

Community Foundation Trends and Priorities

Executive Summary | April 2026



CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change

Guiding the Path Forward

A Message from the President & CEO

At CFLeads, we believe community foundations are essential leaders in building strong communities and advancing equitable, long-term solutions to the issues that matter locally. Our role is to support community foundations as they cultivate and strengthen their community leadership muscle, helping them navigate complex and emerging challenges, and lead with purpose and confidence wherever they are on their leadership journey.

This report reflects our commitment to listening to and learning alongside the community foundation field. Through the Issues of Interest Survey, CFLeads has gathered insights from leaders nationwide to surface priorities, challenges, and opportunities. These insights shape our programming, partnerships, and advocacy, including our Economic Mobility work and Community Foundations for Civic Health, launched in 2025 in partnership with the Rhode Island Foundation and the National Civic League. As we move forward, we remain committed to deepening this engagement to ensure our work meets the field's evolving needs and advances communities where all residents can thrive.



In a time of rapid change, community foundations are uniquely positioned to listen deeply, convene broadly, and act with both urgency and care. I encourage you to remain steady in your values, and continue to lead with the thoughtfulness and courage needed to create sustainable change in your community.

Onward!

Mary L. Thomas
President & CEO, CFLeads

Introduction & Purpose

CFLeads launched the Issues of Interest Survey in 2019 to better understand the priorities, challenges, and opportunities shaping community foundations and the communities they serve. As the field continues to evolve, the survey provides a consistent way to capture **emerging trends, track shifts over time, and elevate the perspectives of place-based philanthropy.**

This work serves community foundations, national partners, and CFLeads by **elevating field-wide priorities, informing strategy and alignment, and ensuring our programs and partnerships remain responsive to evolving needs.** This executive summary provides a brief overview of key findings from the 2026 survey, with a forthcoming comprehensive report offering additional data, trends, and insights from across the field.

Methodology and Demographics

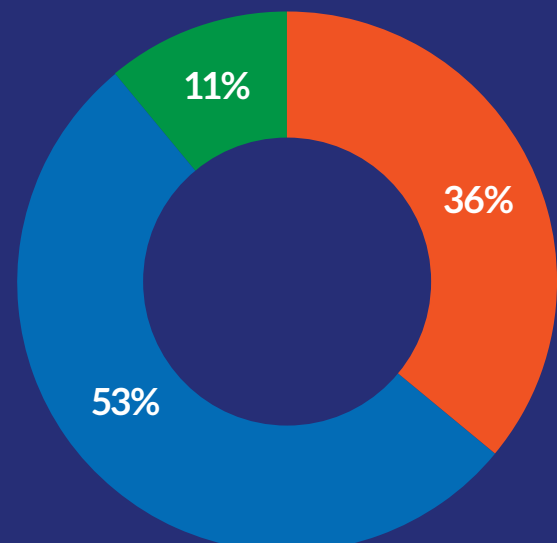
In 2026, CFLeads expanded the Issues of Interest Survey to build on prior iterations, broadening survey focus beyond issue areas to also collect insights on strategic skills and competencies, growing opportunities, and overall leadership sentiment among community foundations.

The survey received responses from 106 community foundations accounting for 12% of the nearly 900 community foundations across the United States.

Respondents represented a diverse cross-section of the field in terms of geography, asset size, and community context. Analysis confirmed that the sample accurately reflects community foundations across census regions and asset sizes.

