We've Been Here Before: Community-Based Nonprofits Confront Crises

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Presented by Building Movement Project and Solidarity Is

Deepa Iyer: Welcome, and thank you so much for joining us today for our webinar hosted by Building Movement Project and Solidarity Is called "We've Been Here Before: Community-Based Nonprofits Confront Crises." We're really grateful to all of you for joining us. We know that this is a difficult time for many. Even though in most states we've been sheltering in place for six weeks now, the weight of this time wears on each of us in different ways. We send you all our care and support and we hope that the conversations that we are curating offer connection to community for each of you, ideas to implement, and catalyst for action. Today's webinar is the second in our Nonprofits and COVID-19 series. A month ago, we hosted a webinar on how Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian-American movement leaders were responding to COVID-19, which highlighted the structural racism being exposed by this pandemic. Today we're going to be exploring lessons learned from past crises.

Most of us on this webinar are part of the nonprofit/movement-based/advocacy/organizing sector, as well as social service agencies. We also have representatives from philanthropy, government, and academia as well. Thank you to all of you for being here. We know that this issue is an important one for all of you to be learning about and we're really excited to be providing this knowledge.

I want to provide a little bit of information about Building Movement Project. We are a national nonprofit organization that strengthens social change organizations and networks through our research, training, and tools. We have released various reports, including the *Race the Lead* reports about people of color leadership in the nonprofit sector, as well as our visual tools and exercises, including the social change ecosystem map, the movement leadership tool, and our *Solidarity Is This* podcast. Our work on COVID-19 is a reflection of this commitment to strengthening social change organizations. In addition to this series of webinars, our staff are writing articles about the racial equity implications of COVID-19 and we're also pulling together a report based on a survey and interviews with nonprofits that are led by people of color. To that end, we would love it if you all could share your input and your knowledge as we seek to understand the effect of COVID-19 on organizations and communities of color. If you are a person of color on this call and you lead a nonprofit in your community, please take the survey. It takes 10 minutes to complete.

As I mentioned earlier, we have come into this conversation with the benefit of learning from our last webinar, one that was held down really by women of color who lead Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian community groups. On that call it was very clear, as you well know, that the pandemic is exposing the multigenerational effects of white supremacy, nativism, and capitalism. We learned about various effects of COVID-19 on communities of color, communities with highest needs. These range from barriers to care and access to care, including high rates of illness and deaths for communities of color. In hotspots like Louisiana, Detroit, and Washington D.C., Black communities are facing higher rates of illness and death. People in Indian country are also facing access to care issues. We're also seeing health risks for queer and trans communities and disabled community members. In addition, when it comes to the economy, there are increased rates of unemployment being reported by Latinx community members, the rights of essential workers are in question, and many cannot access the stimulus packages that are coming out from the government. Another angle to the effects of COVID-19 is around violence, criminalization, and enforcement. We're seeing an increase in gender-based violence, as well as an increase in anti-Asian racism. We are seeing anti-Black violence and the rise of armed vigilantes,

especially among white supremacist groups in this moment. There are also racial disparities of enforcing shutdown orders and the issues of government monitoring and surveillance. These are just some of the many effects that we are seeing of COVID-19, particularly on communities of color.

In this moment, as we ground ourselves in the present realities of what is happening, we also wanted to take some time to learn from the past. I will start with this quote by Ella Baker, who said that "in order to see where we're going, we not only must remember where we have been, but we must understand where we have been." In order to do that, we have asked three people to tell us about the ways in which they've learned from the crises that they've worked on, and our goals for this conversation are threefold:

1) To understand and explore the similarities and differences from past crises and COVID-19, specifically from the standpoint of nonprofits run by people of color.
2) To understand how nonprofits led by people of color have responded to public crises and what they require in order to be sustainable
3) To understand what various sectors should be doing now to ensure a more equitable future

The three crises points that we're focusing on, and there have been many public emergencies obviously over the past two decades, but the three that we're focusing on today include September 11th and its aftermath, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Great Recession of 2008. There are through-lines on what has happened between the crises that we have been through before, whether that is 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina or the Great Recession. Everything from the failure of government to be responsive to our communities, the divestment of resources from those who need them, catering to capitalism over the needs of people, disparity placing people of color from displacement to discrimination to government surveillance. It really begs the questions: What have we learned? Do these systems work if at all, in terms of our people? What is the role of nonprofits in really attending to the crises that happen in our communities?

Typically, nonprofits are part of a crisis cycle. From relief to recovery, to reimagination and rebuilding, nonprofits have been frontline responders. When it comes to relief efforts, they have been part of recovery efforts in terms of influencing decisions and policies. They've obviously been part of reimagining and rebuilding systems and policies and institutions through the lens of equity, solidarity, and inclusion. To learn more about how that has been possible in the past and what we can learn from that, and what is important for the future as well as the present, I'm so pleased to welcome three panelists who are just remarkable people, as well as advocates and leaders. I'm really grateful to them for taking time to join us, because I know that they are extremely busy right now, and I really appreciate that they've taken the time to join us.

A little bit about our panelists in terms of introductions. **Seema Agnani** is the Executive Director of the National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development or National CAPACD, which is a coalition of more than 100 community-based groups that work to advocate in low-income, Asian-American and Pacific-Islander communities and neighborhoods. Seema was a founder and the former Executive Director of Chhaya CDC, which is a housing and economic justice organization based in Queens, and she was the head of that organization during and after 9/11 and that's what she'll be speaking about today. Also with us is **Alberto Retana**, who is the President and CEO of Community Coalition, which is a nonprofit organization in south Los Angeles that empowers residents there to transform their communities and reimagine public safety. Alberto actually joined Community Coalition in 1988, so he's been there quite some time. Community Coalition created the People First Platform, a

comprehensive policy agenda informed by over 4,200 adults and youth to move resources to the highest-need communities. Alberto will be talking to us about the lessons learned from working through the Great Recession. Finally, we're joined by **Ashley K. Shelton**, who's the Executive Director of the Power Coalition, a statewide 501(C) organization in Louisiana that combines community organizing, issue advocacy, and civic action. Prior to that role, Ashley was the Vice President of Programs at the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, where she worked on response efforts related to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and she'll be talking to us from that vantage point. Welcome to all three of you.

