



# What We Cannot Do Alone

Assembling Regional Funder  
Networks for Housing Justice

November 2023



**Funders Together**  
TO END HOMELESSNESS



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# I. Introduction

“All politics is local” suggests that even federal policy developments are largely irrelevant apart from state, city, and county implementation. So it is with the movement for housing justice and the philanthropic organizations that support it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, when national advocates and the CDC called for non-congregate shelters via hotels and motels, localities were the ones to mobilize the proverbial Super 8 on the corner for isolation or quarantine. Additionally, in areas where philanthropy was already coordinating their work and had strong relationships, those funders deployed response funding and stepped up to support public agencies much faster than other communities.



This is the overarching rationale for regional networks (and, in some ways, Funders Together to End Homelessness as an institution). Philanthropy is best equipped to fund the movement when it operates as a movement itself, building coalitions between traditionally separate and self-perpetuating funders. These coalitions accomplish together what cannot be done by any funder acting alone.

Funders Together’s [north star of housing justice](#) contends that the movement to end homelessness has been too focused on simply moving people inside rather than attending to the systems that destabilize so many people’s lives in the first place. But that does not mean that any single street outreach provider is at fault: it means their work would be unnecessary if systems stabilized housing further upstream. How are communities to know if they are collectively funding (and advocating for) prevention in proportion to services if they do not coordinate? Funders Together regional networks strive to make that coordination a reality.

This resource provides an overview of the existing regional networks and collaboratives under Funders Together’s support. First, it examines both the meaning behind and the mechanics of their operations. Then, it profiles the entities that use Funders Together’s name for a closer look. It concludes with recommendations for anyone considering forming a regional funder network focused on housing justice.

**The purpose of this report is to :**

- ⇒ make the case for regional networks,
- ⇒ help existing networks benchmark with their peers, and
- ⇒ cast a vision for actualizing housing-justice values in local communities of funders.



## II. Design of Regional Networks

Funders Together to End Homelessness aligns its members across the country, in addition to pushing other national advocacy organizations and the federal government, toward its vision for and values of housing justice. But Funders Together's ability to advance progressive policy and systems transformation depends on its rootedness in the lived reality of its local members. FTEH staff lean on the regional networks to keep them apprised of local policy struggles, innovative ideas, and exemplary advocacy efforts. In this way, funder networks exist in mutuality with Funders Together's national staff.

### Considerations for Using the *Funders Together* Name

Whether regional networks adopt the Funders Together brand is less important than the work they take up. But utilizing the FTEH name can bring certain advantages; as one network leader put it:

“

Funders Together has “a strong national brand and reputation among philanthropy and the homeless sector. [FTEH is] seen as a leader in racial justice and advocacy. As a local collab that uses the FTEH name, I find it beneficial to have that name connection when attending statewide or national convening in our sectors. The brand conveys a sense of our values, expertise, and professionalism.”

”

Taking up Funders Together's name and brand, therefore, constitutes alignment with its [commitment to racial equity](#) and [strategic framework](#)'s vision of housing justice. But that is not to say that complete agreement is necessary nor that this relationship is conflict-free. "We don't have to have the same strategic plan," another network leader explains, "but it's helpful to have the same North Star." Navigating the grey area between healthy disagreement and misrepresenting the Funders Together brand can sometimes be tricky, however. By adopting the Funders Together name, regional networks consent to a relationship of [loving accountability](#) with the national staff. Staff will sometimes call networks in when its values seem distorted and invite that accountability in return.

Read the [FTEH Commitment to Racial Equity](#)

Read the [FTEH Strategic Framework](#)



## Staffing and Structure

While this document uses both *networks* and *collaboratives* to refer to the funder networks in Funders Together's purview (see Appendix for the list), their definitions differ. Put simply, a collaborative pools funding and a network does not, though even this distinction is fluid. Networks may (and arguably should) align funding for projects deemed a collective priority, but don't usually do grantmaking as an entity. Some networks partner with other funder collaboratives instead. Notwithstanding alignment or pooling funding, networks provide space for peer-learning, solidarity, accountability, and advocacy.