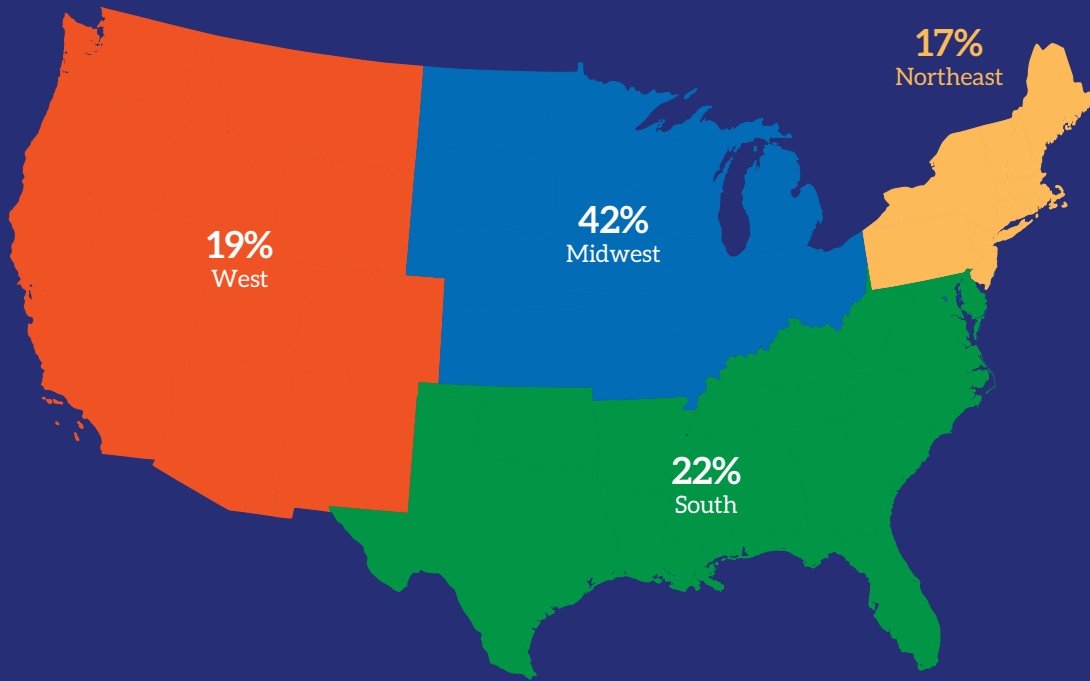
The survey was administered online and shared through a variety of philanthropic networks and field partners. The format included multiple-choice questions, rating scales, and open-ended responses, allowing participants to share both quantitative and qualitative insights. Together, these responses provide a **comprehensive picture of how community foundations are leading and responding to their communities' needs.**

Community Foundation Asset Size

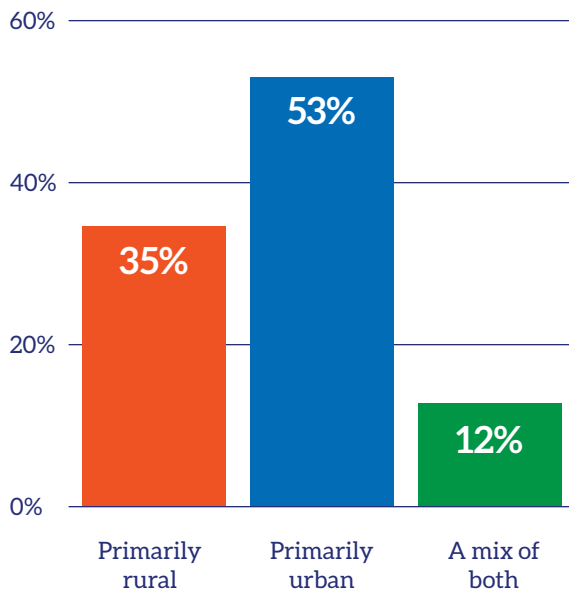


● Small \$0-\$49M ● Medium \$50-\$499M ● Large \$500M+

Community Foundation Census Regions



Community Foundation Service Area



Key Insights and What Stands Out

Community foundations report a broad range of priorities across both skills and issue areas, reflecting the diversity of their roles in supporting local communities. **While clear patterns emerge in impact focus, key competencies, and responses to emerging issues, priorities also vary by region, asset size, and across rural and urban contexts.**

These differences highlight the influence of organizational and geographic factors in shaping both strategic direction and capacity-building needs across the field.

01 Community Foundations Are Strengthening Key Skills to Tackle Diverse Issues

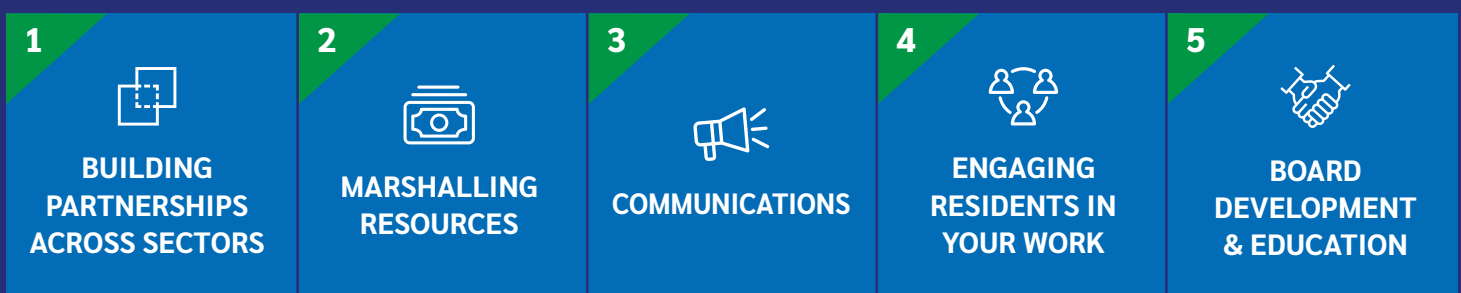
Top Community Impact Areas and Priority Interventions

In what areas are community foundations most interested in engaging?