Before we get started, just a quick overview of our format today. I'm going to ask each of our panelists two rounds of questions. I encourage all of you who are listening to please put questions into the Q&A box if you have any for our panelists, then we'll move into that portion. We'll end with a call to action and recommendations.

Let's go ahead and get started. The first question I have is: what are the similarities between the COVID-19 crisis and the emergency that you responded to? We'll start with Ashley and then move on to Alberto and Seema. Ashley, go ahead.

Ashley Shelton: Great. Thanks so much for having me this afternoon. Deepa, I think this is such an important conversation and I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of it. I think when we talk about the similarities between COVID-19 and Katrina, I think it's just always true that the first thing that comes to mind is the exposure of the amount of poverty and difference that exists in our communities, and the difference in people's ability to be able to cope, to be able to respond. These things come up almost immediately when you start thinking about how systemic and structural racism has put people of color to such a disadvantage. These disasters create a mirror that just reflects back to us the ways in which we have kept certain groups of folks from being able to have the ability to work from home. What a privilege it is to be able to have that. We find that a lot of our essential workers are people of color and in particular are African-American women.

I think what I worry about with this particular disaster, when I think about what's similar and what's different, is that what's different is that there's no economic engine for this disaster other than the federal government. At least with the hurricane, typically there's rebuilding, houses, furniture, things have to be bought and it helps hold the economy up until things can get better. But I think that in this case we don't have that. Which then draws me to the more important point, which is if the only engine is the federal government then we have to make sure that those dollars come down in a way that's actually people-centered. I think that that's also part of the similarity and the difference, is that we always want to solve with only a business-focused solution. I am certainly a proponent of business and the economy and all that great stuff, but I also understand that again, people have been devastated by this virus and do not have the ability to just come out of this.

We're coming out of the quarantine here in Louisiana on Friday. What is the ability of someone who has not been able to work, they're three months behind on their rent, and then they're going to just magically be able to manage all of the things that we know are going to come on the other side of quarantine? And especially for people living in poverty, especially for people of color? I think another thing is figuring out and defining what people-centered recovery actually looks like and really talking about the fact that this moment is about re-imagining these systems. The systems have been broken. We know they're broken. I think that this, COVID even more so than Katrina, has exposed the brokenness of these systems, whether it be criminal justice, lack of affordable housing, not having enough transportation. I think that those are things that we've got to have real conversations about and

really think about as we try to get the economy back up and running. How are people going to go to work if childcare centers aren't open? How can childcare centers open if there are all these issues around this virus continuing to ravage our community? There were just 612 new cases in Louisiana and tomorrow we're open. Right? I mean, it's so crazy. It's a phase one opening, but it's still crazy. Then I think the other point that I think is really important to make is the trauma. We don't talk about what it means for people to have to grieve. So many lives were lost in Hurricane Katrina. The inability to truly grieve and even know where your loved one is. We see some of those similarities with COVID, that my family members are dying and people are having to bury them without their families around them and without access to a support system. I do think that piece of trauma comes with loss and also just the fear of this virus and what's going to happen to your family if someone were to contract COVID-19. The fear of your inability to come out of this 17 days later from a hospital visit, if you're lucky enough to survive, and then carry medical debt. Right? Thinking about all of these ways in which the dominoes fall in ways that keep communities of color trapped in a cycle of poverty and criminalization.

I think that criminalization piece, too, sticks out for me. I mean, we're giving citations to folks. We've got stop-points in Black communities, but you can go to Audubon Park and jog with no PPE on, nobody's bothering you, no citations. We've been fighting those things. So, again, that movement building core, those of us that have been on the ground fighting, we are going to continue to fight. We’ve shut them down, but they're back. So we're figuring out another way to ensure that they're not disproportionally impacting communities of color with citations and things that don't help us recover from this.

Deepa Iyer: Thanks so much, Ashley. And thanks for opening with that phrase of “people-centered recovery.” I think that that's something that is really helpful when we think about the framework for even re-imagining, which we'll get to later. I want to turn it over to you, Alberto, to talk a little bit about the Great Recession and some of the similarities that you see between that moment and this crisis today.

Alberto Retana: Thank you, Deepa. Thank you everyone who has logged in. Sending greetings from South Los Angeles to wherever you may be sitting in and zooming in from. So appreciative of all of you joining us. Appreciative of Ashley's point around having a people-centered recovery effort. I think it’s probably the center of, not just her point, but why we're on this call today. There was a lot that Ashley shared that I strongly and deeply connect with and agree with. And although Louisiana and Los Angeles, New Orleans and Los Angeles, are very different, a lot of our people in South Los Angeles come by ways of Louisiana and New Orleans. So there's a lot of kinship in our neighborhood and yours.

I'm 44 years old—I've lived through crises, and read a lot about crises, and have dealt with the day to day crisis of working with people of color and oppressed people in the United States. This is my first crisis while in leadership and my first crisis of this magnitude that has impacted my life personally. So, while there have been other emergencies, like 2008, what is not different are the underlying economic and political systems that our entire society depends on and functions off of. So, in the normal day to day, there are those that have a lot, those that have some, and then those that don't have at all. This is the normal and it's not okay. And it's never been okay. So we do our best to transform it. In a place like the United States with low levels of democratic action (for all of the reasons that we know that we won't get into—it’s not about apathy, but about suppression and decisions that are constantly being made for us), the underlying system stays and we go on living our lives, struggling for our families.

