for both local governments and for community-based organizations (CBOs) in their advocacy engagements by providing examples of best practices and tactical recommendations to support the equitable implementation of the American Rescue Plan.



QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY



To identify regions within the state of California that would be most illustrative of the American Rescue Plan's (ARP) distribution to Latino communities, we examined the Latino populations of cities and counties throughout the state, as reported by the 2020 U.S. Census¹, and **selected municipalities from each section of the bell curve** (low, mid-range, and high percentage of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino). Secondly, we **sought municipalities that received a range of amounts of ARP aid²**, and thirdly, that were **highlighted to us anecdotally** as instances of vivid examples of successful or unsuccessful federal aid implementation to Latino communities.

Our approach to conducting this case study once the regions were selected was twofold: an online review of digitally accessible information and resources, and interviews with grassroots and grassroots community leaders with particular expertise and experience in the facilitation of aid to Latino individuals and families most in need. **Digital research** consisted of local news coverage, social media content, and resources available on official government websites. **Community research** consisted of extensive interviews with over 15 advocates, organizers, and community leaders from each of the four municipalities. The questions used were as follows:

1 April 2020, U.S. Census Bureau: [Quick Facts: Los Angeles County, Sonoma County, Calexico City, Merced City](#)

2 State of California Department of Finance: [Local Fiscal Recovery Fund Allocations](#)

To what degree has the city and/or county been proactive about soliciting public input, and to what degree has it been reactive to that input (and in particular, to Latino community voices)?

What communication channels have been used and/or created for community participation?

To what degree are you seeing (Latino) community partners involved in decision-making and implementation processes?

To what extent has the city and/or county prioritized transparency in its ARP implementation processes? What new metrics or mechanisms has that required, if any?

COUNTIES

LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Population, total:

10,014,009

Population, Hispanic or Latino:

48.6%

ARP dollars received (in two tranches):

\$1,949,978,847



PART I: Digital Research

Los Angeles County



The online resources and opportunities related to ARP funding in Los Angeles County were the most robust of the four municipalities surveyed, and offer a high-watermark example of transparency and comprehensiveness. The County offered an entire site dedicated to ARP titled “[LA County Recovers](#),” and guides visitors through the vast collection of data with five clear headings at the top of the page: “The American Rescue Plan Act,” “Explore The Data,” “Reports,” “Contracting Opportunities,” “Grant Opportunities,” and “Get Help.” Under the tab titled “The American Rescue Plan Act,” visitors receive a description of the legislation and the four main funding priorities identified by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Furthermore, Los Angeles County has included a wide variety of expressions of implementation data, from maps to graphics to dashboards. Robust data is shared

in the [Maps and Data](#) section, including an [Equity Dashboard](#), [Equity Explorer](#), and [Project Map](#). This is a promising demonstration of commitment to fund distribution transparency.

However, the County’s online ARP platforms reveal several glaring absences. Primarily, it does not appear that public comment has been or currently is invited by the County. Although data is shared on the [Reports and Presentations](#) page, and [Contracting Opportunities](#) are made clearly available, it is not clear when, where, how, or even if public comment has been – or is still being – invited. Additionally, all the County’s ARP resources are only available in English. Although the website does include a range of settings options for increased accessibility, it does not offer any of the data in any languages other than English.

Those deficits were not wholly dispelled by a survey of media coverage on Los Angeles County’s ARP implementation process. Outlets such as Los Angeles Daily News, CBS Los Angeles, and others³ covered the various County-wide spending⁴ plans⁵ that proceeded from the federal funds, but only one piece mentioned the County government soliciting public comment, an operation conducted via the [Care First and Community Investment Advisory Committee](#) (CFCI).⁶ The CFCI Advisory Committee existed prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was originally titled “Measure J Reimagine LA Advisory Committee,” focused on creating alternatives to incarceration for residents of Los Angeles County. The Committee also began further community-feedback initiatives in late April 2022, including a survey, project recommendation form, and virtual and in-person listening sessions across the County. However, they are soliciting community input on only a fraction – five percent – of the ARPA dollars allocated to the County, and so while their methodology is laudable, it does not appear to have been applied to the vast majority of federal funds.

