

# PLACES OF PROMISE: Building Up Middle America's Organizing and Communications Capacity

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

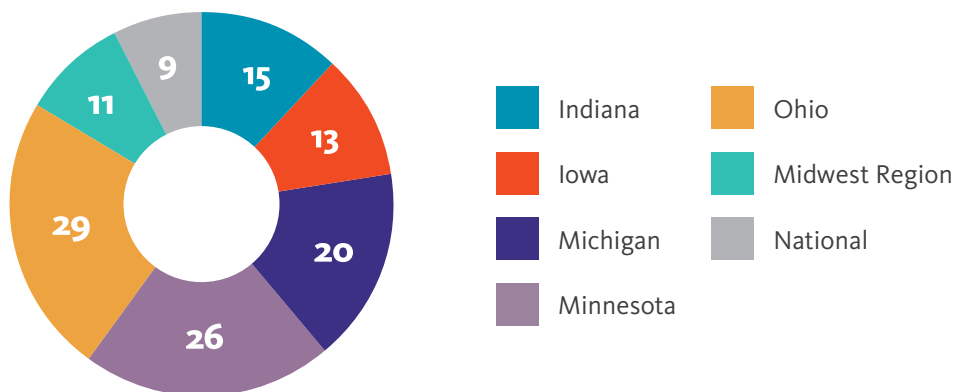
JANE BLOCH • TUSCULUM CONSULTING • JULY 2018



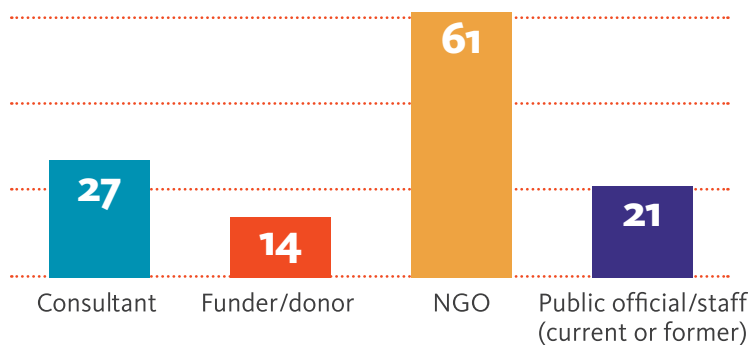
## PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project assessed grassroots organizing and communications capacity across five states: Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. Over the course of three months in early 2018, 123 people from more than ninety different organizations working in these states, as well as groups with regional and national expertise, shared their time and insights. These qualitative conversations traversed the ideological spectrum, incorporating interviewees' diverse perspectives and experiences that range from holding public office to expertise in community organizing, policy, communications, and public affairs. Each individual interview provided input that, when combined, paints a multilayered overview of each state's advocacy landscape.

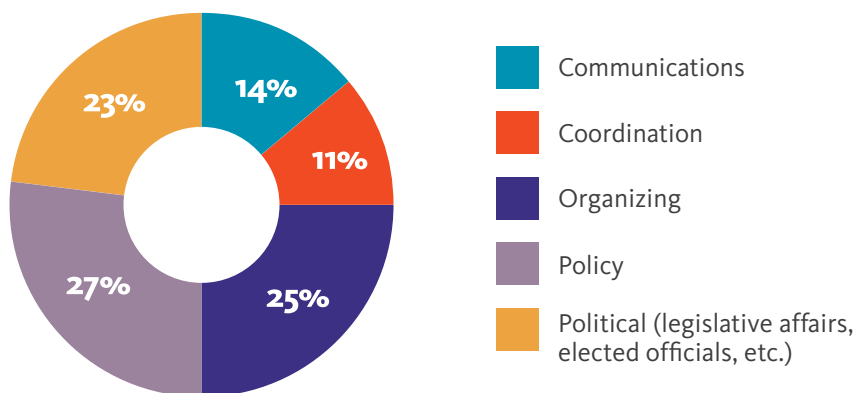
### INTERVIEWS BY LOCATION



### INTERVIEWS BY SECTOR



### INTERVIEWEE EXPERTISE



No state has sufficient field capacity to support advocacy across multiple issues, nor does any state have in place networks able to effectively contend with rampant, well-resourced opposition groups. Long-term investment in grassroots organizing and communications to date has been minimal—and additional resources are very much needed to develop a sustained advocacy infrastructure that can have an impact and withstand constant parachuting.