**Collaboratives → pool funds**

**Networks → peer learning**

**Funder networks are trending toward hiring staff to coordinate their work – but it's complicated.**

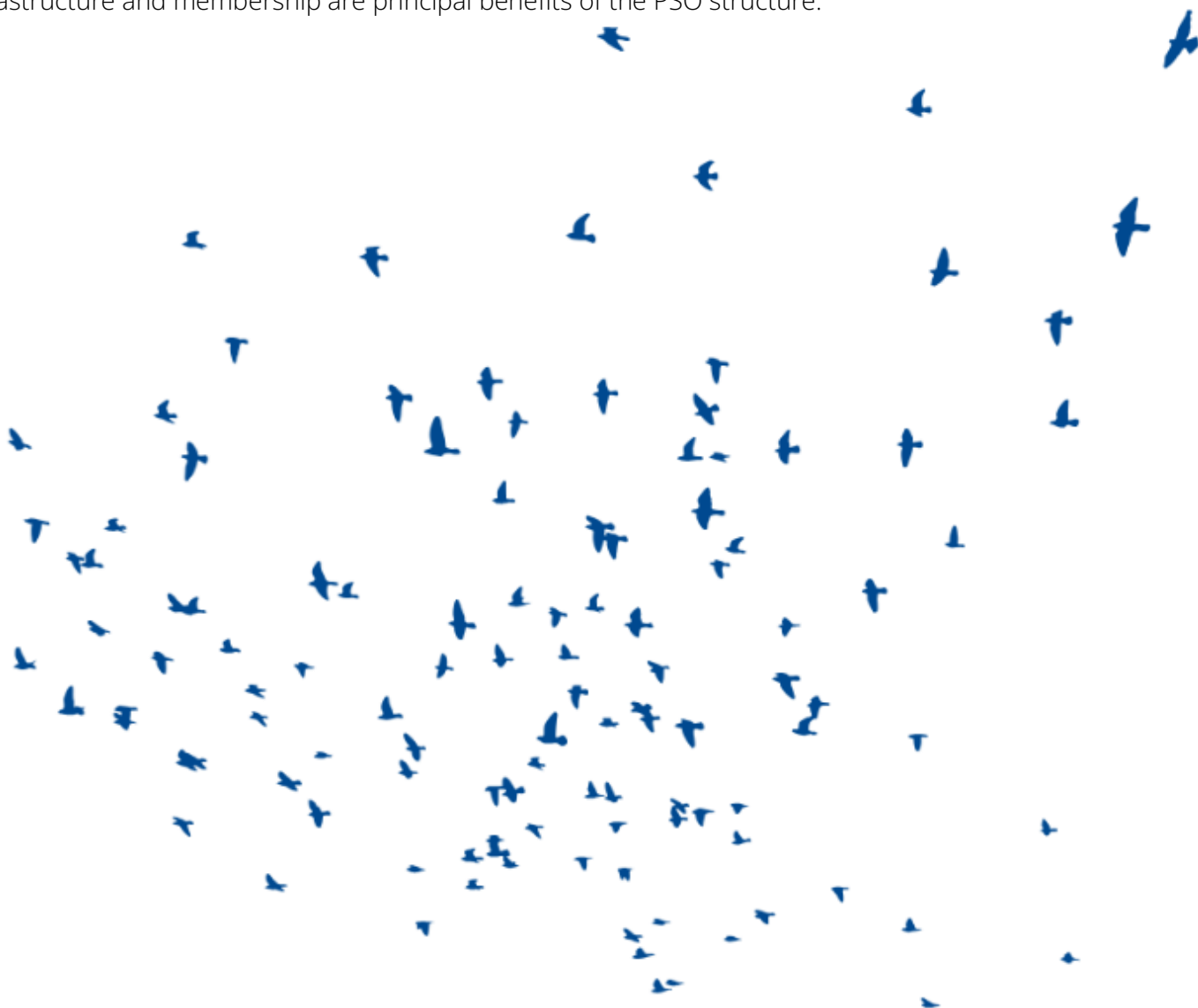
Regional networks comprise various structures and staffing models. Some are housed within place-based philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs) and staffed by employees (or contractors) of that PSO (see FTEH Baltimore and San Diego). Others are incubated by foundations (see FTEH Chicago and Los Angeles). Amongst Funders Together members, none are independent nonprofits; rather, networks have found it advantageous to utilize the administrative support of existing entities for fiscal management and staffing.

