Power Takes Practice

Youth Leadership and Social Change in Washington State

Prepared for Allen Family Philanthropies
by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing







Allen Family Philanthropies

FCYO

A Note from Allen Family Philanthropies

Allen Family Philanthropies (AFP) invests in communities across the Pacific Northwest to strengthen arts and culture, empower the next generation of changemakers, and support a global network of partners dedicated to protecting wildlife, preserving ecosystems, and creating lasting change. Our youth program focuses on increasing youth awareness of and access to leadership opportunities in the Pacific Northwest, strengthening local and regional networks for youth organizing, and bolstering evidence and best practices to drive greater investment and support. In 2025, AFP invested $5 million in 10 nonprofits across Washington state that are working to develop and expand community-based programs that provide young people with training, mentorship, and platforms to organize around the issues they care about most. In addition to funding, these organizations are receiving support via a peer learning cohort because this type of work is strongest when local and statewide organizations are connected to one another rather than working in isolation.

In a related effort, AFP partnered with the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing to produce this landscape scan, which examines the current state of youth social change and organizing across Washington state: who is doing the work and how they are doing it, what they need in order to sustain themselves and grow, where the field's strengths and challenges lie, and what opportunities exist for funders and practitioners to build a stronger and more connected ecosystem. The scan finds that the field of youth social change in Washington has real momentum despite structural challenges that limit its durability and growth. The organizations themselves play distinct yet complementary roles that need further development for the field to become more effective.

Understanding the ecosystem matters because strong youth organizing infrastructure benefits individuals and communities alike. Young people develop skills that serve them for life, and they build durable relationships across identities that strengthen the civic fabric of communities. Communities gain a pipeline of engaged residents who understand how power and policy work, building capacity to solve problems that haven't emerged yet.

We hope this landscape scan will serve the field by offering shared language and information, elevating the important work underway across Washington state, and making needs more visible for the purpose of increasing resources and collaboration.

Special thanks to the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, which has been an essential partner in this work.





Anh Nguyen
Director, Arts, Youth and Communities

A Note from the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing

Over the past 25 years, the U.S. youth and intergenerational organizing field has advanced by leaps and bounds. Across the country, young people have built enduring organizations, sharpened their power-building practices, and led campaigns that have expanded what is possible. And yet the field also remains in the nascent phase. In addition to identifying over 400 organizations doing youth organizing work, our organization produced the 2025 National Youth Organizing Landscape Scan, which revealed a field that is still growing, adapting, and discovering what it truly takes to build long-term power in ever-changing circumstances.

Over decades of work with hundreds of organizations, we have come to recognize many of the underlying patterns that determine whether organizations can realize their full potential. Among the most critical lessons is the essential role of infrastructure—the relationships, resources, knowledge, and tools that help strengthen organizations while expanding what is possible for the field. Our work at the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing's (FCYO) reflects this relationship between organizational capacity and field infrastructure—bringing organizations together to assess their practices, developing tools and structures that help them meet and surmount challenges in forward-looking ways, and building the field's collective knowledge base.

Founded in 2000, FCYO sees philanthropy as central to this infrastructure—a critical actor in enabling or foreclosing greater possibility. In our engagement with funders, we have found that many of them are genuinely seeking to move beyond simply providing resources to becoming true companions in the work—walking alongside organizations that want to strengthen their practices while pushing themselves to examine and improve their own practices and assumptions as funders.

This is why we were thrilled when Allen Family Philanthropies invited us to conduct this landscape scan.

Washington's young people are already demonstrating extraordinary leadership: protecting community members facing detention and deportation, advancing economic justice for working families, and standing up for queer and trans students. Allen Family Philanthropies is paying attention to these young leaders and responding with both curiosity and commitment. The foundation is already making bold investments in the field, while committing to its own learning to deepen understanding and evolve in parallel.

The stakes are as high as they have ever been. The challenges facing young people and our communities require us all to learn, adapt, and grow. At FCYO, we believe deeply in the capacity of this field to continue building collective power—and to create the conditions that allow that power to flourish.

Upward together,



Laura McCargar
Executive Director



Kel Kroehle
Director of Learning and Development

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Executive Summary	5
Preface	9
A Continuum of Youth Engagement	10
The Fundamentals of Youth Organizing	12
The Organizational Landscape	13
Organizational Composition and Geographic Distribution	14
The Communities Served and Issues Addressed	16
Levels of Collaboration and Connectivity	18
What the Organizational Landscape Reveals	21

Section	Page
The Landscape of Practice	23
The Practices of Leadership Organizations	24
The Practices of Civic Engagement Organizations	27
The Practices of Organizing Groups	30
Strengths and Challenges Across the Field	33
Strengths	34
Challenges	35
Looking Ahead: Recommendations for Funders	37
Case Studies	40
Closing Thoughts	43

Front Cover Photos:
Top: Washington Youth Alliance; FEEST.
Bottom: Powerful Voices

Executive Summary

Young people have always been among society's most powerful catalysts for change. Across history, they have relentlessly challenged entrenched systems, exposing contradictions between ideals and reality and organizing their communities around visions of a more just future.



Courtesy of Washington Youth Alliance

The young people of Washington state are no exception. Nearly one-quarter of the state's residents are under the age of 19, and young leaders are already stepping into roles once reserved for adults. They are organizing their peers, testifying before legislators, and building campaigns on issues from educational equity to climate justice to affordable housing. Yet the organizations that train, support, and connect these young leaders often operate with limited visibility and resources.

This landscape scan, which draws from survey responses from more than 100 organizations and interviews with a subset of survey respondents, offers the first exploration of Washington state's youth social change ecosystem: who is doing this work, what they are doing to cultivate youth leadership in service of social change, and where structural barriers are constraining growth. The scan leverages the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing's Youth Engagement Continuum and Power to Win Framework to understand the various roles that organizations play in this ecosystem and the specific practices that can move young people toward collective power.

A Field with Momentum—and Structural Shortcomings

Across the state, organizations are cultivating leadership among young people who have historically been excluded from civic and political power, including young people of color, immigrant and refugee youth, LGBTQ+ youth, Native youth, and young people living in rural communities. Likewise, the field's top-priority issues—education justice, health justice, immigration, and economic justice—are less a reflection of funding trends than of the priorities of Washington's young people based on their lived experiences.

This scan identified three types of youth social change organizations:

- **Leadership development organizations**, which build the confidence, sense of identity and belonging, and foundational skills that young people need to see themselves as civic actors
- **Civic engagement organizations**, which create pathways into civic participation and support young people in navigating legislative hearings, meeting with policymakers, and seeing the impact of their voices on electoral outcomes
- **Organizing groups**, which operate on a longer timeline and engage in leadership development and strategic campaigns to build a membership base that can ultimately exercise collective power and win lasting change
- In a healthy youth social change ecosystem, these approaches are mutually reinforcing, not in competition, and they form a continuum that young people can move along over time.0

As a whole, the field is experiencing a growth spurt. Nearly half of the youth organizing groups surveyed came into existence after 2015, and the ensuing decade has been marked by rising youth activism and sustained mobilization around core issues. Washington's own history of social movements, alongside its progressive political climate and strong urban organizing hubs, has provided a foundation for that growth.

The landscape scan reveals patterns that are difficult to discern from the perspective of any single organization:

- **The field leans more heavily toward leadership development than building collective power.** Leadership organizations account for most of the field (57%), while organizations centered on civic engagement and organizing are comparatively fewer (26% and 17%, respectively). Money follows the same pattern: The field's organizing groups have the smallest budgets and thinnest staffing among the organization types.
- **The field's geographic concentration limits capacity in outlying areas.** Youth leadership organizations are heavily concentrated in King County, with a smaller hub in Spokane, leaving much of Eastern Washington, rural communities, and many Tribal communities largely on the outskirts of the ecosystem.
- **Youth social change organizations are disconnected from their natural intergenerational allies.** Washington has strong coalitions in labor, immigrant rights, and economic justice, but youth social change organizations rarely have a place within them, which indicates greater disconnection from the state's broader social movement landscape than their issue alignment would suggest.



Courtesy of Powerful Voices

A Shared Recognition of Constraints on Growth

The organizations included in this scan clearly recognize—and seek to address—the constraints on their growth and effectiveness. In focus groups, leadership organizations were candid about wanting to shift from creating leadership opportunities for young people within the organization to engaging young people in external advocacy and organizing work. Civic engagement organizations articulated a desire for more durable youth membership structures that progress from episodic engagement to sustained member-based power. Organizing groups expressed a desire to expand their reach but identified challenges such as staffing constraints, limited funding, and the absence of a statewide system to support them.



Courtesy of Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane

Leaders of these groups also identified challenges for the field as a whole:

- **The field lacks a shared understanding of power-building.** Organizations chasing the same outcomes often cannot agree on what to call the work: Campaign, advocacy, and organizing mean different things to different people. Theories of change tend to live in people's heads rather than on paper. Many organizations lean more heavily on the moral authority of young people—their age and their personal story—than on building the collective muscle that comes from organizing together. Arts, culture, healing, and wellness programs are often directed toward individual expression rather than folded into campaign strategy or efforts to build collective resilience.
- **Connections between organizations are lacking.** Few networks or coalitions exist to bring organizations together on a regular basis; those that once did (mainly youth leadership summits) have been quietly discontinued. Groups working on the same issue in the same city are sometimes unaware of each other, and young people pay the steepest price when they age out of youth-specific programs—without ties to the broader movement, they have no place to apply their leadership skills.
- **Funding patterns hinder growth.** Youth social change work is chronically underfunded in Washington, as it is nationally, and organizing groups are hardest hit. In addition to limiting what any single group can accomplish, this scarcity turns natural allies into competitors over a shrinking pool of dollars and can lock smaller organizations out of coalitions that charge membership dues.
- **The political moment is hurting capacity.** Ongoing sociopolitical upheaval is pulling organizations in competing directions. Escalating attacks on immigrant communities, overlapping climate crises, growing economic precarity, and the denigration of civil rights are all generating real urgency and putting organizations into a survival posture instead of focusing on the longer-term work of building power. No single organization can absorb pressure at this scale alone.