I hate the notion of gender reveals because I'm incredibly critical of everything associated with the gender reveal party, but I know a lot of my family members are involved in gender reveal parties. And

one of the things that is actually happening right now is the great social reveal. It's what people have talked about: the exposure. This is one huge social reveal that I think is demonstrating a few things that are similar to when 2008 happened. The first thing is revealing. You talked at the very beginning about structural inequality across race, class, gender, and all the other determinants that shape our society. Ultimately, the system is set up to protect private property and profit over people. That the national conversation is our willingness to let people die, to get our economy off the ground as if it's an either/or question versus an end. At what point can we do both? And there's no reason why we need to throw lives away. Like, "Oh, it's only 5%. Oh, it's only 1%. Oh, it's only..." At what point is no lives good enough?

I think, ultimately, it's about the reveal of private property and all of the white male heteronormative interests that are wrapped around that. Two, it reveals an actual assessment of power. We try to do power analysis every day in our work, but it's rare that we're able to really get a handle on what power looks like, and you really get a good sense of it when crises like these happen. Who has it, who doesn't, in government, in philanthropy, in the nonprofit sectors. You'll see nonprofits that disappear. You'll see nonprofits that emerge. You see good government leaders that rise in leadership. You see those that don't, you see decisions that are made.

So, the 2008 stimulus package and all the bailouts that took place, as well as some of the consumer protections, is a reflection of who actually has power. And right now we know who has power in the White House. We know who has power in the Senate. We know who has power in the nonprofit sector. Much of that was revealed by the reports that Building Movement Project does, but certainly it's exposed even more so today in terms of who has power in the nonprofit sector. Which nonprofits are being called by their mayors and by their legislatures to inform what a "recovery effort" looks like all exposed power for what it is and what it's not.

The point I'm about to make is somewhat complicated and nuanced, but I think it still applies, which is that interventions are race-neutral. And that is incredibly problematic when we've seen all the data point to the disproportionality of the impact on Black folks, Indigenous folks, Pacific Islanders in particular, it's incredibly problematic. We've learned that the COVID crisis, just like the economic crisis, the curve doesn't come in one way. It comes in multiple waves at different intensity, at different levels. And so the race-neutral response to a racist context is incredibly similar. The last thing I'll say about this and close out in terms of the similarities between 2008 and now is there's a great social reveal around our social community values, both the good and the bad. So, what is it about our country? What is it about our neighborhoods? What is it about our organizations that show the rhetoric of, "Together we win?" I fundamentally believe in the value of coming together across race, across class, not doing so in a way that's ignoring people's histories or context, but to actually come together is a big deal. And the fact that we're doing it in crisis represents the very best of our people, but it also exposes the social and community values that are problematic, that have been informed by individualism, rugged individualism, of hoarding of resources, lack of resources, blaming each other, rather than actually having a society. It exposes the healthcare system and its inadequacies, of having overflowing emergency rooms when, in reality, hospitals should never have been the first point of care in the first place. So it exposes a lot of nuts. That's all I'll say right now. So: structural inequality, power, race-neutral policies, our social and community values.

Deepa Iyer: Thank you so much, Alberto, that was really helpful. And you gave us another phrase to go along with what Ashley started us off with: "the great social reveal." And also the assessment of power and understanding that that actually goes across all sectors as well. I'm going to turn it over to Seema

now. It's hard to believe that almost 20 years have passed since 9/11. I know both of us have been working in our communities all that time, but tell us a little bit about the similarities that you're seeing between what happened in the aftermath then, and what's happening now.

Seema Agnani: Thank you, Deepa, and thank you to my fellow panelists. I think a lot of what we're seeing unfortunately is similar to what we saw two decades ago. The social reveal really surfaced the issues that are relevant to the most vulnerable in our communities. I think the thing that really stands out to me is those that are most vulnerable (cash earners, undocumented, very small businesses, LEPs, seniors), those groups are really feeling this the most and did from the onset. And I think they really need to be centered in the long-term recovery and rebuilding. As you pointed out, I was working in New York City with the South Asian and Muslim community in New York during 9/11. And, in addition to the trauma and the losses that people were experiencing at that time, the South Asian and Muslim communities also had multiple layers of impact.

There was of course the economic loss. Lower Manhattan came to a standstill and that meant all those people, from drivers to small business owners, people selling fruit on the street, all were severely economically impacted. And because they were earning in cash in many cases, even simple things like documenting income so they could get the relief was a major challenge. So we're seeing a lot of those same issues emerge here. And then, of course, the harassment and heightened levels of discrimination that emerged post 9/11 that resulted in hate crimes, harassment in schools, job loss. I remember getting calls from different community members who were fired days after 9/11 because they were Muslim. So, that is also happening. And then the last piece is, of course, the institutional response. Unfortunately, we probably will see more, but post 9/11 there was the special registration program, where hundreds of thousands of South Asian Muslim and others were rounded up at that time, none of which were found guilty of anything. The fear that that created in those communities really had a major impact on their ability to be resilient in those times.

I think it is worth sharing a quick story. My organization was working in a building in Queens. We were organizing tenants, the majority who were from Bangladesh who were Muslim. And we had to quickly pivot from organizing those tenants who were getting ready to ask for repairs in their building to providing very basic assistance, making sure they got the food they needed as family members were literally disappearing. It was helping them navigate that process, getting legal support and navigating the special registration program. Basic needs like food and shelter were what we had to really refocus on.

So, I think the lack of the safety net also emerged in the immediate aftermath of when this pandemic really came to its beginning. At that time it was the faith-based institutions, the neighborhood businesses, and the really small community-based neighborhood organizations that really stepped up and responded and got people the food they needed and the support they needed because they had the relationships and were able to navigate the neighborhood. Again, during this period, we're seeing that happen. I think we're also seeing major gaps in small business support. We could talk about that later, but I think that's one area that really surfaced for us: the lack of infrastructure and support for small businesses. The fact that all these mutual aid funds have emerged around the country is inspiring to see. And I think that shows the level of experience that our groups do have in crisis at this point, knowing that it couldn't just wait for government to come in and save communities, but really stepping up and creating those funds to try to really respond to immediate needs.

