

Empire Health Foundation Report

Activating Community Voice



Introduction

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Roanhorse Consulting, LLC (RCLLC) partnered with the Empire Health Foundation (EHF) to co-create an equitable evaluation model that centers EHF's Equity Healing Framework and partnership with grantees. RCLLC is an Indigenous-led firm that purposefully works to change power dynamics in health and economic systems to build a world in which our children and grandchildren will thrive. We partner with organizations to help them use meaningful evaluation approaches in how they work with those most impacted by centering equity and Indigenous values and knowledge in their work. EHF believes that health is a fundamental human right and boldly advances health equity in the Inland Northwest. In collaboration, they pursue innovative solutions and transform systems to improve health and quality of life.

The first phase of our partnership was learning about the EHF, the people who drive its mission, and how their Equity Healing Framework shows up in their day-to-day work and projects. It is important to note that, while the framework resonated with all the team members, there was an ongoing internal discussion about how to operationalize the framework within the organization and how to ensure it resonates with their community partners.

Once we had a foundational understanding of EHF, we wanted to learn from their community partners, about how they felt EHF was showing up for them/with them and how EHF can best support them. We collectively agreed that before we could begin to co-create an equitable evaluation model with community partners, we needed to get a baseline understanding of how their community partners viewed them and center their feedback in this initial process.

Building on the work of the Equitable Evaluation Framework™ (EEF), we focused on grounding ourselves by centering relationships, learning about the values that drive each of our organizations, and weaving in concepts of the EEF.

“EEF challenges us to be explicit and intentional about axiology (what we determine to be right), ontology (what we believe to be true/reality), and epistemology (what is evidence/knowledge). It expands 21st-century definitions of validity, objectivity, rigor, and embraces complexity. It challenges cultural norms that continue to place preference for a singular type of truth, knowing, and evidence. The EEF changes the nature of methodologies, as well as offers a starting place for new or conventional ones.” - [The Equitable Evaluation Framework™: May 2023 Expansion wEquitable Evaluation Initiative \(2023\)](#)

The focus of this initial phase was to ground RCLLC in EHF's values and learn from, and with, their community partners/grantees to inform a potential second phase to co-create EHF's evaluation model.

Phase I: Grounding/Discovery

(initially December 2022–February 2023)



Phase II: Co-creation Design, Iterate, and Plan

(initially February–March 2023)



Phase III: Implementation/ Testing/Applying

(initially April–May 2023)



Final Phase: Celebrate & Prepare for the Next Phase of Contract

(initially June–July 2023)



Brief Description of Our Work in Phases

RCLLC organized our work in four phases which allowed our team to manage our time together and co-create the vision and deliverables of the project. This process allowed our team to engage in deep discussions and regular reflections with the EHF team members ensuring collective learning and understanding were infused into different phases of the project work.

Phase I: Grounding/Discovery

(initially December 2022–February 2023)

This phase allowed RCLLC to work closely with the EHF team members to understand and align the project with our values and approaches, create the foundation of what this project is built on by assessing what is needed and the feasibility of it, and ground the RCLLC team in the EHF's portfolios. While this phase is the start of the work together, the grounding actually continues throughout the life of the project. This phase demanded a greater amount of time to allow the teams to build trust and relationships with one another. The timeline was extended to March 2023.

Key activities completed in this phase:

- Reviewed key EHF background and content
- Reviewed EHF grantee content
- Created Miro board as a tool to track key discussions and learnings
- Hosted 1-hour meetings with each program team member
- Hosted 2.5-hour Kick-Off meeting with EHF
- Hosted two regular 1-hour check-in meetings with EHF

Phase II: Co-creation Design, Iterate, and Plan

(initially February–March 2023)

This phase moved the RCLLC team from the grounding phase to understanding how community partners viewed EHF and where the Healing Equity Framework showed up or did not show up. It also allowed RCLLC to work closely with EHF team members to create a project roadmap that guided our process for community outreach. The timeline for this phase was updated to March–May 2023.

Key activities completed in this phase:

- Hosted two 2-hour check-in meetings with EHF
- Created a Notion page to hold project documents, notes, meet recordings, etc.
- Co-created interview questions to inform the guide
- Defined the community engagement process
- Identified the community partner interview list (15 with an additional five)
- Began the discussion on how to reciprocate data back to the community

Phase III: Implementation/Testing/Applying

(initially April–May 2023)

In this phase of the work, the RCLLC team began to build on the work created in the grounding and co-creation phases, and moved into interviews with community partners. We learned from community partners about their relationship with EHF—what is working well, challenges, and recommendations to consider in centering EHF's Equity Healing Framework. The timeline was updated to May–July 2023.

Key activities completed in this phase:

- Updated the Notion and Miro board content as needed
- Conducted outreach for interviews with community partners and scheduled interviews
- Conducted 1.5-hour interviews with community partners (with a goal of 20 interviewees)
- Hosted a meeting with Pyramid Communications to incorporate key questions into the interview
- The RCLLC team traveled to Spokane, Washington on June 26–28, met with the EHF team, and went on an impromptu site visit with Kevin Penass to AICC
 - Created a PowerPoint for updates on the progress of the project, discussed the next steps, and shared their learning around the Equitable Evaluation Initiative
- Hosted two 1-hour check-in meetings with EHF

Final Phase: Celebrate & Prepare for the Next Phase of Contract

(initially June–July 2023)

RCLLC completed community partner interviews and conducted qualitative analysis. A final report was created one week in advance for the EHF team's review which identified key themes and recommendations to consider, along with the next steps. RCLLC will discuss the findings of the report with EHF staff in person and capture any reflections and feedback provided. Together, RCLLC and EHF teams will celebrate this work and begin planning for the second phase to co-create an evaluation model. The timeline for this phase was updated to August–September 2023.