What This Means for Funders

The field has been shaped by decades of philanthropic funding patterns, as seen in its organizational composition, geographic concentration, and emphasis on individual outcomes over collective power. As long as philanthropy is a crucial source of funding for social change work, funders should seek to be more active participants in defining what is possible. To do so, they will need to examine their own practices as rigorously as those of their grantees.
This landscape scan's key recommendations are presented below in an order that reflects how funders can pursue a coordinated effort to address the field's constraints.

- **Align philanthropic funding.** Alignment among funders is essential to a more coordinated field. This includes developing a shared understanding of the Youth Engagement Continuum and the fundamental practices of power-building, mapping the field's existing funding streams, and assessing and aligning funding strategies to ensure that organizations have the stability to grow and progress toward collective social change rather than just offering programs.
- **Support strengthening organizational practices.** Youth social change organizations need to align on core concepts and frameworks to strengthen their practices and improve their organizational capacity. Funders can create opportunities for shared learning, fund technical assistance, and tailor support to each organization's stage of development rather than applying a one-size-fits-all template.
- **Support connections among organizations.** Funders can help close the distance between organizations by supporting convenings and learning exchanges; facilitating relationships between youth organizations and Washington's established labor, immigrant rights, and racial justice coalitions; and backing organizations that can act as local, regional, and statewide organizing hubs in places where those are lacking.
- **Distribute funding in ways that reflect a movement mindset.** Pooled funding and other collaborative funding mechanisms can help build philanthropic alignment, spread administrative burdens, and reflect the field's actual priorities rather than the preferences of any single funder. In addition to moving toward multiyear general operating support, which can help organizations build stability and take strategic risks, funders can also broker relationships between grantees and other funders. These connections can sometimes prove to be more valuable than the grant itself.

Conclusion

This landscape scan reveals that Washington's youth social change field has growing energy and capacity but is still uneven. Some organizations have a clear theory of change, while others are still working to develop one. Some have built a stable membership base, while others mostly serve program participants who cycle through and move on. Some know about other groups working toward the same goals in the next neighborhood, while others do not.

No single organization can build power alone. The parts of the ecosystem must reinforce one another over time. This requires funders to invest in organizations, relationships, leadership pipelines, and statewide infrastructure so individual acts of leadership can add up to lasting change and a sustainable movement. This scan lays out a path for Washington's philanthropic, public, and nonprofit institutions that are committed to strengthening the field and ensuring that it can keep growing for generations to come.



Courtesy of Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane

Preface

In the fall of 2024, Allen Family Philanthropies (AFP) launched Mobilizing Young Leaders (MYL), a funding initiative to support youth social change organizations across Washington state. Nearly 500 organizations submitted letters of interest, which reflected not only the depth of the field but also the scarcity of resources flowing into it. AFP invited 38 organizations to submit full funding proposals and ultimately awarded 10 organizations grants of $360,000 to $500,000 each, over three years. In addition to funding youth social change organizations, a core component of AFP's strategy is to build an evidence base and elevate best practices that support greater investment in youth leadership and action. To that end, AFP partnered with the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) to conduct this first-of-its-kind landscape scan of Washington's youth social change field, engaging Moon Snail Consulting and Esther Wang to support data collection, synthesis, and analysis.

Methodology

In the spring of 2025, AFP invited the 500 organizations that had submitted letters of interest to complete a survey covering a broad range of organizational characteristics, including youth leadership models, member demographics, issue focus areas, and primary funding sources. The analysis in the "Organizational Landscape" section of this scan draws on responses to that survey from about 100 of the organizations whose primary work falls under the "social change" segment of the Youth Engagement Continuum (leadership, civic engagement, and organizing) rather than focusing exclusively on youth development or direct service. Together, these organizations form what we refer to in this scan as Washington's youth social change field.

The analysis in the "Landscape of Practice" section draws on a two-part qualitative research effort between July and August 2025 that included a detailed survey of nine of the 10 MYL cohort organizations about their power-building practices. This was followed by three virtual focus groups in September 2025 to learn about cohort members' self-identified strengths, challenges, and capacity needs as well as their insights into what practices and resources could help strengthen the field.

Acknowledgments

This landscape scan reflects the contributions of many hands, both seen and unseen. Special thanks go to the hundreds of organization leaders who took time away from their demanding work to share their insights. Their contributions are the backbone of the scan's findings. FCYO and AFP also extend their deepest gratitude to Jessica Werner of Moon Snail Consulting and Esther Wang for their rigor, curiosity, and commitment to producing work that serves not just this scan, but the field it describes. And, finally, thanks to the young people whose leadership this work exists to support—who have shown up, organized, and persisted in working for a more just world, despite the obstacles in front of them. Their vision is what this field is reaching toward—and can achieve, given the necessary infrastructure to support it.

A Continuum of Youth Engagement

Beyond their families, neighborhoods, and schools, many of Washington's young leaders are supported by an array of organizations whose role extends beyond simply providing opportunities to young people who walk through their doors. These organizations work to holistically nurture young people's personal development and leadership skills, providing cascading benefits to our broader society in the form of leadership pipelines and positive systemic change that can outlast any single campaign or election cycle.



Top: Washington Youth Alliance; FEEST.

Bottom: Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane; East African Community Services

In 2000, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) developed the Youth Engagement Continuum, a framework describing the spectrum of approaches organizations use to engage young people, from direct service provision to authentic youth empowerment, leadership development, and participation in social change efforts (Figure 1). This typology has provided the field with a way to understand the strengths of each approach, how the approaches relate to one another, and how each can be strengthened.

Figure 1.
Youth Engagement Continuum
Source: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organzining



The publication of the Youth Engagement Continuum also marked a milestone in the evolution of youth organizing as a distinct approach to social change, which emerged in the 1990s as a fusion of community organizing and positive youth development. Youth organizing goes beyond youth leadership development and civic engagement by equipping young people to organize with their peers and communities, build durable political power, and pursue systemic social change. Field experts and academic research have documented its far-reaching impact on youth leadership, democratic participation, and community outcomes.

The Fundamentals of Youth Organizing

History shows that social change is not won by individual moral clarity alone, but by organized constituencies that mobilize people, sustain pressure, and hold decision-makers accountable. The youth social change field ultimately seeks to cultivate that collective capacity. Individual confidence and leadership matter, but they are a means to an end. The larger objective is to enable young people from communities that have been marginalized, exploited, and excluded from decision-making to exercise power together, drawing strength from their peers, families, and communities in ways that those in power cannot easily dismiss.

While youth organizing involves many of the practices employed by youth leadership and civic engagement organizations, it focuses on building collective power to secure lasting change. This power-building has three dimensions, as described in FCYO's Power to Win Framework, a tool developed to help organizations sharpen their youth power-building practices:

Base-building

Base-building is the sustained work of recruiting, developing, and organizing community members to conduct campaigns and work together toward a shared vision of social change. It relies on intentional outreach, ongoing relationship-building, and a clear membership structure that distinguishes program participants from members who make an explicit commitment to collective action and the organization's broader mission.

Transformative leadership development

Transformative leadership development cultivates new leaders while deepening the capacity of those with more experience. It integrates political education, organizing skills, and social-emotional development through structured leadership pathways that give young people genuine responsibility—from recruiting peers and leading campaigns to participating meaningfully in decisions that determine how an organization operates and what it fights for.

Strategic campaigns

Strategic campaigns translate organized people into organized power. Effective campaigns connect immediate policy goals to longer-term structural change through a coherent theory of change and a realistic assessment of where power resides, how it operates, and what will be required to shift it. They also serve the multiple functions of developing leaders, strengthening membership, and winning concrete improvements for communities.

The Organizational Landscape

Washington state's youth social change field spans the full breadth of the Youth Engagement Continuum. Across the state, organizations provide spaces where young people can develop their sense of identity and belonging, strengthen civic participation, advocate for policy change, and organize sustained campaigns that achieve tangible victories. Nearly all the organizations surveyed for this landscape scan expressed a desire to deepen their power-building work, integrate organizing into their practices, and build the kind of collective muscle that compels decision-makers to respond.

Unlike in states such as California, where sustained philanthropic investment has supported youth organizing for decades, the youth organizing infrastructure in Washington is relatively young, unevenly distributed, and insufficiently interconnected. This scan examines how that infrastructure has developed, where it is strongest, where gaps remain, and what investments could enable the field to realize its full potential.

Washington's field is shaped by diverse organizational missions as well as the state's broader political economy, geography, and social movement history. Hundreds of organizations engage young people in leadership development, civic participation, and social change activities. While these organizations know their own work, their partners, and their communities, they have operated without a full understanding of the field as a whole and its various parts.

To our knowledge, this scan provides the first systematic mapping of the youth social change field in Washington. We examine the field across four dimensions:

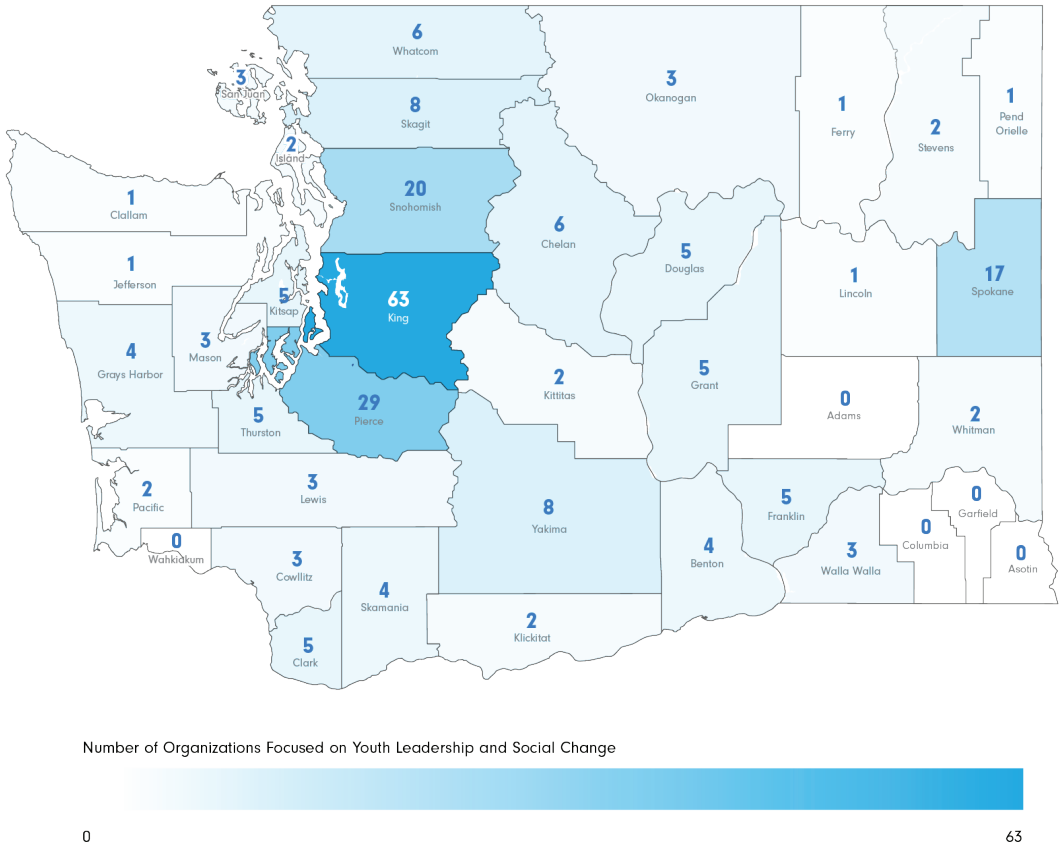
- Organizational composition and geographic distribution
- The communities served and issues addressed
- Levels of collaboration and connectivity
- Governance and funding sources