This is not the first time that grassroots capacity has been identified as a gap. This issue has been raised, flagged, discussed, and put aside multiple times. But sufficient long-term, multiyear investment in grassroots capacity has not yet come into being, despite the acknowledged need for it. In a 2012 report, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy recommended funders invest more heavily in communities and engage at the grassroots level. **“Grassroots organizing is not only a strategy for building public pressure . . . but also can determine whether public will exists in the first place.”** But resources to provide grassroots support have been slow to follow recommendations. As one interviewee in Michigan asked, **“Why do we give \$20B to post-disaster repairs but can’t get \$1B to build up levee systems to make sure it doesn’t happen again? It’s the same with grassroots.”**

## TOP-LINE FINDINGS

- **Timelines require patience, fortitude, and a long-term commitment.** Developing long-lasting, and ultimately self-sustaining, infrastructure requires patient investment over time. Grassroots organizing, communications, and social and digital outreach, when implemented together, can be quite powerful. But this kind of investment requires patience and is best served by ongoing, multiyear commitments.

- **Yes, and . . . (don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good).** There will always be near-term, critical moments and opportunities that require response and provide new pathways for policy advancement, including grassroots leverage. It takes an intentional division of labor and resources to ensure that adequate funding supports ongoing long-term infrastructure needs, while also creating the capacity to pivot and effectively take advantage of near-term prospects.
- **The Midwest is not monolithic.** Each state has its own set of internal political, socioeconomic, and network complexities. Grassroots infrastructures need to be viewed as state-based. Though new regional network approaches may seem more efficient, be cautious, and thorough, when evaluating their perceived value and likely impact.\*
- **Leadership development is wildly under-resourced.** Due to inconsistent resourcing, national groups cyclically parachuting into states around election cycles, and uneven statewide advocacy infrastructure, the talent pipeline for Midwest organizing and communications professionals is thin. Additional, ongoing leadership programs are needed to cultivate, train, and embed professionals in these networks.
- **The boom-bust nature of cycles ruins good relationships. Part 1:** Campaigners “parachute” into states for targeted, short-term field and campaign efforts around elections or votes and then leave promptly thereafter, eroding both community trust and effective infrastructure. **“It’s like building sand castles cycle after cycle.” —Michigan. Part 2:** Additionally, in Michigan and Ohio, cyclical parachuting has created almost toxic relationships with some local organizations, particularly those with ties to frontline communities, low-income communities, and communities of color. Many of these organizations are treated transactionally; often they are brought into campaigns as low-cost

\*There is one notable exception to the emphasis on state-specific recommendations. The development of a leadership and talent pipeline will have greater impact if state-specific cohorts also connect regionally to learn from, and develop stronger relationships with, the experiences and knowledge of networks in other states.

vendors. This diminishes organizations' ability to develop durable, authentic relationships within their communities and impedes broader coalition and network collaboration.

- **Cross-issue infrastructure investment is lacking, but it is needed (and can be challenging).** Broad networks that work across multiple issues and connect constituencies who have like minds are not prevalent, but are necessary and extremely valuable. Historically, many funders often invest to impact a specific goal, and tend to back off when their primary issue is not a central focus in a network. This narrow approach, which leaves a lot of opportunity untapped, should be reconsidered. Internal funding dynamics can be complicated, but cultivating high-functioning, effective, and long-lasting advocacy capacity that functions across multiple issue areas is viable with consistent investment.
- **Technical capacity is strong, but effective communications capacity is thin.** Advocates are adept at speaking in language grounded in technical content, but that does not translate well to policymakers or the public. **“We keep falling back into facts and relying on bringing in experts to try to change minds. And it keeps failing.” — Minnesota.** Too many groups rely on familiar, outmoded habits (e.g., letters to the editor) or falsely perceived funder expectations (e.g., media hits) rather than impactful, strategic communications. Additional capacity is needed to communicate policies in terms of values, narratives, and personal stories, rather than graphs and wonkishness.
- **Digital and social media outreach is noticeably underdeveloped and deserves targeted investment.** Digital capacity overall is thin. Groups are unable to maintain regular contact with their contact lists or leverage social media for promotion and engagement. They rely too much on email action alerts as a primary (but less effective) mode of contact, and they're unfamiliar with social media

best practices. There is near unanimous support for expanded, ongoing digital and social media capacity, and a willingness to learn and adopt new practices.