Deepa Iyer: Thank you so much, Seema. I think the story was really instructive and it also reminds us that nonprofits are continually having to pivot when it comes to addressing the immediate needs of our

communities. All three of you spoke about a lot of the similarities between past crises and today, ranging from the lack of adequate infrastructure, the failure of government, the social, racial, and class disparities that exist, as well as government policies, the enforcement and criminalization of communities of color, and that the communities with the highest needs are not always centered as Ashley mentioned.

So, those are many of the similarities, but as you all alluded to, there are differences as well. One of the things I wanted to ask you about is the ways in which our sector, and community-based nonprofits, have engaged in since the crises that you all talked about and worked on. A tremendous amount of advocacy and organizing, grassroots efforts, narrative shifts, policy work. What has happened when you look back? What are some of the lessons learned from that time when it comes to nonprofits? What can we utilize in this moment to uplift our communities and uplift the policy demands that we need to be making right now to reimagine the future? What is it that we can learn from the past that we've practiced, that we've built, that we've collaborated on, whether it's nonprofits, government, or philanthropy, that you can lift up for us? I want to start the second round with Alberto and then Seema and Ashley. Alberto, go ahead.

Alberto Retana: I mean, it's an obvious point, but I want to make it explicit. I can only answer this question from the place I sit in in South Los Angeles, which may be very different from Detroit, Michigan or Navajo Nation or in a community of Pacific Islanders who are impacted at 12 times the rate of white folks. So: time, place, conditions, and context matters. This is the story I share from my vantage point. And hopefully some of it will resonate. Some of it might not. 30 years ago, a group of community leaders, activists, and frontline responders were brought together to address a crisis that was destroying black families, in particular killing black families, incarcerating them, separating them, suffocating them from their dignity and respect. You could probably think of a host of issues that could fall under those terms, but that crisis in particular was the crack epidemic impacting South Central Los Angeles.

It was a public health issue that was treated as a pathology, as a criminal issue, as an individual issue, as opposed to the undergirding economic and social conditions that led folks to self-medicate in the first place. Two years after we were founded to address that crisis, our city burned in flames and South Central was the epicenter of the crisis that was on national news with what many people call the LA riots. We call it the LA uprising. So this begins to get at the differences. The conditions were very different then. We had a chief of police of Los Angeles at the time that said that Black people might be more likely to die from chokeholds because their arteries do not open as fast as they do in "normal" people. We had a Republican governor, we had a Republican state legislature. When the national guard was called into LA to enforce martial law, there was no access to elected officials, no real access to power. We couldn't get to the governor's office. So the national guard was in cahoots with a racist chief of police and a Republican governor. And even though we had a Black mayor who was on our side, most of the time, he was also squeezed out of power from the decisions that were being made. There was little in the way of mass organizations or people-power institutions. Activists from across the board at that time were forced to meet in living rooms, basements, and in secret, with little support from philanthropy. Outside of crisis, our legislature was passing policies like proposition 187 and 184, which are Trump-like policies of today.

So, while the underlying economic and political systems are the same today, our political organization power and formations were nascent. So, what's different? 30 years later, California has emerged as a state of resistance, as Dr. Manuel Pastor points out in his book. He documents the work that we've done over the last 30 years. We are now seen as a left-leaning alternative to Trump. And although there's a

lot more we have to do in California because, make no mistake, California still has contradictions that we have to address, it did not happen by accident. It did not happen by random change of political attitudes. It did not happen because we're a majority people of color state now. It happened because of strategic, deliberate effort by activists and civil rights organizing to build and express power through mass organizations, politics.

As the COVID crisis hits us in LA, we're in a very different place today than we were 30 years ago. We have elected officials we can call. We have access to the governor's office. We have dozens of organizations. Every Saturday, 20 community leaders, people of color, leading organizations, Black, Brown, Asian, API folks, Native folks are coming together to talk about how we build power and how we make sure that we don't have a race-neutral response, which we'll get to in a second. So I'll just close by saying that, while we have access to power today, which we didn't have 30 years ago, we don't have seizure of power. We still don't have the kind of power we need. We still have a way to go. And if we do our work, the California of 2050 will look far better than the California of 2020, which does look better than the California of 1990, when we first started. So progress is protracted. The organizing that we've done has been deliberate.

Deepa Iyer: Thanks so much, Alberto. It's really helpful to hear about the history and the origins of Community Coalition and how things have progressed. I really want to lift up this point about building people-powered organizations. Strategic, deliberate, mass-organizing needs to be supported, but it doesn't just happen by accident. So, thank you for that. Seema, I'm going to turn to you next. Can you share with us a little bit about what are some of the lessons learned from post-9/11 and the environment that puts nonprofits in perhaps a more strategic position than they were when 9/11 occurred?

Seema Agnani: Yeah, so I think there's a lot of growth that has happened over the past two decades in the nonprofit sector more broadly. And that work is paying off now. As Alberto said, we still have a lot of work to do, but we have made progress as a sector. Post 9/11, we were calling some of the organizations that we ended up partnering with for the first time in that moment of crisis. And I think the thing that has happened since then is our organizations have built our own capacity and we have also built partnerships and built trust with other organizations across the sector. I think in that moment of crisis, we understood the importance of not just working in silos, but really building across movements.

It has not been perfect, but we really, at this point, have relationships in place that were activated immediately upon this crisis hitting. That trust-building work that we have done over the years has really been helpful. The other thing is groups understanding where their strengths are and figuring out where they can enter this space and be most effective. We did a lot of thinking around, "Okay, what are we doing now? What are our strengths and how can we contribute in this moment?" rather than trying to do everything and be everything to the community. We have also learned about one another's strengths and were able to participate from that perspective from the beginning.