Networks are trending toward hiring staff support (defined, for this purpose, to include both employees and contractors), even though each still maintains a leadership structure with volunteer chairs/co-chairs much like Boards or steering committees. It is helpful to designate the role of coordination to a single person (sometimes with additional support) to ensure the network achieves its goals. Convening these leaders from all the regional networks is a principal function of Funders Together's Director of Networks.

Staffing costs money: the network staff interviewed for this paper named fundraising to sustain their own positions to be a principal challenge; one estimated they spend 25% of their time on fundraising-related activities. Membership dues alone rarely sustain the staffing networks require, which warrants supplemental, substantial grants. Moreover, funders can perceive an investment in funder networks to detract from grantmaking to direct service. On the other hand, the more staff, the more capacity to engage new funders in the housing justice movement and increase collective impact. Without staffing, for example, Chicago FTEH likely would not have doubled its membership and raised 6.5x more money than its initial budget over three years.

**Network staff report that a principal challenge of their jobs is fundraising for – and justifying – their own positions.**

For networks housed within regional PSOs, most emerged from existing buy-in from that PSO in housing and homelessness. Many PSOs already operate affinity groups, working groups, or committees on topics like homelessness, which can be a natural embryo for a Funders Together network. Access to their infrastructure and membership are principal benefits of the PSO structure.



## Key Activities

One question Funders Together's CEO, Amanda Andere, often asks networks to consider as they forecast their work is:

### What can we do together that we cannot do alone?

Accordingly, for this paper, Funders Together networks identified concrete actions resulting from their network that would probably not have taken place with funders working independently. For several, participating in the network provides cover to support advocacy or projects that individual foundations might not have felt permitted to support. For example, a relatively conservative family foundation might not individually join a sign-on letter criticizing the mayor's office for their recent sweeps of encampments but can do so by proxy through supporting their local Funders Together network's signature. In this way, networks can afford to be bolder and more progressive than individual funders.



**Advocacy Example:** Check out this [public policy framework](#) that guides Heading Home Minnesota Funders Collaborative's advocacy priorities.

Those who pool funding can demonstrate more concrete outcomes from their collaboration because they funded specific projects or organizations. For example, Funders Together San Diego's pooled fund seeded three new organizations led by people with lived experience out of a recognition that people who had been homeless lacked clear decision-making power in the local continuum. They also funded narrative-change projects, shared-housing advocacy, and helped bring a Flexible Housing Subsidy Pool to San Diego.

### Virtual vs In-Person Meetings

Most meetings went virtual during the pandemic, technology that enabled Funders Together networks to keep meeting. The virtual option also facilitated the participation of new members. For example, one Maryland-headquartered funder joined and remains active in Chicago FTEH because they do grantmaking in Chicago. In-person-only meetings would preclude that.

As most have witnessed, though, virtual meetings can sacrifice opportunities to build relationships that are crucial for accountability and peer-learning. Some are mitigating this reality by meeting in person once per quarter with virtual meetings the months in between.

Often an endeavor that leads to forming a network, it is an annual process for many networks to assess all its members' grantmaking process. This has multiple purposes, as articulated by Chicago FTEH:

“ One of the first crucial things CFTEH did with staff capacity was collect and analyze members' grantmaking data. We wanted to better understand which organizations our members were funding, which program models they were supporting, how their funding was dispersed geographically, etc. The analysis helped CFTEH tell a clearer story about members' collective investment (\$50M over the last two years). It also grounded the group's strategic planning process, offered benchmarks for future goal setting, fostered transparency with external partners, and invited reflection on shared values and grantmaking practices. It's become so helpful to collect this data and reflect it back that it's become an annual practice. ”