We begin with organizational characteristics because institutional structure shapes what organizations are positioned to accomplish. Understanding where organizations are located, how they are organized, and the conditions under which they operate provides a foundation for later assessments of both organizational practices and field-wide capacity. It also helps identify where targeted investments could strengthen not only individual organizations, but the field as a whole.

Organizational Composition and Geographic Distribution

Organizations are heavily concentrated in King County, with a secondary hub in Spokane. The Seattle metropolitan area's large population and concentration of philanthropic and institutional resources drive this pattern, while rural and Eastern Washington—areas facing persistent economic disinvestment—are correspondingly underrepresented (Figure 2). For Native communities, the gaps are even more pronounced. Despite the presence of sovereign Tribal Nations across the state and their strong presence across social movements, Native-led youth social change efforts may be underrepresented because they often operate through Tribal governments, community-based structures, and networks that are less visible within conventional datasets.

Figure 2.
Distribution of Organizations Across the State



Across every region of the state, leadership development organizations outnumber other groups (Figure 3)**.** Leadership development organizations make up the majority of the field (57%), significantly outnumbering civic engagement (26%) and organizing groups (17%). This distribution is not coincidental—it reflects decades of public and philanthropic funding directed toward measurable youth development outcomes, making youth leadership development the most reliably funded entry point into social change work. Although organizing groups are concentrated where population density is highest, the concentration in King County also reflects the greater availability of philanthropic resources and organizing infrastructure than elsewhere in Washington.

The larger survey found that 41% of organizations focus their work locally, with 27% operating regionally, 16.5% statewide, and 15.5% multistate or nationally (Figure 4)**.** Civic engagement and organizing groups are more likely to operate on a broader scale than leadership development organizations, but even so, the current geographic distribution of organizations does not reflect the full diversity of the state.

Youth civic engagement and organizing groups are newer, on average, while leadership development organizations tend to be more established. Nearly half of the youth organizing groups were founded after 2015, reflecting the rise of youth activism around immigration, climate, racial justice, and electoral politics in the past decade (Figure 5).

Figure 3.
Youth Engagement Types Across the State

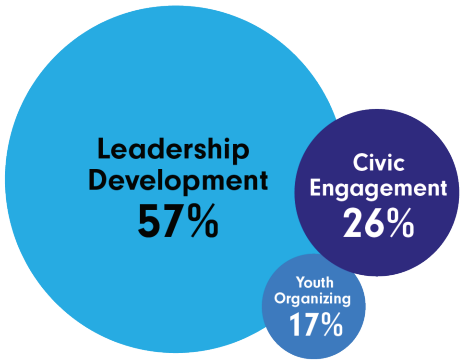


Figure 4.
Geographic Focus of Organizations

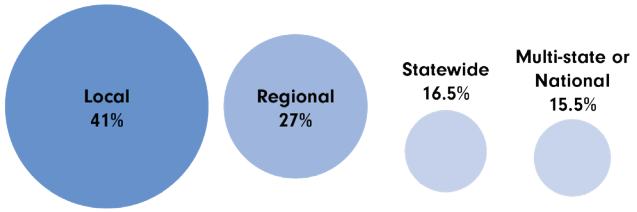
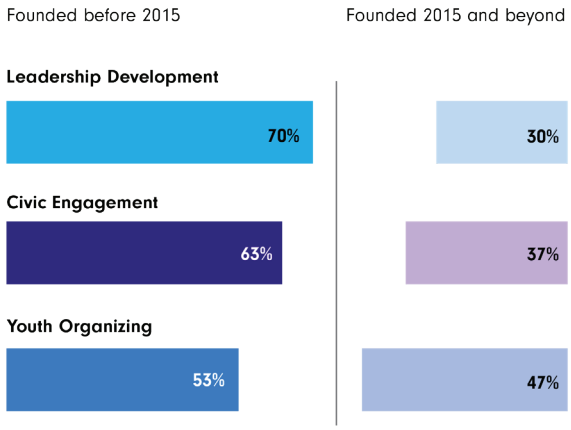


Figure 5.
Relative Age of Organizations, by Type



The Communities Served and Issues Addressed

Much like in the field nationally, Washington's youth social change field is weighted toward leadership development of young people most affected by systemic oppression, including youth of color, young women and girls, LGBTQ+ youth, immigrants, and youth living in rural areas (Figures 6-9)**.** The demographics of the field reflect a strong orientation toward equity. But representation does not automatically translate into long-term leadership or power. In Washington state, this challenge grows out of the institutional context: Many young people enter social change work through school-based or program-based settings, engagement is often tied to grant cycles or program timelines, and structures of support for continued participation into adulthood are limited. This is a significant gap in a state with strong higher education institutions, labor opportunities, and public-sector pathways that could serve as natural entry points for continued engagement.

Figure 6.
Organizational Membership by Race and Ethnicity

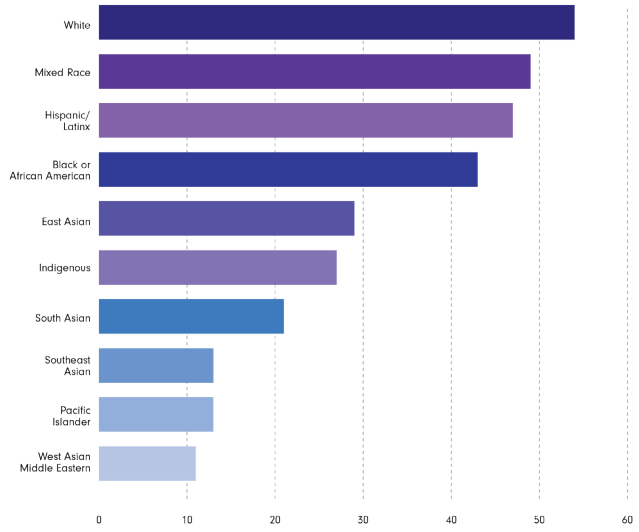


Figure 7.
Organizational Membership by Gender and Sexuality

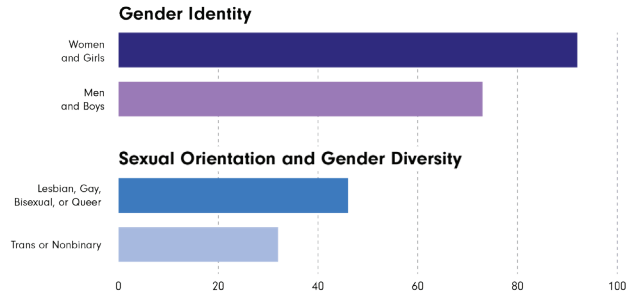


Figure 8.
Organizational Membership by Age

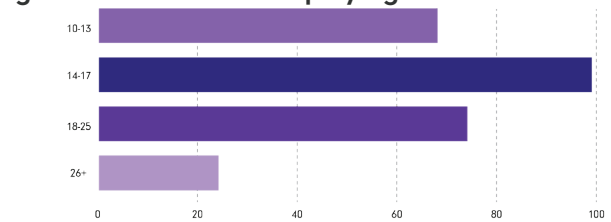
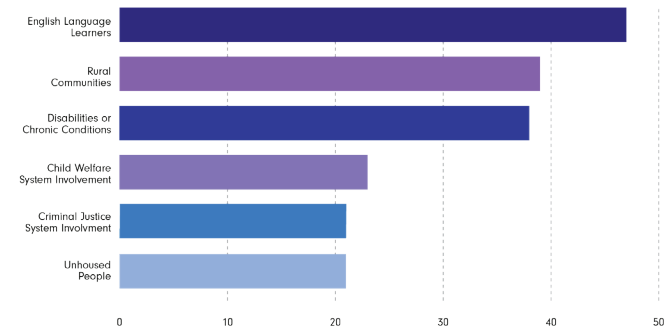


Figure 9.
Organizational Membership by Other Demographic Characteristics



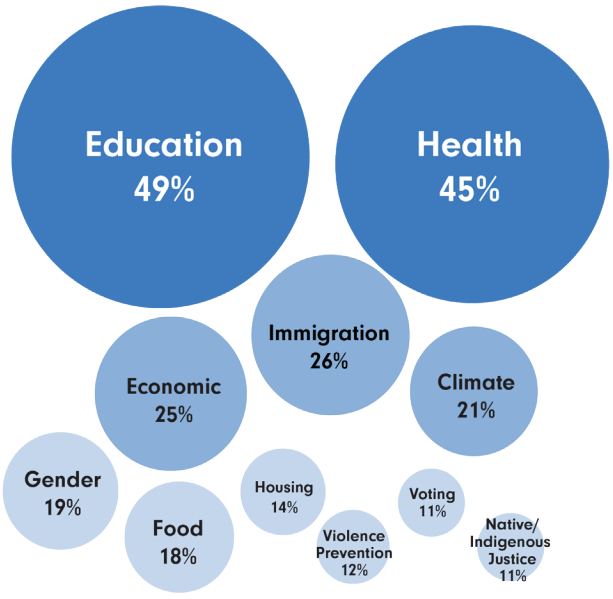
English Language Learners: People whose primary language is not English and who are developing English language proficiency. Rural Communities: People living in rural communities. Disabilities or Chronic Conditions: People with disabilities or chronic conditions, including physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities as well as mental health conditions. Child Welfare System Involvement: People with involvement in the child welfare system, including current and former foster youth. Criminal Justice System Involvement People with involvement in the criminal justice system, including currently and formerly incarcerated people. Unhoused People: People experiencing homelessness or housing instability.