One example is the first stimulus bill that came out, which came really quickly, so we definitely were not equipped. But immediately after, the civil rights organizations and many others started to be in contact with one another and responded quickly in terms of where we needed to weigh in and where we saw the gaps. So, that was a sign of progress. I think that's particularly important right now, when we have an administration that's hostile towards all of our communities. There is that kind of shared interest bringing us together in terms of what we want to really see in the long run. Having built that trust,

having had conversations about what the narrative should look like and what the longer-term vision really should look like, is paying off now. We still have a lot of work to do, but it's been helpful in terms of our ability to respond in this moment.

Deepa Iyer: Thanks, Seema. The relationship building, the solidarity, the cross-movement work, getting out of the silos and leaning into strengths, are all pieces of advice. To be honest, maybe even for nonprofits that are coming up right now in the wake of this particular moment to respond, to think about building. Ashley, I want to turn to you to talk a little bit about best practices learned from Katrina. I know you've also worked in philanthropy and have that background. What are some lessons learned that put us in a better place right now to attend to what is evolving around us today?

Ashley Shelton: I have very similar points to Seema and about organizing and advocacy. I think during Katrina, I was a funder on the funder side, all we kept hearing from the national audience and funders and community was that there was no capacity here. And I think that's the buzz word for: "Let's not listen to Black and Brown organizations on the ground, we need to just bring all these folks to kind of parachute in and help us." I think one of the lessons learned with that, when I was at the foundation, was that we significantly invested in expanding and building on our policy and advocacy, as well as our organizing infrastructure, because we knew that no matter what the federal money was going to, it would far outweigh whatever philanthropic dollars we received.

Even though we had the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund and other dollars, the reality was that was 50 million versus 60 billion. Helping people understand that fighting for those dollars to actually get to the ground is where the power was and where the greatest opportunity was. When I look at our organizing and advocacy community now, I feel blessed. I've got a whole team of folks that I can fight on the ground with. I think Seema's point about leadership and building those relationships, everything that we have won and continue to win since Katrina has been because there is a group of us when all the folks leave. When there's nothing, when nobody feels like talking about your disaster anymore, there are those of us for whom everything they love is in this place. So, I'm not packing up. I'm not going anywhere. I've got to fight for my community and the people that I know are hurting even still as we try to repair the things that are there.

I do think that having that network of leaders who hold the line about what we're going to allow to happen and not happen to the people that we're fighting for every single day has been really, really powerful. I think it's also impacted our advocacy. It used to be, "Hey, there are smart folks that have lots of smart ideas about the policy solution to any number of different problems." But for us, Katrina's actually pushed a bigger narrative about how directly impacted people are not a part of the advocacy solution. It doesn't matter if you're smart enough to figure out what the answer is. We need to actually have policy action informed by impacted people, period. Those are the things that we learned and that came out of Katrina.

Another thing that is really important is being able to work along all levels of government. A quick story, after Katrina, it really was the federal government and local municipalities that were in alignment and we were fighting the state at the time. And so, if we couldn't get some alignment around housing issues or how some CDBG dollars would be spent, I could call my fellow New Orleanean who just so happened to be working at HUD. And he would just keep the application on his desk until we could have a community conversation about what the solution was.

It’s unfortunate with this administration that we don't have those same kinds of connections, but we were able to build power along both the local, state, and federal and really talk about the fact that before we brought community to DC to talk about what was actually happening to impacted communities following Katrina, the congressional body had never heard from anybody from our states. They'd heard from our congressional leaders, but that's not the same as a grandmother who's lost her home, every photo she ever took, these things that were really powerful, stories of what had happened to people. That other piece is also making sure that we're bringing directly impacted people into these conversations and keeping them front and center.

We keep talking about essential workers, but another point would be around data, right? We open up as a state on Friday, but we're trying to race to make sure we have as much data as possible to be able to tell the story of what's happening to essential workers in our state. Who they are, how much money they're making, and are they getting hazard pay? Do they have access to PPE? Whatever the story is, we can prove that we know what's happening to people. I always tell folks, "I only care about data for the purposes of policy action." Because we can get lost in that, but I do think it is important for that particular instance of making sure that we can tell the stories of what's happening to people.

We’ve also talked to folks in Puerto Rico, we've shared our stories with other folks that have been living in disaster, are experiencing disasters. One thing that comes up time and time again, unrehearsed, when we do these conversations is that we have to think about the children. It struck me that even though we were doing housing and workforce and training, the reality was that we had to understand the trauma that had happened to our children, that our children were growing up in the relief and recovery phase. It was also painful. Everybody wasn't recovering in the same way and the recovery dollars didn't come down in fair, thoughtful ways.

I would close by saying: "Be careful of the words." People talk about how resilient and beautiful the people of Louisiana are. I always remind folks that we are a beautiful, resilient people. But if you do not change the things that forced me to be resilient, which means I'm stretching myself for periods of time, it's just oppression. And you don't need to dress it up and use a pretty word to call it what it is.

Deepa Iyer: That's super powerful. Thank you for saying that, Ashley, because I think that is a word that's used to describe our kids, our communities, people of color, right? "They're resilient. They're going to be okay." It doesn't really tend to what needs to be dismantled, that it's not just keeping wrong all the time. Right. But the systems need to change, that the burden is not always on us. Thank you, again, to all three of you for laying out some of the ways in which communities have built up power. Some of the themes that you brought up were the importance of building people-powered organizations that are focused on mass organizing. We talked about the access to power that has been gained particularly in all levels of government and how to actually use that power to our advantage. We covered the importance of trust and relationship building, working across silos, across movements, beyond our silos, but also being really clear about what we're good at and effective at. And the importance of thinking about narrative and what the narratives are that are being told. I really appreciate the wisdom and the insights. I want to go into a little bit of time for Q and A.

There are a couple of questions that have come up and I'll try to direct them to each of you in a particular way:

- Seema: How has your organization pivoted to respond to this particular crisis? What kind of health do you all need particularly from perhaps philanthropy or partners? That would be helpful to hear. If others want to talk about the health needed, that's fine too. Feel free but that question came in specifically for you.
- Ashley: How do you shape the narrative of a crisis and how people are understanding that crisis, both in the moment, but also actually in terms of the future? When people think about Katrina or Rita, how do we shape the narrative so it isn't one or the other?
- Alberto: How does philanthropy, or how should philanthropy, think about investing, organizing, and people-power movements that go well beyond the immediate crisis?

