



**FUNDERS FOR
A JUST ECONOMY**



NFG NEIGHBORHOOD
FUNDERS GROUP
Connecting people, place and power

BUILDING POWER IN PLACE

**Houston: Breaking the Cycles of
Disaster, Displacement and Disenfranchisement**

contents

INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT.....2

INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS4

 OUR METHODOLOGY4

 OUR ANALYTICAL APPROACH.....5

INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE CYCLES.....8

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: GEOGRAPHY & DEMOGRAPHICS..... 11

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: CAPITAL & CORPORATIONS.....16

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LABOR.....19

THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LAND24

 Parents, Workers, and Shaping Public Investment.....28

POWER IN PLACE: GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE29

 Houston’s Strong Mayor, For Business29

 No Election Too Small, No Pre-Emption Off Limits.....29

 Mobilizing Harris County, Redefining Blue Politics 31

POWER IN PLACE: THE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE 33

 From Cycles to Civic Power 33

 Local Strategies, National Impact 35

 Building Back, Better Than Ever.....37

 The Deeper Victories 38

POWER IN PLACE: WHERE FUNDERS FIT.....40

 Local & Regional Funders.....40

 National Funder Engagement.....40

REDEFINING POWER: 7 PATHWAYS TO ACTION42

 #1 Houston is in motion, but outside ideas about Texas are often stuck... 42

 #2 People power is the real return on investment..... 42

 #3 Build up movements before you stand up tables..... 44

 #4 Recognize the links among civic and economic power-building - and coordinate funding across these areas. 44

 #5 Innovations in organizing in Houston require innovations in funding. . 45

 #6 Help funder peers move from fear to trust. 46

 #7 No election, no organization, no community is too small; no dream for change is too big in Houston or Texas..... 46



WHO WE ARE



Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG) is a network of national and local grantmakers throughout the U.S. We bring together funders to learn, connect, and mobilize resources with an intersectional and place-based focus. We create inspiring organizing spaces for funders to explore shifting power and money in philanthropy towards justice and equity. Our member network includes donors, philanthropic institutions, and their staff interested in supporting racial, economic, gender, and climate justice movements across the US.

Leading the Building Power in Place project, **Funders for a Just Economy (FJE)** is a program of NFG committed to advancing the philanthropic conversation around intersectional economic justice and workplace power. We are committed to placing organized labor, worker centers, worker justice campaigns, policy efforts, and organizing strategies at the center of our efforts. Partner groups address the disparate impact of economic policies on people of color, women, migrants, and low-income individuals and families. Two of our key programs include (1) Meeting the Moment, creating collaborations for a just future of work(ers) that also addresses long-term racial, gender and climate justice and (2) Labor's Evolution, strengthening ties among labor unions, community-based organizations and philanthropy and charting new directions in worker-led organizing.

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FUNDERS FOR A JUST ECONOMY

INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT

The newest uprisings for Black lives, accelerated in 2020, not only put Black-led organizing at center stage, but it also remapped the ways philanthropic and other institutions think about power to incorporate the South and Midwest. So too has the success in shifting state-level power and national electoral results in Georgia and Virginia. Yet places like Houston, Texas are rarely on the radar as hubs of change, often coming to national headlines in times of disaster. Yet such a headline-driven view obscures both active changes and the seeds of long-term transformation to build power.

More broadly, the impulse and intention to direct new resources to the South and Midwest and to rural communities can often be met with confusion on where to even begin - or with rapid action wrapped in assumptions on what works where. This can translate into frustration in these underfunded areas as local movements for change are bypassed for more well-resourced groups with national reach, or are asked to replicate one model that may not fit local geography, history, and power relations.

When it comes to expanding the geographic reach of funding to support lasting change on inequality, in other words, mobilizing resources must be met with a deeper knowledge of and partnerships with Black, Indigenous,

migrant, and people of color-led movements rooted in place. Local funders, too, must also be considered in this landscape and as potential partners.

Building Power in Place emerges from a recognition that there is no “one size fits all” solution to addressing low-wage worker issues and economic inequality in the US, especially if we want to pay attention to race, gender and climate. In fact, many challenges workers and low-income communities face are place-based or geographic. Think about how local policies like a \$15 minimum wage can be undercut by state pre-emption, or the power that corporate forces like Amazon or agri-business exert in rural and exurban places. This has never been more clear than under COVID-19, where essential worker protections are a complex patchwork, and often include battles among local cities and state governments in intervening in dangerous industries like meatpacking.

We ask: How are low-wage workers and organizations that represent them addressing unequal economic, health conditions, given the complex geography of power in the US? Where are their connections among places in terms of both what low-income Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities face and how they organize? What role are funders playing – and where can they shift – to best respond to the specific place-based conditions related to economic justice?

This project is as much a research process rooted in community voices as it is an active process to help forge a shared understanding among funders, community, and labor organizations, and other key stakeholders through listening, learning, and building together.

Generously funded by the Public Welfare Foundation, BPP has **3 goals**:

#1 Identify specific urban and rural communities with organizing, policy advocacy and other efforts regarding economic justice for low-wage workers and understand how conditions are shaped by place-based factors such as state preemption. Deepen knowledge of the ways in which organizations respond to geographically-specific conditions and the ways they tangibly shift power and the economic prospects for low wage workers.

#2 Bridge donors, funders, and organizations engaged in related areas - including workforce development, community health and equity - regarding building power for workers. Share more information about worker-led strategies shifting precarious conditions and creating new visions of the economy in places that have not traditionally received significant funding for movement-building and grassroots organizing.



#3 Build and strengthen relationships with local and regional funders in the identified communities through larger events on issues facing marginalized workers, and facilitate a deeper relationship to national funders, community groups, and NFG.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROCESS

OUR METHODOLOGY

BPP is driven by interviews, public conversations and informal dialogue as qualitative research. Each site was selected in partnership with our member organizations, with community groups where we have partnerships, and with our NFG programs. They were narrowed down through a process where we mapped places (1) outside the more conventional sites of significant foundation funding; (2) where NFG programs had active ties, in order to build on our prior commitments and ensure longevity of work; (3) where there was active worker organizing and/or locally-specific manifestations of anti-worker policy (for example, state preemption.) Sites were then filtered to include a diversity of rural-urban or state/local relationships, and to ensure spread across South, Midwest, and rural regions.

At each site, we interviewed local community, family, and collaborative grantmakers, as well as state/national funders with a strong and active

presence in a location. Interview outreach for foundations was conducted via existing NFG networks and community partner recommendations. We then snowballed to map out a wider network of funders and to determine which officers and staff would be the appropriate interviewees. Questions included what the interviewee viewed as the most pressing economic justice issues; how foundations supported work to change these conditions; what challenges they faced in distributing funding; and what gaps they see in local and regional funding related to economic justice. Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour, and were recorded with transcripts.

We also interviewed and held open info-gathering conversations with labor and community organizations, an approach designed to both gather data and foster new connections among these movements and foundations. Partners for this are selected based on analysis of active worker-led organizing; groups were selected that (1) are led by BIPOC, including in management, (2) work across labor unions and community organizations, and (3) include an emphasis on intersectional organizing. Outreach was conducted to interview leadership of these groups through various networks, including other NFG programs. In the case of Houston, we conducted more than a dozen in-depth interviews.





Figure 1: Houston's West Street Recovery cof-ounder teaches newer members, volunteers, and community members how to repair broken pipes during the deep freeze of 2021 (Winter storm Uri).

Our virtual Strategy Session in May 2021 ([“A New Social Contract for Houston: Expanding Labor and Civic Power, from Construction to Climate”](#)) also allowed us to gather perspectives and actively foster relationships among funders and organizations. The session was advertised through NFG

and other networks to local, regional, and national funders, and featured organizations profiled in this report.

Quotes are anonymized to protect confidentiality. Qualitative data was supplemented and fact-checked with secondary source academic literature, labor and economic statistics (most significantly from the University of Southern California Equity Research Initiative (ERI)/PolicyLink [National Equity Atlas](#)) newspapers, and other media.

OUR ANALYTICAL APPROACH

How do we begin to get a grasp on the local economy? To start to address this, we turned to a longer tradition of theory that views the economy as underpinned by **land, labor, and capital** (where corporations are subsumed). These three planks are not fixed containers, a long history of political and economic research tells us, but in fact, there is significant tension between the drive to commodify these and the social destruction reaped by free market ideas and practice. **Indigenous, Black radical, decolonial and/or feminist scholars and activists** have driven this point home repeatedly, **showing how we value land, labor and capital is never a given**. How we conceive of property or work can be transformed to better serve all life and reflect broader visions beyond the destructive, extractive



market – as it has been historically in certain indigenous, Black and other cultural traditions, and many strive today to make possible at a community level in many ways. While (racial) capitalist transformation has sought to make land, labor and capital solely profit-driven, there have been key moments of political transformation that have pushed back to redefine these economic elements more responsive to and rooted in social needs like care. In other words, these *Building Blocks* of the economy **not only shape power but are active sites where power is contested and challenged**. The terms of labor, land and capital (from the local on up) must be up for debate if we are to shift the systemic, historical inequalities that shape worker's lives. To highlight place dynamics tied to people and environment, we also look at geography and demographics as building blocks influencing the local economy.

In what ways then, do movements practically shift power on this complicated terrain? Significant new work has been done linking movements, funders, and practice in place. Focusing on the possibilities for progressive governance at the US state level, the **University of Southern California Equity Research Institute (USC ERI)** [*Changing States framework*](#) **lays out six key arenas for contesting and wielding governing power**. The research shows the electoral, legislative, judicial, administrative, communication, and corporate must each be addressed to make change

last. The USC ERI framework offers a critical intervention in both recognizing the specific ways power plays out at different geographic levels, but also where and how movements develop multi-issue, multi-faceted strategies that can take them from building bases and influencing decision-making towards wielding governing power. These arenas of governance thus form one leg of how *Power in Place* is enacted.

Frameworks like *Changing States* and related movement research helps address what capacities are necessary, such as a diverse coalitional and leadership development structures, to change arenas of governance. To understand more precisely how the specific economic landscape fits, we brought in a third area of research by scholar Beverly Silver and others on **the ways workers historically have shifted economic power**. First, workers can build associational power with political or community groups via legally-recognized forms. Second, they can wield their position in the market, such as striking when there are few options to replace them. Finally, they can leverage their position in a key industrial area or production process. Merging these complementary vantage points on progressive movement and worker power under *Movement Ecosystems*, we paid attention to **both the forms and strategies power-building takes** - and how these respond to and reshape local (and state, national, and global) economic building blocks.



Foundations are, of course, inseparable from movement capacities and strategic orientations to the economy, so we also include them in Power in Place. Our findings across these **lead to our roadmap on ways forward for philanthropic partners in change, *Redefining Power***. As all of our research is rooted in local realities, each of these recommendations will look different by place – though we anticipate commonalities that we will also use to inform our own responsibilities as a funder network.



Figure 2: Members of the leadership team from Living Hope Wheelchair Association. LHWCA organizes mostly-undocumented disabled Houston residents to claim their rights, fight health care access, and participate in civic and policy engagement; many are injured workers from Houston’s deadly and massive construction industry. (Photo credit: LHWCA)

Components	Key Elements	Key Questions
Building Blocks	Geography & Demography	What key contextual elements shape the landscape of economic & political power?
Building Blocks	Capital Labor Land	Where is economic power contained & sustained locally?
Power in Place	Arenas of Governance	Where and how do government and other institutional actors enact power over land, labor, and capital locally?
Power in Place	Movement Ecosystems Where Funders Fit	Where and how do movements organize and strategically wield power in the economic building blocks? Where do/how can funders play a role in this?

INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE CYCLES

Houston often comes on the radar of national funders with major disasters: Hurricane Harvey in 2017, the Deer Park Chemical Fires in 2019, the 2020 Texas deep freeze, even the persistent COVID-19 crises in a quickly-reopened state. The cyclical nature of disaster in Harris County and the broader region is increasingly an example of the persistent price of global climate crises, and a national and statewide shift to privatize infrastructure and prioritize corporate profits over the safety of life. Hopes, though, turn to Houston every few years when national elections roll around. Many progressive and liberal forces see the region as emblematic of the state's majority-minority future which helps inch statewide numbers from red to blue. On the flipside, business elites peddle a story of a "miracle" economy that has attracted big technology and energy companies and where billionaires build new homes and developers push through massive residential projects – mostly to openly spite "regulated" states.