Courtesy of Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane

Organizations in the field focus on issues that young people actually face. Education justice and health justice are the top two priorities, followed by immigration, economic justice, and environmental and climate justice (Figure 10). These priorities reflect ongoing struggles over educational funding and equity, growing concern about youth mental health, rising housing costs, and the accelerating impacts of the climate crisis, particularly in rural and agricultural regions.

Figure 10.
Priority Issue Areas Identified by Survey Participants



Levels of Collaboration and Connectivity

Washington has a robust social movement landscape, with strong statewide coalitions in labor, immigrant rights, and anti-poverty advocacy. But youth social change organizations are only partially connected to these coalitions. In the larger survey, organizations more frequently reported collaborating with schools, local governments, and community-based institutions than with peer organizations in the youth social change field or with groups in the broader social movement ecosystem.

Largely absent from survey responses were intergenerational networks, coalitions, and alliances devoted to organizing and social change, such as labor unions, immigrant rights networks, alignment tables,[1] environmental coali tions, and racial justice organizations. Only one organization mentioned working with the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network or OneAmerica, for example, even though more than two dozen of them identified immigrant and refugee justice as a primary issue area.

This is not simply a matter of lack of youth representation in adult spaces. Disconnection from coalitions with corresponding interests limits an organization's ability to scale up its advocacy work, access shared political insights, and participate in spaces where major decisions are made. Several factors are at play: Youth organizations are often structured as program-based nonprofits rather than as social movement organizations; participation in coalitions may require resources or capacity that smaller, youth-focused groups lack; and youth-led work may differ culturally or strategically from the work of more established institutions. The survey did not examine the reasons for this pattern, making it an important area for further inquiry.



Courtesy of FEEST

[1] An alignment table is an entity that builds strategic alignment among grassroots organizations that have shared or overlapping goals.

Governance and Funding Sources

Nationally, nearly 30% of organizations in FCYO's 2025 National Youth Organizing Landscape Scan identified as youth-led. In Washington, 5% of surveyed organizations identified as youth-led, while 22% reported being youth-led programs within adult-led organizations and 36% reported intergenerational leadership structures (Figure 11). These findings suggest that Washington's youth social change field relies more heavily on adult-led and intergenerational models than the national sample.

This reflects a deeper pattern: In Washington state, youth leadership is cultivated more than it is institutionalized by giving young people decision-making authority. The challenge is to not only increase the number of youth-led organizations but also to build models that allow for meaningful youth-led governance within sustainable structures.

Washington is home to some of the largest philanthropic institutions in the country, and the public sector makes significant investments in youth. But organizations consistently report that funding for social change work—particularly youth organizing—remains limited. Public sources (particularly from King County through initiatives like Best Starts for Kids) provide a significant funding base, but these funding streams are generally tied to specific educational, health, and prevention outcomes. That limits flexibility in civic engagement and organizing work, and organizations in Eastern Washington have few options equivalent to those in King County. Washington's major philanthropic institutions have their own constraining patterns, including geographic concentration in Seattle, preference for established organizations, and emphasis on measurable short-term outcomes over movement-building infrastructure.

Figure 12 ranks the top institutional funders of the surveyed organizations by the collective number of mentions when asked to list their top five institutional funding sources.

Figure 11.
Leadership Models

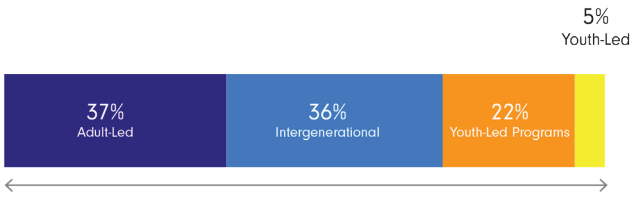
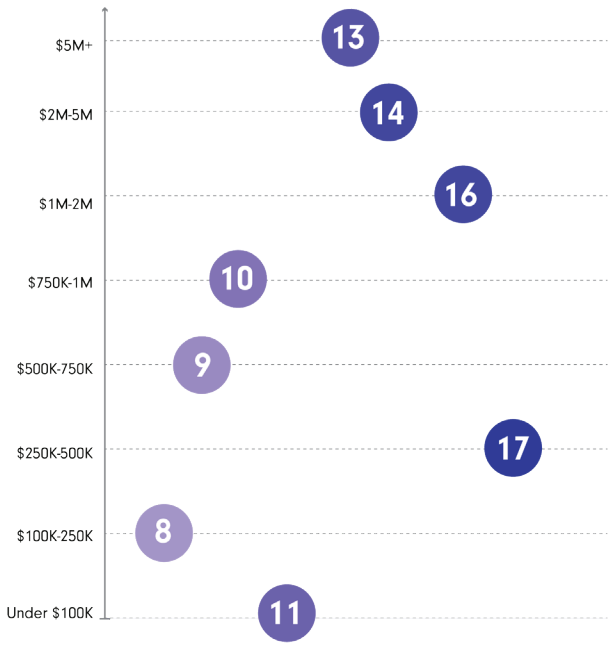


Figure 12.
Top Institutional Funders

Public Investment	Philanthropic Investment
King County	Inatai Foundation
City of Seattle	Seattle Foundation
Washington State Department of Commerce	Gates Foundation
	ArtsFund
4Culture	Ballmer Group
WA Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction	United Way

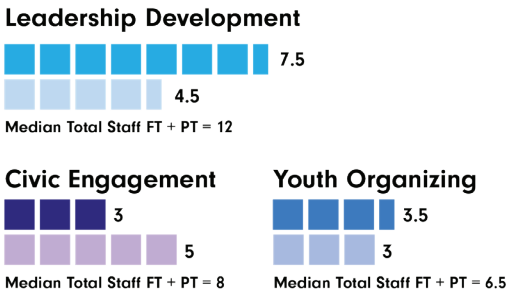
The median budget of organizations in the field is between $750,000 and $1 million (Figure 13)**.** However, that figure obscures sharp disparities. Of the organizations with the largest budgets ($2 million and more), 67% are leadership development organizations and just 11% are organizing groups. No youth-led organization reported a budget of $500,000 or higher. In a high-cost state where salaries, housing, and operational costs are elevated, these constraints can compound quickly, limiting the ability of organizations to build the infrastructure needed to realize their vision.

Figure 13.
Organizational Budget Ranges



Civic engagement and youth organizing groups operate with far fewer full-time staff than leadership development organizations, and they rely more heavily on part-time support (Figure 14)**.** Limited staff capacity affects not only what organizations can accomplish today, but also their ability to cultivate youth leadership over time.
Table 1. Staff Size by Organization Type

Figure 14.
Staff Size by Organization Type



What the Organizational Landscape Reveals

Taken together, the survey findings depict a field with real momentum: Young people are engaged, issue-focused, and hungry for connection, and organizations are committed to and rooted in their communities. But they face persistent structural constraints that include underdeveloped infrastructure, limited staff capacity, lack of connection with other groups, and reliance on funding sources that reward short-term outputs over the slower work of building power.

Addressing these dynamics and cultivating the strategic alignment, relationships, and infrastructure that allow youth social change organizations to multiply their power is more than a matter of increasing funding. It requires knowing where in the field to intervene and how. This must begin with a close examination of organizational practices, including how organizations build youth leadership, civic participation, and organizing as well as where targeted investments could most effectively strengthen those efforts.



Courtesy of Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane

Characteristics of the MYL Cohort

The 10 organizations in the MYL cohort reflect broader patterns in Washington's youth social change field in terms of organization age, geographic reach, leadership model (intergenerational, youth-led, or adult-led), budget size, and staffing, as shown in the Figures 15-20.

The geographic areas they serve include Seattle, South King County, Spokane, Omak, Olympia, and statewide.

- Asians for Collective Liberation
- East African Community Services
- FEEST
- Foundation for Youth Resiliency and Engagement
- Nuestras Raíces Centro Comunitario
- Powerful Voices
- Stonewall Youth
- TeamChild
- The Washington Bus Education Fund
- Washington Youth Alliance

Organizational Form
All 10 organizations are 501(c)(3) nonprofits. Two of them, both statewide groups that engage in civic engagement and/or organizing, also have a 501(c)(4) affiliate.

Figure 15.
Year Founded

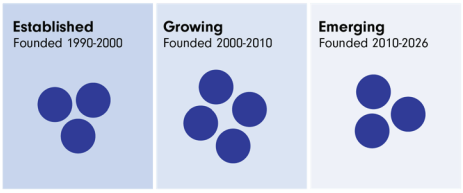


Figure 16.
Geographic Focus



Figure 17.
Leadership Model

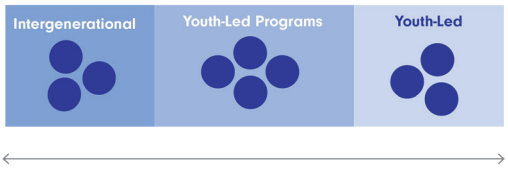
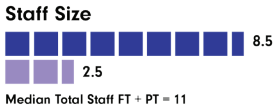


Figure 18.
Organization Staff Size



Figures 19.
Budget Size

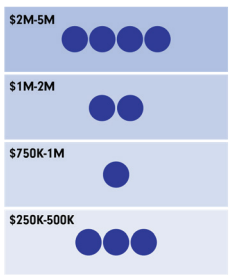
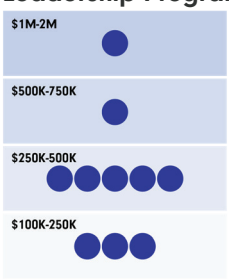


Figure 20.
Budget Allocated to Youth Leadership Programming



The Landscape of Practice

Opportunity means more than access to a megaphone—it means avenues for moving from engagement to real influence, so that when young people speak, they are not only heard but are in a position to actively shape decisions that govern their lives.