Seema Agnani: Thank you, Deepa. Thank you for all the support and love from the attendees. In terms of how we're pivoting immediately after, I have to say, I really appreciate how philanthropy is being flexible in this moment. We immediately started to talk to our member organizations and set up lines of communication to really hear what's going on on the ground. For me, this was difficult because I have always worked in community. Having shifted to the national level, it was challenging for me. I wasn't quite sure what the role is that we should play? But we decided to do a number of things. One, get resources to our groups because they were responding immediately and needed to fill gaps. And we're fronting all those costs, whatever support we could provide for them. We're making sure we're creating spaces for our members to share strategies, be it through webinars, through collecting of resources. For us, language access is a major issue. So, we're also wherever member organizations are translating materials, we're simply just sharing them. And it is helping because we're able to cover languages that are often ignored, from the Pacific Islander languages to Southeast Asian, those are always left behind. We're also just sharing resources.

In terms of what we're trying to do now as an organization, we're trying to raise funds. I know there are a lot of funds out there. We didn't want to compete with our member organization. So we haven't been very public, but we've been appealing to institutional donors to contribute and really want to provide flexible funding to groups on the ground to really do what they're doing. We're also trying to invest more in storytelling. One appeal to philanthropy would be everybody wants us to tell stories, but we need resources to do that work. We have a one-person communications team. We’re trying to do what we can to collect stories and engage our partners in that work, but really from the grassroots to our level, we do need support to do that work. We know how important it is. Lastly, we have a lot of policy advocacy efforts. We don't have the capacity we need to really push for our communities on the national level. So, we have been trying our best and partnerships are helping, but I think we need increased capacity in that area as well.

Deepa Iyer: Thanks, Seema. I think a lot of folks are probably nodding at what you're saying because they're in the same boat, listening in. There are just a myriad of needs and yet, it's oftentimes really difficult to keep meeting them over and over. Thank you for just laying those out. Ashley, on to you and the question around narrative. How do we shape narratives that are people-centered and that are really being faithful to the experiences of communities that often get left out of the story altogether?

Ashley Shelton: One of the things that we had done before we were all quarantined was we brought together all the policy groups around the state that were working on different issues and really understood what the work was of each of the groups. What were they trying to change and move within those issue area groups? These policy recommendations were coming from a space of impacted people. And we quickly turned what would have been our policy agenda for the legislature into a roadmap. One

of the things that we did was we took every issue area and we gave recommendations to our state government, our governor, who was also constitutionally, one of the more powerful governors in the country, and are really leading with narratives around paid sick leave.

If we really want to address COVID, 45% of the people in the state of Louisiana don't have one day of paid sick leave. And so what we've been doing is just creating a bully pulpit. We sent the policy, the roadmap, to every legislator. We printed it out and sent it to every legislator. We've had conversations, great conversations with Congressman Richmond in his office about why did we pick up certain policies or why did we mention certain things over the other? It's about just pushing. We've been pushing with some national media and asking our state partners to help us with our comms because, like Seema said, we just don't have the comms capacity to bombard. But, we do a lot of web ads and we help our partners do web ads. It's just about who has capacity and how do we spread that capacity amongst the partners that we work with. But I do think that it's sticking. It's making it much harder for our legislature that's in session right now, that'll be talking about another paid sick leave bill that we're pushing. And interestingly enough, they killed one, but this one we're asking the harder questions and really challenging them and really creating some media around how we are going to protect our workers.

If the economy is the only thing you care about, how are we actually going to center people? On the narrative side, it's a combination of a bunch of stuff. It's app ads. I always make comments on national and regional reports that come out about what's happening to people in Louisiana so that I can really project what our reality is. The last thing I'll say is using moments, organizing moments, to tell a broader story. For example, all of the sanitation workers are striking in New Orleans. Our partner [Voice of the Experience] has some COVID relief dollars and they're going to allow them two weeks... They're trying to figure out what the exact amount is to help support them while they're on the line. So that strike can create a basis for a larger conversation about essential workers, about safety and about what needs to happen when we talk about essential workers. Using moments of organizing to really tell a bigger story. Getting your trash picked up is real and personal to every single person. At the end of the day if you can't get connected to the plight of folks that are suffering, it's these kind of demonstrations that help connect people. We've also been just trying to use those to build campaigns and communications.

Deepa Iyer: It's really important to talk about those organizing moments. The other piece that I've heard you talk about a lot is how you all utilized the racial equity framework from the beginning, using a concept that a lot of other folks had not heard about to shift the narrative again and shape it. Alberto, the question around why it is important that philanthropy stays on the scene after the fire is out. And the importance of investing in people-centered mass organizing movements.

Alberto Retana: The opening quote by Ella Baker about looking back at history to look towards the future is incredibly relevant when we're thinking about philanthropic investment. There are no shortcuts to solving inequality. There are no shortcuts to solving the brutal, divisive, and dehumanizing impacts of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and all that we're trying to work on. Oftentimes, in moments of crisis and disaster, everyone gets executive-like and starts making executive decisions. Whether you're on the left or on the right, in either case, let's just stick to our folks, otherwise it could compromise our values of democratic action. To Ashley and Seema's point of how we make sure that those that are most impacted by the problems that are generally furthest from the decision-making table are actually smack in the middle to help shape and define what the future looks like: I think it's easy for me as an executive at an organization that is grounded in the community to move into executive action. We all have to ground ourselves in values and practices to ensure that the people that we claim to be at the center, are

always at the center and are anchoring the decisions we make. The same goes with philanthropy, especially as philanthropy comes out and says that they're really wanting to get behind the people.

