

MY TURN

How to leverage federal dollars to advance equity through community councils

BY GUEST COMMENTARY
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From left: Debbie I. Chang, president and CEO of Blue Shield of California Foundation; Chet P. Hewitt, president and CEO of Sierra Health Foundation; Tyler Norris, chief executive of Well Being Trust; Robert K. Ross, president and CEO of The California Endowment, and Richard Tate, executive vice president of The California Wellness Foundation. Photos courtesy of the authors

IN SUMMARY

The American Rescue Plan provides an unprecedented opportunity to build communities' ability to address long-standing inequities.

By **Debbie I. Chang, Chet P. Hewitt, Tyler Norris, Robert K. Ross and Richard Tate, Special to CalMatters**

Soon, communities across California will receive an unprecedented infusion of federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act. While these funds can certainly help ease budget shortfalls created by the pandemic and meet immediate community needs, they offer the opportunity to reimagine how we can begin to address structural inequities that were laid bare over the past year.

Policymakers may be tempted to push money out the door as quickly as possible with short-term fixes. However, we must not repeat some of the earlier relief efforts that had the unintended consequence of [exacerbating](#), rather than ameliorating racial disparities.

We should use these funds differently – to create enduring inclusive approaches to decision-making where those most affected by the pandemic play a driving role in identifying, developing and implementing the solutions.

Eliminating structural inequities will not happen overnight, but we need to start now to design and align real solutions across different sectors and organizations. Thankfully, the American Rescue Plan provides the flexibility to do just that. And we have models in California that demonstrate what such local, inclusive spaces can do.

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Several well-respected organizations, including the [Brookings Institution](#) and [George Washington University](#), are calling for some type of public-private-nonprofit sector coordinating council that can thoughtfully plan, in a timely way, and oversee the investment strategy to ensure equitable distribution of ARP funds and achieve long-term impact.

Importantly, community voices must be included in a meaningful way so that residents from under-resourced communities help shape decisions about how these funds are spent. We believe such councils, which we call Recovery and Equity Councils, or RECs, can balance the need for responding to immediate needs at the local level while planning for the future.

As Brookings notes, "The stakes are high ... In 10 years we may look back at this time and ask: Which places merely spent their money, and which places invested it?"

The end result of such equitable and strategic investments is a down payment on turning the tide on historical racial and economic injustices and, ultimately, communities that are more resilient to future pandemics.

By way of example, policymakers can turn to the [California Accountable Communities for Health Initiative](#) (ACH), where 13 community-based demonstration sites possess the key ingredients needed for Recovery and Equity Councils. They bring together residents with local leaders from health care, public health, social services, public safety, businesses, community-based organizations and philanthropy to tackle tough issues with an equity lens.

Priorities are locally determined, whether addressing the root causes of trauma or community violence, improving a condition such as cardiovascular disease or substance use disorder, or tackling food security or affordable housing. They actively engage residents through a variety of means with an eye toward ensuring Accountable Communities for Health priorities reflect those of residents from the most under-resourced communities.

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Moreover, as a result of years of developing trusted relationships, when the COVID pandemic hit, nearly all Accountable Communities for Health sites were able to pivot to coordinate partner organizations' efforts, ensure that residents voices were heard and implement equitable responses.

For example, in East San Jose, the local ACH, the [PEACE Partnership](#), played a major role in ensuring the county's pandemic response helped people who were left out of federal stimulus payments; they were able to raise and coordinate resources to provide direct assistance to more than 700 families in need.

Many ACHs, such as the San Diego [Neighborhood Networks model](#), are also fostering a diverse community-based workforce that helps residents navigate the complexities of government programs, including health care and social services. Mobilizing these workforces will ensure equity in American Rescue Plan funding distribution, as well as serve as an economic opportunity and career pathway.

The American Rescue Plan provides an unprecedented opportunity to build communities' ability to not only respond to immediate needs but to put in place the relationships and infrastructure to address long-standing inequities. The path to such an equitable recovery must center community power in the planning and implementation of this ground-breaking investment.

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