Courtesy of Washington Youth Alliance

All 10 organizations in the MYL cohort engage in youth leadership and social change efforts, but they do so through distinct approaches that span the Youth Engagement Continuum. Some organize young people into sustained membership-based campaigns designed to build collective power. Others emphasize advocacy, equipping young people to navigate civic institutions and influence public policy. Still others begin by cultivating a sense of identity, belonging, and leadership through culturally grounded programming and community relationships. Each approach contributes something different to the field, and each provides a different set of opportunities and challenges in translating youth participation into lasting collective influence.

Table 1 summarizes the primary purpose, role, core activities and practices, strengths, challenges, and capacity needs of each organization type. The sections that follow draw on the larger survey, MYL cohort survey, and focus groups to better understand how organizational types contribute to expanding young people's collective power, the conditions under which particular practices flourish, and where alignment, coordination, and shared infrastructure could unlock greater potential across the field.

> "Young people have the freshest perspective on what justice really means, but they often lack the opportunity to advance it."
>
> — MYL cohort member

Table 1.
Characteristics of the Three Types of Youth Social Change Organizations

	Leadership Development	Civic Engagement	Organizing
Primary Purpose	Cultivate a sense of identity and belonging and foundational leadership skills	Equip young people to meaningfully participate in civic and policy processes	Build collective power for structural change through sustained organizing
Role in the Field	Build the social and emotional foundations for civic agency	Bring young people into civic institutions and democratic processes	Anchor campaign infrastructure; translate youth engagement into a durable membership base
Core Activities and Practices	Arts and culture, healing and wellness, peer mentorship, internal leadership pathways	Legislative advocacy, voter engagement, civic skill-building, issue education	Base-building, political education, leadership ladders, sustained campaigns
Strengths	Community trust, holistic youth development, strong family and institutional relationships	Deep community reach, ability to move young people into civic engagement processes, responsiveness to urgent conditions	Strategic clarity, member leadership tied to concrete outcomes, proven campaign wins
Challenges	Explicit theory of change, connecting programming to advocacy, organizational capacity for social change work	Membership structure and recruitment, youth decision-making authority, connecting episodic engagement to long-term strategy	Staff and funding constraints, long-term leadership pipeline, organizational sustainability, field coordination
Capacity Needs	Leadership-to-impact alignment, technical assistance for civic engagement and organizing	Organizing frameworks, sustained follow-through systems, strategic planning support	Organizer staffing, campaign infrastructure, peer coordination and coalition support

The Practices of Leadership Organizations

Primary Purpose

Youth leadership organizations are built on the belief that before young people can change the world around them, they need to develop a sense of belonging, identity, and agency within their own communities. To create the conditions under which young people from marginalized and systemically oppressed communities can be seen and valued, programming tends to be holistic by design, weaving together direct services, healing and wellness supports, arts and cultural activities, peer mentorship, and leadership development.



Courtesy of East African Community Services

Role in the Field

Youth leadership organizations often serve as a first point of contact between a young person and the possibility of civic involvement—a place where they can discover that their perspective matters and their community is worth fighting for. In doing so, these organizations build the relational and psychological foundations that strong civic engagement and organizing work rely on. These groups also maintain deep roots in their communities, including with families, schools, and local institutions.

These longstanding connections give youth leadership organizations broad reach and local credibility, making them natural partners in advocacy and organizing efforts. They are well positioned to introduce new young people to civic engagement, mobilize participants around community issues, and amplify organizing campaigns through networks cultivated over many years.

Core Activities and Practices

Arts, culture, and activism. Arts and culture function in these organizations not as programmatic add-ons but as primary vehicles for leadership development. Young people gain leadership skills—by planning and putting on events, developing communications, and facilitating community conversations—while simultaneously building cultural pride and exploring questions of race, gender, identity, and justice. The political education that occurs through this work is often implicit rather than direct, and is embedded in the act of creation and collective expression.

Healing, wellness, and direct support. From drop-in centers to mentoring programs, gender-specific programming, career and college readiness, mindfulness training, and healing circles, youth leadership organizations combine support services with traditional leadership development practices. The services are central to youth leadership work, not delivered alongside it. Youth leaders are also supported in creating resources for their peers, such as a teen survival guide to teach self-advocacy in reproductive and behavioral health. This integrated model is especially significant in rural and under-resourced communities, where a single organization might serve simultaneously as a source of practical support, a community gathering place, and a young person's primary opportunity to participate in social change efforts.

> "We are pretty authentically youth-formed, which means we are vibrant and fun, and it is a really joyful place to work."
>
> — MYL cohort member

Peer leadership and internal advancement

Leadership organizations offer structured opportunities for young people to assume increasing responsibility within the organization itself, such as by serving as paid fellows, mentors, program facilitators, event leads, and members of youth advisory structures. They develop concrete leadership skills while seeing that their leadership is valuable enough to be institutionalized. One focus group participant described how this works in practice: "Our Youth Engagement Board designs and implements our community engagement activities in communications, outreach, and event planning. Adult staff provide support and resources as needed to help bring our youth leaders' visions to life."



Courtesy of East African Community Services

Challenges

Every leadership organization in the MYL cohort expressed eagerness to expand their social change work—to not only create leadership opportunities for young people within the organization but also engage them in external advocacy and organizing. This interest is driven in no small part by young people themselves. As one leader noted, the young people are "passionate about their community and passionate about the issues their communities are facing.... [They want to] make change."

While the desire is clear, the pathway is less so. As one leader acknowledged, "We're still navigating how to fully transition from strong youth leadership within our program to deeper youth organizing." For organizations that have built their identity and infrastructure around internal leadership opportunities, the shift toward external social change work will require deliberate capacity-building and strategic clarity. The following list describes the work that is most needed.

- **Articulate an explicit theory of change.** Many leadership organizations operate from a well-developed set of values but without a clear theory of how their work can contribute to structural change. To move into civic engagement or organizing, they must make those assumptions explicit, defining the change they seek, the mechanisms of change, and how existing programs can contribute to longer-term goals. For one organization, that process exposed a disconnect between service delivery and their social change work—what one leader described as "aligned on vibes but not on practice." Clarifying their theory of change prompted revisions to staffing, budgeting, and program design that strengthened the organization's broader strategy.

> "We're still navigating how to fully transition from strong youth leadership within our program to deeper youth organizing."
>
> — MYL cohort member

- **Connect programmatic work to social change.** In many organizations, arts programming, healing circles, peer mentorship, and cultural events are treated as separate from social change work. To deepen their civic engagement and organizing work, they need a clear understanding of how these activities can contribute to broader social change goals, and they must communicate those connections consistently to staff, participants, partners, and funders. Experience from youth-serving organizations nationally also suggests that healing practices are most effective when they strengthen an organization's overall capacity rather than focus exclusively on individual well-being.
- **Assess and build organizational capacity.** Engaging seriously in advocacy and organizing requires infrastructure that many youth leadership organizations have not yet had reason to develop. This includes hiring staff with organizing experience, political education curricula that connect internal programming to external campaigns, and systems for recruiting, developing, and retaining youth members as distinct from participants or clients. As one leader described the challenge, "Our youth fellows have all expressed a desire to lead independent campaigns year-round. Given that we are at capacity, we would need to hire more staff to provide one-on-one support to youth leaders and expand our community engagement team with experienced grassroots community organizers to develop and facilitate anti-oppression trainings in collaboration with youth leaders."
- **Deepen youth decision-making opportunities.** Youth leadership organizations have built strong models for youth participation in internal programming. The next step is to extend that participation into governance, such as through hiring, strategic planning, and budgeting. This will not only facilitate youth empowerment, but it will build the organizational infrastructure and culture that make sustained civic engagement and organizing possible, including—critically—cultivating young leaders' ability to take on visible leadership roles outside the organization.

The Practices of Civic Engagement Organizations

Primary Purpose

Civic engagement organizations aim to equip young people with tools and opportunities to meaningfully participate in civic and public policy processes via electoral work and legislative advocacy (such as get-out-the-vote campaigns and ballot measures) and engagement with local institutions (such as school boards). Whereas leadership organizations support young people in finding power within themselves, civic engagement organizations focus on marshaling young people's moral power—in particular, their status as youth—in service of social change.



Courtesy of Asians for Collective Liberation in Spokane

In Washington, these organizations frequently work at the intersection of direct services and civic engagement, using legal support, immigration assistance, educational programming, and community-building to both provide services to young people and offer an entry point into advocacy work. Many of these organizations have strong intergenerational dimensions, engaging families and communities alongside youth.

Role in the Field

Civic engagement organizations serve a critical bridging function. They translate the identity, confidence, and community rootedness that leadership organizations cultivate into civic participation. They make the democratic process legible and accessible to young people who have historically been excluded from or ignored by it, and they create experiences of civic agency that can be transformative even when they do not produce immediate policy wins.

At the same time, advocacy work can often be episodic, following the rhythms of legislative sessions and election cycles. This approach gives civic engagement organizations reach and agility but can limit their ability to build durable power. Several leaders highlighted this as a tension their organization is working to address.

Core Activities and Practices

Legislative advocacy. Civic engagement organizations in the state are consistent practitioners of direct advocacy, bringing young people to Olympia to testify, meet with elected officials, and participate in the formal processes of policymaking. These groups invest significantly in preparing young people for this work, including through "know your rights" trainings, legislative education, bill tracking, and advocacy skills development. These experiences can be pivotal for participants, offering tangible evidence that their voices can reach rooms where decisions are made.

Civic education. Voter registration, voter education, and get-out-the-vote efforts are core activities for many civic engagement organizations, often targeting young people who are newly eligible to vote, including systems-involved youth. This work is grounded in a belief that civic participation is both a right and a skill, and that supporting young people in exercising that right (particularly those who have been most actively excluded from civic life) is itself a form of justice.