Key activities completed in this phase:

- Conducted 18 community partner interviews and qualitative analyses total
 - Identified key themes and recommendations
- Prepared the final report
- Conducted a 4-hour in-person meeting with EHF to review the final report
 - Finalized Powerpoint presentation
 - Captured reflections and feedback
- Prepared the planning document to inform the second SOW

Positionality

Research and evaluation are rarely objective and the researcher/evaluator is often deeply connected to the people, the ideas, and the learning that happens in real time. As many Native scholars have shared, it is all relational and an incredible privilege to be in this position. Instead of separating ourselves from the evaluation, we are centering who we are, our lived experiences, and our collective interest in transformation. We want to properly introduce ourselves in this report and acknowledge that while we work to center the participants' voices in critical themes and reflections, we are also bringing in our experiences and ideas in the work. [Here](#) is a bit more on positionality from Jara Dean-Coffey, founder of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative.

Olivia Roanhorse, COO

Research and Evaluation Portfolio Lead
Roanhorse Consulting, LLC

I am Diné (“the people” in Navajo) and grew up in Window Rock, Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation, with my twin sister. Our maternal clans are Near to Water (To’ahani) and our paternal clan is Bitter Water (To’dichiinií). The Diné recognize and ground ourselves in our connectedness through our clans and we greet one another as relatives, recognizing our places in the world. I currently reside in unceded Tewa territory, also known as Albuquerque, New Mexico, with my daughter and partner. As a twin, my sister and I were blessed into our community. Twins are prominent in Diné creation stories and were unique in their journey to kill Monsters plaguing the Navajo people. I honor those stories and regularly reflect on the gifts I bring and the learning I can do with others.



I have over 25 years of lived experience navigating, learning, and unlearning the complexities and processes in public health, academia, and nonprofits. These are all Western-based institutions and ways of learning. While I appreciate some of what I learned from them, they each have their own systemic barriers they have created in how they serve communities, especially Indigenous people. I am committed to working in true partnership with Native communities who center their lived experiences, culture, and language to strengthen the health and wealth needs of their communities.

In this work with EHF, I uplift my lived experiences to co-create a learning process and outcome that builds on our collective gifts while also acknowledging that centering equity and those most impacted requires regular personal and organizational reflection. I appreciate the opportunity to build a relationship with the EHF team in their work to ground and weave equity and healing into all that they do.

Shawna Douma

Research and Evaluation Associate
Roanhorse Consulting, LLC

My traditional name is Zit-de-yah, after my late maternal grandmother. I am from the Pueblo of Laguna, San Felipe, and Hopi-Tewa. My clans are Big Ant from my mother (San Felipe), Little Roadrunner from my father (Laguna), and Corn whenever we venture home to Hopi territory in Arizona. I currently live in Albuquerque, New Mexico with my three children and partner. I grew up in Kawaika (Laguna Pueblo) surrounded by family and participating in our culture. I was born into a long line of cattle ranchers and farmers who taught us the importance of caring for the land, early morning rising, and hard physical work. I was blessed to have my grandparents who connected us to one another, told stories of our history, sang songs, showed us how to love unconditionally, taught us humility, and filled our cups with laughter. I am also a survivor of domestic violence and was a single mother of three during my healing journey.



I am proud to say I am an alumna of Haskell Indian Nations University located in Lawrence, Kansas, which opened my eyes to view the world with an Indigenous lens, rather than the Western worldview I was taught in school. For over 20 years, I sought out roles in the nonprofit and government sectors that allowed me to utilize this lens, focusing on positive youth development, volunteerism, economic development, and community health. I found myself challenging and advocating for systems to become more inclusive to the values of the people and their lived experiences, and to uplift their ingenuity.

My values are grounded in community, service to others, and humility. It is my hope that the work with EHF will improve how the organization defines and commits itself to building the right relationships with the community, guided by the community, and continues to center lived experiences and equity with staff and in projects.

Casey Long

Research and Evaluation Manager
Roanhorse Consulting, LLC

I am Diné (“the people” in Navajo), and I grew up in a border town near the Navajo Reservation called Gallup, New Mexico. I am Todik’ozhi (Salt Water Clan) and Nat’oh Taachii’nii (Tobacco of the Red Running into the Water People). Through my clans is how I identify as a Diné male and how I recognize relationships to all things around me. I currently reside in Gallup, New Mexico, still. I like to say that I am “forever an uncle,” and I enjoy spending time with my nieces and nephews.

Over the last seven years, I have worked in nonprofit organizations (locally, regionally, and nationally) with a strong emphasis on public health. At the same time, I was attending graduate school to expand my knowledge about public health practices. I have enjoyed the spaces I got to sit in and the constant use of Western public health practices through my bodies of work, but a portion of me felt like I was doing more damage than good. Oftentimes, I would find myself educating others about my Diné way of life and hoping they would have some level of understanding of where I was coming from. Through that experience, I realized that I wanted to center my lived experience with my work and with a community that understands where I am coming from.

Through this work with EHF, I get to center my lived experience and help co-create a process that feels right with everyone. I appreciate being able to work with the community of Spokane to get an understanding of how EHF is operating.



Methodology and Qualitative Data Approaches



As an Indigenous-led company, RCLLC works to center our lived experiences and our Indigenous knowledge in all of our work. Indigenous knowledge, outlined by LaFrance and Nichols (American Indian Higher Education Consortium, 2009) is the grounding for the growing work of Indigenous Evaluation framework and approaches. Indigenous knowledge is how Indigenous people come to know the world and can broadly be explained through three approaches:

Empirical Knowledge: knowledge gained from observation and experiences—or, what do you see?

Revealed Knowledge: knowledge gained from spiritual or ancestral interaction such as through dreams, ceremonies, visions, etc.—or, what do you feel?

Traditional Knowledge: knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation that conveys traditional values and beliefs—or, what do you know?

By centering these approaches and questions, we bring in a worldview and foundation that decenters Western approaches to evaluation and ensures community knowledge and perspectives are included in the evaluation process. This process is also key to the Equitable Evaluation Framework's grounding work.