Though coming from different value systems, both sets of narratives erase a critical element of Houston's rapidly-changing national and global role. How do regional economies expand and national elections shift? Who cleans up neighborhood streets after a hurricane, clears out toxic waste, or

bails out flood waters? How do whole new subdivisions or global tech headquarters really sprout up?

When you flip the view to that on the ground in Houston, a different story emerges. The people – often historically-rooted Black, Indigenous and Latinx, as well as more recent Asian-Pacific Islander migrants - whose work and energy is being exploited to sustain a global-scale energy economy, to build thousands of homes, to clean up disaster where the state has failed, and to rally voters for national parties, are making their voice heard in new ways. Labor and community allies have set a new path to move local construction from one of the deadliest industries in the US to a model of corporate accountability. Civic engagement groups are creating ties that rely less on electoral swings and more on building a culture of collective voice based on multi-racial, multi-issue organizing. Neighborhood groups and coalitions are stepping in where a laissez-faire/let-people-die state government abandoned them to generate networks of resilience and resistance – particularly in communities of color worst-hit by disaster. New Harris county officials have come to power thanks to cross-cutting mobilizations that have given everyday people a voice to stand up to state pre-emption on everything from mask mandates for COVID-19 to minimum wage and local hire for rebuilding efforts.





Figure 3: Workers Defense Project, Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation, and other members of the cross cutting Build Houston Better platform responding to Hurricane Harvey at a 2019 press conference announcing recent policy victories towards equitable, high-road recovery. (Photo Credit: WDP)

Rather than being the invisible subjects, Houston’s movements are not only answering deeper strategic, national, and global questions that funders grapple with, but also posing new ones. The Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor

Federation and Worker’s Defense Project are operating at the intersection of sectoral-level *and* local geographic strategies in focusing on construction through the successful Build Houston Better and WDP’s Better Builder Program. HOME Coalition and neighborhood groups like West Street Recovery are combining economic recovery and mutual aid with civic engagement to build a vision of alternative recovery and shared power that highlights *generations* of inequality. Houston Coalition for Equitable Community Development (HCEDD) is remaking community benefits into a deeper multi-issue organizing platform to shift the historically-Black Third Ward. Houston in Action is showing how groups working on immigrant rights, housing, environmental, abolition and other important issues can have ballot impacts yet still help push elected official accountability and support a persistent, organized voice for those not given a right to vote. And groups like Living Hope Wheelchair Association are bringing to the center undocumented disabled workers, many injured on construction jobs, to drive movements.

Many more organizations, some featured here and others just emerging, are showing why a siloed, campaign-centric approach to funding loses out on the real work for long-term change: the real daily, deep organizing that keeps protects whole workers, connects across communities, and leads to real shifts in power, even in the midst of deadly crises.



The fact is much of this change has happened *without* significant national and even local foundation involvement. As one organizer shared, “Houston is experiencing is a sense of awakening and a call for reckoning of the buildup of all of these race-based discriminatory practices and inequities over the generations. Communities are becoming more empowered and energized to start confronting these issues, but it’s being done with minimal deep investments.” As local foundations like Houston Endowment and Episcopal Health Foundation are adopting and funding Black-led equity groups and systems-change approach, funders like Simmons Foundations are driving much local support for organizing. National foundations like Ford, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Heising-Simons are bucking the trend of cyclical electoral and disaster-focused investment to look at long-term change and unrestricted, grassroots support. These are a start to Texas-sized (and really global-level) issues.

The next step is clear to organizers – and this report seeks to show funders at all scales where they can play a role. Regional, state, and ultimately national change starts on the ground in Houston in re-centering and organizing everyday people in the face of disaster, displacement and disinvestment. As one organizer boldly shared in our accompanying webinar, “We live in a state that doesn't care that people died in a freeze, that it doesn't care that vulnerable people died in a flood. Our people are

powerful because we've survived the intentional genocide and extermination that has happened in the state for many generations. And we're still here and we're going to continue to be here.” The question is: Will funders be there also, standing with and supporting community and worker-led organizations fully?



Figure 4: Houston's next generation: A Mi Familia Vota organizer, part of Houston In Action's coalitional efforts during the 2020 Elections. (Photo credit: Brandon Washington)



THE BUILDING BLOCKS: GEOGRAPHY & DEMOGRAPHICS

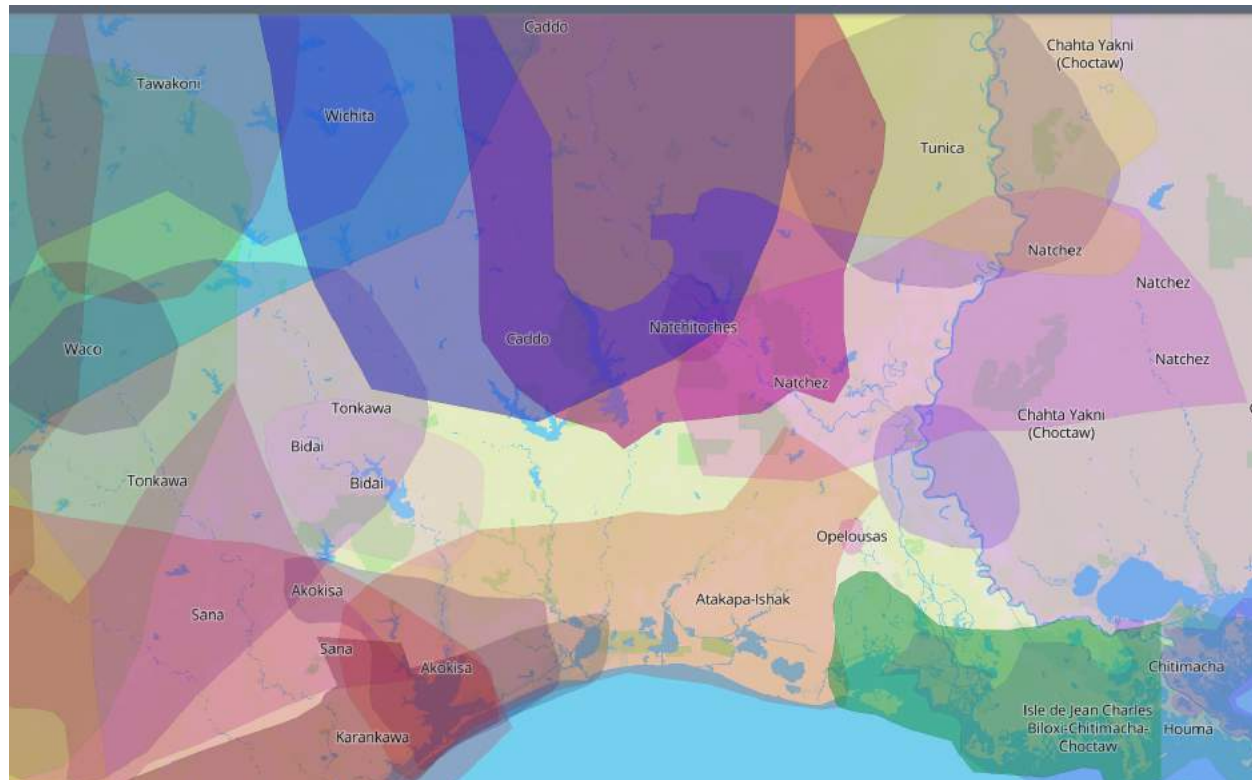


Figure 5: Map of indigenous lands in the Gulf Coast region. (Map Credit: Native-land.ca; see site for more info and how to support.)

#1 A Tunica-Biloxi saying proclaims, “**Tahch’ihchi ra inkniti, “Tahch’ihchi hishtahahki likat’ihch, Tonimahonisema hishtahaki hēhchi ‘ōnta.**” *The Sun strongly told us, “If the sun is shining, the Indian people are still here.”*¹

The Gulf Coast offered a vibrant and lush home for its traditional caretakers, including Atakapa, Karankawa, Tunica, Biloxi, Ofo, Choctaw, and Ayovel peoples who made home and brought life from what the settler colonists named Texas and Louisiana. The genocidal violence of European settlement decimated populations, destroyed harmony with the local ecology, and forced tribes to re-organize in smaller bands – a part of intergenerational environmental destruction and extractive land politics leading to today.

But indigenous tribes continue as the sun: a vibrant voice connected to and shaping Texas’ future. These include the Atakapa-Ishak nation, which continues to meet in community and still fights to gain federal recognition.² Similarly, the Tunica-Biloxi brought together different tribes and became one of four federally recognized tribes (in Louisiana), engaging recently in a process of Tunica language reclamation.³ More than 70,000 Native residents live in Houston today, yet the closest Bureau of Indian Affairs office lies in

¹ See: <https://www.tunicabiloxi.org/>

² See: <http://www.atakapa-ishak.org/>

³ See: <https://www.tunicabiloxi.org/>



Oklahoma, some 460-miles away.⁴ The Tunica-Biloxi have newly constructed the [American Indian Center of Houston](#), opened in February 2020, offering services, workshops, and other community space. That same year, spurred in part by the death of Carrizo- Coahuiltecan nation elder Enrique Hynes, young Indigenous leaders also fought for the city's recognition of Indigenous People's Day and the removal of a Columbus statue in the city.⁵

#2 Houston's history is shaped by the transformative struggles for abolition and Black liberation – most famously tied to the history of Juneteenth in Texas. In part embedded in the Jim Crow regime, in part a destination for rural migrants from other Gulf regions fleeing deep South violence, Houston became a hub of emancipated Black life post-Civil War and the first half of the 20th Century.⁶ While the Fourth Ward, or Freedmen's Town, are among the most recognized centers of Black life (see text box), the Third and Fifth Ward are also key neighborhoods- the former being where police murder victim George Floyd grew up. Hemmed in by redlining and targeted by hyper-policing tied to the war on drugs beginning in the 1970s, these neighborhoods were stripped of state resources.



Figure 6: George Floyd Mural in Houston's Third Ward, where Floyd was born. Artist @visualpaint, photo by C2CK Photography (CC)

Multi-generational exclusion has driven many mostly-Black residents into poverty – with more than half of Third Ward residents holding an income of less \$10,000.⁷ Yet, as cycles of dis/investment have shifted, these neighborhoods have been targeted for gentrification, and residents have mobilized faith and community groups to curb this displacement. Working to preserve housing and businesses in sites like Third Ward's Emancipation Park (and newly, Avenue), Black communities have brought to the public the central role they play in Houston's past, present, and future.⁸

⁴ Martinez, Katrina (2020). "New Native American center opens to serve Houston's underserved indigenous community." *The Cougar*. March 25.<http://thedailycougar.com/2020/03/25/native-american-center-houston/>

⁵ Whalen, Emma (2020). "Heights resident pushes Houston community to honor its Indigenous history." *Community Impact Newspaper*. Nov. 9. <https://communityimpact.com/houston/heights-river-oaks-montrose/people/2020/11/09/heights-resident-pushes-houston-community-to-honor-its-indigenous-history/>

⁶ Pruitt, Bernadette (2013). *The Other Great Migration The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941*. Texas A&M.

⁷ Blach, Trevor (2020). "Why Black People Are Being Displaced From Houston's Third Ward." *US News*. June 18.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2020-06-18/how-gentrification-is-displacing-black-people-from-george-floyds-childhood-neighborhood-in-houston>

⁸ Minsker, Justin (2018). "The Story of Houston's Third Ward and Emancipation Avenue." Texas Historical Commission.

<https://www.thc.texas.gov/blog/story-houstons-third-ward-and-emancipation-avenue>



#3 Houston is also entangled in Texas’ history as part of Mexico, and both long-term settlers and long-term migration from Mexico and Central America. According to 2010 Census data, nearly 20% of the Houston-Galveston region was US-born Latinx, and 15% Latinx born outside the US.⁹ Most of this population was Mexican, but a significant portion Salvadoran.

Cross-border solidarity regarding but going beyond immigrant rights has critically influenced Houston’s political, economic, and cultural life. In late 2020, Houston lost activist Maria Jimenez to cancer at 70 – and her career embodied the immigrant rights and migrant leadership that reshaped Houston over decades.¹⁰ Joining the Mexican American Youth Organization as a student at University of Houston, she later ran for office as part of new emerging progressive Raza Unida ticket. Since then, she worked to support Mayan communities in Central Mexico, and locally helped support Central American workers, via Service Employees International Union (SEIU), bringing in 2006 a first-ever union contract for 5,300 janitors resulted in a 47% pay increase.¹¹ She also created the South Texas Human Rights Center.