3 Jan 2022, Metro: [Metro awarded \\$1.24 billion from Federal American Rescue Plan Act to maintain service and project progress during COVID-19 pandemic](#); April 2022, SCV TV: [LA County CEO Unveils \\$38.5 Billion Spending Plan](#)

4 July 2021, Los Angeles Daily News: [L.A. County approves \\$975 million spending plan for federal rescue act dollars](#)

5 April 2022, CBS Los Angeles: [“LA County to launch new career training programs in May”](#)

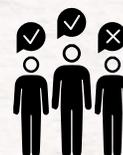
6 April 2022, Pasadena Now: [Los Angeles County Residents Encouraged to Provide Recommendations on \\$100 Million Funding Plan This Month](#)





PART 2: Community Research

Los Angeles County



Leaders in the philanthropic and organizing communities provided vital insight from their various cross-sector perspectives. Advocacy in Los Angeles County was largely carried out through coalitions that were not exclusively Latino but included Latino-led organizations, such as the Immigrants Are LA campaign and Best Start Network. There was a shared agreement that the County seems to have acknowledged the needs of immigrants as a priority in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic by creating an Office of Immigrant Affairs and by participating in the LA Justice Fund, a public-private partnership to provide access to due process for immigrants facing deportation. Appreciation was also expressed for the Board of Supervisors' willingness to take meetings facilitated by leaders from CBOs with advocates for the immigrant and Latino communities.

In the summer of 2021, the County Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution to adopt an equity formula to help steer ARP resources to communities most in need.⁷ This motion also had the welcome impact of requiring county departments and agencies – for the first time – to intentionally think about how their programs will have an equitable impact, understand what the agencies are doing wrong when their programs do not have an equitable impact, and devise strategies and tactics to address those shortcomings.

However, interviewees emphasized shortcomings in the County government's inclusion of Latino community voices in decision-making processes, resulting in immigrants and Latinos not being fully included in the benefits of crucial civic resources. Although the County has demonstrated an abstract philosophical investment in equitable ARP distribution, the funds funneled through county agencies and the materials they have produced – such as the Equity Dashboard and other equity-centered plans – are not fully translating that federal support to Latino communities. Longstanding barriers to these communities' full engagement with local government are surfacing again with ARP implementation.

The most significant barriers include:

- **Lack of knowledge about available resources**
- **Misunderstanding about the documentation needed to qualify**
- **Language barriers**
- **Technological access barriers**
- **Lack of time to learn about or utilize the resources**
- **Lack of trust in government programs**

⁷ July 2021, Office of Supervisor Holly Mitchell, [“Board Moves to Create Countywide Equity Formula for Ensuring American Rescue Plan Act Funding Reaches Communities Most Impacted by COVID-19”](#)

Furthermore, the County CEO did not engage in proactive community engagement, resulting in a piecemeal approach that left gaps in participation: engagement decisions and tactics were described as left up to each member of the Board of Supervisors, and each supervisor's office was reported to take its own approach.

Multiple leaders across the philanthropic and organizing communities also cited linguistic and technological challenges as a major barrier to equitable ARP distribution. For example, even though County resources are occasionally translated into Spanish upon request, there are also a wide variety of national and indigenous languages spoken by the immigrant and Latino communities. This contributes to a significant digital divide as well, a divide that is made wider by the inability of many people to access, use, or maintain an internet connection. The combination of language and technology barriers, as well as low levels of trust in government structures and programs, result in a low level of community engagement, low confidence in the ARP distribution data collected by the County, and low confidence in the metrics of success it utilizes post-implementation. Because the County has not made an effort to create input channels that are truly accessible, the community does not consider itself to be a priority of the County, which fosters frustration, distrust, confusion, and – most relevant to our research questions here – implementation of ARP dollars that is not fully inclusive.

An effective way to maximize inclusive, meaningful impact of the County's ARP funds would be to invest a significant share in expanding CBOs' ability to deliver services to the communities in which they operate – often low-income and high-need communities. CBOs essentially perform a free service to the County by acting as a liaison, educator, facilitator, and communicator between the people and the County.

All of these services are provided in both directions – to the County, and to the people the County serves – despite CBOs lack of resources to do so. All of the community leaders emphasized the urgency of the County government investing in the organic infrastructure provided by the CBOs, who already have trust and fluency in community dynamics and relationships, and are most accurately able to determine the community's needs and direct public funds.

“People don’t trust the county, so they don’t go to the clinics, don’t use the resources, et cetera,” shared one advocacy leader in LA County. “That’s why organizations like ours exist.”

This disconnect was acutely felt by communities with significant geographic distance from the City of Los Angeles. Although the County has offices in cities and communities other than the City of Los Angeles, advocates shared that those County offices were little more than sources of basic civic information, rather than evidence of close, intentional relationships with local communities. CBO leaders underscored that they serve some of the most challenged and marginalized people in the County, who do not have the time or resources to travel to the City of Los Angeles for advocacy work, meetings with influential County officials, or direct actions. The greater a community's geographic distance from the City, organizers shared, the less they were prioritized by the County for intentional outreach and support. While the County would occasionally hold or attend one-off meetings in those outlying communities, a more regular level of engagement is needed to build dialogue.