Issue-based education and public engagement. Although they do so less frequently than organizing groups, civic engagement organizations often involve young people in public education campaigns, community meetings, rallies, and know-your-rights workshops that are tied to pressing issues in their communities—such as immigration enforcement, juvenile justice reform, language access, education funding, and mental health supports. These activities typically focus on equipping young people to speak with authority about their own experiences and the policies that shape them, and to do so in ways that are accessible to the broader public.

Entry through direct services. A distinctive feature of these organizations is that young people often enter not through advocacy activities but via services such as legal assistance, educational support, mental health services, or culturally specific programming. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge. The trust built through service provision can offer a meaningful foundation for deeper engagement but translating that trust into sustained organizing requires intentional pathways that many organizations are still developing.

Challenges

The central challenge facing these civic engagement organizations is expanding from episodic engagement toward sustained member-based power that compels decision-makers to respond not just to individual testimony but to organized community interests. One focus group participant described the difficulty of building the power of young people who are in "survival mode"—working two jobs and managing family responsibilities, for example, with little margin for sustained civic engagement. These challenges go beyond better scheduling or stronger outreach—they reflect structural questions about membership, recruitment, and the relationship between services and organizing. The following list describes the work that is most needed.

- **Anchor campaigns in long-term strategy.** Many advocacy-related activities are tied to immediate policy priorities or electoral cycles without being situated in a long-term theory of change. Developing a clear vision of structural change within the organization and how near-term activities can build toward it would allow organizations to make more intentional choices about where to invest their limited capacity and how to measure impact.
- **Develop more intentional membership structures.** Most civic engagement organizations engage young people as participants, clients, or paid fellows rather than members with ongoing responsibilities within the organization. This model lowers barriers to participation and allows organizations to respond flexibly to community needs, but it can make sustained engagement more difficult. One focus group participant noted this contradiction: "While stipends are helpful and keep youth engaged at a surface level, the deeper question is how we invite young people into harder work, within themselves and within systems, that will strengthen their capacity to keep building toward their vision."

  One youth organizing group went through the process of clarifying and strengthening its membership structure and ultimately realized that the stipend model was attracting young people who were not aligned with the social change work. Now stipends are reserved for those with a higher level of responsibility and longer-term engagement, and young people join the organization because they are compelled by its mission and campaigns, not just financial rewards.
- **Expand youth involvement in setting advocacy priorities.** Young people in these organizations are actively carrying out advocacy activities—testifying in front of officials, canvassing voters—but less consistently involved in setting the priorities and strategies that guide that work. Deepening youth leadership in this dimension would strengthen both the quality of the groups' advocacy work and the pipeline of young people who see themselves as long-term participants in social change work rather than temporary contributors to someone else's vision.

> "While stipends are helpful and keep youth engaged at a surface level, the deeper question is how we invite young people into harder work, within themselves and within systems, that will strengthen their capacity to keep building toward their vision."
>
> — MYL focus group member

The Practices of Organizing Groups

Primary Purpose

Youth organizing groups are defined by a single unifying commitment: to build the collective power of young people from marginalized and systemically oppressed communities to drive structural systems change. The work is rooted in the conviction that the conditions young people face in their schools, neighborhoods, and broader society are not natural facts but rather the results of political decisions, and that those conditions can be changed by people who are organized to push for change.



Courtesy of The Washington Bus Education Fund

Role in the Field

Within the youth social change field, organizing groups play a critical role in bringing young leaders into strategic campaigns that can produce systemic change and build a strong base of members with enough power to make those in authority accountable to the communities they represent. As one leader said, "Our main thing is training young people in community organizing and creating opportunities for them to be decision-makers about the health and mental health issues that greatly impact their lives, but for which they're rarely put in positions of power to be able to influence."

Several organizations articulated a vision for their role that extends beyond their own membership base, including serving as an anchor institution for the broader youth organizing field and convening organizations across the continuum to develop shared strategy and coordinate action.

Core Activities and Practices

Intentional base-building. Youth organizing groups in Washington distinguish themselves through their intentional cultivation of a strong base of members. Organizations described their constituencies with precision, identifying the schools, identities, age groups, and communities from which they recruit as well as the consistent, relational outreach activities they engage in to expand that base, including weekly one-on-ones with peers and unengaged community members, monthly tabling (setting up a dedicated space at local events to engage community members and provide information), phone and text banking, social media, and educational events. Importantly, recruitment is itself a leadership practice. Young people are responsible for bringing peers into the organization, introducing them to its work, and supporting them through successive stages of engagement. As one leader explained, "We really think about how we're building members up through this ladder of engagement, and that requires us being very clear-eyed about our metrics and what we're hoping to achieve every time we do field events or community events or campus tabling."

Political education and training in organizing skills. Youth organizing groups invest heavily in both political education (on topics such as capitalism, racial justice, labor history, gender justice, and the mechanics of local and state government) and training in organizing skills (such as power mapping, campaign strategy, one-on-one facilitation, public speaking, canvassing, and digital organizing). These activities are integrated into the organization's programmatic structure, frequently through annual intensive summer fellowships or camps that are complemented by clinics or trainings throughout the school year.

Differentiated leadership pathways. Organizing groups clearly define various roles for youth participants, with structured pathways for assuming increasing responsibility over time. For example, one organization distinguishes between members (those who participate in open meetings, political education, and calls to action), leaders (student organizers who receive stipends), and advanced leaders (returning student organizers who have spent two to three years in the program). Individuals take on roles according to their social-emotional, community building, and organizing skills and are mentored to explore and grow into other roles, including facilitators (who co-lead meetings with decision-makers, plan and co-facilitate base-building events, co-develop curriculum, and represent the organization's work in public), outreach staff (who conduct weekly outreach to bring constituents into their base and recruit the next cohort of youth), and mentors (who support others in building skills such as tabling or speechwriting). Ultimately, leadership is understood not as an individual achievement but as an expanding capacity to support and develop others and strengthen the organization itself.

Campaigns as the vehicle for youth leadership development. For organizing groups, campaigns are the primary vehicle for leadership development. Campaigns require young people to research issues, analyze power, build coalitions, recruit members, negotiate with decision-makers, mobilize supporters, and sustain collective effort over time. In the process, participants experience firsthand how organized communities influence public decisions. One leader in the MYL cohort described a recent win: "This past legislative session, we were able to secure $17 million for youth mental health supports.... We are most proud of our Youth Day of Action, where we brought around 100 youth to Olympia to advocate for this." Campaigns like this provide young people with direct evidence that organized collective action produces real outcomes, and they serve as the experiential basis for understanding what it will take to win again.

Challenges

The focus groups made clear that organizing groups are not constrained by a lack of ambition. One leader was just coming from a coalition meeting where they and other organizers had pushed for decreased police presence in schools, and another had just left a meeting on the implementation of a Seattle levy for educational funding that their organization had helped win. These leaders are clear-eyed about what it takes to build youth power on both the local and statewide levels, and they are equally clear about the obstacles. The challenges their organizations face are less about commitment than about the structural conditions that limit their ability to fully act on that commitment. The following list describes the work that is most needed.

- **Address staffing and capacity challenges.** The single most consistent challenge named by leaders of organizing groups is staff capacity. Organizing is relational by nature, and as such it is time intensive. As one leader put it, "One of the biggest internal challenges we face engaging with youth organizing is staff capacity. Meaningful, one-on-one mentorship and leadership development with young people takes significant time and capacity. Yet hiring more staff to hire more youth is expensive, as we pay all staff a living wage and provide stipends for youth." The funding model compounds this. As another leader noted, "Funding for systems change work isn't as plentiful as [for] direct service work. We also still need long-term organizing for systemic change so that our permanent condition isn't constantly needing to rely on support services."
- **Build a long-term leadership pipeline.** Youth organizing groups are grappling with a longstanding challenge in the field: how to sustain leadership as young people "age out" of an organization. As one leader put it, "It's important to have young people be part of the movement and also acknowledge that that is a very transient identity. How do we create a pipeline into organizing? How do we retain organizers, and then retain alumni, folks who exit but are later interested in coming back?" Another framed it as a field-wide responsibility: "We need to invest the time to help people be connected to an ecosystem where they can also thrive and contribute." Developing that leadership pipeline is a macro-level concern, and one that extends beyond the youth social change field. It will require stronger coordination across organizations; connections to labor, higher education, and adult civic life; and sustained investment in the infrastructure that would make those connections possible.
- **Cultivate a sustainable organizational culture.** The pace of organizing work can be overwhelming. As one leader said, "The culture of organizing work easily lends itself to burnout.... [T]he turnover is always crazy high." Leaders of youth organizing groups were not the only ones to note the issue of burnout, but it is a particularly pressing concern for them given the demands and pressures of organizing work. While individual organizations can take steps to build healthier internal cultures, sustainable culture is also a function of whether groups are adequately resourced to do work at a human pace instead of being in perpetual emergency mode.
- **Build coordination infrastructure across the field.** Youth organizing groups consistently identified isolation from the broader social movement ecosystem as one of the greatest limitations on their effectiveness. In some cases, this isolation is reinforced by resource dynamics, such as when coalitions require financial contributions that smaller organizations cannot afford or operate with gatekeeping dynamics that exclude newer groups. In other cases, it is simply the result of insufficient infrastructure for connection: no shared convening space or no coordinated opportunities for relationship-building and strategic alignment across organizations. One leader expressed interest in addressing this directly: "We are interested in co-hosting or being a founding member of a youth-led conference in the PNW, to strengthen relationships and collaboration and build up the foundation of youth organizing in Washington." They added, "Additionally, we are wanting to host more gatherings, listening sessions, and town halls but need access and funding for an office space more reflective of our needs."

Strengths and Challenges Across the Field

The landscape scan and close examination of organizational practices, taken together, tell a coherent story. Washington's youth social change field has real momentum and a strong base of organizations that understand what they are trying to build. It also has structural patterns in funding, coordination, and infrastructure that, left unaddressed, will continue to constrain what that momentum can produce.



Courtesy of Powerful Voices

Strengths

Organizations are deeply rooted in and guided by their communities. Across the field, organizations are embedded in the communities from which their youth leaders emerge. Many are led by young people who share the lived experiences of those they organize alongside and employ an explicitly intersectional analysis of how race, class, gender, immigration status, geography, and other dimensions of inequality shape young people's lives. That proximity strengthens organizational legitimacy and ensures that priorities are grounded in community realities rather than external agendas.