Through the early portion of the contract, RCLLC spent many months understanding the work of EHF, and how they are working with community members in Spokane, through their portfolios. As RCLLC felt grounded in the work of EHF, the staff of EHF helped co-create interview questions. Interview questions have been centered around the three approaches listed above—what do you know?, what do you feel?, what do you see?—to center the community voices on how well they are working with the community. Once interview questions were selected by EHF staff, RCLLC created an interview guide to guide the process.

Community members were selected by EHF staff based on the quality and length of their relationship with the foundation. EHF staff curated a list of 20 individuals and six alternatives in the Spokane area who they thought would be good candidates to take part in the interviews. EHF and RCLLC collectively agreed they were interested in hearing from community members who may or may not have a good working relationship with EHF. EHF and RCLLC recognize that 20 interviews are not a comprehensive representation of their community partners; however,

it can provide EHF with a glimpse into how community partners perceive them and help them further build out their Equity Healing Framework.

Once the list was solidified, RCLLC did an initial outreach to the 20 individuals to ask if they were interested in sharing their candid reflections on EHF. Once community members agreed to take part in the interviews, RCLLC scheduled time to meet with them via Google Meet.

Data collection was done by RCLLC staff and interviews were conducted by three RCLLC team members (six interviews, seven interviews, and seven interviews, respectively, for a total of 20 interviews). On the day of the scheduled interviews, RCLLC used the interview guide and the AI tool Otter.ai to record and transcribe the interviews. RCLLC started the interview by reading the interview guide to let individuals know the following:

- The purpose, and process, of the interviews is to create an equitable evaluation model.
- The interviews would take no longer than 90 minutes and a separate link would be sent to interviewees to receive a \$150 honorarium for their time
- The information provided during their interview would only be evaluated by RCLLC staff. If one of the community members' quotes was to be used in the final report, RCLLC would seek their approval first.
- RCLLC staff would answer any additional questions about these interviews from participants.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted by RCLLC staff. Over the course of two months, RCLLC was hoping to get a total of 20 interviews but ended the interview process with 18 interviews. All 18 interviews were recorded and transcribed with the Otter.ai software and were password-protected and stored in RCLLC's Google Drive. The majority of the interviews used the full 90 minutes. The data analysis was done in multiple phases:

- Individual RCLLC staff were in charge of reviewing the interviews they completed and creating some initial themes from their interviews. This included each member reviewing the transcription and their notes. This process took approximately 1–1.5 hours per interviewee.
- RCLLC staff met approximately five to six times to discuss key themes and create one document to organize key themes and quotes. This also included reviewing and discussing data from the Miro board, which was collected over the course of the project to ground the context and themes. This process took approximately 15 hours.
- RCLLC staff were in charge of circling back to interviewees to request the use of their quotes in the report. This process took about 1–2 hours.

Introduction to Evaluation Findings: Key Themes from Interviews

The RCLLC team has identified some key topics to help organize what we have heard from community partners, but it is important to note that these topics are interrelated and connected to each other. While we created interview questions to help guide the conversation, our team encouraged participants to share what was most important to them. This allowed participants to lean into their wisdom, speak candidly about their experiences, and provide a critical space for deep conversations and reflections.

Furthermore, while we had developed a specific question around EHF's Equity Healing Framework, it became pretty clear through our interviews that there is a disconnect to the framework—most people had briefly heard about it but had not spent time reviewing it. The few that had actually skimmed through the framework described it as a good or positive thing, but that right now it is more of a theoretical document to them. It is not clear to them on how it is being actualized into EHF or in working with the community.

"How many times have organizations and the government—and everybody in history—said to Indigenous people 'here read this, this is what we believe? But then they lie and don't follow through, and they don't ever commit. They don't ever do the work. So to be really honest, I will see the healing framework when I see the healing.'"

"I'll be honest, I'm inherently suspicious of documents like that. They often feel like they're produced in some DEI shop for an organization to get credit from other organizations. You know, I don't necessarily think that's the case with Empire: that's personal history speaking, not history with [the] organization speaking."

We highlight these important reflections on the Equity Healing Framework to ground our understanding of where it sits or "lives" in the community. We also recognize that these reflections are from a small group of community partners and there is still much more to learn from the community. There is still a lot of work ahead in not only operationalizing the framework internally with the EHF team and board but also in how the community sees it in action in their continued partnership with EHF.

"If the healing framework is systematized and operationalized within the structure of EHF, and every staff member has been provided the support, education, skill building, and the opportunity to truly understand our existence in a way where we know they've done some deep level white supremacy culture assessments for themselves, then I know they can be trusted to do and use that healing framework in a real way. And then it'll matter to me. But it's not there yet. We're not there yet. I'm not required to read that because it's not operationalized."

Moreover, there were a small number of participants who had a chance to read and walk through the document and felt it important to acknowledge the negative and harmful historical context of written documents provided to communities of color by people in positions of power. There is a sense of mistrust, especially if the communities were not directly involved in creating the document; even still, these individuals expressed they would rather see actions rather than a document.



History of Relationship with EHF

New Leadership under President Zeke Smith

Since Zeke Smith, the president, joined, each community partner shared how they have seen the culture at the EHF shift—as well as with new staff—to rebuild relationships with the community and center trust. Zeke was mentioned as a critical person in changing their perspective of EHF and centering values that align with justice. Community partners described Zeke's presence as respectable, humble, kind, open, honest, and approachable for true dialogue to occur.