Top 5 Skills and Competencies

Which skills are most important for your community foundation to develop?



02 Equity, Social Justice, and Immigration Continue to Anchor the Work of Community Foundations

Amidst shifting norms and increased pressure around work related to equity, social justice, and immigration, many community foundations continue to demonstrate sustained interest and commitment in these areas. These issues remain central to how a substantial share of community foundations define their priorities, even as specific strategies, such as communications and resident engagement, may evolve to better serve their community contexts and changing needs.

Across the nation, many community foundations are continuing to advance this work by **strengthening relationships with both donors and communities, engaging in more transparent conversations about systemic inequities, and using intentional, audience-aware language that creates space for productive dialogue while building shared understanding**, as highlighted by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.¹

Community Foundation Equity, Social Justice, and Immigration Insights

38% More than one-third (38%) of community foundations identify Equity and Social Justice as a formal community impact focus area.

50% Approximately one in two (50%) respondents identify applying a racial equity lens as a high or critical priority for skill development.

60% Welcoming and Belonging (e.g., cultural inclusion, community connections) ranks as the leading area of interest within immigration-related work, cited as a strong interest by 60% of respondents.

03 Civic Health Is Recognized as a Core Component to Effective Community Leadership

Top 3 Civic Health Learning Areas



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

e.g. community dialogue, service, and volunteerism, and arts/culture-based strategies



CIVIC SKILL BUILDING

e.g. local problem-solving processes, neighborhood and community organizing, etc.)



LOCAL NEWS & JOURNALISM

Civic health has emerged as a growing priority for community foundations, with strong interest across multiple areas related to community engagement, participation, and access to trusted information. **Respondents identified several learning areas that reflect a broad understanding of civic life and the conditions that sustain it.**

For community foundations, the prominence of social connectedness within civic health closely mirrors respondents' strong interest in welcoming and belonging within immigration-related work.

Interestingly, this sentiment is also reflected in Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement's Civic Language Perceptions Project, which reports that amongst the average person, **words such as "belonging" and "community" serve as the most effective terms to invite connection rather than defensiveness.**² Together, these findings suggest that community foundations understand well how relationship-building, inclusion, and a sense of belonging are foundational strategies to effective community work, regardless of issue area.

Emerging Opportunities and Creative Community Leadership Approaches

Impact Investing Is Moving from Interest to Action

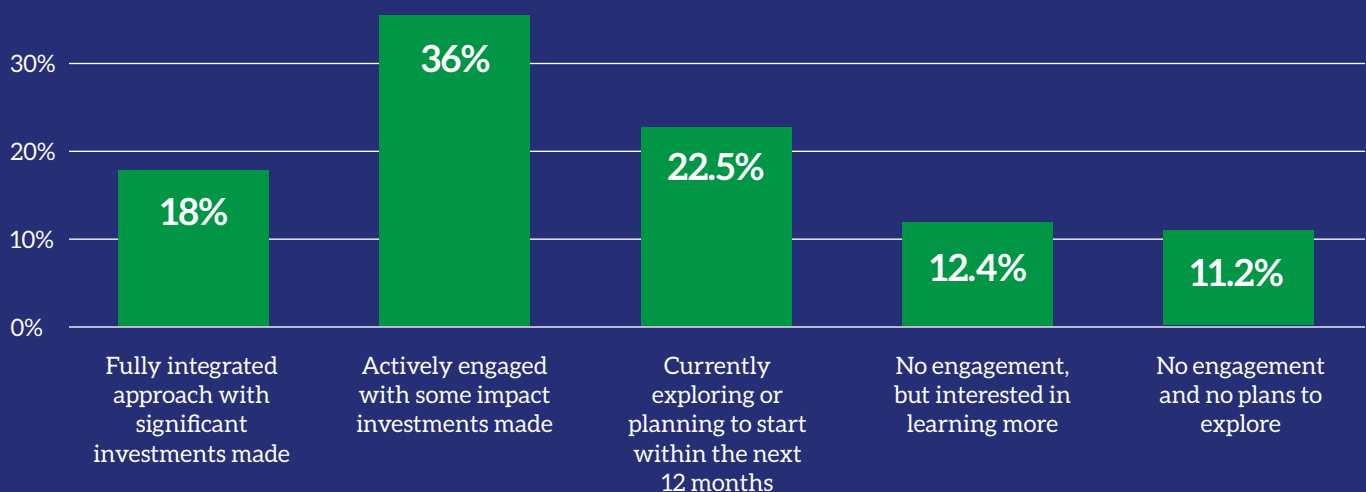
Impact investing is increasingly recognized by community foundations as a powerful tool in advancing long-term community goals. **Nearly 54% of community foundation respondents are currently engaged in impact investing strategies**, signaling increased confidence in this approach as a viable mechanism for impact.