Networks also prioritize collaboration and relationship with public partners, including county, city, and state governments in addition to continuums of care. For some, raising the profile and influence of philanthropy in government decision-making was a principal reason for forming as a network in the first place. For example, FTEH Baltimore is organizing its action plan in support of the city's affordable housing plan, working closely with the mayor's office, who is a member of the network. In Chicago, CFTEH will direct over \$1M to expand government staff capacity at the city and state by funding five new staff positions focused on homelessness, one in the Mayor's Office and four embedded in state agencies. In addition, Home for Good in Los Angeles backed the city's Inside Safe program, collecting best practices while providing supplemental funding for the initiative (see additional nuance on public engagement in the recommendations below).

## Mutual Support and Peer Learning

The role of peer learning is central. One network specifically designs its meetings to be one-third business and two-thirds learning, the latter tackling topics on issues prioritized by the group and often informed by current events in the homelessness advocacy community. Some learning-centric meetings include guest speakers. Chicago FTEH, for example, offered a five-part training series on racial justice that was open to all CFTEH members and community partners, providers, and people with lived experience. The consultants selected derived from Funders Together's national programming. Funders Together's national staff often help identify learning topics and arrange guest speakers from our national network of funders and advocates in the housing justice movement.

Peer-learning necessitates a sizable asterisk, however. It can be wasteful for networks to invest the time, energy, and dollars into learning sessions that only benefit those present and have little impact on the group's prioritization or actions – funding that could have been directed to direct service or advocacy, for example. On the one hand, the principal purpose of any peer-learning group is to promote solidarity among those with like positions, contexts, and values, who otherwise work in isolation. On the other hand, this solidarity falls short if not used to mobilize funders for collective action.





### III. Funders Together Network Profiles

## A. Chicago Funders Together to End Homelessness

Chicago Funders Together to End Homelessness started when seven local funders loosely collaborated to support the Continuum of Care's capacity and priorities on homelessness for several years leading up to 2020. Simultaneously, Michael Reese Health Trust was transitioning to a public charity, enabling them to support advocacy through incubation of efforts like funder collaboratives. This network took notice of both Funders Together's national reputation for visionary leadership rooted in racial justice and existing regional networks' local impact, namely in Los Angeles, and knew this represented the bold coordination they sought in order to leverage the power of philanthropy. Funders



Together formally recognized the Chicago chapter in 2020 with the onboarding of its first Director.

Michael Reese remains the fiscal sponsor of Chicago Funders Together to End Homelessness, employing its two staff (a fulltime Director and Program Manager) and providing back-office support. Moreover, Michael Reese administers CFTEH's new Housing Justice Fund, a pooled fund supporting advocacy and community organizing with \$2M in total grants over two years. Its [stated purposes](#) include:

- Eliminate racial disparities in who experiences homelessness and why
- Shift decision-making power from predominantly white institutions and systems to Black and African American communities most impacted by homelessness
- Reframe narratives about homelessness from those focused on personal responsibility to those focused on systemic causes and exclusionary housing practices
- Secure increased, dedicated public and private resources to end homelessness
- Build public and political will to end homelessness

This Fund represents a major achievement both for Funders Together networks and acts as a model for grantmaking practice. It arose from a comprehensive assessment of CFTEH member funding areas, which revealed an insufficiency of investment in advocacy, particularly of funding to support organizations led by Black people, Indigenous people, or other people of color. The Fund aims to address that gap explicitly. Despite it being an experimental effort, the fund welcomed dozens of applicants when it was announced. Eligible candidates were offered the chance to submit a full application in writing or orally in person. As the process has rolled out, CFTEH is documenting the lessons they collect in order to improve the next round of applications and uplift promising practices for the field.