Furthermore, government actors create frustrating, counterproductive challenges when they distribute a large volume of funding on tight deadlines to CBOs that are currently without the internal capacity to effectively implement those additional resources. Because many CBOs function as intermediaries between government and community, they were also navigating pandemic-related issues – rental assistance, employment assistance, vaccine education, public health outreach, and others – that put additional strain on their already-stretched resources. This, too, would be ameliorated by more robust partnerships between municipal governments and CBOs that enhance the capacities of CBOs to scale up their impact in communities.

“Be consistent to build trust. If the county doesn’t seek out the voices of those who are typically underserved, then they won’t have a complete view of what the community needs are.”



A major challenge to formalizing such partnerships is the difficulty that CBOs experience, particularly those with small budgets and teams, in procuring a contract with the County. Many CBOs tend not to have the capacity or systemic fluency to navigate complicated compliance requirements on their own. Instead, the County often contracts with large organizations that already have in-house resources and capacities to win contracts, but not the connections or community trust to reach the sectors of the community that are most in need of support.

Community advocates recommended that the County address these challenges through a combination of contracting reforms; the use of trusted third parties, such as community foundations, to administer contracts; and service navigator programs in which trusted CBOs are resourced to provide members of the community with information and assistance about available services and how to access them. Such approaches have the potential to foster greater trust, engagement, knowledge sharing, and targeted resource distribution.

Despite the challenges described above, many CBOs are attempting – and, in most cases, succeeding – to close gaps left open by the County government. Many of them expressed optimism that, if expanded with sufficient resources and in partnership with CBOs, several County-wide initiatives hold promise to make a meaningful impact in the lives of Latinos most impacted by the pandemic. Those highlighted were:

- [Breathe Guaranteed Income program](#)
- [Promotores](#) program
- [Immigrant Essential Workers Public Charge Outreach and Education](#) program
- [Market Match](#) program
- [CalFresh](#) program

Community advocates expressed excitement and willingness to expand and strengthen these programs in partnership with the County; there was a powerful, unanimous sentiment throughout these communities that success was achievable via County-CBO partnership.

Pictured: Promotoras LCF Just Recovery



COUNTIES



SONOMA COUNTY

Population, total:

488,863

Population, Hispanic or Latino:

27.3%

ARP dollars received (in two tranches):

\$96,018,973

PART I: Digital Research

Sonoma County



In Sonoma County, the government offered a range of digital resources. An official site titled “[The American Rescue Plan and the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund \(ARPA\)](#)” includes a detailed explanation of the legislation and offers a Spanish translation option on all pages.

The County ARP website also offers evidence of extensive public outreach. From late September to late October 2021, five town halls were hosted, and included breakout rooms and a digital survey to collect input. The survey was posted on the County’s website as well. On January 6, 2022, the Human Services Department and the Office of Equity held a focus group for CBOs (though limited it to only those with prior experience receiving federal funds). Following that focus group, on January 22, the same two agencies hosted an [Organization/Agency ‘Meet-and-Greet’ Morning Session](#) and afternoon session, which they reported was attended by over 200 people. Registration,

translation, and transcription of meeting materials into Spanish was available as well, and the recordings are still available online. The County appears to have continued responding to community requests for engagement following this initial outreach effort: in light of the “multiple requests” to host further networking opportunities received at the meet-and-greet sessions, they then created six more ARPA Networking Meetings throughout February 2022.

Most encouragingly, the County created the [County of Sonoma ARPA Community Work Group](#), which “supports the equitable distribution of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds by elevating the experiences and needs of the low income communities and communities of color most disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.” The group’s members and charter are available on its website, which also professes to have placed an “explicit focus” on “Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people” in the group.

The conclusions of this multi-pronged community outreach effort are described on the County’s website and identify the following areas for prioritization:

- **Disparities in public health outcomes**
- **Negative economic impacts on households and individuals**
- **Need to expand and fortify broadband access**
- **Need for rapid cash assistance to those most affected by COVID-19, especially people who were not eligible to receive the full amount of the federal stimulus payments**



Very few of these community engagement opportunities garnered press coverage. One outlet⁸ covered the open application process for the ARPA Community Work Group in August 2021 (applications closed only a few weeks later, and the “candidate checklist” it mentions is no longer available). Another article⁹ covered a March 2022 announcement from the County that it was allocating “\$34 million to support community resilience programs that address community needs identified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.” However, it is unclear whether the established media outlets in the County played a significant role in disseminating information about the ARPA process to their readership.

Furthermore, the County has not yet done much reporting of its own, either: the [How The County Uses The American Rescue Plan Act \(ARPA\) State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds \(SLFRF\)](#) site contains no actual figures, and has not been updated since July 2021. Similarly, the [County of Sonoma Recovery Plan: 2021 Report](#) contains no figures, nor any mention of Latino,” “race,” or “immigrant.” There are 33 mentions of “equity.”