Participation is most common among mid- and large-sized foundations (over \$50 million in assets), which is consistent with respondents' identification of **staff capacity** as the top barrier to deeper engagement in

impact investing. For many foundations, moving from exploration to action requires not just sufficient staffing, but also **internal alignment, and effective infrastructure**. As a result, some community foundations have implemented structural changes, such as developing cross-functional working groups to better align their teams and emphasize impact investing as a core function of their mission.³ As the field continues to build capacity and confidence, **impact investing continues to emerge as a power tool** community foundations can leverage to drive lasting, systemic change.

Community Foundation Engagement in Impact Investing

What is your community foundations current level of engagement in impact investing?

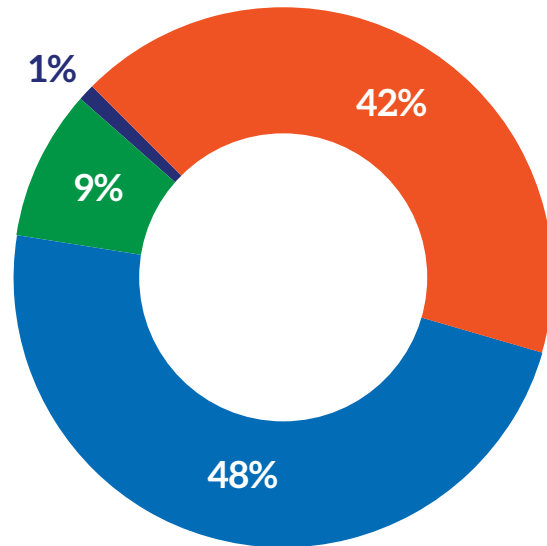


Artificial Intelligence Is Emerging as a Useful Tool, But Capacity Gaps Remain

Community foundations are adopting artificial intelligence (AI) at rapid rates, with **82% of respondents indicating that their organizations are exploring, or actively implementing AI tools or workflows.** Simultaneously, only **10% of community foundations report having a good or excellent understanding of AI across staff, leadership, and board.** With current levels of adoption rising, this internal knowledge gap warrants additional exploration, particularly when considering research from the Center for Effective Philanthropy which finds that **three-quarters of nonprofit leaders believe that none or only a few of their foundation funders understand their organizations' AI-related needs or concerns.**⁴ Together, these insights affirm the opportunity for targeted capacity-building, funder education, and shared learning to ensure that AI adoption is informed, intentional, and mission-aligned for both community foundations and the organizations they partner alongside.

Community Foundation Understanding of Artificial Intelligence

What is your organization's collective understanding of artificial intelligence?



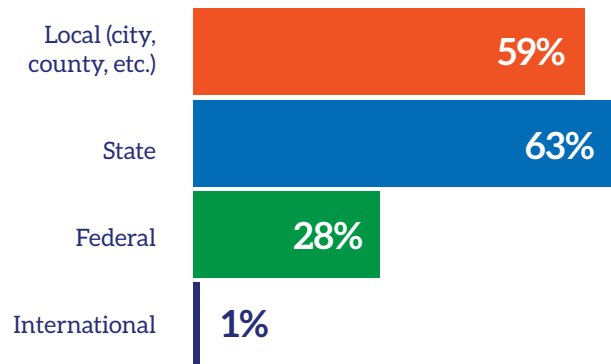
Policy and Advocacy Engagement Is the Norm, Not the Exception

As community foundations continue to strengthen their community leadership capacity, their involvement in policy and advocacy has expanded. Community foundations report engaging in a range of relevant activities such as coalition building, public awareness campaigns, legislative advocacy, research and policy analysis, and grassroots organizing. Survey responses highlight that **more than 54% of respondents are actively engaged in policy and advocacy work, with an additional 15% currently exploring or planning to begin within the next 12 months.**

Notably, most community foundations express interest in **engaging in policy and advocacy work at the state level, indicating opportunity for state-wide coalition building and strategic alignment.** There is also growing interest in **engaging in policy and advocacy efforts at the federal level,** underscored by the February 2026 launch of the bipartisan Congressional Community Foundation Caucus led by Gabe Amo

Community Foundation Engagement Interests Across Federal, State, and Local Government

At which level(s) of government are you most interested in engagement?