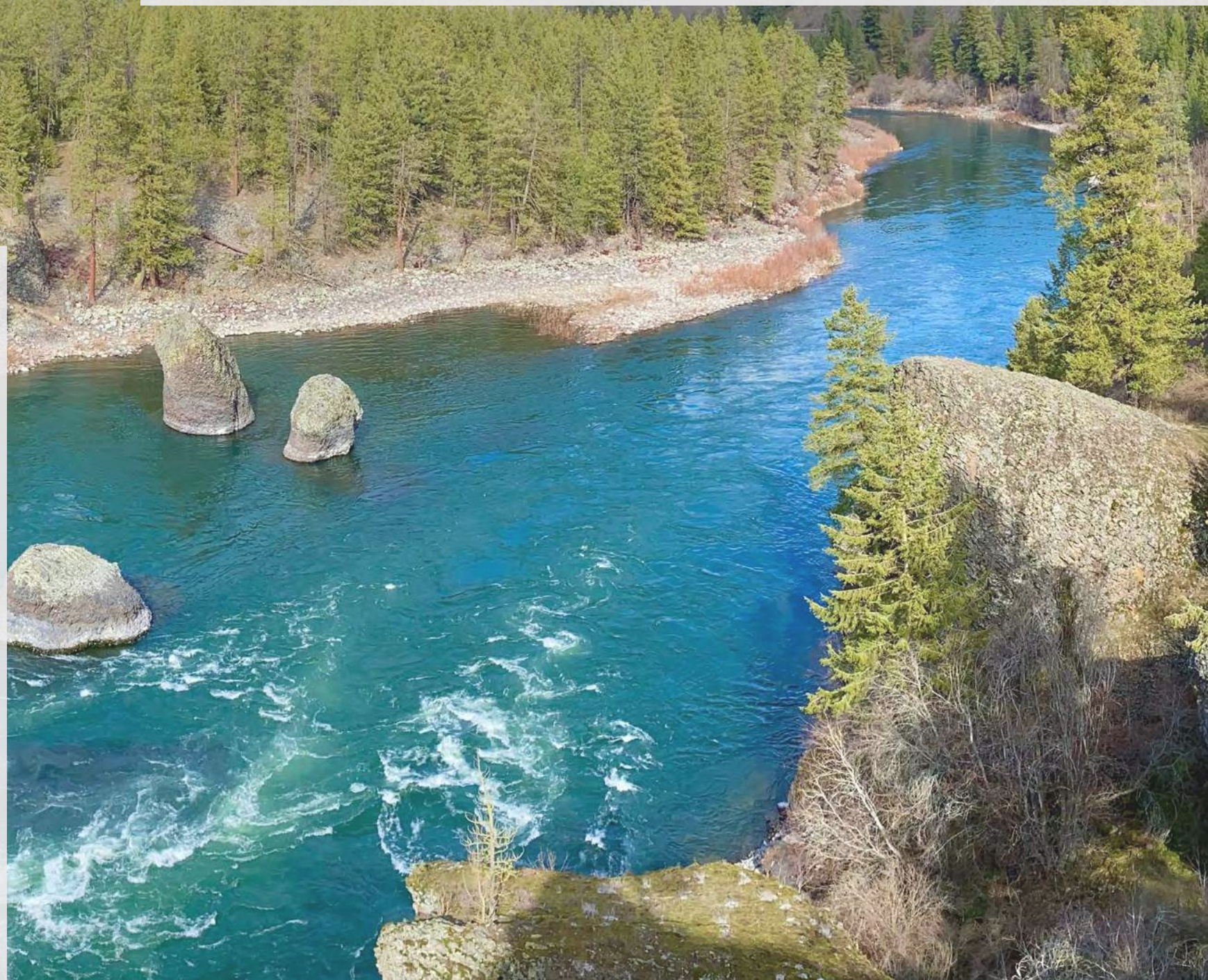
"I was thinking to myself, I don't know if I could do that with the head of any other organization, but Zeke makes it very...he's very approachable."

Most of the interviewees had been connected to EHF prior to the current leadership of President Zeke Smith, approximately by or before 2018. Those connected to EHF prior to current leadership each described that initial relationship as "rocky," "traumatic," "degrading," "racist," "disrespectful," "toxic," and "not a strong relationship". During that time, leadership was known to retaliate against community leaders who tried to hold them accountable. A few shared their negative experiences of prior leadership and colleagues who worked there.

"It was a rough start for everyone. They [EHF] sent out program people who didn't know how to be in community and caused a lot of harm."

"I grew up like it takes a village to raise a child. That's how we grew up. Our elders are our aunts and extended family, and so coming into this individualistic culture and having exposure to narcissistic [people] was against all my values."

"I tell people, 'Please don't even try to work there, it's so toxic.' And not only was it from two leaders, but it also bled into the people who were leading and it was just so bad. So even though they did equity work and pushed for diversity, equity, and inclusion, it was not practiced inside the organization."



“Work in the US I think is a reflection of the culture which is so transactional, but Zeke is taking this work from an angle of relationship building. The core really is relationships and building trust with people to see the humanity in one another. If you are being transactional, it’s not going to work here.”

However, several shared that, while the shift has been good and positive—with more intentional efforts to engage and listen with/to the community about their needs and challenges—there is still some uncertainty as to the level of care and longevity in which EHF is rebuilding relationships.

“They seem to be in a learning phase and now might be a key moment of influence. It seems like they’re open to hearing from the community, hearing what it is we actually need, as opposed to just swooping in with their cash—and you know, who has the dollar has the power kind of thing. It seems they are a lot more relational.”

“Is this business or is this real? I think that’s just something that, as a person of color, there’s always that mistrust, especially between organizations and people of color because of the historical damage that has been done. But I just feel like they do care for me, but how much do you care about me?”

Community partners are aware that a shift in leadership staff is occurring. One area where it is felt is through EHF staff turnover. It was mentioned that EHF has been having turnover over the last couple of years which makes it difficult for community partners to re-establish relationships and bring new EHF staff up to speed on projects. In these transitional times, some community partners have witnessed their connection and communication to EHF become a lot less frequent and more worrisome, especially when new staff is not introduced to them.

Rebuilding and Strengthening Relationships

The majority of community partners expressed that their willingness to rebuild their relationship and trust with EHF was based, not only on their interaction with Zeke, but on the individual interactions with EHF staff who inspired confidence that a more positive shift was taking place. The most notable influence has come from seeing a more diverse, multicultural staff who are at different levels of engagement with the community.