## B. Funders Together to End Homelessness—Baltimore

Maryland Philanthropy Network (MPN) is the regional philanthropy-serving organization representing the whole state of Maryland, and like many place-based PSOs, it hosts affinity groups and networks on priority areas. Under the auspices of MPN, a Basic Needs Affinity Group formed in response to the 2009 recession. Over time, group members realized that most discussions were focused on housing and people experiencing homelessness in Baltimore. In parallel, the Baltimore Mayor's office of Homeless Services (MOHS) conducted a scan of philanthropy's contribution to homelessness programs in the



community, which uncovered that funders collectively contributed more than \$12 million, which is substantial in comparison to the \$25 million distributed by the Continuum of Care. All this funding, however, went regrettably uncoordinated.

Amy Kleine from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, who chaired MPN's Basic Needs Affinity Group, was already a member of Chicago Funders Together due to the Foundation's funding presence there and thought that a similar model could work in Baltimore to promote such coordination. Sara Cooper from the Annie E. Casey Foundation knew of Funders Together's reputation through her involvement in the FTEH community of practice on employment. With this knowledge of



Funders Together and its impact on local communities, Amy and Sara convened a group of interested funders to discuss standing up a Baltimore local chapter of Funders Together. The response was overwhelmingly positive to start Funders Together-Baltimore and, with extensive input from existing networks and Funders Together staff, they launched in 2019. MPN and member funders agreed that the new Funders Together network should replace the Basic Human Needs Affinity group and offered continued hosting support.

At the time of this resource, Baltimore's chapter is in its early life. At the moment, they do not pool funding, but occasionally align around certain opportunities. Their structural support with MPN has been firm from the beginning (though they recognize that could be challenged if the network ventures more aggressively into advocacy). They have generated buy-in from some area foundations interested in affordable housing and homelessness investments, and have nuanced yet strong partnerships with the Mayor's office, which is a member of the network. Several members of FTEH-Baltimore serve as volunteer leaders of the Continuum of Care and the Mayor's Leadership Committee on Homelessness and Housing.

They have undergone some racial equity work, which led to shared values, a clear purpose statement, and next steps to include the engagement of individuals with lived experience, the onboarding of a paid staff person, and decision points around the focus and function of FTEHB. Currently, FTEHB is developing a three-year action plan so that the network can be clear with its focus, impact desired and specific collaborative and bold strategies. Their leadership by two co-chairs, one prioritizing their operations and the other their homelessness expertise, has proven effective. In late 2022, they onboarded a new part-time Facilitator to “staff” the network (as a contractor with MPN). Early learning suggests it is necessary and helpful to dedicate a point-person to lead the network toward its priorities for action and advocacy. Sustained funding for this position is unknown at this time but the hope is to convey progress and impact over the past year in order to support ongoing investment in a paid staff person.

## C. Funders Together to End Homelessness—San Diego

Funders Together – San Diego (FTEHSD) emerged in 2014 from a homelessness working group organized by San Diego Grantmakers. They formed a pooled fund after adopting Funders Together’s name, but later shifted to the local United Way as fiscal sponsor. In 2016, fiscal sponsorship returned to the regional PSO, now known as Catalyst of San Diego and Imperial Counties, once they grew the capacity for this role. FTEHSD’s fulltime Director is a Catalyst employee, utilizing their back-office support and enabling advocacy under their 501c3; Catalyst charges about 4% of FTEHSD revenue for this administrative role. While their Director benefits from both the autonomy and structure Catalyst enables, in addition to access to Catalyst members, the consequence is relative isolation in the role’s uniqueness (another reason to access Funders Together’s *network of networks*).



Blurring the lines between our definitions of networks and collaboratives, FTEHSD manages a pooled fund, which has enabled the group to support priority issues and agencies in a more streamlined process, affording grantees a single grants management process despite multiple funders. Examples of the pooled fund’s results include the establishment of three new advocacy organizations led by people with lived experience, in addition to a narrative change campaign and a new organization that utilizes faith-based entities’ properties for housing development (YIGBY.org).



Nearly ten years old, FTEHSD is confident that their partnership as a Funders Together network is responsible for philanthropy’s growing influence in the housing/homelessness realm in the San Diego region. But their long-term sustainability is at risk as their budget relies on a multi-million-dollar gift from a sunseting foundation years ago. Already spending significant time on fundraising, FTEHSD’s director faces the challenge of developing a plan to ensure the network’s stability once the sunset fund runs out.