⁹ Policylink & PERE (2013). An Equity Profile of the Houston-Galveston Region. USC PERE. More at <https://nationalequityatlas.org/find-resources/library/an-equity-profile-of-houston-galveston-addendum>

¹⁰ Trovall, Elizabeth (2020). “Maria Jimenez, Influential Immigrant Rights Activist, Dies At 70.” *Houston Public Radio*. Dec 4. “<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/houston/2020/12/04/387157/maria-jimenez-influential-immigrant-rights-activist-dies-at-70/>

¹¹ Matt Vidal and David Kusnet (2009). *Organizing Prosperity: Union Effects on Job Quality, Community Betterment, and Industry Standard*. Economic Policy Institute and UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

Jimenez’s work represents the multi-generational nature of Latinx activism in Houston linking across Central America and Mexico, indigenous and Black communities, and labor, community and civic power – most recently helping propel progressive Latina Lina Hidalgo to County Judge.¹²



Figure 7: Legendary Houston immigrant rights and transnational activist Maria Jimenez, who passed away at 70 from cancer in 2020. (Photo Credit: Houston History Magazine/SEIU Local 1.)

While Texas has passed an unprecedented ban on sanctuary city laws (thereby giving police the right to inquire on immigration status),¹³ Houston organizers have built grassroots and, at the county, civic power to pass policies that, as one interviewee noted, “have certainly flown in the face of state [migration] policy.” These include creating a \$2 million fund in 2020 through the Harris County Commissioner Court to support free legal services for those facing deportation in any Houston’s detention centers.¹⁴

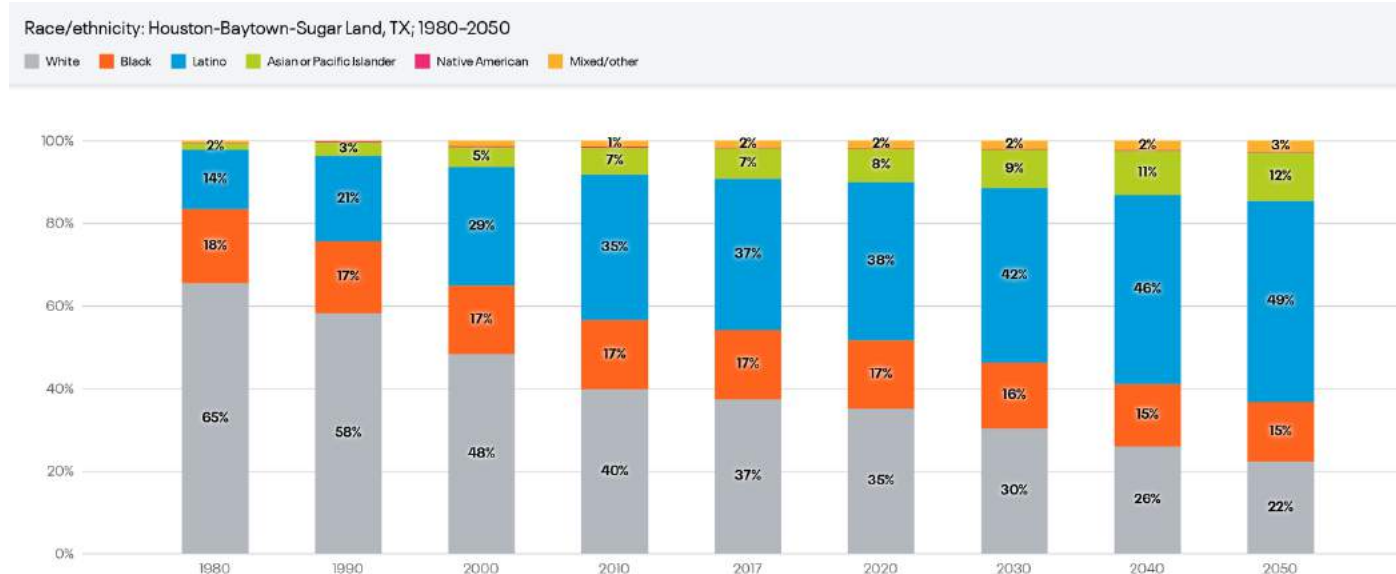
¹² Gomez, Denise (2015). “Maria Jimenez: A Life of Activism.” *Houston History Magazine*. <https://houstonhistorymagazine.org/2015/07/a-life-of-activism-maria-jimenez/>

¹³ Mansoor, Sanya and C. Pollock (2017).

¹⁴ Guttin, Andrea (2021). “Revisting Victory: The Path to an Immigrant Legal Service Fund.” HILSC. <https://www.houstonimmigration.org/ilsf-one-year/>



Figure 8: Changing demographics in the Houston Metro Region. (Chart Credit: USC ERI/Policylink National Equity Atlas.)



Data source: U.S. Census Bureau; Woods & Poole Economics, Inc.; National Equity Atlas

#4 The Houston-Galveston region ranked 9th most diverse in US large metropolitan regions, surpassing other Southern cities such as Atlanta and Houston. It is also the 5th most populous region – growing a stunning 20% from the 2010 to the estimated 2020 census.¹⁵ More than 7% of the region’s

¹⁵ Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas Totals: 2010-2020". United States Census Bureau, Population Division. May 2021.

¹⁶ Ernst, SaraWilli. (2021). "Houston Hasn't Seen A Spike In Anti-Asian Hate, But Experts Say The Data Is Unreliable." *Houston Public Media*. <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/criminal-justice/2021/03/29/394530/is-the-spike-in-anti-asian-hate-happening-in-houston/>

residents identify as Asian Pacific Islander (US and foreign-born), most prominently Vietnamese, South Asian and Chinese or Taiwanese. The experiences of Houston’s Asian migrants are often less-visible, and many organizations note how underserved these groups are with resources regarding reporting hate violence, but also in general towards accessing social services.¹⁶ Organizations like OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates have been a long-term voice (since 1979) creating space for the specific needs of API communities, most recently in conversations on the Census 2020, equitable disaster recovery, and COVID-19 protections.

#5 Often those learning about Houston underestimate not just the diversity but the size of the region which covers nearly 10,000 square miles. Under the Woodlands-Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) are nine Texas counties (Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery and Waller), which include 124 incorporated cities and 33 census designated places. The region is larger than New Jersey or Connecticut.¹⁷

¹⁷ ClickHouston (2021). "Just the facts: 31 facts and figures show just how impressive the Greater Houston area is." *ClickHouston*. <https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2020/05/17/just-the-facts-31-facts-and-figures-show-just-how-impressive-the-greater-houston-area-is/>



While a point of pride for some, transportation across the region is a “huge issue.” Even larger: uniting political and social demands across the diverse suburban/exurban-ized region. Yet this is precisely part of its importance to a national conversation: with further suburban demographic shifts towards BIPOC communities, Houston is a place to look for concerted efforts to bridge movements across both suburban and small cities, and to set a new vision for the region.

Forging Freedom in the Fourth Ward

Founded right after the US Civil War, Freedmantown or Freedmen’s Town in Houston embodies the struggle for self-determination, formed by liberated enslaved people, who came into the city from plantations and settled in the Buffalo Bayou lands. In Houston’s Fourth Ward, the neighborhood would come to, over time, become a hub for Black institutions, professionals, intellectuals and property owners.¹⁸ While the neighborhoods had been a home to Black residents pre-Civil War, this was a turning point that made Freedmen’s

Town as the “mother ward” of Black Houston. In 1938, the city used eminent domain to take over large chunks of the Town to build new public housing, which ended up occupied by mostly white residents. Yet this did not stop the permeation of Black community life throughout the Fourth Ward.

Over time, Freedman’s Town has been designated a historical district, a process that had been in part hoped to help stem gentrification and to create a space for Black business and home ownership in the early 2000s. But these efforts were unable to stem the rapid redevelopment into townhouses and mid-rise units. Today, much of the original landscape has been wiped out, except for – in the words of the *Houston Chronicle* – “the street layout, a park with remnants of a church and bricks handmade by [formerly enslaved people]” that residents had to fight to keep intact. This has put even deeper meaning and passion behind Black community-led efforts to retain other historic regions, like the Third Ward.

¹⁸ McDavid, C., Bruner, D., & Marcom, R. (2008). Urban Archaeology and the Pressures of Gentrification: Claiming, Naming, and Negotiating “Freedom” in Freedmen’s Town, Houston. *Bulletin of the Texas Archaeological Society*, 79(10), 37-52.



THE BUILDING BLOCKS: CAPITAL & CORPORATIONS

#1 When it comes to Texas' economy, it's hard to avoid the state's self-declared reputation as a "miracle." What this translates to is that the state has championed itself as a refuge for corporations fleeing the taxes and regulation present in other states. Indeed, many companies have made dramatic exits to cities like Austin, Dallas and Houston. Of course, some of these stories are far less spectacular than they seem – often just amounting to the moving of particular operations, or wealthy CEO's shifting homes. This trend is also in character with global capitalism's constant movement since the 1950s to where companies can get incentives and where labor protections are low. Silicon Valley companies have been especially vocal and favored Austin in their moves. Houston has also sought to attract these companies, a new home to some parts of Google's operations and to financial technologies ("FinTech") like Bill.com.

But more than just the promise of a free-market haven is real public incentives and dollars put towards attracting capital. The statewide Texas Enterprise Fund as well as Chapter 380/381 (city/county) agreements have

been estimated to give out \$1.76 billion annually.¹⁹ Yet the real benefits of these moves have yet to be seen. Research demonstrates that across the state, the expense doled out does not match up to the reward, with far less direct jobs created locally than promised and with even fewer going to local companies.



Figure 9: Data and infographic from Workers Defense Project & Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, LBJ School of Public Affairs (2015). *The Failed Promise of the Texas Miracle*. Austin: WDP. Avail at: <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/40971>

¹⁹ Workers Defense Project & Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, LBJ School of Public Affairs (2015). *The Failed Promise of the Texas Miracle*. Austin: WDP. Avail at: <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/40971>



#2 Houston also continues to welcome a steady stream of relocating oil, gas, and energy companies – a long-time staple of the region, with deadly results for its residents. One interviewee called the city “at its core, a petro-chemical state,” which is in part tied to its port location and ability to move supply across the Gulf Coast. The assumed dependence of the economy is especially challenging when it comes to not just labor organizing, but also to the ways fossil fuel money supports philanthropy regionally, as we’ll discuss later. In reality, as noted in the next section, growing health, retail, logistics and other sectors employ far more people than oil and gas, and the economy has shifted tremendously since the 1970s peaks of oil and gas power locally. Yet fossil fuel company propaganda and power is significant - shown in the ways wind power was falsely blamed for the collapse of electricity during the 2021 deadly freeze.

#3 Incentives flow as well to attract larger developers, who have driven speculative commercial and residential construction tied to the steady stream of wealthy new companies. As one interviewee shared, “The city likes to create tax havens and give incentives that they say boost the economy, but these only really help the top 1% of developers and executives. It doesn't really help workers.” Companies are able to broker deals that allow them to grab land that is public, as well operate with few obligations – even to the safety of their workforce. One of the great ironies

of Houston capitalism is that for a supposed free-market haven, real estate and construction company power really magnified dramatically after Hurricane Harvey, siphoning federal disaster investment and relying heavily on public dollars.

Alongside real estate companies is a construction industry that, while profiting from mega “sweetheart deals” – like the one Rice Management Company secured in the Third Ward (see below), is itself fissured and subcontracted. The decentralized structure means that, as one organizer shared, “most workers are working for smaller employers with limited capital, which pushes responsibility to the smallest contractor who has least ability to pay for things that good employer needs to provide.” Not coincidentally, major estate and construction companies are the largest donors to Texas’ dominant Republican party – further shielding them from accountability while boosting their profit at taxpayers’ expense.

#4 “In Texas it’s easier to have the big truck, the big house, those consumer comforts, but now with climate change we are starting to see the cost of all that,” one organizer explained. The price of the “everything is bigger in Texas” story, of the fact that the massive region is also home to more than a third of the country’s oil and gas companies, of a global port – all tied to corporate power – is layers of toxins permeating water, air, and earth. This



lung-crushing burden falls on BIPOC neighborhoods like the Fifth Ward, which has at least two cancer clusters affecting children and adults. Yet corporations, in part exerting influence at the state over regulation, have curbed the ability to mitigate or stop pollution. One interviewee shared, “We have so many chemicals in our air, and we don't have any right to know what has been released during the chemical spill.”