It is also important to note that the relationships developed with the current EHF team are not reflected evenly across the team.

“There are folks that are really interested in engaging with me and listening and learning. And there are folks that are completely resistant and dismissive.”

“A portion of the staff makes their presence of the foundation very well known, and opens the doors to allow committee members to leverage their resources. On the other hand, the group of people doing that are all BIPOC and I don’t know if the organization as a whole has internalized the need to actually leave the office and get into the community.”

In both prior leadership and current, some community partners felt they were being ignored or siloed because they were actively sharing their feedback with EHF but it was not well received. Ironically, speaking out about inequity has negatively impacted some community partners’ relationship and work with EHF. The participants shared they were either personally ignored in their relationship with EHF, their project was not funded, or they were “pushed out” of initiatives.

Based upon the majority of the community partners’ comments, the traumatic experiences and harm caused by the prior leadership’s legacy continues. There is an acknowledgment from several partners that EHF must start the process for healing and repair with the community before true relationship building and trust can occur.

“I think there needs to be some actual type of healing and repair, especially for people who worked there who are still in this community and who will be doing business with EHF. Because we carry the stories of this community, and we have people who are our allies who are still mad at this organization. So I truly think like a public, or some type of healing and reconciliation will be good.”

Given past harm that has not been addressed or resolved, there is a sense of uneasiness and tension for some community partners that hinders their capacity to rebuild trust or even return to the EHF building without being triggered.

“When I went to that event last week [open house], I hadn’t gone into the building since I left but it was really my first time spending more than five minutes there. I went into the basement, which is kind of like their main event space. And I literally had to take a big breath because it was trauma, like I felt my body tensing up. When they broke us into tables to talk about the different strategies they have I just decided that I really wasn’t in a place to engage because I think I was still trying to figure out the shock I had in my body. It was literally PTSD.”

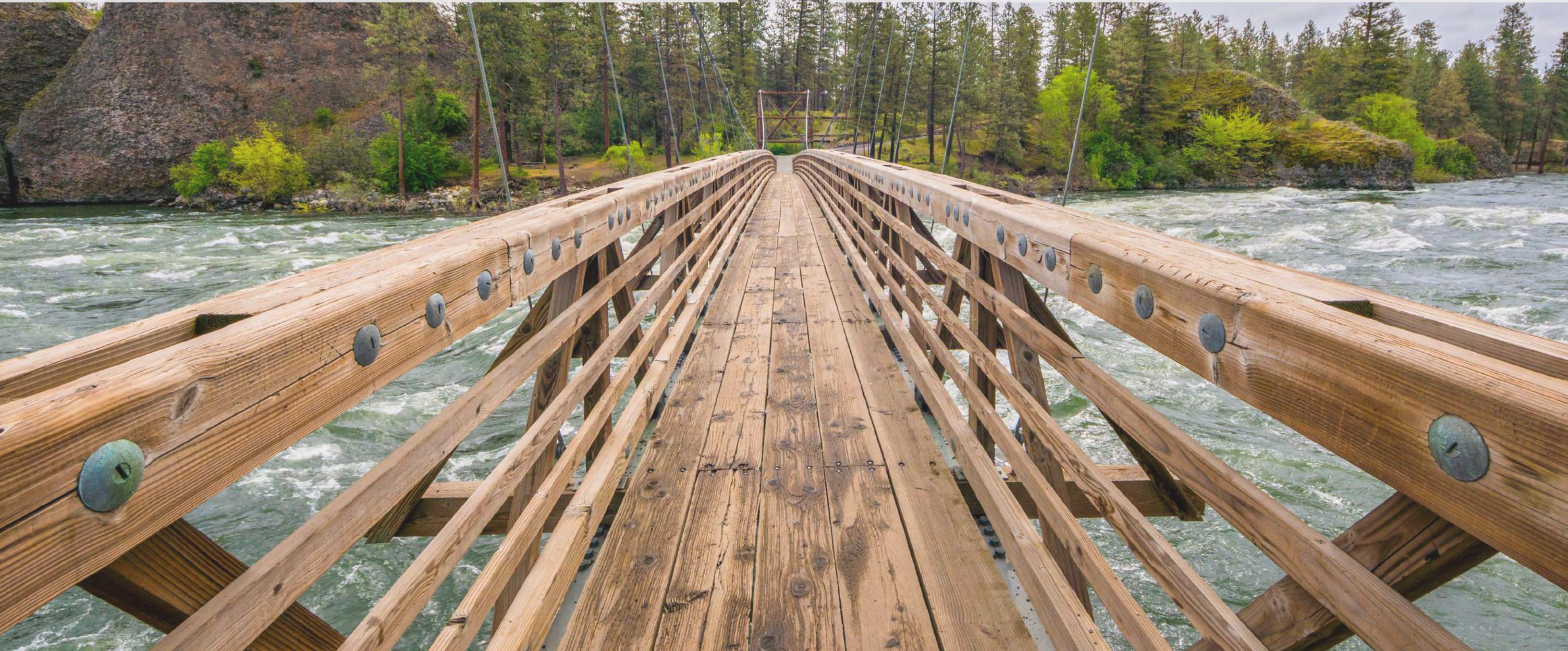
Strengths of EHF

While this section highlights many strengths of the EHF organization and team, there are also places where concerns are connected to the highlights and strengths. We included these because of how interwoven and connected they were to the context of participants' reflections and feedback.

Many community partners described the importance of EHF in their work and in the community. And what areas of EHF they appreciated and wanted to acknowledge as important to them and their organizations.

"Well, I think what they've done that I haven't seen any other foundation really do is that they are really looking at, in my view, smaller nonprofits, the ones that really don't have resources. They're seeing the value of us versus the Catholic Charities or the Salvation Army's or the YMCAs. And so it's like this is the only community partner out there that I've seen that embraces the little guy per se."

