

## **Santa Cruz County Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments: A Model for Dispersing Limited Local Government Funds**

**Overview** – The Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments is both a funding model and a movement to achieve equitable health and well-being for county residents through committed local action and funding.

**Challenge** – With ongoing state and federal budget uncertainties along-side increased needs for those facing economic loss, housing and food insecurities and other hardships, many community-based organizations (CBO) turn to county and local governments for funding. In Santa Cruz County, where we face systemic underfunding and economic uncertainties that contribute to ongoing budget challenges, we must determine how to disperse limited local dollars when the needs far surpass the resources. Amidst interest for more transparency and greater community involvement in fairly awarding limited local dollars, county government must also ensure equity is centered in the decision-making process, so we measurably uplift historically marginalized and underserved populations through our funding efforts.

**Solution** – State and federal governments set policy and allocate funding to County agencies who administer local safety net services, both directly and through contracts with local CBOs. The County of Santa Cruz has historically gone beyond this foundation and provided additional grant funding for local CBO service programs, initially done through more traditional and less competitive funding practices. The process has evolved over time to become an equity-centered, results-based collective impact model, CORE Investments. The CORE framework identifies eight conditions of well-being that support a thriving community, including health and wellness, stable and affordable housing and shelter, healthy environments, economic security and mobility, lifelong learning and education, thriving families, and community connectedness. Interested CBOs compete for three-year grants through a competitive request for proposals (RFP) process focused on addressing inequities certain populations encounter in achieving the CORE conditions of health and well-being. In partnership with City of Santa Cruz, the County awarded \$5,953,900 in CORE Investments, sourced through local revenue, in fiscal year (FY) 2022-23. Funds went to 41 local CBO and agency partners operating 57 programs with outcomes aimed at addressing inequities through services ranging from homelessness prevention and intervention, environmental education, food insecurity, immigrant services, youth and senior programs, employment training, and parent programs, just to name a few. Greater transparency and community involvement was achieved as the funding model and movement evolved, through deliberative engagement with valued partners representing nonprofits, public agencies, grassroots groups, funders, and community leaders. We incorporated the community's views regarding what they valued, that funding should be available to various sized organizations, and for programs that are strongly evidence-based as well as

innovative “promising practices”. This engagement was key, considering the changing needs of the community resulting from the impacts of the Pandemic, the July 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fires and the increased unaffordability of the Santa Cruz County housing market. This engagement also met the growing desire of CBO partners to ensure equity for grant applicants, as well as equity for the community through the programs funded. CORE “Institute” trainings were, and continue to be offered for, interested CBOs and county partners, covering collective impact, data use, and impacts of structural racism and inequities, which benefit CBOs’ efforts to be competitive with additional funding opportunities. As a result of this shift, CORE Investments now incorporates equity as both a process and a desired impact, focusing on anti-racism and racial equity explicitly but not exclusively.

**Innovation** – The approach to shift away from traditional funding practices towards a transparent, equity-driven approach that promotes collective impact is innovative and is a model to be replicated for communities of all sizes and demographics. The CORE framework allows a community to take an iterative approach to a collective impact model and become invested in the achievement of data driven results that allow for more equitable and accountable funding of local community service programs.

**Results** – CORE Investments provides fair and equitable distribution of limited local funding to CBOs and other eligible applicants. The updated RFP process removed the appearance of bias that existed in the traditional funding model used previously, and it allowed all potential organizations an even playing field in seeking funding—from application through to the awarding of funds. Funded programs demonstrated how they would address inequities and committed to submitting data to determine their program’s impacts over time. The approach is community informed, equity-centered, outcomes driven, and helps address the systems of oppression that create the greatest needs in the populations served.

**Replicability** – The County's process, highlighted through annual reports that include lessons learned, is easily replicable for those communities invested in a collective impact and equity centered approach to local grant funding. The FY 2022-23 RFP (included in the additional materials section) provides a blueprint for any county to undertake its own transition from reliance on more traditional safety net funding practices, to that of an equity-centered, results-based, collective impact model.

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**Additional Materials** – CORE Investments information, the FY 2022-23 RFP, and a recent Santa Cruz County Grand Jury report on CORE Investments as a model of transparency are linked below:

<https://www.santacruzhumanservices.org/Home/FundingOpportunities/COREInvestments>

<https://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/Portals/0/County/GSD/Purchasing/Solicitations/HSD1-2021%20CORE%20Investments%20RFP.pdf>

[https://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2023\\_final/2023-2\\_CORE\\_Report.pdf](https://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2023_final/2023-2_CORE_Report.pdf)