(RI-01) and Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01). This caucus is intended to elevate community foundations as trusted local partners, and **ensure that federal policymakers understand the value and contributions of community foundations nationwide.**⁵

Conclusion

The data confirms what CFLeads has asserted since its inception: community foundations are uniquely positioned, and have the ability to respond with agility, galvanize communities around shared priorities, and advocate for systems-level change that creates lasting impact. This impact is especially amplified when internal and external stakeholders are aligned around shared priorities and strategies, which allows community foundations to move faster and act bolder.

As community foundations continue to navigate evolving landscapes and lead thoughtfully in their communities, this report invites leaders to stay curious, creative, and connected to achieve more in partnership with the communities they serve.

Community foundations are invited to remain:

CURIOUS

The most effective community foundation leaders continue to ask questions, interrogate data, and stay open to new ideas and findings, even when existing assumptions are challenged.

CREATIVE

The challenges that communities face today are too complex for traditional approaches alone. This means that leaders must be willing to explore new tactics, take informed risks, and explore the full suite of community leadership approaches in service of community priorities.

CONNECTED

The most impactful community foundation work is built on trusted relationships with residents, partners, and funders. This connection requires proximity, humility, and sustained commitment to ensure that community voice drives both strategy and resources.

- 1 Bartczak, Laurie. Bridging Differences to Advance Equity: Three Lessons Community Foundations Are Learning About Engaging Donors and Community. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. January 25, 2024. <https://www.geofunders.org/news/bridging-differences-to-advance-equity-three-lessons-community-foundations-are-learning-about-engaging-donors-and-community/>
- 2 Erickson, Siri. How to Talk Bridgey 2.0: How to Talk About Democracy Under Pressure. Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), 2026. <https://www.pacefunders.org/language/>
- 3 Beges, Sarina, and Emily Imhoff. Evolving the Community Foundation Business Model of the Future. Aspen Institute. February, 2025. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/EVOLVING-THE-COMMUNITY-FOUNDATION-OF-THE-FUTURE_02.2025.pdf
- 4 Arrillaga, Elisha Smith, Seara Grundhoefer, and Christina Im. AI With Purpose: How Foundations and Nonprofits are Thinking About and Using Artificial Intelligence. The Center for Effective Philanthropy. 2025. https://cep.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CEP_AI_Layout_FINAL.pdf
- 5 Office of Congressman Gabe Amo. Amo, Fitzpatrick Launch Bipartisan Caucus to Support Community Foundations. U.S. House of Representatives. February 11, 2026. <https://amo.house.gov/press-release/amo-fitzpatrick-launch-bipartisan-caucus-to-support-community-foundations>

Learn More

CFLeads is proud to present insights from community foundations across the country which strengthen the field through shared learning, data, and connection. In addition to this Executive Summary, the full report will be available in Summer 2026 and includes a more detailed view at each section with insights on how the data and results are impacted by demographics like census region and asset size.

The full report is offered as a CFLeads Investor benefit, or is available for non-CFLeads Investors on our [Resources page](#).

Stay Involved

To become a CFLeads Investor please visit our website at cfleads.org. This work is only possible because of the collective support of our Investors, funders, and partners.

For more information about CFLeads' upcoming programs and opportunities, sign up for our [mailing list](#) or visit our [website](#).

Acknowledgments

Author: Enida Jeteric, MPA, MNM, Program Manager, CFLeads

We extend our gratitude to the more than 100 community foundation leaders whose time and insights made this report possible. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the CFLeads Board, Staff, and Lillian W. Acton, Independent Evaluation Consultant, for her valuable support in analyzing and evaluating the survey results.

CFLeads

Community Foundations
Leading Change

info@cfleads.org
www.cfleads.org

CFLeads Board of Directors

Rose Bradshaw, Chair
North Texas Community Foundation

Isaiah Oliver, Immediate Past Chair
The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida

Simeon Banister, Vice-Chair
Rochester Area Community Foundation

Eileen Connolly-Keesler, Treasurer
Collier Community Foundation

Shelly O'Quinn, Secretary
Innovia Foundation

Anna María Chávez
Arizona Community Foundation

David N. Cicilline
Rhode Island Foundation

Stuart Comstock-Gay
Delaware Community Foundation

Dr. Michelle Mickle Foster
Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation

Felecia L. Lucky
Heron Foundation

Christopher Nanni
Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham

Randy Royster (Retired)
Albuquerque Community Foundation

Lisa Schroeder (Retired)
The Pittsburgh Foundation

Daniel P. Templin
DeKalb County Community Foundation

Tonia Wellons
Greater Washington Community Foundation