With that in mind, I think there are three particular things that I think philanthropy can do in this period to learn from the past. There's a lot of things. I have like 10 things, but I'll only share three things. One thing we've learned from the past is that philanthropy has not invested in LA, and I would venture to say, it probably took place after Katrina and certainly took place after 9/11. It definitely took place after 2008. It definitely took the place after '92. In all these disasters, organizing was not where all the money went. Organizing was probably where the least amount of resources went. All of the other resources went elsewhere. So I believe that there are three things that philanthropy can do.

1) They need to lead by following. They need to not lead by leading. They need to lead by following, by listening to those that are directly impacted, by bringing in folks that are typically not in their kitchen cabinets to actually inform where their money goes, how they spend and how they invest. They need to actually engage folks on what does organizing look like and get behind that, as opposed to just doing service delivery, mutual aid, or build out a social service sector, which is absolutely important, but all that does is mitigate inequality. It doesn't solve it. They need to lead by following people of color. There was a coalition in LA of a hundred groups. 80% of the leaders were white people. I was like, "What's going on? That can't happen." Our white allies have got to do a better job of thinking about who's at the table, who's advocating. Not just people of color, but our folks. So: leading by following people of color.
2) the second thing that I would encourage philanthropy and everyone to do is solve inequality. Stop trying to mitigate against capital and how this helps solve the actual contradictions that exist. That means, you divest in funds that don't help. So you have stocks, you have hundreds of millions of dollars in the stock market. Take it out of the fossil fuel industry. Take it out of the banking industries that are hurting our communities, the pipelines. Invest it in clean energy, invest it in the things that are actually growing. Invest it in the things that matter, that help us in terms of the economy. Invest in bold solutions. Go after the organizations that are doing work on the ground.
3) The third thing is that they just need to spend more. So lead by following, solve inequality, spend more. Let go of this 5% mindset— go spend 20%. Spend down your resources, get the money to us, create flexibility. Do automatic renewals for the next two years. Make it easier for us to live out the freedom dreams that we all have for our communities, as opposed to setting all the restrictions. Crystal Hayling, an amazing Black woman leader is doing just that at The Libra Foundation. I think she's a good example of where to look to.

Deepa Iyer: That's great. Great to do the shout out. The scope and depth of this crisis, as you all have mentioned, is perhaps larger, deeper than any of the other crises that we have talked about. So, the investments have to mirror that as well.

We're getting to the close of our webinar. I really appreciate folks continuing to stay on, that's because of your power and your insights. The last question here is really the call to action. Each of your organizations has put out a policy platform with demands about what to do to reimagine and rebuild. I'm curious to know if you could share one of those bold ideas. About whatever system change you think needs to happen at this time. When you share it, if you could talk about what nonprofits need to do as well as government or philanthropy, when you're thinking about that big systems change. We’ll start with Seema and then go to Ashley and Alberto. Seema?

Seema Agnani: Hopefully as we move to the rebuilding part of this work, we definitely want to look at solutions that are more equitable and inclusive. We definitely don't want to just recover and go back to the way things were. They were not working for our community. In terms of the bold solutions that we need to be thinking about now, there are some things that I really want to lift up.

One is around the economic recovery. Maybe this is getting a little too specific, but to my point around small businesses and microenterprises, I think these small businesses, ironically, are why people had moved into our cities. Why we spent the last decade working around gentrification and displacement. Those same businesses that brought people in are at risk of being lost right now. We really need to think about solutions. All of the relief that's been offered to businesses has been focused on very large businesses, larger corporations. Even the MBDA, the Minority Business Development Association. They work only with businesses that are above a million in budget size. That leaves out so many portions of our economy and things that drive our city. I'm thinking about resourcing the very grassroots and smaller sized businesses. On the housing side, all the relief is focused on home ownership in general. I think if you look at housing programs that are being pushed out on the federal level, all of it is focused around home ownership. When, in fact, the majority of low-income people are renters. Not even just low-income folks. So, I think, shifting our focus to renters and shared equity models, land trusts, and cooperatives. Those are the ways we can build wealth and include everyone in those strategies. Broadening those types of solutions.

Lastly, to what Alberto pointed out, we're having mass unemployment now. How do we take this opportunity to retrain people? Retrain workers? To really work in industries that will address climate change and things like that? If we have so many unemployed, there's an opportunity there to really invest in those areas that we really need to at this point.

Deepa Iyer: Thanks so much, Seema. Thanks for laying out the housing, the solidarity economy pieces and asks. I am going to turn to Ashley. What about some bold solutions? I know you all have a policy platform. Tell us one thing that you want to really hone in on that folks should know about.

Ashley Shelton: I think we looked at a lot of things. I'll talk about criminal justice, because I think that that's one of the more powerful issues that we have to address as a state and certainly as a city in New Orleans. But also to economic opportunity, I think that these systems are broken. There's no other moment than this moment to know how broken they actually are. I'll tell you, and I think my other panelists would agree that, we're in the calm before the storm. I think that it's quiet and there are bad things happening, but if you don't feel them yet, you're going to feel them in 60 days. You're going to feel some of the ugliness that exists in our leadership, our elected leaders.

One of the things that we really focused on, that I think is really powerful, is really looking at criminal justice reform. New Orleans is one of the most incarcerated places in the world. We have worked with our partner, Voice of the Experience (VOTE) led by Norris Henderson, to offer up to our state several recommendations around keeping people safe. Around addressing the fact that we're putting people in a no-win situation around their lives. It doesn't even make any sense. The governor was responsive and did let some folks out. But not nearly at the level of recommendation that we had made around letting folks that had medical conditions. Letting them have furlough, giving folks that were already getting ready to get out, giving them those days and just letting them out, letting return home.

Even more powerful is the juvenile justice space. Or just as powerful. The literal state statute says that, "Juvenile justice is about rehabilitation. It is not punishment." The idea that we are still fighting to get

our juveniles released and sent home to their parents and their families has been extremely frustrating. We have laid out really clear policies about what needs to happen for our incarcerated communities around the state. Being able to really call them on the injustices and the treatment and the things that were going to be necessary to prioritize life—I feel really good about those policies. I think that we're going to see more criminalization. And so we need to make sure that we have a response.