⁸ Aug 2021, Sonoma County Gazette: [Want to help spend some federal Benjamins in Sonoma County?](#)

⁹ March 2022, Sonoma Index-Tribune: [American Rescue Plan funding available](#)

PART 2: Community Research

Sonoma County



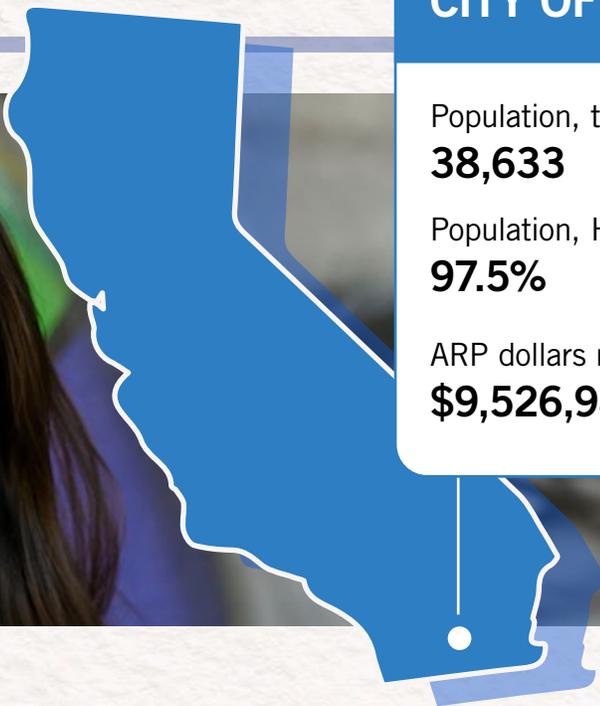
In Sonoma County, the most significant barrier between communities most impacted by COVID-19 and the ARPA dollars intended to support them was a lack of trust in government actors, which resulted in a lack of trust in the programs offered, due to negative community perception of other aid programs offered in the past. Organizers cited not only a dearth of outreach efforts, but a failure on the County's part to acknowledge suggestions and other offers to help from CBOs that are skilled in outreach and communication within the Latino communities. In the government's absence, various CBOs and mutual aid efforts rose up to fill that gap and meet community members' wide-ranging needs with all the nuance, specificity, and intention that those needs required. When community members were in crisis, they sought support from individuals and organizations with whom they already had a trusted relationship, and who they knew were invested in providing straightforward, clear communication and prompt aid.

In some rare cases the County did fund a CBO initiative, such as care packages to support individuals who needed to remain at home in post-exposure isolation. These occasions were initially interpreted as a promising sign of more rigorous, intentional, invested partnerships to come. Instead, that support was temporary and sporadic, and unevenly applied to the community as a whole: CBOs who already had existing relationships with various government actors were prioritized, while those without those relationships or systemic fluency for gaining agency access were overlooked.

Furthermore, the barriers for both submitting an application for ARP support and for qualifying for that support were considered untenably high. CBOs shared that, in several cases, they required professional legal support when completing the application, or had to rely on legal expertise they already had access to via the broader community network. The meeting on ARP applications hosted by the County only included an overview of the application process and timeline, but no individualized support for navigating the complexities of the application, many of which were unique to each CBO.

Community leaders cited a need for regularly scheduled grant writing workshops hosted by the County that were sufficiently staffed to support all of the organizations that qualified for aid, rather than leaving organizations to attempt to correctly submit the application on their own. Now is the perfect time for County governments to start putting these partnerships, communication channels, and other community-invested infrastructure in place so that, when the next federal aid package with a deadline arrives, the money can be spent wisely and intentionally, and in fact reach those who need it most. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of engaging residents directly whenever possible, rather than relying on representatives from large nonprofits, foundations, or other direct-service organizations to speak on those residents' behalf. To the greatest extent feasible, community members should be able to speak for themselves. The County Supervisors and the Chief Equity Officer were particularly appreciated for their willingness to engage organizations – which, the leaders we spoke to hope indicates a willingness to engage residents directly.

CITIES



CITY OF CALEXICO

Population, total:

38,633

Population, Hispanic or Latino:

97.5%

ARP dollars received (in two tranches):

\$9,526,987

PART I: Digital Research

City of Calexico



The City of Calexico government has provided no page on its website describing ARP, its impact on the community, or how individuals can become involved in allocation decisions. The city's [home page](#) is offered only in English, and a quick search for key terms related to ARP yields no results, other than five agendas from the Calexico City Council's regular meetings, the most recent of which is from January 2022. That [agenda](#) indicates that the city manager gave a presentation on ARP, and that the Council was slated to approve a letter of support for the application prepared by the Center for Employment Training for funding as a 'backbone organization' for the "ARPA Good Jobs Challenge." There is no indication that public comment has ever been, or is currently being, solicited. Because of Calexico's population size, official reporting on how ARPA funds are being used is not required, but transparency is recommended as a best practice of good governance.