The field has the capacity to produce real results. Where civic engagement and organizing infrastructure exist, organizations are securing tangible results. Leadership organizations continue to build the foundation of relationships, trust, and youth development on which broader social change efforts depend. Civic engagement organizations have expanded access to democratic institutions for young people who have historically been excluded from civic life. And organizing groups have secured millions in legislative funding, shifted school district policies, and built member bases capable of mobilizing on short notice.

The field shares a consensus on what it needs. One of the field's greatest assets is the degree of reflection that organizations bring to their own practices. Leaders gave candid assessments of their organizations and the field as a whole, including the limitations of their organizational models and the constraints on their work—from the absence of coordination infrastructure to the mismatch between funding conditions and organizing timelines. "We worry about organizing our young people but not necessarily about organizing ourselves," one leader observed, "and that is very much something that is needed in this space." This is a crucial insight: Fields rarely advance without a shared understanding of both their strengths and their limitations.

> "We know that the system has been working ineffectively for generations and solutions would also need a generational approach. But when we're working with young people there, I think of them almost as a migrant population. We only have a set group of folks one to four years max. How do we continue to tell that storytelling and embody those values as we move on from next generation to next generation?"
>
> — MYL cohort member



Courtesy of FEEST

Challenges

The field lacks a shared framework of practice. Organizations often pursue complementary goals while working from different understandings of the practices that underpin youth social change. Concepts such as campaigns, advocacy, leadership development, and organizing are used inconsistently across the field, theories of change often remain implicit, and membership structures, leadership pathways, and political education vary considerably in their level of development and application. Without a shared vocabulary or practice framework, organizations cannot readily identify complementary roles, assess one another's strengths, or engage in the kind of coordinated strategy that produces systemic change.

Also lacking is a shared sense of clarity and alignment around the unique role of young people in social change. Many organizations continue to rely primarily on young people's moral authority—the power of personal testimony or the symbolic force of youthful voices—rather than systematically cultivating their collective political power. Arts and cultural programming, for example, often emphasizes individual expression despite its demonstrated capacity to also strengthen campaigns, reshape public narratives, and mobilize communities. Similarly, healing and wellness practices are sometimes framed primarily as individual interventions rather than as ways to help sustain collective action. These patterns are not unique to Washington—they reflect shortcomings in the field nationally.

> "We're here to win campaigns and to win the issues that young people care about, because it's important for us to show you that passion can have results and that we can make change. That's how we keep people in the movement long term."
>
> — MYL Cohort Member

Field fragmentation limits coordination. Despite considerable alignment in mission and values, Washington's youth social change field is largely fragmented, with few networks, coalitions, or alliances that reliably bring together organizations for peer learning and strategic coordination. Within the youth leadership subset of the field, convenings that previously took place have been discontinued. The absence of these collective spaces means that organizations working on the same issues in the same geographic areas are often unaware of one another. As one leader reflected about a recent youth leadership summit, they were already in partnership with some of the other participants, but "some of the folks didn't know that the other folks existed, even though we're in the same geography." Describing the importance of connecting with new values-aligned organizations working on social and racial justice, they added, "This summit creates that sense of community, that we're not alone."

This fragmentation also weakens long-term leadership development. Without relationships between youth organizations and the broader social movement ecosystem, young people have few clear pathways to continue in the work—they disperse rather than deepen the leadership capacity that took them years to build. "There's a lack of coalition within the youth-building spaces," one leader observed. Organizations are, as another person put it, "very siloed."

Limited resources pose real challenges for what organizations can build and sustain. Youth social change work is chronically underfunded in Washington, with organizing groups and youth-led organizations facing the greatest shortfalls. Leaders describe being unable to hire the staff they need to support young people's leadership at the scale their communities require. "For us, it really does boil down to capacity and wanting to make sure that when young people come to us with actions and initiatives that they want to lead themselves, that we have folks on our team that can support them, so that they don't feel like they're really holding it out all on their own," one leader said.

This scarcity hinders collaboration. Limited funding creates competition and mistrust among organizations that would otherwise be natural allies. "The funding is so low that—and I'm going to call a spade a spade—it creates bickering among some organizations. It creates distrust," one leader said. Others described being excluded from coalition spaces due to an inability to make financial contributions—a barrier that compounds isolation and limits smaller organizations' access to the shared strategy and political intelligence those spaces provide.

Geographic concentration limits statewide reach and impact, particularly in rural areas. The field remains concentrated in Seattle and Spokane, leaving significant portions of the state without meaningful youth social change infrastructure. Rural organizations face a distinct set of challenges, including transportation barriers, politically challenging environments for racial justice and/or LGBTQ+-affirming work, and an acute version of the leadership pipeline problem. "Youth turnover is especially hard in rural communities," one leader said. "We have a cohort of youth that have engaged in leadership development and organizing over the past six years, and they are now in college or leaving for college several hours away." Another leader noted economic geography as a factor: "Youth leadership succession is also challenging, especially in rural communities like ours where young people have to leave the community to gain access to economic stability"—taking with them the organizing capacity their communities need.

The political moment is constraining organizations' capacity. Organizations across the field are navigating a political climate that is simultaneously creating real urgency and depleting capacity. As young people and their communities face intensified threats—including increased immigration enforcement, overlapping climate crises, and widespread economic precarity—organizations are being pulled toward mutual aid and rapid response while they are also trying to build longer-term infrastructure for collective power. "Our community is in survival mode," one leader said. Another described the dampening effect on participation: "One challenge is the fear that many students are facing in participating in social movements, and the uncertainty of what might happen to them or their families if they join." The scale of these conditions exceeds what any individual organization can address alone; what's needed is a field-level response and philanthropic partners that are clear about the relationship between immediate need and long-term power-building.

> "One challenge is the fear that many students are facing in participating in social movements, and the uncertainty of what might happen to them or their families if they join."

— MYL cohort member



Courtesy of Washington Youth Alliance

Looking Ahead: Recommendations for Funders

Washington state is home to some of the largest philanthropic institutions in the country. At the same time, its youth social change field is growing and committed but chronically underfunded. That combination presents opportunities that require a deliberate response.



Courtesy of East African Community Services

The following recommendations are addressed to Washington's broader philanthropic sector, with the belief that the sector should not simply be an external observer of the field. Funding decisions over the past decades have shaped the field's organizational composition, geographic distribution, and prevailing approaches to youth social change. Strengthening the field will require the philanthropic sector to examine its own assumptions, incentives, and practices with the same rigor it applies to evaluating its grantees.

The following sections present recommendations organized around four priorities: building philanthropic alignment, strengthening organizational capacity, fostering a more connected field, and distributing resources equitably and sustainably. They are presented in a sequence that reflects how philanthropic alignment and coordination are necessary prerequisites to strategic funding.

Build Philanthropic Alignment

Develop a shared understanding of youth social change and, in particular, youth organizing. Funders seeking to support young people in leading long-term systemic change should work to develop a shared understanding of the Youth Engagement Continuum and the organizing practices outlined in FCYO's Power to Win Framework. This means clearly understanding how youth organizing builds on and differs from other forms of youth engagement and the distinct roles of different types of organizations within the field. This alignment-building among funders can take many forms, including peer learning cohorts, briefings from practitioners, convenings with youth organizers, and informal learning sessions. The goal is not simply to learn about youth organizing but to develop a shared understanding that informs funding strategy.

Conduct a funder landscape scan. The landscape of youth social change funders is as fragmented as the field they support. A statewide funder landscape scan that maps existing funding streams, organizational relationships, geographic distribution, and strategic priorities would be an important first step toward making genuine coordination possible. In addition to highlighting opportunities to expand funding, this scan would help clarify patterns in current investment that might be inadvertently reinforcing the field's structural limitations.

Assess and align philanthropic strategies. Funders that are committed to strengthening youth social change should honestly assess their funding patterns and whether they generate the field-level results they desire. This means understanding where funds are flowing, whether funding approaches are helping organizations gain the stability they need to grow, and whether the outcomes being measured reflect progress toward meaningful social change rather than just program activity. It also means considering the funder's role as a partner—one that convenes organizations, brokers relationships, amplifies the field's work publicly through organizational publications, and uses institutional relationships to open doors that organizations cannot open on their own.

Strengthen Organizational Capacity

Support alignment among organizations. Organizations are eager to learn from one another and collaborate, but misalignment on core concepts and frameworks limits what that collaboration can achieve. Philanthropic investments in shared learning can yield some of the highest returns, creating opportunities for organizations across the continuum to develop shared language, assess their work, identify best practices, understand each other's roles in the field, and build relationships that make coordination possible. This work requires more than occasional convenings; it calls for an ongoing process with dedicated resources, facilitation, and explicit engagement with the fundamentals of youth organizing across all organization types.

Provide differentiated support based on organizational needs. With a shared foundation established, the next opportunity for funders is to support organizations in moving young people from civic engagement to sustained collective influence. The type of support needed depends on where organizations sit along the Youth Engagement Continuum. Leadership organizations can benefit from strengthening their theories of change, connecting programmatic work to civic engagement and organizing, and developing the infrastructure for meaningful youth decision-making. Civic engagement organizations need support for deepening membership structures, leadership pathways, and long-term strategy. Organizing groups need greater staffing capacity, stronger coordination infrastructure, and clearer pathways that connect youth organizing to the broader social movement ecosystem. Recognizing these different needs will allow funders to reinforce organizational strengths while addressing the constraints that are most likely to limit future growth.

Identify current technical assistance capacity and gaps. A healthy social change field needs technical assistance partners that help organizations strengthen their strategies, practices, and internal capacity. These intermediaries can play an essential role by providing coaching, facilitating peer learning, developing shared tools and curricula, and maintaining institutional knowledge about what works.

Funders interested in strengthening Washington's youth social change ecosystem should assess the state's existing technical assistance infrastructure, identify important gaps, and incorporate capacity-building partners into broader funding strategies. Those partners may include national organizations with deep organizing expertise along with regional organizations that can provide sustained relationship-based support.