The last thing is that this federal money is going to come down. There's $1.8 billion in Louisiana right now. The people that they've chosen to program those dollars are really great leaders in our community, but do they really understand what we know as activists about these dollars? And how they really need to be put in the community to help? So, we need power, continue to fight, voice. That’s the thing that's going to get us to a people-centered recovery.

Deepa Iyer: That's great, thank you so much. Alberto, could you share a little bit about some of the bold solutions that we need to be paying attention to right now.

Alberto Retana: There's an ancestor of all of ours, I try to carry her message with me in the work that we do by way of Detroit, Michigan. A revolutionary activist, organizer, by the name of Grace Lee Boggs. And she would ask the question, "What time is it in the clock of the world?" I think there's no more relevant time, at least in my life, to be asking that question than right now. Of course, context, place, all matters. Both our global connection, but then in our own unique backyards. For me, if we go back to where we were, then we fail. And for Los Angeles and for California, what's in front of us though, there are still huge social contradictions we have to resolve. Largely because we're in a liberal state as opposed to a progressive state, as a step towards a more revolutionary outcome. So for me, the clock of the world that ticks is, how do we move California and LA from a liberal place to a more progressive place? That's a very different question in a very different place, depending upon where you sit. But for us, that's the contribution we can make. That will hopefully contribute to the rest of the country and to the rest of the world. And part of that means we need to move away from recovery. I think I need help figuring out what the “to” is. Away from recovery to reconstruction? To recover is to return to what was taken. And for many, we've never had. So we can't just recover. We have to reconstruct something better, something new, that takes us away from where we were.

Recovery would mean that the emergency wins we would have made in this period in California, would disappear. We’ve reduced our jails from 17,000 to 13,000. They were built for 13,000. There's activists pushing that right now, now they're suing them to get more folks released. If we go back and then we send everybody back in jail, then we haven't achieved that. We now have folks that are unhoused, that are in hotel rooms. That should be permanent. But if we go back to the way we were, they'll be back on the streets. And we'll have 60,000 folks continuing to live on the streets of Los Angeles. Right now, we've eliminated the SAT as a reason to go into the UC system in California. Why? Because white kids all of a sudden are dealing with the level of oppression that they didn't have to deal with before. Something that our communities have been facing for generations. The SAT's gone for now. If we go back to where we were and bring it back, then we failed and we continue to establish the liberal state.

Part of our job is to make sure that the wins we've made in California, we've made permanent, to create space for other places to do the same. How do we achieve equity and racial justice, as a centerpiece to any roads to recovery? That would be a huge effort. The fact that Angela Glover Blackwell was involved in the key conversations of Governor Newsom’s releasing order is a huge victory. But the Mayor of Los Angeles needs to do the same thing. That would be a move and a step forward. So, we have to change our organizing strategy, our alliance building. We have to change The White House. If we don't change

The White House and we don't change the outcome of who's in the Senate. Then we're going to not go back to where we were—we're going to go backwards. So, for me, the clock of the world is ticking. I'm hearing it. We have a responsibility to organize around it now, now more than ever. For me, solidarity is absolutely critical. Without multiracial solidarity that centers Black lives and the most marginal voices at the front lines, we will lose. We have to build the solidarity needed. And we got to get our white folks to get themselves together, to actually fall in line and get behind what we're trying to build. We're going to build a kind of society that lives, breathes, the dignity, respect, and freedom that our ancestors have been striving for, for us to do.

Deepa Iyer: Thank you, that is really powerful. I appreciate that we've been able to bring in two ancestors, Ella Baker and Grace Lee Boggs into this conversation. That gives me a feeling of being grounded and really anchors the conversation that we've been having. One of the key things that I want to just keep shouting out is the fact that we can't return. There is no normal to return to. And so, how do we preserve any gains that we're having right now, for the long run? I want to end with some recommendations that we pulled together at Building Movement Project and Solidarity Is. To really amplify what you all said.

- For nonprofits: the importance of coordinating and collaborating. Really building that multiracial solidarity. Focusing on sustainability and wellbeing, because a lot of us are dealing with vicarious and direct trauma. Thinking about nonprofit sustainability for people of color who are leading. Leading with a community-centered equity framework. Holding philanthropy and government accountable. I think Alberto said something like, "We may have access to power, but we also need to be able to actually hold that power accountable to us and for us."
- For philanthropy: if it has this racial equity frame that a lot of members of philanthropy talk about, how is that actually being practiced, especially now? Scaling up investments to meet the depth and scale of this crisis in really bold ways. Taking risks with new organizations that are just starting to work with communities. Balancing that emergency response funding with long-term power building investments.
- For government: Put people first, really think about systems and plans and policy that put people first. Have plans in place that are informed by community needs, that make sure that the recovery, as well as the relief efforts, are coming from community. Implementing systems change— the systems that we have been talking about don't work. It is not about making them work again, but actually dismantling them and rebuilding something new.

Those are just some recommendations we wanted to share. I want to just take a moment again to thank Seema Agnani, the Executive Director of National CAPACD. Alberto Retana, the President and CEO of the Community Coalition in Los Angeles. Ashley Shelton, the Executive Director of the Power Coalition in New Orleans, Louisiana. Thank you for your wisdom, your ability to speak truth in an unfiltered, but very powerful way. And the commitment that you have to your communities, for decades. As you all talked about these crises, I could just feel the amount of work and commitment and time you have put in. But as Ashley said, these are the people that we care about. We're not just leaving.

Thank you for the work you're doing and the vision that you are putting out there and have been for some time. Thank you to the attendees for being part of this series of conversations. Please learn more about our work. You can go to buildingmovement.org to learn about our reports, resources, trainings, and all that we're trying to offer in this moment and have been for 20 years now. With that, we're going to close. We appreciate everyone for being here, stay safe and healthy, and look forward to connecting with you all again. Thank you.