The media coverage of ARP decision-making in Calexico suggests that the public comment process was a fraught one. One article¹⁰ from January 2022 covering the city manager's presentation at the meeting reports him "[reminding] meeting participants that input was taken from the community and the council for the use of funds" and extending an open invitation to a workshop in early February. However, coverage¹¹ of the workshop indicated it was only attended by about 30 Calexico residents, and citizens and city council members left the meeting feeling "uncomfortable" with the city manager's proposal.

¹⁰ Jan 2022, The Desert Review: [Calexico presents proposed use of ARPA funds, invites public input before finalizing](#)

¹¹ Feb 2 2022, Calexico Chronicle: [Citizens Propose Uses for Calexico's ARPA Funds](#)

Discomfort was further voiced by Imperial Valley organizers in an op-ed¹² several days later, in which they insisted that city councils across California should not “pit providing premium pay to essential workers who are in dire need of additional resources to cover rent, food, and other familial needs, against tackling critical infrastructure projects like broadband.” They expressed frustration at a choice that had been framed by the city council as zero-sum: infrastructure versus impacted families and workers: “Next week, this story of competing priorities and limited resources is coming to a clash when the Calexico City Council is planning to vote on a spending plan of our city’s remaining American Rescue Plan funds.”

Utilizing public media to voice their concerns, the Calexico community successfully advocated for reconsideration of ARP allocations, and the vote described in the op-ed was postponed¹³ from the February City Council meeting. News coverage reported that members of the public expressed frustration with the lack of transparency and communication from the majority of city council members, as well as the city’s lack of engagement with the community about how to spend the ARP funds.¹⁴

PART 2: Community Research *City of Calexico*



Leaders from CBOs in the City of Calexico underscored a need for more direct, timely, and transparent communication between city officials and the communities they serve. While the community workshop that was offered to brief residents on ARP spending plans was appreciated, it was not well publicized and only came after a significant portion of the funds had already been allocated.

This absence of opportunities for the community to provide input continued to characterize the remainder of the process. At the workshop, when the city’s allocation plan was unveiled, it contained plans for distributing resources to issues and projects around the city that were not related to the pandemic or the people most impacted, and it did not reflect proposals provided in writing by CBOs. It was the impression of several community leaders that, generally speaking, city officials are often not informed on the sanctioned uses of federal funds, and the funds’ limitations – or even the amount of funds the city would receive. Educating city officials on these regulations and requirements then falls to community members. CBO leaders emphasized that such a misguided plan could have been avoided if the City had earnestly and thoroughly solicited and integrated feedback from the community and community leaders.

12 Feb 10 2022, Holtville Tribune: [CA Cities Must Equitably Spend Rescue Funds; Let’s Start in Calexico](#) (opinion)

13 Feb 17 2022, Holtville Tribune: [Calexico Postpones Vote on ARPA Proposals](#)

14 March 17 2022, The Desert Review: [Community outrage pushes Calexico to include essential worker premium pay in ARPA spending](#); March 17 2022, Calexico Chronicle: [Calexico Council Approves Alternate ARP Imperial County Coronavirus Relief Funds Program Package Final Plan](#)

Despite the workshop attendees' critique of the spending plan – and CBOs' repeated outreach to the city offering to support them in creating a new plan that better served the community – the city made no changes to the plan in the month between its presentation and the scheduled vote. This failure to solicit or integrate input before presenting the plan, or before raising the plan for a vote following the community's negative reaction, damaged the community's trust in the city government.

CBOs described themselves as doing the City Council members' work for them by hosting multiple education sessions, conducting a survey of Calexico residents, and preparing an alternative plan that reflected the community's needs.

Ultimately, community advocates saw their agenda come to fruition when the City Council voted 4-1 to move forward with an alternative plan, known colloquially as "Plan B," which was largely created by community leaders in collaboration with allies on the Council. Plan B included community priorities of revitalizing downtown Calexico, establishing an essential worker relief program, and funding for parks and recreation. At the time of writing, its full implementation was still pending.

Community advocates attribute the successful passage of the community's Plan B ARPA implementation plan to the tremendous amount of grassroots organizing, education, research, and advocacy they conducted.

CBOs described themselves as doing the City Council members' work for them by hosting multiple education sessions, conducting a survey of Calexico residents, and preparing an alternative plan that reflected the community's needs.