Foster a More Connected Field

Invest in convenings and learning exchanges at multiple levels. Organizations consistently noted the absence of regular convening spaces as a barrier to collaboration. Funders can help address this gap by working with leaders in the field to design and host recurring local, regional and statewid e gatherings that strengthen relationships, facilitate peer learning and create opportunities to develop shared strategies. National funders are particularly well positioned to connect Washington organizations with peers in states where youth organizing infrastructure has developed over longer periods (such as California and Michigan), creating opportunities to exchange lessons, strengthen practice and build relationships.

Broker relationships with adult-led social change organizations. Youth social change organizations are underrepresented within many of the state's established coalitions. Funders can play an important convening role by introducing youth organizations to labor unions, immigrant rights organizations, environmental coalitions, racial justice groups and other social movement partners. Those relationships can strengthen youth influence within broader campaigns while developing pathways for young leaders to remain engaged as they transition beyond youth-specific organizations.

Fund organizations that can serve as local, regional and statewide organizing hubs. Building statewide capacity will require organizations that can serve as regional anchors for coordination, leadership development and shared strategy. In some parts of the state, those organizations already exist and need additional investment to expand their role. Elsewhere, particularly in rural communities, building stronger regional infrastructure might require supporting the creation of new organizations, including intermediaries or networks that can connect otherwise isolated groups.

> "There is...a lack of coordination between the youth entities. Even us here...would we really be meeting like this if it wasn't for a grant pool? I'm so grateful that we have it. And it's also: How do we continue that?... I've been in the youth organizer [space] for five and a half years across the state, and every day I encounter a new youth organization that's either youth-serving or youth-led."
>
> — MYL cohort member

Distribute Resources Equitably and Sustainably

Create collaborative funding mechanisms. Pooled funds and other collaborative funding mechanisms can build philanthropic alignment, enable strategic investment in the field, reduce administrative burden on organizations, and ensure that funding priorities reflect the actual needs of the field rather than the preferences of any single institution. These types of funding vehicles work best when grantee organizations can contribute meaningful input during the design and implementation process.

Move toward multiyear general operating support. Power-building is not a program. It is an organizational capacity built over years through accumulated relationships, repeated practice, and the ongoing development of leaders. Providing funding on annual cycles and tying it to deliverables is often counterproductive to the work. Providing multiyear general operating support, in contrast, gives organizations the flexibility to plan strategically, retain staff, strengthen infrastructure, and respond to emerging opportunities without sacrificing long-term priorities.

Case Studies

Detroit Youth Organizing for Power and the California Youth Power Fund

Building a strong and sustainable regional youth organizing field requires many stakeholders to come together with focus and a shared commitment to collaborate closely over the long term. Across the country, funders and organizers are running experiments in this direction—and generating lessons directly relevant to Washington state. Detroit Youth Organizing for Power (DYOP) and the California Youth Power Fund (YPF) are two emerging bright spots in this work.

Detroit Youth Organizing for Power

Detroit's organizing field has real depth. The city has a long organizing history and a wide range of active approaches and traditions. That richness comes with complexity, as organizations draw on different frameworks for what power-building means, which can create challenges when approaches are not aligned or coordinated. Simultaneously, funders in the Detroit region are grappling with a familiar question: After decades of top-down, outcome-driven grantmaking, what does it take to fund power-building at the grassroots level in a way that is meaningfully collaborative?

In 2022, the Skillman Foundation approached FCYO to conduct a landscape scan of youth organizing in Detroit and the surrounding region, prompted by an institutional commitment to strengthening youth organizing and an awareness that interest alone was not sufficient to gain the required trust or knowledge to do that successfully. The scan drew on nearly 40 interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted over the course of a year, along with meetings of a 15-person advisory council composed of Detroit-based youth social change leaders in which they discussed challenges they faced in their work. The Skillman Foundation research revealed many challenges that parallel those in Washington: lack of clarity on strong organizing practices, chronic resource scarcity, lack of alignment on young people's role in social change, lack of connections between youth social change organizations and the broader movement ecosystem, and the difficulty of building power in hostile political conditions. The resulting report, "Power and Potential: Youth Organizing in Southeast Michigan," provided an overview of the local and regional landscape—including organizers' insights on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities facing the field—and identified a youth organizing field primed for growth, given the right conditions.

Over the next two years, a cross-section of stakeholders in Detroit's youth organizing field, including both organizers and funders, worked to align around a shared vision of what strong organizing practice looks like, what youth-led power-building requires, and how funders should weigh their own judgments against community-based decision-making. In addition to monthly alignment-building sessions, the group took a joint learning tour to study youth organizing groups elsewhere in the country that had made advances by honestly assessing their power-building practices and making adjustments accordingly. This experience revealed real differences in perspective among organizers and funders alike, and by working through them rather than smoothing them over or deferring discussion, the group produced a set of grounding assertions about the field's key challenges. Those assertions informed the design and funding of a resulting program, Detroit Youth Organizing for Power.

DYOP is a two-phase, cohort-based grantmaking and capacity-building program supported by a pooled fund. Its overarching goals include:

- Promote unity, collaboration, and coordination among a core group of youth-led and intergenerational organizing groups
- Support cultivation of shared values, vision, and strategy for field-wide movement building
- Align around a shared standard of organizing praxis, deepening the field's ability to build collective power
- Deepen organizational strength to support long-term sustainability
- Create opportunities for funders to learn from and work alongside youth organizers to deepen understanding of their work and align funding

In its first year, DYOP moved $1 million in grants to 10 organizations, paired with targeted support via four program components:

- Monthly Community of Practice sessions that brought cohort organizations together for shared learning, relationship-building, and peer support, reducing isolation and competition across the field
- Supervisor training for adult staff who manage or mentor youth organizers, focused on trauma-informed leadership, youth-adult power dynamics, and sustainable supervision practices that prevent burnout
- Coaching, provided by a national organizing training organization, that offers strategic guidance and responsive support around leadership development, organizational systems, and campaign planning, adapted to each organization's context and pace
- Technical Assistance Grants that provide low-burden, flexible funding for critical capacity needs such as fiscal sponsorship, technology upgrades, infrastructure, facilitation, or evaluation.

The first phase of DYOP concluded in the summer of 2025. Participants developed a common understanding of the pillars of building grassroots power and assessed their own work against that framework. Beyond monthly sessions, organizations had the opportunity to put shared learning into practice through collaboration around a ballot initiative, strengthening relationships and testing coordinated work in a real-world campaign. The phase 1 evaluation is now underway and will inform the next phase of the program, which will again be co-designed by organizers and local philanthropic partners, and will broaden the work to explore a more ecosystem-wide approach shaped by regional conditions.

The California Youth Power Fund

The California Youth Power Fund is a statewide collaborative fund dedicated to strengthening the long-term infrastructure of California's youth organizing ecosystem. YPF was initiated in 2020 through a partnership between Youth Organize! California (YO! Cali) and a coalition of funding partners that recognized both the tremendous impact of youth organizing and the chronic underinvestment in the field. While youth organizers were leading (and have always led) campaigns to transform schools, communities, and statewide policy, funding for long-term organizing infrastructure remained fragmented, short-term, and insufficient. Rather than creating another traditional grant program, the partners set out to co-design a fund alongside the youth organizing field itself. Youth organizers, social movement leaders, and funders worked together to develop the fund's priorities, governance structure, and grantmaking approach, led by YPF's partnership with YO! Cali. This collaborative design process focused on participatory decision-making, trust-based philanthropy, and a commitment to shifting power to those closest to the work.

Today, YPF's mission is to support youth leadership, civic engagement, and youth-led organizing so young people can have the power, capacity, and resources to advance lasting social, economic, environmental, and civic change. To realize its mission, YPF practices multiyear, trust-based grantmaking that shares power: Young people and social movement leaders shape funding priorities and grantmaking decisions, ensuring that investments serve the communities most affected. Beyond funding individual organizations, YPF also aims to invest in the broader conditions that allow youth organizing to thrive over the long term, including, but not limited to, leadership development and capacity building, organizational sustainability, cross-regional collaboration, and stronger partnerships between social movement leaders and funders.

YPF views grantmaking as one component of a stronger statewide youth organizing ecosystem. In addition to providing multiyear general operating support, YPF invests in the relationships, learning spaces, and infrastructure that help organizations and the broader field grow together. This work includes:

- Convening youth organizations and funders through statewide learning events
- Supporting cross-regional relationship building and collaboration among youth organizing organizations through deep partnership with YO! Cali
- Creating opportunities for shared learning among funders and social movement leaders around trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking
- Strengthening statewide infrastructure by expanding investments into historically under-resourced regions, including the Central Valley and Southern California
- Supporting youth leadership and participatory governance so young people can directly influence funding priorities and strategic direction
- Building visibility for the youth organizing field through storytelling, communications, and knowledge sharing that elevate successful organizing models and encourage greater long-term investment

Since making its first grants in 2021, YPF has continued to evolve through ongoing learning with grantee partners, youth leaders, and funders. To date, it has moved $6.6 million into the field of youth organizing across the state and now maintains a full-time staff.

YPF is expanding from a Northern California focus to becoming a truly statewide initiative, mobilizing coordinated funder investment to strengthen youth organizing infrastructure across Northern California, the Central Valley. and Southern California.

Closing Thoughts

Washington state is at an important moment in the development of its youth social change ecosystem. As this landscape scan has shown, the field comprises organizations with deep roots, committed staff, and genuine relationships with the communities they serve; young people who are politically engaged and hungry to lead; and funders with both the capacity for and interest in making a significant difference. What the field lacks is not energy or commitment—it lacks the infrastructure, capacity-building support, and sustained investment needed to allow organizations to coordinate in a way that compounds that energy and commitment over time.

The recommendations in this landscape scan are offered as a starting point for this work, grounded in what organizations have said they need and lessons from the national field. They will, of course, need to be refined through ongoing conversation with organizations, tested against the realities of implementation, and adjusted as the field develops. Building a powerful field will take time as well as a willingness among funders to measure success not by the number of attendees at an advocacy day, but by whether the conditions of young people's lives are actually changing to reflect the world they desire and deserve.



Courtesy of FEEST










Allen Family Philanthropies

FCYO