## IV. Recommendations for Prospective Networks





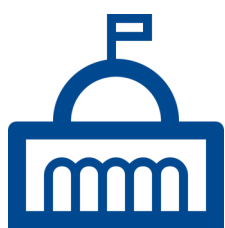
## Find a champion—or become it.

Advocates and service providers are often hoping for funders to collaborate in their communities. But barring some exceptions, funders primarily listen to other funders when it comes to pooling resources and sharing practices. If you are a funder who sees the need for collaboration in your community, utilize your own influence to get conversations started. If you aren't a funder, leverage your connections to find a funder co-conspirator.



## Partner with regional philanthropy-serving organizations.

Most communities belong to a regional philanthropy-serving organization (PSO). Many such PSOs already operate learning networks or pooled funds. Some PSOs that support a Funders Together network consider it one of their many issue-based networks and their networks officer oversees it. This is a natural entry point. But only partner with PSOs with a demonstrable commitment to racial justice.



## Assess the role of public partners in the network.

Funders Together acknowledges that local and state government entities, including continuums of care, are integral to and principally responsible for any community's effort to end homelessness. But Funders Together excludes public entities from its programming because it believes philanthropy's role, in part, is to participate in government accountability (it is also necessary for funders to hold each other accountable). Funders may shy away from naming unjust policies in the same rooms with those decisionmakers. That said, some Funders Together networks do include public entities, which is their discretion. The point is to have some space only for funders and boldly articulate what needs to be said in spaces with government partners.



## Clarify your purpose and think long-term.

As Powell et al describe in [\*How Philanthropic Collaborations Succeed, and Why They Fail\*](#), successful funder collaboratives (with the same bearing on networks) operate from a "clear investment thesis." The group should arrive at consensus around the analysis through which they understand the problem of homelessness, how they will target their shared or aligned resources accordingly, and what investments can only be done together that would be impracticable alone. (See also Funders Together's [recommendations](#) for supporting the movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes transferrable lessons.)



## Follow the lead of people who have experienced homelessness.

Funder staff hoping to create a network, but who lack lived experience of homelessness or housing insecurity, should assess whether that need is also perceived by people without homes. In both the planning process and operations, devise a strategy to prioritize meaningful contribution from and leadership by people with lived experience, including funder staff who have lived experience.



## Start with an investment scan.

One of the most practical and productive actions a funder network can shoulder is surveying the landscape of philanthropic investment in housing/homelessness. This indicates what the community is collectively prioritizing and isn't, usually pointing to potential priorities for the prospective network.



## Define critical mass.

Networks interviewed for this publication estimate that about ten funders are necessary to sustain engagement and momentum. Certainly, smaller networks exist, but their success assumes high engagement by all involved, while most networks rarely enjoy 100% attendance. For groups of ten funders or more, a smaller steering committee or other leadership body is often helpful to dive into the weeds where not everyone belongs.



## But wait: do you really need a new thing?

Funder networks are part of and uphold the nonprofit industrial complex, same as Funders Together to End Homelessness, and regrettably so. As funders consider forming new networks, then, they must continually ask whether all this coordination will actually improve the lives of those experiencing housing injustices, especially Black and Indigenous people without homes. They must ask what is at stake if communities *don't* form a funder network. Funders Together implores *both/and* thinking to hold the complexity of these questions as we all organize ourselves toward irrelevance.



# Help is here!

Funders Together staff are here to help! Staff can:

- connect you to other regional networks,
- provide sample documents and resources,
- help you plan meetings and speak at them as needed,
- introduce you to subject-matter experts on housing/homelessness,
- connect our national programming to your local context, and more.

[Contact Michael Durham](#), Director of Networks, to get started.