Activists like Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services have linked Houston to a larger “cancer alley” of petrochemical manufacturing in Louisiana, as the end-point for attempted tar sands pipelines like Keystone XL, and as a fundamental link to a global climate crisis. Towns like Manchester and Harrisburg – nearly all low-income BIPOC communities – have 22% higher risks of cancer than neighboring areas. There, high schools are built within a quarter-mile of three petrochemical plants, nearly 160,000 barrels a day of gasoline are produced in single plants, and tens of thousands of vehicles pass per day tied to the ports.²⁰

Yet, as much as Houston (and Texas) represents the power of petrochemical and other corporations, it is also in many ways a birthplace of the environmental justice movement. In 1979, famed researcher Dr. Robert

Bullard first helped sue the government for environmental racism in its attempt to site a massive landfill on Houston suburb that was 82% Black.²¹ At the heart of this crisis, according to one lifetime resident and organizer, is an “individualistic survival of the fittest mentality.” Events like the deep freeze made clear why some “white folks have the guns and bunker; they have no purpose, no intention in helping anyone. The government is set up that way – it provides no support, and you have to fight to survive.”

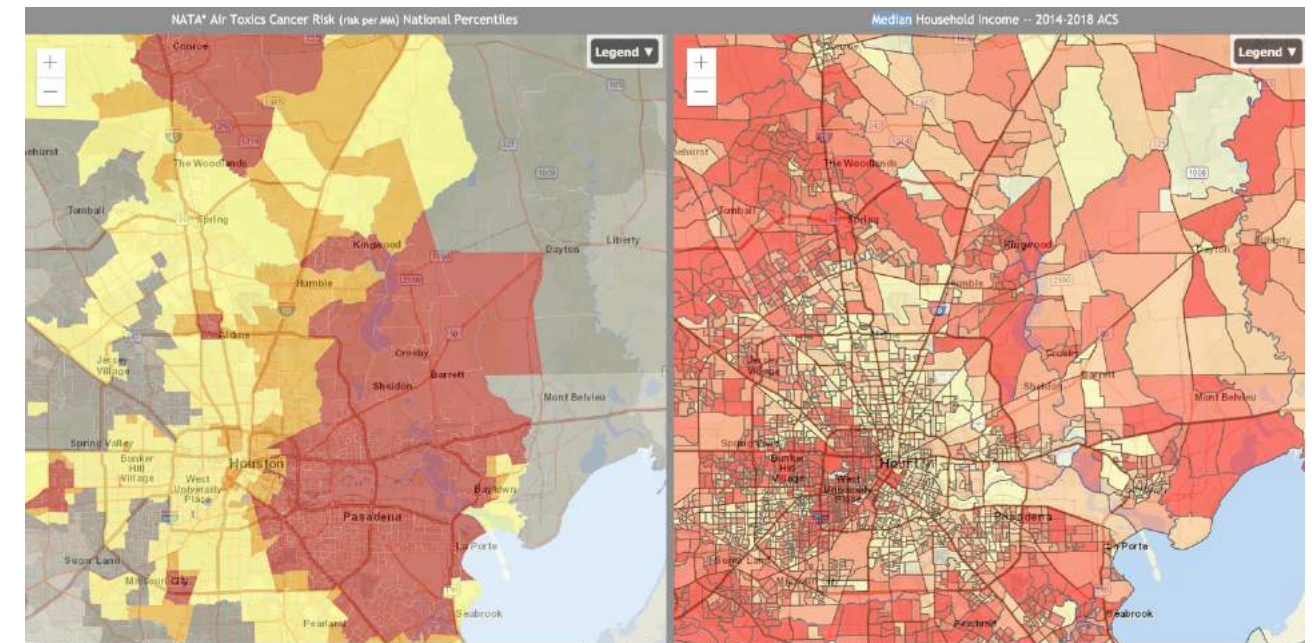


Figure 10: Houston/Woodlands region comparison of Air Toxics Cancer Risk (Right – Darker red = 95-100th percentile) to Income/Poverty Level (Left – light yellow = less than \$38K median income). (Chart credit: [EPA EJ Screen](#))

²⁰ Mankand, Raj (2017). “As Houston plots a sustainable path forward, it’s leaving this neighborhood behind.” Texas Tribune. Aug23. <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/08/23/houston-plots-sustainable-path-forward-its-leaving-neighborhood-behind/>

²¹ One of Dr. Bullard’s first research articles codifying environmental racism: Bullard, R. D. (1983). “Solid waste sites and the black Houston community.” *Sociological inquiry*, 53(2-3), 273-288.



THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LABOR

#1 According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data from May 2020, more than 13.8% of Houston’s regional jobs were concentrated in office and administrative (i.e. back office) support.²² 5.9% of workers were employed in construction, and 4.4% in related maintenance and repair, well above the national averages. Employment, on the other hand, in engineering, architecture, and business operations were lower than the national average, suggesting much of the more well-paying aspects connected to back office and construction are performed elsewhere.²³ Neither of these leading sectors are unionized, though construction, hospitality, aviation, janitors, and public employment are sites of much labor activism.

Across these industries, widening wage gaps persists, and directly contribute to inequalities in poverty. While overall 71% of workers earn \$15 an hour in 2017, less than 53% of Latinxs or 61% of BIPOC workers earn this much (compared to 84% of white workers).²⁴ This adds up to radical differences in poverty: as of 2017, 22% of Latinx residents live below 100% of

²² BLS (2020). “Occupational Employment and Wages in Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land – May 2020.” https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/occupationalemploymentandwages_houston.htm

²³ Cut another way, these sectors – office support, sales, transportation, food preparation, and construction also represent the highest portion of jobs per 100,000 (for example, 137 out of every 100,000 jobs is an office support occupation.). See BLS(2020). “May

the poverty line, as do 18% of Black residents, 9% of AAPI residents and 7% of white residents. For Latinx workers this represents an increase in the poverty level since 1980 and 1990, and an overall trend deepening inequality. (It’s important to note API data is not disaggregated, and does not show difference among AAPI communities). Overall, as Texas’s “miracle” has progressed, wage earnings for those in the lowest 10th and 20th percentiles saw wages *decline* by 25% for the former and 23% for the latter since 1980 (13% and 12% since 1990). Meanwhile, the highest 90th percentile saw their wages grow 23% since 1980 and 22% since 1990.

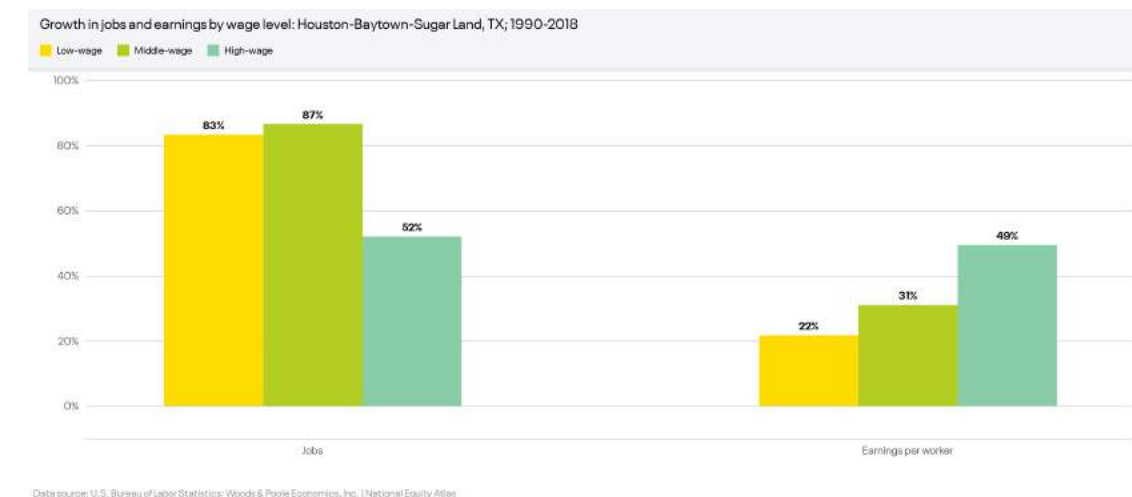


Figure 11: The story behind “miracle” job growth: low-wage jobs are increasing fastest, while high-wage earners see their incomes rise fastest in Houston. (Chart credit: USC ERI/Policylink National Equity Atlas)

2020 Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Area Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates.” https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_26420.htm

²⁴ Data in this paragraph from Policylink & ERI (2021). National Equity Atlas. See <https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/>



#2 While employing an estimated 1 in 13 Houstonians, construction is as much a source of jobs as it is a tremendous driver of the inequality described in #1. It's also one of the sectors where Houston's land, corporate, and labor crises converge – driving the “miracle.” Workers are necessary to support Houston's continual housing and commercial real estate boom. An army of building trades – skilled plumbers, electricians, painters, laborers, and more – make up nearly 20% of overall jobs. As one organizer pointed out, it doesn't take long for one to see “the disparities and a need for unions in the construction arena with such low wages, blatant safety violations and more inequalities ingrained into the culture of the construction world.” Yet the companies who benefit are shielded from responsibility through subcontracting chains and protection by government deals and lack of regulation.

Comprehensive construction research by Workers Defense Project (WDP) shows a statewide industry where the majority of workers are paid poverty-level wages. Nearly a quarter (22%) of construction workers are regularly denied payment for their work, i.e. wage theft; 50% are denied owed overtime, 41% are wrongly classified as independent contractors, and 78%

have no health insurance.²⁵ This has tremendous social consequences, not the least of which is forcing state social services, public health and hospitals, and other providers to absorb the costs of enforced poverty, workplace injuries, and other inequity.²⁶

#3 Compounding the challenges workers face is the lack of unionization that in many other US regions shaped improvement in workplace construction conditions. In construction, organizers noted that Texas construction is denied higher wages, protective gear, health care, and other benefits unionized workers receive in the Northern (and Western) US. Of course, a lack of union representation is a wider issue in Houston, where density is 4.0% (and Texas-wide 6.0%).²⁷ Other leading employment sectors remain vastly unorganized, most prominently the healthcare sector. The region is a hub for global medical tourism and care. It was not until 2008 that nurses in one Houston hospital became the first ever in the state to join National Nurses United.²⁸

The union difference is clear in the sparse sectors where workers have been able to achieve union rights. Houston's other big industries include food

²⁵ Workers Defense Project (2020). *Build a Better Texas: Construction Working Conditions in the Lone Star State*. UT Austin Division of Diversity & Community Engagement.

²⁶ Root, Jay (2014). “Hurting for Work.” *Texas Tribune*. <https://apps.texastribune.org/hurting-for-work/>

²⁷ BLS 2021. https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/unionmembership_texas.htm

²⁸ SF Business Times. (2008). Houston Hospital First in Texasto Join Nurses' Union.” <https://www.bizjournals.com/eastbay/stories/2008/03/31/daily5.html>



preparation and service, which employ 8.1% of workers.²⁹ The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 455 represents some 14,000 grocery workers, who were hit hard by COVID-19. More than 500 workers at Kroger were diagnosed from December 2020 to February 2021, in the midst of continual organizing for hazard pay, vaccine priority, better health care, and control over pensions.³⁰

#4 Hampering union power is the “right to work” state framework imposed by Texas conservative politicians and corporate donors, that – while not directly banning unions – foments a “free choice” ideology that unions are somehow restrictive to worker’s rights while reducing union membership and resources. Texas also holds the dubious honor of being the only US state where worker’s compensation is not required. More than half a million workers had no coverage, with 81% covered on the state’s system and 13.5% on private insurance plans (according to a comprehensive 2014 investigation).³¹ What compensation system exists is stacked against workers, with more than 40% of claims (and often closer to 50%) disputed and only about 30% resulting in a win for injured workers. As such, worker’s

compensation claims have dropped since 2007, even if injuries have not. Meanwhile, Texas persists in being the deadliest place for workers, year after year.³²



Figure 12: Organizers with Living Hope Wheelchair Association organize in the field, often reaching undocumented and low-wage workers injured by the construction industry and having no recourses for compensation.