"If we have something going on, and we write to them, or we call them and send an email saying, 'We'd like help with this or have this challenge,' then they figure out how to make things work. We're just not used to that kind of relationship with foundations until Empire Health Foundation."



Another critical approach to how EHF currently supports the community is how they provide capacity building or technical support to community organizations. An overwhelming response of community partners expressed gratitude for EHF's technical assistance support, training and funding in leadership education, marketing, grant writers, evaluation, fundraising strategy, financial management, direct lobbying, filling out federal grant paperwork, law and legal navigation, budget training and management, and capital outlay support. This type of support helps open doors to new partnerships, funding sources, leadership development, and deeper investments into the community they serve.

"I'm really passionate about this whole thing about making our local organizations stronger. We have the skills. We have the passion. We don't have the money or training, or the people sometimes. We have the training on how to do the work on the ground but we don't have the training in these areas to manage the structure. And that's what we could use more of."

"One of the things that I love that they did is that they gave me technical support. Which would introduce me to a lady who helped me with my grants and coaching and business plan. That was a game changer!"

"Steven [EHF] helped us with grants to get funded and received our first BIA grant ever received for extra staff and resources. He even created a generic background statement we could use across all grants and is working with us on our capital campaign. Yeld Grant [MCKenzie Scott] applied for \$1M, and we just found out we're a finalist!"

"I knew I had a need for a professional coach, you know, as an executive person. I need somebody who's creating space for me to make mistakes, talk about mistakes, talk about my pathways, think strategically and be intentful. And they've helped pay for that. And I'm really grateful to them for that."

Several people talked about how EHF wants to do things differently than philanthropy and this is really important to them. Specifically, to "disrupt philanthropy" and support efforts that work to change systems by giving community partners and consultants the freedom to do things differently.

"Because these systems are designed to not serve communities of color, right? They are designed to make it as difficult as possible. So these are some ways that we can get creative about disrupting. And I think that it feels really good to have that freedom."

"What if X isn't something my community has identified as something that they really want? Yeah, so many foundations are just so nondiverse but EHF is changing this."

They talked about how EHF is being more intentionally connected to the community and building strong relationships with people so that they are comfortable reaching out to EHF team members. And they feel they are being seen as thought partners and equals in spaces with them.

"I tell my colleagues and friends that Empire Health Foundation is an additional voice of the community. They are looking at the social determinants of health, the political determinants of health, and they're really partnering with community members and community leaders in a way to support individuals, their families, and the communities as a whole, but also other organizations [I work with]. How do we partner and learn from Empire Health Foundation so that we can then amplify the work that we're doing but also at the same time amplify the work that Empire Health Foundation is doing? Because we all win when our community thrives."

Some community partners acknowledged the shift EHF is making to be more intentional in engaging and including funding for organizations identified as or serving BIPOC, LGBTQ, disabled, and gender expansive work. In doing this, community partners expressed a sense of accomplishment to "finally having a seat at the table for their voices to be heard" but recognize the real work in educating funders, like EHF, is now beginning so long-term investment can continue to occur.

"They just recently added people with disabilities. It's interesting to go to a lot of different meetings and there's a lot of different marginalized communities that are brought up. But you know, we're not getting talked about. So if they're not even talking about us, how do we even get seats at the tables because we're not even thought about. So EHF has been awesome because there's finally an organization that is listening to us and wants to be engaged with us."

Community partners appreciate EHF giving their organization a voice at key tables and in key conversations. EHF is considered a critical connector with a very wide reach. They are seen as having power and influence in how they work with the community and provide credibility for partner organizations when seeking funding resources.

*“Keep supporting the organizations that are doing the work. The boots on the ground folks that need the most support, and are the least funded and their voices are the most muffled. **Continue to amplify those voices.**”*

Several partners talked about the Equitable Economies work and the importance and role of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC). The role of the CAC is seen as an important way to center those most impacted in key decisions. Not only is a committee of community members collectively guiding the Equitable Economies’ work, but they are also advocating for technical assistance that organizations are finding useful and meaningful to grow their organizations.

Finally, since many organizations do not have policy staff or communications support, they rely on EHF to help them advocate for key policies, educate political leaders and provide critical communications across Northwest Washington.

Challenges with EHF

The goal of the EHF’s Equity Healing Framework is to “[focus] our attention on how we engage with communities and understand their needs.” EHF has—is—making shifts to better care for and learn from communities in their work, but there is still a need for more personal and interpersonal work within the organization. Several participants shared their frustrations with EHF not identifying and unlearning white supremacy culture and characteristics in their personal, interpersonal, and organizational work.

“I think part of this is acknowledging if you’re doing anti-racist work—you’re not just challenging systems, you’re challenging yourself on a daily basis to dismantle racism. There have been conflicts that have come up, and they are always managed behind closed doors. Triangulation. Nobody wants to talk about them. And that is actually white supremacy culture, right? We don’t hurt anybody’s feelings. But when we don’t address it, that harm, it snowballs, right? And that’s happening internally, and it’s actually now started to happen externally. And so that’s another thing where if they can get on that same page, and you should be doing conflict. If you’re pushing things, if you’re disrupting, you’re gonna be in conflict all the time. So they have to feel comfortable with challenging themselves, getting over themselves, and listening. So, I would spend—I would spend all of the next six months doing that before they launch their new strategic plan.”

Several participants described that they felt that EHF was funding organizations that were not truly representing those most impacted in the community. And in doing so, they were not thinking about intersectionality or equity and `instead were “checking identity boxes.” This is how it felt or was perceived because it is unclear how EHF identifies organizations for funding.

“And so that is one thing that I brought up and even asked questions of [EHF]. How were they [grantees] chosen? And there’s not any transparency around that. And I think if you’re working on thinking about unconditional love. I think so much of that is about being authentic and transparent, and listening. And I think there’s this expectation from foundations often that nonprofits be an open book, which they should, but they don’t reciprocate that. People want to understand why they’re being funded, or why they’re not being funded, so that they can learn and grow and it feels like they won’t even share that information in-house with each other.”