Photo: City of Calexico - City Hall, Facebook

CITY OF MERCED

Population, total:

86,333

Population, Hispanic or Latino:

57.6%

ARP dollars received (in two tranches):

\$27,427,882



PART I: Digital Research

City of Merced



The City of Merced’s online digital ARP resources are limited and difficult to find. The city government offers no clear link to ARP resources from its [home page](#). A keyword search of the website yields several resources, including a document from December 2021 titled [City of Merced ARPA Spending Plan](#) which offers a breakdown of how the City intends to spend its ARP funds; and an August 2021 announcement of the City’s [“COVID-19 Community Impact Study”](#) with detailed plans to send mailers via mail during the week of August 30th with ARP information and a survey via paper, QR code, or the city website. It is unclear whether or how the survey differed from the [“Keeping Merced Working, Healthy and Safe”](#) survey currently on the city’s website. The August 2021 announcement also said that the city planned to hold a “study session” and two public hearings in October, November and December 2021 on the matter; only one of which seems to have been advertised via a [notice](#) posted on the website.

The media coverage of Merced’s solicitation of public input is relatively limited. One outlet¹⁵ quoted Merced’s city manager describing the survey: “There’s a series of ten questions all focused around what the ARPA requirements are, and we’ll be asking the community to either rank areas of importance or to provide us feedback on areas for investment.” Several months later, another media outlet reported that over 3,000 residents responded to the survey and that during an open city council meeting to review the results, members of the public voiced support for premium pay for essential workers outside of city government and young people rallied outside the council chambers calling for \$3 million in federal relief funding to be directed to youth jobs and direct income programs.¹⁶

15 Aug 2021, ABC30 Action News: [Merced asking for residents’ input on spending American Rescue Plan funding](#)

16 Oct 2021, Merced County Times: [City leaders review results of survey on ARPA funding](#)



In Merced, consistent community advocacy, much of it led by youth, moved the City toward making investments that reflect community needs. The City was not initially inclined to engage the community for input on how to prioritize the spending of its share of ARP funds nor was it focused on directing ARP resources on those populations most negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Youth advocates in Merced City had already established a model for effective advocacy in 2020 following passage of the CARES Act, by showing up in large numbers to provide public comment to the city council, resulting in a \$1 million allocation for rent, mortgage, and utility bill relief for struggling families. In 2021, before ARP was enacted into law, advocates in Merced began to research the potential benefits of the law, organize, and educate each other and the community through various workshops. After much discussion, CBOs and community members reached agreement on a proposal for how the City should allocate its ARP funds, focused on housing, youth programs, water infrastructure, guaranteed income and premium pay for low-income essential workers.

Through direct meetings, town halls and city council meetings, advocates consistently called for the City to adopt its shared priorities and urged the City to engage with the community directly, especially traditionally underserved communities in Southeast Merced. The city government seemed to express some interest in community input, but these efforts were not thorough or effectively executed in the view of community advocates. An example of this was the survey launched by the city to gather feedback; the available responses were limited and biased toward existing government initiatives.



Pictured: 99Rootz

The community workshops offered by the city did include interpretation services but organizers suggested that the city could do more to meet the community where they are and reduce accessibility barriers by hosting the town halls in a variety of locations beyond City Hall, accessible by public transit and with plenty of parking and childcare, and by choosing a variety of times so that people with different work schedules could all participate. Additionally, community advocates suggested that the city government seek more coverage by local media to alleviate the burden on already-overextended CBO resources (many of which are volunteered or offered pro-bono) to inform the community about ARPA and how to provide input. Without these measures, outreach efforts are merely cosmetic.

Ultimately, **City officials did take notice of the public input they received, through the survey, public comments during the City's town halls and council meetings, and a youth-led rally** that received media coverage. By December 2021, a majority of the city council members supported key priorities identified by local CBOs: Merced's finalized ARP spending plan included \$6.5 million for affordable housing, \$1.25 million for youth employment programs, and \$1 million in stimulus payments for essential workers (a.k.a. Merced Stimulus Program).¹⁷ The City's allocation of \$1.25 million for youth employment subsequently helped Merced County win a \$4 million grant from the state to support youth employment, thus multiplying the impact of the advocacy led by Merced's youth.

After the funding allocations had been made, community advocates continued to engage with City officials on the implementation of these funding decisions. For example, the City adopted CBOs' recommendations on the design of the Merced Stimulus Program's application, which made uptake in the program run smoothly. Youth advocates are now working with the Merced County Economic Development Director as paid members of a "Youth Design Team" to determine how to shape and implement the youth employment programs funded by ARP and state funds across both Merced City and County.