These combined realities have a tangible effect on the bodies and minds of workers, who face disproportionate rates of death and disability caused by their worksites. Texas has ranked number one in workplace deaths in the U.S. for many years, with construction a main driver of this tragedy. Living Hope Wheelchair Association is the only

²⁹ BLS (2020). “Occupational Employment and Wages in Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land – May 2020.” https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/occupationalemploymentandwages_houston.htm

³⁰ Redman, Russel. (2020). “Kroger Houston, UFCW 455 spar over pay, health benefits.” *Supermarket News*. <https://www.supermarketnews.com/retail-financial/kroger-houston-ufcw-455-spar-over-pay-health-benefits> Drane, Amanda. (2021). “Union again hits Kroger over vaccines as cases in Houston spike.” *Houston Chronicle*. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/article/Kroger-union-calls-for-logic-in-approach-to-15937658.php>

³¹ Root, Jay (2014). “Behind the Texas Miracle, a Broken System for Broken Workers.” *Texas Tribune*, June 29.

³² Malewitz, Jim (2015). “Workplace Deaths Up in Texas, Which Still Tops List.” *Texas Tribune*. <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/09/17/workplace-deaths-texas-us-leader/>



source of support for mostly undocumented workers whose injuries take them out of the workforce altogether, organizing for immediate medical equipment and healthcare access and for the rights of and collective civic voice for people with disabilities.

#5 Organizations like Workers Defense Project, the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation (TGICALF), AFL-CIO, Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades Council and a dedicated coalition of organizations have stood at the front lines of restructuring the always-growing, but ever-dangerous construction fields. They have sought diverse ways to hold companies accountable, including pressuring public institutions who are driving new construction to provide living wages and protections. They have also passed ordinances to ensure public contracts adhere to certain wage and protections, especially following the post-disaster recovery.

The approach of Houston’s labor and worker organizations like TGICALF and WDP reflects an important mix of envisioning big-picture *sectoral* strategies with a focus on shifting specific, *local geographic* conditions and power dynamics. These include efforts like WDP’s Better Builder® Program, which target large developers to make comprehensive wage, training and hiring

commitments, monitored through third parties and the cross-cutting Build Houston Better campaign (see below).

Workers and communities face an uphill challenge getting companies to live up to the local worker protections that do exist or to the promises made via community benefits and other agreements. One leader explained, “Government agencies really don’t seem to care about the policies that they’ve enacted so often times it discourages workers from pursuing claims against their employers.” Another noted “The process [of making claims] is lengthy so overall workers just lose hope, and say, I may never claim back wages, things will never get resolved...workers go through a lot of harassment too when they’re going through this process.” This squeeze on workers can create fear of collective action, forcing employees to embrace an attitude of not wanting to “cause a commotion” or “you should be grateful, you just have work.” Much of the workforce is undocumented, and increased anti-immigrant xenophobia from the state government also worsens the fear of enforcement.

#6 Even with the entrenched challenges, Houston is also the epicenter of a steady uptick in unionization in Texas.³³ With the presence of the port in a

³³ Fannig, Rhonda (2018). “Small But Noticeable Growth Of Unions In Texas Is In Line With The Larger National Trend.” KUT/Texas Standard.



globalized, logistics-driven era, transportation is central to jobs, composing 8.9% employment.³⁴ Teamsters have organized to expand their membership by nearly a quarter in the last year. Relatedly, hospitality workers at the Houston International airport have also been active as part of UNITE HERE, which most recently has fought hard to protect workers from rounds of COVID-19 layoffs (by airlines like United who raked in federal funds) that have hit low-wage workers of color hardest.³⁵

Shaping the Future Workforce, Today

Among the industries where union power is expanding– and worker power is helping shift conditions for both employees and communities – is education. With K-12 teachers and assistants representing a large part of the workforce, the AFT in Houston has been a leader in conversations on equity in schooling, as well as

regarding public services. In Fall 2020, when Houston’s Independent School District re-opened quickly (only to immediately close 16 schools for confirmed COVID-19 cases), teachers staged a “sick-out” to demand smaller class sizes as well as mask requirements, improved ventilation, and other safety measures.³⁶ The AFT has also been a vocal advocate at the state level, where it has faced a hostile terrain; the 2021 legislative cycle alone included attempts by the Texas Educational Agency (TEA) to impose its authority and a highly-controversial ban on critical race studies in grade school social science, including banning the use of the *New York Times’* 1619 Project or even giving extra credit for political activism or policy internships.³⁷ At the same time, teachers also readied to strike and put pressure statewide to win a 2019 pay increase -one that has since been protected by the legislature.³⁸

³⁴ BLS (2020). “Occupational Employment and Wages in Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land – May 2020.” https://www.bls.gov/regions/southwest/news-release/occupationalemploymentandwages_houston.htm

³⁵ Gonzales, Sofia (2021). “United Airlines Workers Urge Houston Officials To Help Save Hundreds Of Jobs.” *Houston Public Radio*. <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/transportation/2021/06/09/400176/houston-airline-workers-face-an-uncertain-future/>

³⁶ Isenee, Laura. (2020). “Houston Teachers Stage Sick-Out to Demand Better COVID-19 Protocols.” <https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/education-news/2020/10/22/384495/houston-teachers-plan-sick-out-as-district-revises-when-covid-can-close-a-school/>

³⁷ McGee, Kate. (2021) “Texas educators worry bill limiting the teaching of current events and historic racism would ‘whitewash history.’” *Texas Tribune*. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/05/26/texas-teachers-critical-race-theory-legislature/> Texas AFT (2021). “Legislative Update: How public ed fared in the session ending today.” *Texas AFT* <https://www.texasaft.org/government/legislature/legislative-update-how-public-ed-fare-in-the-session-ending-today/>

³⁸ Miller, Justin (2019). “‘We’re Not Stupid’: Texas Teachers Take on Dan Patrick and the Legislature over Dismal Education Funding.” *Texas Observer*. <https://www.texasobserver.org/were-not-stupid-texas-teachers-take-on-dan-patrick-and-the-legislature-over-dismal-education-funding/>



THE BUILDING BLOCKS: LAND

#1 Houston has been a testing ground for one of the most fundamental re-organizations of US land markets in likely centuries. Within the suburban-dominated region, new housing communities being sold at breakneck pace are going into the hands of financial private-equity firms, such as Blackrock Inc. For example, when DH Horton Inc. built a 124-unit subdivision in Houston's area in 2020, it was snapped up rapidly by institutional investors of private capital.³⁹ Some estimates suggest nearly 24% of single-family housing in the city went to companies that are slowly becoming the world's largest landlords. The effect on families is still emerging, but it can be understood in the fact that a city known for its sprawling subdivision is predominantly one of renters - 57% in the city and 45% in the county in 2018, up from 53% and 42% respectively in 2010.⁴⁰ The speculative bubble nearly doubled the median sale price of a home in Harris County from \$139,900 in 2011 to \$220,000 in 2018 (with affordability set at \$186,256).⁴¹

Among homeowners, Black populations are the least likely to own property and keep experiencing the steepest declines ownership – with only 37% of

Black residents owning homes in 2018, compared to 68% of white residents, 62% of Asian and Pacific Islander, and 49% of Latinx people.⁴² This gives considerable power to both developers and landlords over BIPOC residents' futures, considering also the few protections they have. Landlords in Houston, one interviewee described, routinely (and technically, legally) “deny folks housing based on how they pay their rent, like if they use a housing voucher”. As Houston coalitions like HOME Coalition members engage on a “long road” of tenant organizing, displacement and informal encampments continue to sprout daily. Organizations stand at the front lines of protecting families and communities from a new global bubble and speculation crisis, one fueled by developers, construction firms, and financial and venture institutions.

#2 The snapping up of land for speculation and profit extends even to Houston's universities – which have been involved in pitched community struggles regarding displacement. As one organizer noted, Rice University Management Company's planned “innovation district” is not so much focused on building research institutions as much as profiting from private company interest, including Microsoft and Chevron.

³⁹ WSJ

⁴⁰ Shelton, Kyle, John Park, Carlos Villegas, Luis Guajardo, Chris Servidio, and Zhiyan Zhang (2020). “The 2020 State of Housing in Harris County and Houston,” Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University. Houston, TX: Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

⁴¹ Shelton et al. 2020.

⁴² Shelton et al. 2020.



The siting of the project in the Historic Third Ward has put the company face-to-face with community-rooted organizations and long-term residents seeking to protect the predominantly-Black neighborhood. The Fourth Ward and other Houston sites have a long history of community benefit agreements that do not necessarily lead to change, where high-rise condos have replaced neighborhoods but promised concessions have not materialized.⁴³ An interviewee shared how “these memorandums of understanding are often signed just to quell dissent and circumvent actual concerns for material benefit.”

Organizers with Houston Coalition for Equitable Development without Displacement (HCEDD) have been at the forefront of a comprehensive, community-led, contractual process that also envisions oversight regarding implementation, according to one group, in a “very democratic, open public way.” In-depth surveys of the Third Ward from Rice’s Center for Health & Biosciences and Sankofa Institute shows how residents (who are five times likely more to be renters) are squeezed, finding relatively low rent, and lose a sense of Black history and shared life, and access to community centers,

churches, pools, and other resources. Few other such combinations exist in Houston – and landlords take advantage, providing substandard housing with regularly reported issues, including lack of heating/AC and even running water.



Figure 13: A Houston Coalition for Equitable Development without Displacement community meeting, where neighbors from the Third Ward envision a future for their neighborhoods in the face of Rice University’s corporate “innovation district.” (Photo Credit: HCEDD)

⁴³ Smith, Sarah (2019). “The first Black city in Houston is on the verge of losing its identity.” *Houston Chronicle*.
<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/The-first-black-city-in-Texas-is-on-the-verge-of-14466916.php>



HCEDD organizers have charted 7 issue areas that map out much of where struggles over land intersect with a bigger vision of the economy: affordable housing, businesses economic opportunities for individuals, education, tech entrepreneurship, cultural preservation and food access. The greatest asset in this work? Active residents. Ranging from 14 to 76, 98% of residents return to regular meetings and have stayed engaged. Their multi-faceted vision of what they want to see in their economy offers a blueprint for a new Houston that honors the contributions of both long-term residents and new migrants who have been left out of the city's relentless growth-for-profit.

#3 Environmental crisis is radically shifting the cycles of redevelopment and displacement that have shaped community life and land in Houston. Individual working class homeowners face an uphill journey trying to rebuild and restart after disasters like Hurricane Harvey. After Harvey, research, foundation, environmental groups, and public media raised concerns with how Houston had encouraged rampant expansion and development within disaster-prone 100-year flood zones. It became clear that both Houston city and Harris county officials and the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA) – which helps set rates for flood insurance – made it easier and more affordable to build in these zones, and

to avoid utilizing up to date and comprehensive maps.⁴⁴ Indeed, moves like the City Council approving a 620-acre new municipal district right in the floodplain less than two years after Harvey showed the city's leadership still prioritized development above ecological and human safety.⁴⁵

But what happens to existing, damaged neighborhoods in the floodplain is more complicated than just not rebuilding there and moving elsewhere. Where are working-class Black, Latinx and migrant homeowners with few resources supposed to re-create a home? Even land titling, sometimes passed down across generations, is complex, and links to the incorporation of rural areas into Houston's sprawling development. In fact, that development is what put so many at risk. One interviewee shared how her subdivision was integrated in a dense wetland where, in the course of the last decades, developers razed the "natural foliage from trees...and put a concrete jungle instead that allowed water to flow, and for the first time, our neighborhood flooded." Groups like West Street Recovery and Texas Housers and related neighborhood spin-offs like Northeast Action Collective and Harvey Forgotten Survivors Caucus have radically shifted the conversation to put marginalized residents at the center of solutions.

⁴⁴ Shao, Wayun (2018). "A year after Hurricane Harvey, some Texans are using outdated flood risk maps to rebuild." *The Conversation*.

⁴⁵ Rice, Jen (2019). "Houston Flood Czar: Stopping Development In 100-Year Floodplain 'Not Going To Happen'." *Houston Public Media*. June 5th.



These grassroots groups create immediate collective action to share repair tools and addressing basic drainage and mitigation, push for real resources to help deal with issues like persistent mold and unsafe housing, and organize for a long-term “just recovery.” “Working in disaster recovery has made me really understand that we have to have a plan for right now,” another organizer shared. They provide an important model for the nation as climate disasters do not let up – answering to the “right now” while fighting for a just recovery.