Community members should be able to feel safe at EHF, protected, and their pronouns named correctly. Many felt that EHF has not done training or education around gender expansive work and does not require or prepare their staff well.

“I know they haven’t done the de-colonial work and understanding gender expansive humans, particularly those of color, because dead naming happened right in front of an EHF staff and not a word, and I don’t remember their name. I’m not blaming them, specifically, but I’m saying if you don’t prepare your staff and you haven’t taught them the value of making sure that people aren’t dead named, then you can’t protect them when they’re in your space.”

In reflecting on centering health equity and their framework, one person shared that they are not able to have candid and tough conversations. The participant shared they are more worried about hurting someone’s feelings than dealing with conflict that stems from addressing inequity and racism. And instead EHF placates the situation and misses the opportunity to lean into discomfort and learn.

“I would love to see them be bold. Foundations are often very risk averse. Sometimes that means they don’t weigh in on really tough, important issues. So what’s racking the community at a given moment is never discussed, and it becomes an elephant in the room. And it just feels really disingenuous after a while. I would like to see them be bold. And they might piss off some people—welcome to doing this work!”

Across all community partner organizations a shift toward identifying and addressing white supremacy culture and characteristics is being recognized as a priority that EHF needs to further invest in. Partners welcome the opportunity to further EHF's growth in this area, to lead this work with the community, to advocate for more funding to BIPOC organizations, and for EHF to utilize their influence to lead other funding organizations to do this work as well.

"I want to see Empire continue leaning into the leadership of those who are most attuned to the community. I want to see Empire continually leaning into the choices that might hurt a little bit because it means bucking against the colonial structure that makes foundations function. But that will ultimately grow and create change in our community."

Paternalism

Several community partners described incidents where EHF staff treated them like they knew more or better than the communities. Some examples were holding funding from communities until they provided key processes or steps, which were not part of the original contract or agreement. One participant shared their frustration and stated, *"You don't determine our readiness."* Another example was EHF leading a funding strategy for an organization, but not including the organization in the development of that strategy.

In other incidents, one person described that *"one person on the program team engages with the community where they are listening and working alongside organizations. And I think everybody else is in a role where they want to teach and guide and they're not interested in what community thinks or needs."*

Lack of Transparency and Communication

Many people were unclear about how funding was being allocated or how decisions around funding were being made. Participants shared they were aware some organizations were getting funding—because of how communities share information—but it would be better if EHF could be more transparent in their funding criteria and who is funded.

The overall lack of communication with the community was shared as something that really needed to be improved. One person shared that EHF is not doing much to share externally, and when they did get feedback from the community (beyond the Community Advisory Committee), they were unclear how that feedback was being used or if it was being used at all.

"I think there is that piece where there [are] really good builders, but in the partnership of feedback, I guess, if they were able to share a little bit more of how they were getting the feedback and was it being constructive. I myself felt like they were in the middle and playing it pretty hard, where, as an equity practitioner, I also want to be able to co-create items with the people that are being impacted."

"I think they can do better with their communication to the community as a whole on what they're doing. If I'm reading what Empire Health Foundation is working on, what can I do as an individual and something resonates with me? What can I do as an individual to support? How do I get involved?"

"I think it was great to see them invite a lot of community members to an open house to help them get feedback on some of those buckets that they were talking about. That showed intentionality to kind of do a little bit of co-creating. I think having an advisory group is also a step towards that direction. I think they have people that are on there that, when they see something wrong, go speak their mind. So I think that's a brave space to be opening themselves up for criticism on their processes. The pieces that I don't hear—and maybe because I'm that part of that work—is how they're getting that information back, of like, we heard you and this is how we're going about it."



Extractive and Transactional Processes

A group of individuals describe the funding and lack of relationship-building approach set by EHF as similar to the other “traditional” philanthropic funding they are receiving. Although they are grateful for the grants received from the foundation, they would want to have a better relationship with EHF so it does not feel extractive and to better understand what is their long-term strategy for investment. And finally, how can EHF better recognize the work of the community in developing new resources and frameworks?

“It’s like EHF saying, ‘Oh, thank you guys for doing this amazing work in the community. Here’s some money. Oh, now we created a framework based off of your work in your conversations with us, but we paid you so it should be totally fine.’ And I just think no, publish me and acknowledge when you’re using my stuff.”

There also seems to be a lack of clarity on the roles (point people and decision-makers) of the EHF team and consultants in working with the community. One participant shared that they learned that decisions were not being made by EHF team members but by a consultant who was not from the community they were serving. They asked, how does that center those most impacted in the decision-making processes?



Lived Experiences

Throughout our conversations with community members, they shared how important it was for EHF to acknowledge, uplift, and invest in the people with lived experience who are experts in their work and lives. This is more than just listening to community members with empathy—it is recognizing that those who have been through an experience, not only know the nuances and complexities of the situation, but they also know how to mitigate or address it.

Many community partners expressed the lack of some of the EHF leadership, board, and staff in the community. Partners had invited staff to their events and to visit their organizations, but few EHF staff were showing up. As a result, partners feel there is a level of disconnect to the community and authenticity to understanding the people being supported and their lived experiences.

“How are you being responsible to inform the community in a way that tells me that your connection is authentic? And makes me feel like the decisions that you’re making, or the values that you’re holding, are rooted in the community in a way that feels good to us as Indigenous people. I’m not saying they have to do all these things. But I’m saying how were you in the community? How are you being held accountable in the community?”

“They’ve got to go out and do stuff. They need to actually volunteer for the organizations they financially support and volunteer for some that they don’t. We should know who the staff [are] there. I don’t really even know who their chief accountant is right now. But anyone whose job touches on any public-facing thing at all, we should know. We should see them outside the office.”

“You know, the biggest thing is that you used to read all you want about an organization, but I really don’t believe you can see the heart unless you see the work in action. But I really believe that’s where you find what the heart and soul of that organization is because you can’t hide it.”