17 Dec 2021, The Sun: [Merced finalizes \\$27.4mil in coronavirus stimulus spending. Here's where it's headed.](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences shared by community advocates across the four jurisdictions featured in the preceding case studies provide a rich array of lessons learned that can help local governments better engage communities as they determine how to spend their remaining ARP funds and future resources in a way that helps reduce persistent poverty and barriers to economic opportunity among Latinos and other underserved populations. Below are a set of recommended best practices for local governments to adopt.

1 Partner with CBOs

CBOs are experts in community engagement and service delivery because they are integrated into, and have long-standing relationships with, the community. That relational trust positions them to be consistently consulted and utilized by residents who are marginalized by barriers to government programs, particularly in times of crisis. In order to holistically serve any given community, CBOs should be positioned as both strategic and material partners with local governments, and be significantly supported by government funds so they have the resources necessary to continue and expand their vital work. This investment in existing community infrastructure will reduce barriers and encourage robust community engagement, which is a cornerstone of local democracy.

Furthermore, partnership with CBOs would reduce the impetus placed on them to navigate complex and often highly stringent contracting requirements. Several organizations shared that they have never applied for government aid because they don't have the capacity to complete labor-intensive and jargon-filled applications, institutionalize detailed record-keeping, or even stay abreast of funding opportunities as they arise.



Close, operable partnerships with CBOs should also include the following measures:



Invest in CBO infrastructure.

Through intentional investment in CBOs' capacity to deliver services, local governments can increase the reach of public investments into populations that are most marginalized, face barriers in accessing services, or are hesitant to engage with government due to a lack of trust.



Contract reform.

Several community leaders detailed the difficulty of gaining contracts with their governments, particularly if they applied on behalf of small organizations (rather than larger, more established agencies). Ensuring that all organizations interested in partnership with local governments are able to do so, regardless of size or budget, is a key element of responding to community needs.



System navigators.

Government funds should be used to support the employment of system navigators, both on the government side and the CBO side, to augment the relationships between the institutions and facilitate knowledge sharing, resource access, community education, input on policy initiatives, and myriad programs necessary for all residents in a community to thrive. Trust is the most crucial element of a successful relationship, and system navigators would contribute mightily to the establishment – or deepening – of trust between communities and their governments.



Implementation Partnerships.

After the process of public engagement and making budget and policy decisions is completed, CBOs can serve as constructive partners in ensuring that implementation of funding decisions and programs has the maximum impact in communities. They have expertise in how to design programs and services in ways that are accessible and make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

2 Remove Barriers to Engagement

Local governments can directly engage the public through surveys and public forums that are inclusive and accessible to as many local residents as possible. Crucially, feedback should not solely be solicited from large direct-service nonprofits, which have a distinct perspective on community needs from organizers and other residents. Inclusive community engagement can be achieved by incorporating the following practices into local governments' efforts:

Language accessibility.

Provide written materials and simultaneous interpretation services at forums in the various languages spoken and understood by local communities.

Work-friendly timing.

Hold multiple forums at different times of the day so residents across all varieties of workstyles and shift hours are able to attend.

Accessible locations.

Ensure that the venues for public forums are accessible to people with physical disabilities, include ample free parking, and can be conveniently reached by public transit. In jurisdictions that cover a large geographic area, meet communities where they are at by holding forums in different parts of the county or city.

Childcare.

Provide on-site or nearby childcare at forums so that families with young children can participate.

Digital inclusivity, including in-person events.

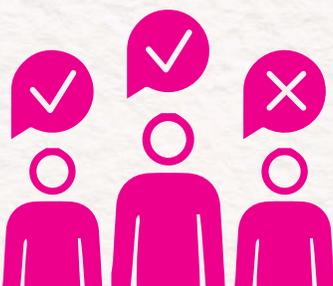
Ensure that engagement does not depend on high digital fluency or consistent, reliable access to the internet. Many residents most in need of government aid are not comfortable expressing their views in a virtual environment.

Advance notice.

Give ample notice for public meetings, so that residents have time to make plans to participate. Notice should be given in the various languages spoken and understood by local communities and distributed through multiple channels, such as social media, local news media, CBOs, and flyers posted in areas frequented by the public such as workplaces and grocery stores.

Issue-specific education.

Even when local governments eliminate all of the above barriers and are able to engage the entire range of community perspectives, marginalized residents in particular have limited means by which to contribute to discussions without comprehensive information on the dynamics at hand. Governments must ensure that all of the background knowledge required to participate is accessible to their constituency and is utilized internally as well.