#4 The cycles of disaster and redevelopment, and with it massive health inequities, are tied to the relentless pursuit of oil and gas. But calling for a carbon-free future and putting it into practice are two different things. As one organizer explained, “Oil and gas is a big challenge because we all have a very complicated relationship in justice work.” The sector is in fact one of the most unionized in the region, in part through associated crafts like welding and electrical, and in 2015 it was even the site of an extended United Steelworkers-led strike at five petrochemical factories.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Sixel, LM (2015). “Unions see strike as energizing local workers.” <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/article/Unions-see-strike-as-energizing-local-workers-6067453.php>



Figure 14: Local groups Northeast Action Collective (NAC) and West Street Recovery (WSR) created disaster preparedness bags for all NAC and Caucus members to aid in the 2021 hurricane season and fears of blackouts during heat waves and the ongoing pandemic. Although working for systemic change, groups like NAC and WSR know disaster is inevitable and frequent. (Photo credit: WSR Staff)



Organizers we interviewed experience first-hand the tensions among the power of this industry versus its environmental and social impact. “Many of us live in a contradictory world where we seek change but where our friends, family, and city are sustained by oil and gas.” As such, cross-cutting coalitions are seeking ways to find “culturally sensitive and complex approaches to take up the place that oil & gas has held” – including how it is a key drive of labor migration and better wages (due in part to unions). Mainstream white-led environmental groups have often failed to grasp this and as such, have been unable to mobilize grassroots energy in Houston. But new generations of environmental justice, labor, and civic power groups are opening deeper dialogue on the meaning of a “just transition” from fossil fuels and new environmental prospects. An important development: In July Texas unions endorsed the [Texas Climate Jobs Project](#), a union-led effort to win both bold climate action and good union jobs.

Parents, Workers, and Shaping Public Investment

As housing and commercial development continues to balloon and spread, so too does public investment. School construction in particular has dramatically increased in Houston’s expanding suburbs to serve the

growing region. Labor and community organizations found common ground realizing that while multi-billion dollar contracts were being doled out to school developers, communities benefited little. Students and teachers were struggling to come up with resources in campuses, and workers doing the building were getting underpaid or not paid at all. “A lot of workers have students going to same schools [being built or expanded] and see the cycle of poverty - parents don’t get paid what they deserve, students don’t get what they need to succeed,” one organizer shared.

Yet, these funds concern public taxpayer money, and a labor-community coalition has challenged what one organizer described as a “misuse of tax dollars and use of irresponsible contracts by a public entity.” Rallying community allies, including leveraging the role of parent-workers, organizations like International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) have been able to fight for mandated wages in the district to ensure some kind of living wage and other protections. Yet in the suburb of Sheldon, companies like Allenko Finishes participated in building the \$146 million, 580,000 square foot C.E. King High School complex and cut corners by skirting prevailing wage and other laws.⁴⁷ Two workers filed a claim against Allenko Finishes showing how their employers had each performing daily

⁴⁷ Carballo, Rebecca (2021). “Construction workers claim wage theft at Sheldon ISD project.” *Houston Chronicle*. Jan. 8th.



work as painters yet only paid them \$12 instead of the \$15.75 mandated wage. In one year alone, this meant \$11,000 in stolen wages; IUPAT District Council 88 helped organize both workers and parents to pressure the Sheldon Independent School district (ISD). Sheldon ISD were not receptive at first, even trying to stop workers from speaking at public board meetings. Fear kept many workers from filing claims, but the sustained community and labor pressure eventually brought a \$2 wage increase across the board in Allenko Finishes's laborer rate – affecting many more than the two workers in the suit and inspiring new collective action.

POWER IN PLACE: GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Houston's Strong Mayor, For Business

Houston's low-income and communities of color, while part of an active organizing and labor landscape, find themselves squeezed at both the state and city level in pushing legislation and regulation that can challenge inequality. Part of what interviewees noted almost unanimously makes local politics a challenge in Houston is a “strong mayor” system. In this way, even as groups have supported progressive council members, the persistence of

mayors attached to the status quo has made change a challenge. Current Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner's approach was described by some as a “business-friendly Democrat” who sees cooperation with business as necessary to “getting anything done.” That “anything” more often than not – as the above shows – is a narrow vision of growth sorely lacking equity, where the quantity matters much more than the quality and value of the companies, jobs, housing, and more. The mayor's lack of commitment to workers has been shaped by historical and current factors: business interests have developed a massive research, communication, philanthropic, and legislative infrastructure in Houston that makes them hard to ignore, including multiple Chambers of Commerce, a bank, energy-dominated Greater Houston Partnership, and more.

No Election Too Small, No Pre-Emption Off Limits

At the state level, Texas has become infamous for deepening experiments in conservative lawmaking and in curbing local power for progressive governance. It's important to note this is not some ingrained culture in Texas, which has seen its own historical left-populist movements advance a



state agenda and governors like Anne Richardson.⁴⁸ What this is more indicative of is the strategy advanced by the neoliberal conservative party that put George W. Bush in office starting in the 1980s. Karl Rove and associates' belief that no office is too small, including pursuit of the state's Supreme Court; railroad commissioners, agricultural, and other less-visible elected and administrative posts; and wide-ranging state legislative and senate positions.⁴⁹ None of this power-grab would be possible without moving in lock-step with large corporations, whether its oil & gas, finance, or developers and tech newer to the scene, who have wielded their power. Texas' shift after a relentless re-organization of right-wing money, messaging and movements to local and state elections helped spearhead the right's own long term national state-level strategy.

What this has meant today is that conservatives have locked up legislative and governor's offices, and empowered a brazen governorship that often makes divisive, legally-questionable political moves - such as Governor Greg Abbott's 2021 declaration of an emergency requiring spending on the border wall and harassment of migrants while pre-empting laws including

fracking bans, regulations on Uber/Lyft, sanctuary laws and even hands-free/cellphone driving measures.⁵⁰ Abbott has often floated making Texas the state with the most comprehensive pre-emption, attempting an ill-formed blanket law in 2017.⁵¹ The irony of a state party that clamors for "freedom" restricting local independence, and the effect of former Gov. Rick Perry and Abbott's consolidation of governor's powers via pre-emption, became even more clear when the state stopped enforceable mask mandates and accelerated economic re-opening in the earliest waves of COVID-19 (with deadly results and Houston County Judge Lena Hidalgo among the most vocal critics).⁵²

The constant state executive and legislative power plays divert much local energy to figuring out – often alongside allies in Austin or Dallas – what might be possible to pass legally, whether its worker safety protections or eviction ordinance in the wake of COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this perpetuated a wholesale ignoring of the dire conditions faced by low-income communities of color. Where the city will often balk at pre-emption, some labor and community groups have built legal capacity to continue to

⁴⁸ The state has also seen progressive or populist farmer movements go after the Agricultural Commissioner's office and

⁴⁹ Frontline (2005). "How Texas Became a Red State (Interviews)." *PBS Frontline*.
<https://www.pbs.org/wqbh/pages/frontline/shows/architect/texas/realignment.html>

⁵⁰ Jayson, Sharon (2018). "In the Lone Star State, Cities Feel the Heat." *US News*. Dec 27. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2018-12-27/cities-versus-state-a-battle-for-control-in-the-texas-legislature>

⁵¹ Svitek, Patrick (2017). "Abbott wants "broad-based law" that pre-empts local regulations." *Texas Tribune*. March 21.

<https://www.texastribune.org/2017/03/21/abbott-supports-broad-based-law-pre-empting-local-regulations/>

⁵² Wilson, Reid (2020). "Texas cities say state is making pandemic worse." *The Hill*. June 27. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/504779-texas-cities-say-state-is-making-pandemic-worse>



push for passing policy. As one organizer explained, groups have to always be equipped to reply to how “quite a few Democrats back down with a ‘You can’t do this in Texas’.”

Mobilizing Harris County, Redefining Blue Politics

Despite how much Texas’ story is one of local and state re-alignment, the trend instead had been for the Democratic Party to pour resources routinely around election season in the hopes to shift the national election, finally fully mobilizing the state’s diversity to swing the state. But the pervasive ways power is entrenched – and the lack of in-depth inclusion of the state’s large Latinx (and Black and API) populations, including by establishment Democrats – mean that this strategy has yet to move the dial. A slow recognition of the need for longer-term progressive civic infrastructure, including more resourced, long-term tables (described below) represents a more recent shift in course spurred by progressive groups and foundations. This is already proving there is not just one way to get things done in Texas, and that right-wing hold can loosen locally in Houston. Winning means having tough conversations, organizers shared. Many labor and 501(c)(4) community allies are refusing to simply hand over endorsements to Democratic officials: “Our approach is, don’t take our ability to endorse Democrats for granted; we are independent and have our

own program. And if you’re slow we’ll push you.” This is helping inspire new cohorts of much more dynamic and “creative elective officials” who bring in organizations as “partners in policy formulation.”



Figure 15: Elected at 28 years old in 2018 to Harris County Judge (a key regulatory position), Lina Hidalgo was supported by progressive labor and community, and has taken key strides on public health, justice, worker’s rights enforcement, and more.

This more long-term, values-aligned strategy is paying off in the Harris County region, organizers have been breaking through. Supported by labor unions and 501(c)(4) progressive groups, several new leaders have taken up positions in the Harris County Court of Commissioners (which oversees governance tying).

Most prominently, Lina Hidalgo won election as County Judge at 28 years old in 2018, as did new Commissioners Rodney Ellis and Adrian Garcia, and later County Attorney Christian Menefee in 2020. Most critically, these new officials have been ready to bring the community in as “partners in policy formulation,” one organizer shared.



The victories at this level were not easy (considering how the County is larger than many states), but the effects have been tangible. As an interviewee shared, “The county was notorious for 45 minute meetings where they would basically rubber stamp contracts to friends of the county Commissioners.” The new Commissioner line-up radically shifted course, thanks mostly to Hidalgo, making all their meetings public and inviting input and much deeper discussion. Harris County has thus made moves on issues of bail reform, secured a \$10 million early education fund, and challenged ICE raids and the “public charge” rule.⁵³ Facing a barrage of racism, sexism, and condescension, Hidalgo also took great risks during COVID-19 enforcing a mask mandate and seeking to curb exposure.⁵⁴

The new leadership has meant a significant opportunity to give the resurgent voice of workers a real role. Commissioners also pushed forward a significant \$15 minimum wage for employees, and when asked by the Build Houston Better coalition, construction contractors, and the County Attorney Menefee has also been in dialogue with labor and community to find ways to make worker protections stick and to circumvent pre-emption. The new County regime has also turned the rhetoric of the right wing

obsessed with government oversight on its head, instead calling for real results-oriented budgeting that puts to question the kind of sweetheart deals the County has cut with developers who rake in large profits but pay workers little. Part of the challenge is that, unlike the city, the County lacks specific ordinance making powers, meaning that organizers are not letting up on changing the city government as well.

Yet, given the long-run efforts for right-wing forces to shift judicial, administrative, and legislative positions across the state and down to the local (spanning to the Karl Rove era, see above), change is a hard and painful process that affects the ways even any regulations operate. Inspectors from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality rarely or slowly respond to residents’ filings regarding toxins sited in their backyard are; worksite regulations often “exist only on paper”; and support for disaster-harmed residents is slow to come (while concessions flow with ease). This is why active organizing on implementation is a critical focus area for many organizations interviewed, blending direct support with larger campaigns to mobilize communities and spur action. As are innovations like worker councils for construction that support consistent

⁵³ Zedaker, Hannah (2019). “Harris County establishes \$10M Early Childhood Impact Fund, selects organizations to administer additional \$7.3M in assistance.” *The Community Impact Newspaper*. See also: <https://cjo.harriscountytexas.gov/Protecting-Workers-Families>

⁵⁴ Carrasco, Luis. (2021). “Essay: Lina Hidalgo puts principle over politics at her own peril.” *Houston Chronicle*. Feb 1. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Essay-Lina-Hidalgo-puts-principle-over-politics-15910959.php>



monitoring. The Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation (TGCALF) and Texas AFL-CIO are also working on training workers and labor leaders to run and succeed in city and county Boards and Commissions to build from these changes. This is part of an overall leadership development strategy there and in several other organizations, where future elected leaders are being trained from Houston's most vulnerable communities.

POWER IN PLACE: THE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Any conversation on community movements must begin with recognizing the long histories of Texas organizing – from Gulf indigenous movements to Black community efforts for self-determination to generations of cross-border activism. Texas has even shaped legacies of populist organizing, bringing white and BIPOC working class farmers under the Jim Hightower brand of politics. Today, movements continue to break ground offering a vision of coalitional, imaginative organizing that has focused its energy on big change: shifting whole sectors, gulf ecologies, cross-border geographies and national politics. While the scale may be Texas-sized and visionary, organizers are deepening an emphasis is on relational, in-depth organizing

that centers the leadership and voice of BIPOC, working class, disabled, queer and trans and other communities.