Cover photo by [Matej Riecciar](#) on [Unsplash](#)



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TO END HOMELESSNESS

# Appendix 1

As an official regional network of Funders Together to End Homelessness, you:

- Support the 2022-revised mission of Funders Together to End Homelessness
- Ascribe to Funders Together's commitment to racial equity and have concrete goals to root out white supremacy culture in your culture and operations
- Align national advocacy priorities on the local level
- Pursue pooled funding and other strategies that minimize territorial dynamics between funders
- Encourage members of the regional network to join national FTEH as full members
- Promote national FTEH programs and opportunities
- Communicate with the Director of Networks about needs and initiatives

Driven by love and disruption, Funders Together staff will:

- Provide a liaison to the FTEH staff, body of members, and national partners via the Director of Networks
- Support Networks in their journeys to live into their commitments to racial justice and liberation
- Authorize use of the Funders Together logo and branding
- Elevate Regional Network needs and successes to a national audience
- Attend Network meetings and help identify guest speakers on priority topics
- Convey national best practices and opportunities
- Connect regional networks to one another for peer-learning

Policy for granting FTEH imprimatur (adopted in 2014):

FTEH agrees to give its imprimatur to regional affiliates who:

- Are committed to best practices as outlined in FTEH's Funding Principles
- Understand and agree to this and the following FTEH Policies and Guidelines:
  - Membership Eligibility Policy
  - Fund Solicitation Policy
  - Brand Guidelines
- Assign at least one liaison from the affiliate network to communicate with staff at FTEH's national office.
- Agree not to undertake or incur any legal or financial obligation for which FTEH may be held responsible without the prior written consent of the FTEH Executive Committee.
- Agree to act in a nonpartisan way and not to engage in any inappropriate lobbying activities.

# Appendix 2

Funders Together convened regional network point-persons for a “learning circle” in February 2023. We asked, “[what constitutes an exemplary funder network?](#)” and generated the following amalgamated list.

- Assess the service-delivery landscape in their communities compared to systems work
- Fund/align funding for prevention efforts, affordable housing, serving key constituencies
- Pursue corrective action (reparations), taking advantage of what public funds can’t support
- Support pro-Black and pro-Indigenous advocacy and organizers; don’t only support the usual suspects
- Lead with lived experience, refusing tokenization in pursuit of authenticity
- Reject the scarcity mindset
- Model the values and characteristics you promote to grantees
- Transcend equity toward justice
- Promote accountability (“love and disruption”)
- Create meeting environments that cultivate trust, love, vulnerability, and learning
- Educate funders and the field in a lifelong process of understanding structural racism and oppression
- Experiment for the sake of the liberated futures we imagine
- Expand your constituency to include funders who don’t think of themselves as homelessness funders
- Respond with flexibility and humility, but consistency in values, guided by community
- Innovate with strategic and efficient investments
- Celebrate success while always pushing for progress



Name	Host organization(s)	Staffing	Geographic Reach	# Funders	Pooled Fund	FTEH Branding	Public agencies included	Regional PSO Affiliation	Advocacy in scope
<a href="#">Funders Together to End Homelessness San Diego</a>	Catalyst	1 Director	City and County of San Diego, CA	15					
Funders Together to End Homelessness – LA	United Way LA, Hilton Foundation	2 Volunteer co-chairs	LA City and County, CA	30	*Collaborates with <a href="#">Home for Good Funders Collaborative</a>				
<a href="#">Bay Area Regional Homelessness Funders Network</a>	Northern California Grantmakers	1 Facilitator employed by PSO	San Francisco, Oakland, Contra Costa County, Santa Clara County, CA	8					
<a href="#">Funders Together to End Homelessness – Baltimore</a>	Maryland Philanthropy Network	1 part-time contractor, 2 volunteer co-chairs	Baltimore City, Baltimore County, MD	32					
<a href="#">Chicago Funders Together to End Homelessness</a>	Michael Reese Health Trust	2 Staff (Exec. Director, Program Manager)	Chicago, Cook County, IL	30					
<a href="#">NYC Fund to End Youth &amp; Family Homelessness</a>	FJC	1 fulltime contractor	New York City, NY	11					
<a href="#">Heading Home Minnesota Funders Collaborative</a>	Greater Minnesota Housing Fund	2 staff	State of Minnesota	15					