When city and county governments invest in processes that eliminate these barriers, valuable and productive community engagement is successful. We learned of an example of these best practices being successfully operationalized by the City of Fresno upon receipt of \$70 million from the California Strategic Growth Council in 2018.¹⁸ To ensure that the community was able to direct these funds, a 126-person steering committee was created. Community members could join the committee if they were a) a City resident, b) owned a business based in the City, or c) were part of an organization that leased in the City and worked directly with City residents. Over the course of two months, six meetings of the steering committee were held. If City residents attended three or more meetings, they were allowed a vote on the final spending package, and if any other individuals attended four or more meetings, they were allowed a vote on the final spending package.

Between each of the meetings, a neutral facilitator collected, processed, and implemented feedback so that progress toward agreement was continually made at each subsequent meeting. Ultimately, the steering committee created and voted on a series of packages that allocated the \$70 million, and the package that was ultimately chosen passed with a unanimous vote of approval. Advocates involved in this remarkably successful and inclusive process attribute this consensus to proactive preparation, elimination of barriers, partnership with CBOs, and transparency.

18 Jan 2018, City of Fresno: [SGC Approves \\$70 Million Package For Fresno's Transformative Climate Communities Projects](#)

3 Prioritize Those Most in Need

The U.S. Treasury Department's three goals for the State & Local Fiscal Recovery Fund includes "Build[ing] a strong, resilient, and equitable recovery by making investments that support long-term growth and opportunity." The Treasury Department's guidelines for how to use the funds repeatedly call for focusing on those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, communities that have endured long standing health and economic disparities, those who have and will bear the greatest health risks because of their service in critical sectors, and those who are low-income.

ARP provides local governments an opportunity to use State & Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) to address inequities, which can lead to healthier and more economically and socially stable communities. Local governments should therefore:

Target programs to those most in need.

Rather than spend dollars evenly across city council or supervisorial districts, use a needs-based approach to get resources to where they will make the greatest difference. To help with targeting resources, the Advancement Project California developed a downloadable [data index](#) that shows where the highest need communities in California exist by zip code.

Be innovative.

Rather than fund existing activities using existing criteria, take advantage of the flexibility the SLFRF provides to reach communities that existing public programs cannot, such as farmworkers and other essential workers regardless of immigration status.

Invest in existing infrastructure.

Rather than create entirely new mechanisms for engaging and communicating with the public, partner with other institutions, such as CBOs, school systems, employment agencies, ethnic media, and others that already have relationships, trust, rapport, and linguistic and cultural fluency attuned to the nuances of each community's challenges and needs.

Institutionalize these investments in a strategic plan

to ensure transparency, clarity, consistency, accountability, and effective reach into the communities most in need and traditionally marginalized – all of which will contribute to improved socio-economic and health outcomes in communities and greater trust between communities and their government.

Additional detailed recommendations on how to prioritize those most in need can be found in PolicyLink's guide for city and county policymakers: "[10 Priorities for Advancing Racial Equity Through the American Rescue Plan.](#)"

4 Institutionalize Transparency and Demonstrate Investment in Feedback

Post information about ARP on the local government website, with a page dedicated to explaining what it is, what it is intended for, how the local government has and will make decisions on using the funds, and how the public can get involved.

In the City of Fresno example, community members noted that it facilitated the restoration of some trust in the City government. The government led by explicitly acknowledging its limitations, and the ways in which it had failed to account for the community's perspectives. Then, it demonstrated earnest, active commitment to righting those wrongs. Community engagement, even if fully accessible, is only meaningful if local governments take the input received into earnest consideration and are transparent about how the input is processed. Local governments should therefore provide follow-up information after public forums and explain how community input has informed its ultimate decisions.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to the following community leaders who contributed their insights, along with other individuals and organizations who preferred not to be recognized by name:

- **Rosie Arroyo**, senior program officer, immigration, [California Community Foundation](#)
- **Dylan Castillo**, member, [Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition](#)
- **Alexis Castro**, member, [Imperial Valley Equity and Justice Coalition](#)
- **Gloria Cruz Cardenas**, director of policy and advocacy, [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights \(CHIRLA\)](#)
- **Rudy Espinoza**, executive director, [Inclusive Action for the City](#)
- **Crisantema Gallardo**, Senior Campaign Strategist, [Power California](#)
- **Jacky Guerrero**, director of equity in community investments, [Advancement Project CA](#)
- **Christy Lubin**, executive director, [Graton Day Labor Center](#)
- **Gilberto Manzanarez**, community organizer, [CalexicoNeedsChange](#)
- **Apolonio (Polo) Morales**, director of external affairs, [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights \(CHIRLA\)](#)
- **Estefanía B. López Pérez**, senior policy associate, [Inclusive Action for the City](#)
- **Angelica Salas**, executive director, [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights \(CHIRLA\)](#)
- **Bamby Salcedo**, M.A., president and CEO, [The TransLatin@ Coalition](#)
- **Maria Jose Vides**, regional policy advocate, [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights \(CHIRLA\)](#)