As documented throughout this report, multiple generations of labor and grassroots groups have helped define Houston. From the immigrant rights, union and worker center organizing of the 2000s to disaster-spurred neighborhood networks started in 2018 to new abolition and just transition visions, Houston's movement infrastructure is multi-faceted, multi-issue and multi-sector. The analysis below is only a (economic justice-centered) snapshot of a wide range of organizing; we highly recommend exploring and linking to the individual partners within these coalitions, listed on these sites:

- [HOME Coalition](#)
- [Houston in Action](#)
- [Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation](#)

From Cycles to Civic Power

Much as shifting Texas to the (far-)right took a concerted effort of organizing people and money from the smallest to the state scale, so too will pushing a progressive vision. While traditional structures of the



Democratic Party have focused more on the money part of that equation, cyclical outpourings of PAC funding has proven not enough. Nor has waiting for demographics to turn into “destiny,” and for the majority-minority state to swing by sheer population numbers. This is in part because much of how electoral money is spent historically ignored and even excluded Latinx, API and Black voters both during and between electoral cycles (where Spanish language resources were rare), and gone more top-down than grassroots.

Yet local organizers’ patient investment of time and energy – often with little resources - is not only shifting voting patterns, but redefining civic engagement in a landscape scarred with histories of exclusion. Coalitions like Houston in Action exemplify a new, multi-modal ideal of how to engage civically, involving both nascent grassroots groups, and more established non-profits. One leader shared, “It’s not demographics just changing Texas; it’s organizing, and it’s real, deep kind of organizing.”

Civic power among marginalized groups has been attacked so deeply, one organizer explained, “people are waking up” to the need to “take the complex issue of civic engagement and embrace and understand the need for multiple tactics.” This includes “organizing, outreach, engagement, policy change, through capacity building on data, racial justice training, organizing, from volunteerism.” Civic engagement, in other words, expands

Figure 16: Houston in Action’s 2019 Community in Action Academy Session on Organizing. The focus on training for organizing is a critical part of new coalitional efforts supporting civic change across electoral cycles. (Photo credit: Houston in Action).



beyond voter rolls to supporting the leadership and voice of communities on the issues that matter to them.

Particularly crucial for national audiences is the geographic scope: Houston organizers tied to coalitions like Houston in Action or the Texas Organizing Project have developed models that organize often-Black and brown suburbs. Their understanding of suburban landscapes, as noted in the prior section, has helped move County offices, and supported interconnected



efforts like the school construction campaigns. Both sets of wins also speak to the importance of involving organizing-oriented labor unions in civic campaigns.

The efforts are, with time, reverberating at the state level: Trump's margin of victory narrowed from 9% to 5.5% in Texas in 2020 (lower than Ohio's 8.03%). An interviewee laid out, "We need to move past the narrative of, 'Oh well, it's Texas, it doesn't change' doesn't hold up. We're going to be the next Georgia – but we need a very developed infrastructure – a long term plan, in a coherent way that links to local efforts."

Local Strategies, National Impact

While elections matter, there's plenty of non-electoral work to do to make Texas democratic and inclusive. This includes finding ways to give voice to more than half a million undocumented people – whom, as one organizer shared, outnumber the population in New Orleans.⁵⁵ It's no accident that worker organizations have selected construction as a prime focus, given its outsized economic and social impact. Much as Houston's own justice for janitors movement helped ignite major immigrant rights activism, focusing

on Latinx and Black, often undocumented workers in the construction field exposes their vulnerability not just lacking workers compensation but left out of the overall safety net and targeted via enforcement fear-tactics.

IUPAT's Strategic Cities Campaign and the AFL-CIO's Presidents' Organizing Initiative (POI) both have poured significant resources to support deeper base-building and innovative collaborations with community-based groups on construction. The latter shows an "increasingly interconnected and collaborative" labor movement locally, in one organizer's words. Leading up to POI's investment, the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation, AFL-CIO integrated 8 different central labor councils and brought together 50,000 affiliated members; investment and improved programmatic work attracted more unions to affiliate. Importantly, this includes non-traditional worker organizations like Workers Defense Project that organize construction, making TGCAFL among the few in the county to include these as official affiliates. The TGCAFL also invested its sparse resources in bringing a new generation of workers and community in through modernizing its communication infrastructure, operating across seven different social platforms and upgrading member outreach technologies.

⁵⁵ Reigstad, Leif (2017). "More Than One Million Undocumented People Live In Houston and Dallas Combined." *Texas Monthly*.
<https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-daily-post/one-million-undocumented-people-live-houston-dallas-combined/>



The coalitional efforts to address construction exemplify an important kind of “sectoral” strategy – one that is often discussed but little understood, and that requires serious attention to geography and local racial, gender and other power dynamics. Worker center and labor leadership recognized that “organizing contractor by contractor wasn’t affecting the change we wanted to make.” Houston was selected as a place with low labor density, “low labor standards, and high exploitation.” Both the IUPAT and Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation have prioritized vulnerable undocumented workers. Workers Defense Project has worked closely with labor partners to address these construction industry dynamics by advocating for the Better



Builder® Program, which invites developers to pledge to uphold standards like living wages, OSHA safety training, hiring goals from local craft training programs, workers compensation coverage, and independent third party monitoring to ensure these standards are met.

It’s no secret also that WDP and unions selected a sector where trade unions have a history of racialized exclusion and do not always engage in social movement approaches. As one leader shared, “You know, look solidarity can mean a lot of things sometimes it’s showing up on a picket line, but sometimes it’s like sitting in a room with your

brothers and sisters and having hard conversations about what is it that we all have in common and how do we figure that out and move forward.” In all these senses, Houston is far from what organizers often see as “low-hanging fruit.” Yet, Houston has led the nation in these victories and “[taking on the] underground economy, affecting real change but also building strong relationships.”

Part of the success of affiliates like IUPAT District Council 88 and Workers Defense Project is their ability to understand the workers as part of a whole community – as the aforementioned school construction campaign shows. In some cases, construction workers also have family members in domestic work, landscapers, childcare and other precarious, unprotected sectors. The organizing in construction is increasingly in concert with other activism then through the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). NDWA, meanwhile, has organized local Houston chapters of their We Dream in Black program specifically supporting the leadership and political development of Black domestic workers. The TGCALF has also been vocal in supporting a County-level agenda of ending cash bail and other criminal justice issues. Together, WDP, NDWA and union affiliates have made a significant impact in supporting the development of multi-racial worker leadership and power in ways that consider the whole worker.



Building Back, Better Than Ever

While civic and economic coalition work had significant victories prior, Hurricane Harvey proved a turning point – or really, an accelerating moment for movements that had been brewing across the early 21st Century. Importantly and uniquely, Harvey’s destruction meant a bridging moment among civic and economic movements in a way that has radically deepened power, including spurring a new generation of grassroots individual organizations. The Build Houston Better campaign and HOME Coalition, forged in the aftermath of Harvey, represent critical coalescing of labor and community organizations to define and pursue an equitable recovery.

The Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation (TGALF) helped drive the “Build Houston Better” Campaign starting in 2018. The partnership has included the TGALF, local building trades council, individual unions, Workers Defense Project, Texas Organizing Project, and the groups worked initially as the Good Jobs committee within the new HOME Coalition. Inspired in part by efforts that TGALF connected to in New York with the Building Trades Council following Super Storm Sandy, Build Houston Better sought to increase access to “good, high-wage, high-road jobs” as part of an equitable recovery. Organizers brought inside and outside strategies to bear to push

forward the agenda, and their energy helped shake a usually much more construction boss-friendly. Part of the campaign’s victories included ensuring OSHA 10 and 30 trainings for all workers, as well as securing \$120 million in funding from federal Housing & Urban Development (HUD) to expand apprenticeship and create targeted hiring for construction workers for government-supported repairs.



Figure 17: Labor and community organizers with the Build Houston Better campaign, launched after Hurricane Harvey, and Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner announce a major legislative win to improve worker protection, wages and training access. (Photo credit: Workers Defense Project.)



The organizers' success spurred an expansive #BuildHoustonBetter campaign to shape multifamily housing being built in damaged areas by the City of Houston. These include mandating a \$15.00 minimum wage for such projects, and including similar safety protections and an apprenticeship pipeline. In fighting for expanding this to the County (again, mobilizing suburban power), organizations have sought a second chance hiring provision to prioritize formerly-incarcerated people for construction training and jobs programs tied to these federal contracts. Labor and community have identified the kinds of loopholes companies use via subcontracting and sought enforcement of these standards across the contracting chain. With new leadership in Harris thanks to creative civic engagement, an approach on both good worker-oriented policy and real enforcement now stands a chance – designed to square up to the state's pre-emption.

HOME Coalition, meanwhile, expanded as a critical convener of other critical conversations. This includes supporting labor/community efforts outlined above, but also recently coalescing anti-eviction organizing. They also proved an important platform to amplify intersectional conversations, including supporting the release of research and organizing by the Living Hope Wheelchair Association regarding the ways disabled immigrants have been shut out of recovery.

The Deeper Victories

While campaigns matter, organizers emphasize that the real changes go much deeper than any policy wins. Since Harvey, the work of groups like West Street Recovery has also deepened everyday engagement beyond the state's power – inspiring viable grassroots cooperation that has proven irreplaceable in times of disaster. BIPOC, low-income populations have felt first-hand not only the disproportionate impact of disaster, as noted in the section on Land, but the failure to deliver on geographic equity promises. One interviewee pointed to the fact “poorer watersheds with the most houses flooded got less money.” FEMA denials have been high, and in general, the actual movement of funds after the flood was a trickle. (It's important to note that organizers were not endorsing this as a sign the government cannot do anything – but that this has everything to do with stripping local infrastructures of resources.)

Groups like West Street Recovery, in floods, freezes and other disasters subsequent to Harvey have often been the first on the ground and those with the deepest neighbor-to-neighbor linkages. Their and other groups' mutual aid approach expanded even further during COVID-19, and these groups have even local government turning to their networks to get out aid and understand the situation on the ground. Such groups have also refused



to leave government off the hook. Organizers tied to West Street sought to craft new local policies that make sense to those who must use disaster recovery systems, and to give voice to the excluded in local meetings. The real win, in this case, is a dynamic, resilient, and engaged population.

As the economic conversation and campaign broadened, Houston in Action (Houston in Action) has pushed radically deepened the civic conversation, taking processes like the 2020 Census as critical opportunity to draw together a common vision of organizing. New, neighborhood-level organizing is vital to this picture, as are groups like OCA Greater Houston representing API populations and Mi Familia Vota moving Latinx groups. It's important to note that foundations like Houston Endowment and Episcopal Health Foundation have rolled up their sleeves to not just fund but sit as part of Houston in Action's membership.

Meanwhile, ward-level campaigns like the HCEDD's efforts to challenge unchecked development have also normalized a deeper engagement and given space for neighbors to imagine and fight together for a common vision (see above). This is the kind of civic energy that national Democratic party officials could only dream of – and it is happening in ways that challenges elected officials across party lines to be accountable to residents beyond the status quo and towards more equitable futures.



Figure 18: Northeast Action Collective hold an action outside County Commissioners court in 2019 demanding the county improve flood infrastructure in Northeast Houston. Members shared photos, testified at court, and presented demands of equity and urgency. (Photo credit: West Street Recovery Staff).

work and coordination. So too is there a need many mentioned to establish a common language of organizing – away from formal legal or policy emphasis to centering organizing. Others describe a reluctance to confrontation that stems from local culture, and the need to embrace “unapologetic organizing” and unapologetic funding of movements – especially given the steep, persistent, and always-bolder opposition.

Many of the coalitions and a good number of organizations also are helmed by women, and coalitional and shared spaces are a vital place for leadership development and alignment. Of course, much work remains to be done – as organizations balance their individual community's pressing needs with cross-cutting



POWER IN PLACE: WHERE FUNDERS FIT

Local & Regional Funders

Local funders in Houston are faced with unique challenges. There are a small number of institutions funding social justice organizing, utilizing various strategies to overcome barriers to doing so. Among the newest changes is Houston Endowment's new, bold initiative for resourcing Black-led organizing. For such work to have an impact on lived experience, it must move beyond one-time energy to sustained commitments. If a particular foundation does not have a portfolio specific to economic justice or community power building, they are strategic and consider the full scope of the work to see how it might fit into an existing portfolio. For example, health funders like Episcopal Health have moved resources community organizing, connecting that work to social determinants of health. One person importantly noted that the success in such local (or national) strategies tying organizing to health is "first, looking to how an organization is living [shared] values and centering the people who are most impacted to create the change we say we want to support...it's decentering how we categorize work (in ways that ultimately limit funding because the work has to fit into these boxes), and centering people."

