

***Native Voices Rising:
Native-led Organizing in the United States through a Human Rights Framework***

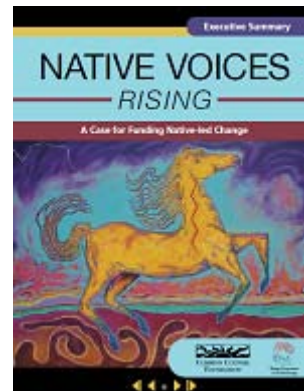
Contributed by Carly Hare, Executive Director of Native Americans in Philanthropy

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Introduction

Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) and Common Counsel Foundation (CCF) have collaborated to create Native Voices Rising, a joint research and re-granting project intended to focus philanthropic attention on the need for increased investment in grassroots community organizing and advocacy in and by American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities.¹

Native Voices Rising recently released the report “A Case for Funding Native Led Change.” The report highlights the challenges and successes of Native-led organizations and presents survey results of 146 nonprofit social change organizations working with and for Native communities throughout the United States.



This report, as well as Native Voices Rising’s ongoing research, fills knowledge gaps within the philanthropic sector regarding the needs of Native communities and the strategies these communities employ to create change through a human rights framework. In particular, the Native-led strategies for change outlined here and explored in greater depth in the report promote self-determination and the ability to develop and seek a Native-led vision of change. Together with community efforts in urban, rural, and tribal areas, this vision of change will help build healthy, prosperous, sustainable communities for Native people and others alike.

Native Voices Rising’s research shows this to be a pivotal time in Native America. In some regions, opportunities are opening up as the result of improving economic standards, higher levels of educational attainment, and better health outcomes among Native community members. However, at the same time, many historical structural challenges persist today. These problematic policies and practices must be viewed and acted upon through a human rights lens.

Challenges to Native Communities

In September 2012, S. James Anaya, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, finalized a special report to the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Speaking before the Council, Anaya stated that indigenous communities in the United States “face significant challenges that are related to widespread historical wrongs, including broken treaties and acts of oppression, and misguided government policies, that today manifest

¹Along with these terms, Native American and Indigenous are also used interchangeably throughout this article to refer to collective populations of Native peoples.

themselves in various indicators of disadvantage and impediments to the exercise of their individual and collective rights.”²

Among the indicators that Anaya might have referenced are that one in every four Native Americans lives in poverty, suffering its various and diverse consequences, including poor health indicators such as shorter life expectancy and high infant mortality. Further, the rate of teen suicide in Native American communities is triple the national average.

Environmental challenges within Native communities also persist: mining and other forms of land development and resource extraction have led to widespread negative impacts on community health, the ecological health of traditional lands, and the availability of subsistence resources. The degradation of environmental health and natural resources is further exacerbated by climate change, the impacts of which are already being acutely felt within Native communities in North America and across the globe.

Another challenge is that local, state, and federal government in the U.S. continually contest tribal sovereignty. A recent example is the *Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl* case, on June 25, 2013, in which the U.S. Supreme Court reversed a South Carolina Supreme Court decision, remanding the case for further hearings in South Carolina court. The outcome of this case will determine who will have custody of a Native child adopted by non-Native parents against the will of her Native father. The Supreme Court issued a narrow decision interpreting three specific sections of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) -- a piece of legislature designed to protect Indigenous children from being adopted against the wishes of their biological parents -- and did not find ICWA to be unconstitutional.

Change Utilizing a Human Rights Framework

Amidst these many economic, environmental, and political challenges, Indigenous people are creating positive change in their communities through organizing, education, and advocacy that utilizes an intersectional approach and draws from a human rights framework.

The Native Voices Rising report highlighted many recent policy and practical victories achieved through Native-led organizing and advocacy. For example, in the Native-led environmental movement, advocacy from actors such as the Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition and the Indigenous Environmental Network led to the enactment of state policies to protect drinking water from contamination and to curtail mining operations that harmed Native lands. Through the subsistence movement in Alaska, specific species of fish, plant, and animal life central to Alaska Natives' subsistence living have received greater government protections.

In urban areas, Native organizations have changed child welfare policies and procedures, created new educational programs, and established comprehensive community development plans. Native media organizations have been successful in pushing policy changes at the Federal Communications Commission that are more supportive of telecommunications development in tribal areas. And Native voter engagement activities have impacted redistricting plans, encouraged the practice of creating “enhanced voter files” (which fill information gaps and help increase voter registration and turnout), and increased overall Native voter turnout.

² For more information, see:

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12501&LangID=E>

Longer-term wins for Native American communities are rooted in the development of youth, elders, and community member leaders who are becoming effective organizers and advocates in their communities around environmental, social, and economic justice.

Funder Strategies For Investing in Native Communities

In addition to highlighting strategies utilized by Native-led groups, “A Case for Native Led Change” also includes recommendations for funders interested in meaningfully supporting Native-led organizations. The following recommendations stem from the report’s in-depth interviews with almost fifty leaders of Native organizations. For clarity, their responses are grouped into two categories: grants and operations. The first details recommendations pertaining to the grantmaking process, while the latter provides more information on organizational and communications issues:

Grants

- Provide increased funding for Native organizing
- Provide more general operating and capacity building support
- Make long-term multi-year funding commitments
- Fund grassroots Native organizations directly
- Invest in community leadership development
- Support development of the telecommunications/media infrastructure
- Provide on-going operating support to voter engagement organizations beyond national election cycles in order to sustain progress and momentum
- Support Native intermediaries that are solidly grounded in Native movements
- Support income-generating activities such as social enterprises
- Incorporate interdisciplinary grant approaches that draw funds from multiple foundation program categories to support organizations and projects conducting work at the intersection of programs, such as, for example, culture and environment

Operations

- Listen and learn about Native communities, including their issues, needs and aspirations
- Be more responsive than directive; find common interests
- Communicate information about grant programs more broadly in the Native world
- Small grant funders should pool funds to streamline the grants application process and reporting requirements
- Conduct research on needs in the field in partnership with Native organizations
- Look beyond the small population numbers as compared to other racial/ethnic groups
- Bring Natives into the philanthropy sector as staff, board members and resources; involve them in shaping and implementing grantmaking work

In addition to providing research that fills specific knowledge gaps within philanthropy, Native Voices Rising is also a grantmaking project. Native Voices Rising’s grant awards are made by regional grant committees, composed of Native community leaders who are supported by staff and technical expertise from the Common Counsel Foundation and Native Americans in Philanthropy.

The first grants will be disbursed in December 2013 with support from the Open Society

Foundation. Interested organizations are encouraged to apply at www.NativeVoicesRising.org. Letters of Intent are due August 15, 2013.

Interested donors/funders are encouraged to contact Common Counsel Foundation to learn more about contributing to the re-granting pool. The full report or an executive summary can be found at www.NativeVoicesRising.org.