- **Rural and small-town engagement is a huge gap—but solutions must focus on authentic, community-based relationships over multiple years to succeed.** Rural outreach was identified consistently as a gap in many states, but there are no shortcuts to success. The kind of relationship development needed in these communities requires ongoing support (and patience). Local voices and organizers who are embedded in communities year round for no less than two years will make a huge difference and should be prioritized.
- **Progressive organizations have not found an effective strategy to reach Midwest working-class white people.** White identity politics are very real in the region, and there isn't yet a cohesive strategy to compete with the Americans for Prosperity approach (dozens of staff in each state, with an ongoing, multiyear presence). Because these states are getting older and whiter, this is a big issue—and many networks working in the region have yet to adapt their strategies accordingly. Several policy papers are circulating about how to approach this, but there is not yet clear movement toward a shared solution set.
- **Playing defense takes a lot of time, but a good offense (or intentional policy goal) could bring people together differently.** In Minnesota, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio there is interest in proactive campaigns for organizations to rally behind (with many mentions of *water issues* as a possible starting point).

---

## REGIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop a leadership and talent pipeline** that is Midwest-focused, diverse, and can provide needed capacities to serve the networks and organizations



across the entire region. Intentional training and capacity-development programs will address the current gaps in homegrown talent.

- **Invest in communications.** The strongest recommendation was to ramp up communications capacity, especially in digital channels, including direct training for communications professionals.
- **Take advantage of the 2018 election cycle to seek out long-term staff.** This is an opportune time to look toward 2019 and identify the best and brightest campaign staff coming into these states. With adequate planning, resourcing, and recruiting, campaign staff could be retained in staff positions designed to fill the gaps identified by this assessment.
- **Don't underestimate local opportunities.** Cultivate opportunities for policy change at the local level, rather than focusing entirely on state-based venues (e.g., state legislatures, state agencies). From a grassroots perspective, local venues, including school boards, city councils, county commissions, etc., can be pivotal for effecting policy and may provide more opportunities.
- **Listen to people and “meet them where they are.”** Knowing local and regional trends, and regularly listening to local communities' concerns, is vital to successful grassroots outreach. Tactics that allow for longer, sometimes less-linear paths to policy change and take into account shifting community priorities will have greater impact.

## POTENTIAL FUNDING MECHANISMS

Several funding models emerged that could be deployed to help provide additional investments in longer-term, cross-sector, and state-based grassroots capacity. All of these approaches are best served by multiyear commitments based on clear multiyear plans.

- **Anchor donors make a difference.** Finding a few anchor donors who can provide a base of resources makes it easier for smaller donors, and smaller NGOs, to participate in efforts to develop lasting advocacy infrastructure.
- **Matching funds may help get resources to scale.** Formal matches could set up funding in a way that encourages, and could necessitate, additional participation and contributions from other funders.
- **“Alternative” funding considerations.** There are opportunities to route additional “bump” funds that align with philanthropic goals, beyond traditional payout mechanisms (e.g., one-time gifts from principal/corpus, intermediary regranteeing entities, and adjusting payout allocations).
- **Collaborative funding models.** When thinking about state-based advocacy infrastructure as a network, collaborative funding models may provide strong options.
- **Economic analysis could bring in new bedfellows.** Economy-wide regional analysis may be a way to bring in new partners. Now is a good time to be modeling and analyzing what a diversified Midwest economy looks like (across sectors) over the next two decades.

## STATE-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific recommendations are available for Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. Each state-specific discussion provides a brief summary of relevant background information and commentary plus:

- Describes opportunities and challenges.
- Identifies strong current partners and potential new partners.
- Offers state-specific recommendations for expanding and strengthening grassroots capacity and infrastructure.

---

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

please contact Jane Bloch at [jane@tusculumconsulting.com](mailto:jane@tusculumconsulting.com).



**MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION**

### PHOTOGRAPHY

Shawn Poynter: cover (top left and bottom left); Jim and LeeAnn Van Der Pol: cover (top right); Rural Renewable Energy Alliance: cover (bottom right)