The efforts of the Simmons Foundation – which many organizers cited as their first and often most long-term funder – exemplify the value of an all-out focus on community power-building. Importantly, Simmons has paired their investments with funder peer organizing. Funder organizing can help other foundations move beyond their fear experienced given the state's political repression. Organizations in Houston often experience hesitation from funders and have to do extra work to make them feel more comfortable. Organizations report that it is easier to get funding for more neutral efforts, such as census mobilization, rather than for work specifically affecting people of color or pushing for policy change. Commitment from one foundation can influence other risk-averse funder peers to also resource the work. This is especially true in a region with many more conservative funders, including oil, gas, and corporate foundations. In this environment, where maintaining nonpartisanship can also be important, it has been helpful to frame resourcing in terms of issue areas rather than political leanings.

National Funder Engagement

National funders can help attract more resources, but need to be mindful of ways to better support in the local context. National funders suffer from not



having the local context, and connecting with local funders can be one important way to learn more and connect around resourcing local work. As one interviewee shared, “there's often a very static view that folks have of Texas and the politics of Texas: that it's a red state, and then it can't change.” Yet, in listening and learning on the ground, versus from a distance, funders are finding a changing state – and an even more quickly shifting Houston. To get more specific on the dynamics of power-building, C4 funding often comes from national funders rather than local ones but is frequently tied to electoral cycles and tends to prioritize more visible groups. Electoral power shift, though, has come from long-term, year-long organizing, and resourcing must reflect this reality. Such tables must not also become spaces where, per one interviewee, organizations “are treated like vendors,” contracted to deliver voter registration or other short-term electoral deliverables.

Ford Foundation's Cities and States program helped shift some of these dynamics. The table centers local, regional, and some state movement-building groups, and is supported by many three to five year unrestricted grants. Heising-Simons, involved in these state movement tables, has similarly invested in the long-term and with funding that organizers can use without being bound to campaigns. While emphasizing the strategic importance of Texas overall, these newer formations also give significant

weight and emphasis on regional organizing in places like Houston. (To note, Ford and others are looking to better shore up presence in El Paso and the Rio Grande Valley.)

It's important to also consider AFL-CIO's POI funding of the Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Foundation (TGALF) and the joint IUPAT/New World Foundation investment in Houston as also signaling potential strategies that show the power of when private funder and labor funding work in tandem. The LIFT Fund and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation also provided funding for grassroots organizing and civic voice to support Build Houston Better. These funds that TGALF helped shepherd went directly to community partners like Workers Defense Project and other smaller grassroots groups. This is a big, yet under-emphasized part of Houston's path-breaking sectoral organizing, and also represent new directions for how labor links geography, sector, and grassroots community engagement through non-transactional approaches.

Without this kind of in-depth engagement and interest in grassroots BIPOC low-income voice, ultimately resource allocation can reflect existing power dynamics, such as where white-led institutions receive the most funding given their ability to get a national reputation in institutional power spaces. Many funders seek to get dollars out as quickly as possible in relationship



to elections or disaster and do so without deeper research about the real ways in which power is shifting. Much as Ford and Heising-Simons have sought to do, national funders are in a unique position to organize their funder peers and introduce new, innovative resourcing models that reflect local realities and better meet the needs of grassroots organizers. Yet, given the small current funding landscape resourcing Houston organizations, there is a wide chasm between who is active now in supporting and just how expansive the organizing landscape and needs are in Houston.

REDEFINING POWER: 7 PATHWAYS TO ACTION

#1 Houston is in motion, but outside ideas about Texas are often stuck.

Organizers and local (and a few active national) funders relayed just how much of a one-dimensional picture of Texas, and Houston, exists in some outside funders' imaginations: simply put, the city and state are simplified as a red state haven for oil, gas, big corporations and trucks too big to change. This, of course, erases long histories of Indigenous cultural connection, Black self-determination, populist activism, cross-border organizing and more. It also misses how much of Texas' present and future

story is being fought for *right now*. As one funder shared, "I think our experience over the last few years - **if you look closely enough, and if you're on the ground, the way that we are - is that Texas is changing and [funders can be] part of changing Texas.**"

As this report has sought to explain, it's neither a demographic transition or economic miracle that is leading to political shifts, but, as the interviewee further explained, "Change is happening through organizing, engaging community, turning them out to vote, and winning policies that benefit working people, and so **we need to make sure we're putting investment in those organizations** that have that long term agenda, that are connecting organizing and policy and politics together and figuring out creative ways to do that." The punchline for funders is simple: "We need people to think of Texas, as in motion and movement" – and real resources can be the engine of advancing even more powerful change with big impact.

#2 People power is the real return on investment

Investing in a changing Houston means recognizing what has led to transformative change – a deepening culture of organizing across civic and economic areas and interdependence. Part of it is due to how much organizing happened *without* foundations or with funding that was not



campaign-specific. This is critical to underline. The disaster response in Harvey propelled organizing because many groups did what they could often without having to comply to pre-set deliverables; they advanced, experimented, and struggled, while many non-local funders stood on the sidelines or were willing to put aside the usual. And the result has outlasted any policy on the 100 year flood zone: **it is a deep base of low-income, BIPOC community networked to speak up and to support each other, and a concerted and shared set of targets in construction and housing.** The same has occurred in very grassroots efforts like the HCEDD fight against Rice. All of these required intensive relational work, where not all the answers existed and where foundations were either absent or willing to support through unrestricted grants. Yet these grassroots, hard-fought, under-funded efforts have led to sustained mobilizations for change. Imagine how much more an impact if real, deep resources are put forward.

This kind of deep, long-term effort isn't always "hot" to funders - nor is work with no guarantees. One organizer shared, foundations are always pushing them for what is "new, exciting, always 'moving the needle'... We pretend we're doing new stuff all the time, but we're actually we do the same thing all the time because it's what works." Organizations need space and time "to screw up, to make changes, to build and start again," another leader explained. "The real return on investment is not discrete policy but

what has already started to sprout, but needs much more funding to fully bloom: **an active "ecosystem of movement building" shaped by a growing "culture of organizing"** that represents sustained, vibrant community power.



Figure 19: An organizer with H-Town Power, a local group part of Houston in Action driving new civic engagement through and beyond the 2020 elections. (Photo credit: Brandon Washington.)



#3 Build up movements before you stand up tables.

While Texas may have strategic national value, funding can happen without building more state tables from the top-down. What is critical about Houston in Action, HOME Coalition, HCECDD, Build Houston Better, and others is that these were not spaces funders created and forced organizers to find a place in; they came out of local grassroots response and a desire to build scale and shared capacity through aligned goals, and increasingly, deeply-shared values. National funders can help re-direct the impulse of national think tanks and electoral forces to generate endless civic engagement tables, and instead **re-route funds to existing, growing local and regional movement coalitions and shared infrastructure**. There is of course a realistic tradeoff and tension some funders described as “between city level and statewide investment,” but Houston and other regions have the seeds of statewide formations already in the works. The more these are amply supported, the more growth and “scaling up” is possible.

#4 Recognize the links among civic and economic power-building - and coordinate funding across these areas.

Houston’s struggles in the construction sector, county government fights, and rebuilding all involved interlinked mobilizations across civic/electoral groups and labor/worker organizations. Texas organizers’ do not show a clear demarcation, and their ability to make change requires work across these lines – as the post-Harvey build back better movement exemplified. School construction campaigns, too, required action pressuring county government, school boards, worker-parents and more. **Texas is a key opportunity to model cross-cutting funding that understands labor’s essential role supporting civic power, and that a more transformational vision for labor’s electoral funding can impact national power from the ground up.** This requires recognizing national labor as a funder and offering progressive local labor a seat at the table, and from labor, moving forward with transformational, movement-rooted approaches to electoral endorsements and support

Towards building this shared infrastructure, several interviewees mentioned key capacities that Houston organizations need support shoring up across civic and labor. These include **centralized research institutions**, particularly given the need for in-depth sectoral research to drive worker organizing and support policy development. Given the complex politics of development and opacity of industries like oil and gas, stronger research institutions can be vital to coalitional infrastructures. (Research partners



from the Rice Sankofa Institute have been vital in HCECDD's Rice development campaign, as has the research Workers Defense has done on construction.) **Political and leadership development training** is also another area where many organizers would like to see future growth and can grow as civic and workplace leaders. Many coalitional groups like Houston in Action are stepping in to provide such services, and the TGALF is looking to build leadership development to train union members to run for office and obtain positions on boards and commission elections.



Figure 20: Organizing in Houston often links to mutual aid: Harvey victim and contractor-in-training and an allied organizer work on a Northeast Action Collective's member's house 2 years after Harvey to remove all mold as the first stage of a West Street Recovery (WSR) full repair. (Photo credit: WSR Staff)

#5 Innovations in organizing in Houston require innovations in funding.

Innovative organizing that meets the particular needs and circumstances in Houston requires innovative funding to match. Coalitions of organizations in Texas are a key way to regrant, especially for smaller groups with less resources, or that might not have 501c3 status. **Support to coalitions who have specific, equitable practice to regrant to individual organizations, such as Houston in Action and HOME Coalition, is an important tactic.** It's also key to **include labor unions.** This was key to Build Houston Better, where Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and LIFT Fund support for collaboration was distributed to smaller worker community groups via labor. At the same time, funders should not ignore individual groups and give groups the autonomy to do work on or outside of coalitions, or outside of tables.

Similarly, **funder coalitions and collaborations are also key, such as pooled funds.** This can be a strategic way to invite bigger players to the conversation. True transformation is not transactional, and funders should be wary of operational practices that perpetuate transactional practices, such as funding one campaign for the short term, cumbersome data requirements, or decision-making based on electoral data alone.



#6 Help funder peers move from fear to trust.

Local and national foundations each have their own peers they can move to action - and fear and hesitation is a major roadblock to investment in Texas. This can be fear locally of facing political targeting, or hesitation or confusion nationally as to where to begin. Funders in Texas have been particularly active in recognizing they cannot just move their boards; if movements are to win **funders should look to organize beyond their institution to bring other local and national foundations along.**

Those interested in investing in Houston should look to organizing together to move these kinds of multi-faceted strategies, helping break through hesitation by bridging peers with local movements and pushing their peers to match investment. This may include pooled funds – sorely lacking in Houston – but also means leading the way for peers to use general operating, seed, community grantmaking boards, minimized reporting, and other mechanisms rooted in trust-based philanthropy. These kind of collaborations can also become an opportunity to stand up together politically and for equity in conversations with local and county government, and wielding their institutional power.

#7 No election, no organization, no community is too small; no dream for change is too big in Houston or Texas

While the national interests in Texas often start at the top with federal senatorial and presidential elections, the reality is that the ways the state turned red has much to do with a concerted, decades-long strategy that saw no election or administrative position as too small. When it comes to Houston, many funders find themselves overwhelmed by Houston's vast size. So **the answer is simple: start small, and start with organizing because it's the key to change.** Houston is witnessing an upswing in grassroots groups, and it's seeing patient local organizing pay off in county, school board, and other positions. The starting point to supporting local and regional movements is the same place organizers begin their work: reach out and build relationships. Build relationships with organizations and be open to new connections; ask local organizers to connect you to their peers.

If Houston has moved very far with minimal money, including taking on some of the most disastrous climate crises and most deadly industries in the US, and seeing change, imagine what real, sustained and dramatically increased funding can bring.



“It’s incredible what has been built with the state literally trying to kill us and when we haven’t had resources. Our survival and existence is amazing.”

Foundations have the power to help organizations move out of survival mode– and the responsibility, as beneficiaries of the same settler and enslavement systems that created Houston. Organizations need time, space, and resources to dream, experiment, and maybe even fail and try

continuing to do things differently and in ways that respond to local conditions. Leaning into philanthropic shifts can support these practices. So can learning, partnering, and trusting a growing, interconnected Houston economic and civic movement landscape that, given the chance, will make a *real* Texas miracle a lasting reality.



Figure 21: Living Hope Wheelchair Association's wider team and members - a powerful assembly at the intersection of challenging inequities tied to race, class, migration status, and ability, and that is bridging deep understanding of key economic sectors and power with civic engagement.