Building Capacity and Leadership

Community partners understand the need to fund programs and ensure work is happening in the community, but they also see the need to fund infrastructure and staff positions. The funding can partially pay a program staff salary; however, leadership is also looking for other funding to cover the rest. They also mentioned that funding rarely covers other positions needed in the organization—e.g. human resources, administrative director, grant writers, etc.—so when those positions are not part of their internal team, usually the executive director or someone else is doing the other tasks.

Many participants would like for EHF to continue to provide nonprofits with capacity building and technical assistance in growing their organizations and infrastructures.

Opportunities for EHF

People are showing up to share their candid thoughts and ideas because they believe in EHF and the work they have done and are doing.

*"I was eager to do this because I believe that they can do this work. Yeah, you [EHF] can do better. They can learn [and] they can move, right? We can all do this together. And so that was why I was excited to do it. And I hope that is the feedback they will receive. Well they don't have to wait until 2026 to start making some changes. We could do sh*t right now. I feel good. I really appreciate you reaching out and the work that you're doing. I think it's gonna be really impactful for the community and help recenter community in this work. So thank you for that."*

Participants are ready to share their ideas and strategies to help move EHF forward in a good way. In reflecting on how EHF knows they are funding those most impacted, a participant shared that, if they were leading the organization, they would focus on those who are directly doing the work with those most impacted and ensure they are on the ground with community—not disconnected from them. And once they are identified, provide critical infrastructure funding and support by leveraging EHF's power and influence, not only with funding but within their networks and connections to political and human capital.

EHF needs to be transparent and actively share their funding portfolio and which organizations are BIPOC led; both board and staff.

"I've done some work with Inatai on the West Side, and their entire staff uses the same language. And that is the same language that they embed on their website. And their grant applications. It is everywhere. Everybody agrees on all the terms. And this is another thing that has been frustrating because I think, while they've [EHF] been taking this pause and listening, they could have been doing some really critical internal work to have a shared understanding of what equity means to them—to understanding white supremacy culture, the tenants of it, and how they're showing up in those ways. And I think this is something that a lot of radical nonprofits do on a regular basis as part of debriefing programming or conflict where it's like, let's take a pause. Let's look at where we've caused harm, where we've done this well, and using that, that critical lens that never happened at the foundation. And I think everyone thinks that they understand equity at a 400 level. And that is not the case. I think some are below 100 level. And there's been a resistance to learning some of that language, which is shared language of the communities. And so how can you have an equitable way? So, thinking about systems, how are you choosing grantees if you have ten different definitions of what equity is and what your values are? If you're funding an organization because they're Black led, but they're also openly queer and trans antagonistic, what does that say about your Equity Healing Framework? And when someone raises concerns like that, you should be able to stay in that conversation and not just ignore it. We can learn from our mistakes and think about how is this decision made, how could it be different, and how can we engage with this organization now that we're in a relationship with them to help maybe bring them along? But if they don't have that shared language, that understanding, everything they do from that point forward is going to be problematic."

Additionally, given the recent decision to remove EHF as the intermediary funder for the Healing Families Initiative, or the Peers at the Front Door, there is a real opportunity to reflect on that work within EHF, and with community partners, to process those difficult discussions and spend the time to create principles, write a reflection paper, and/or actively discuss the overarching question: how does EHF evaluate when to remove themselves from being the intermediary funder?



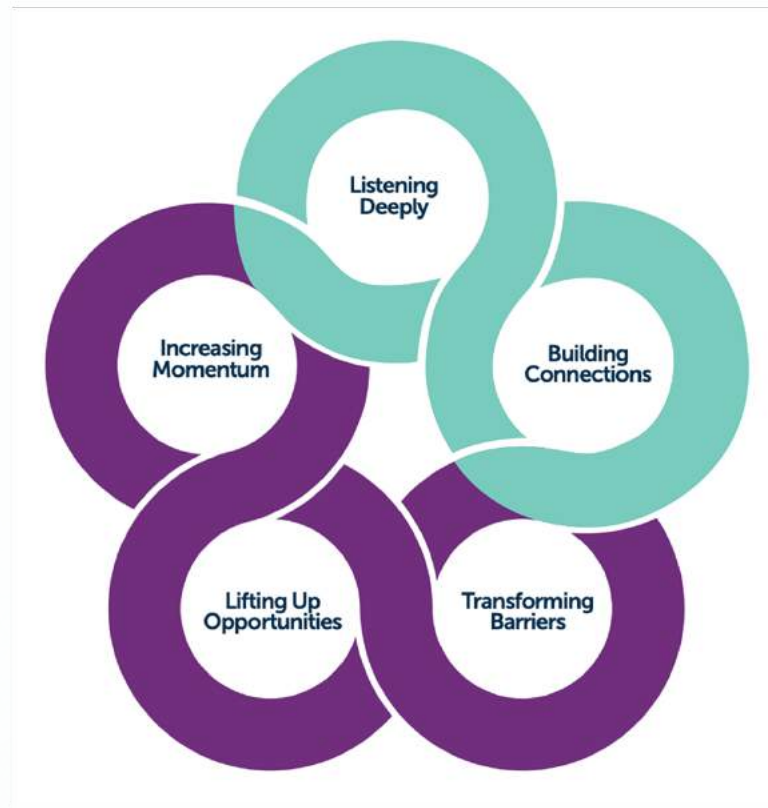
Recommendations

In our time with EHF, we learned that EHF has several efforts going on internally to begin to operationalize and center the Equity Health Framework in all that they do. This includes rethinking their grant-making strategy, rebranding their name to reflect the work they are doing with the community, and finally building the foundation of an equitable evaluation with community partners. In itself, this is going to be a lot of work that EHF has already identified; however, we strongly recommend including and building on what has been learned from these interviews as they are critical to achieving the goals that EHF has set forward, which are deeper and based on relationships and healing.

What is foundational to all of our recommendations **is an intentional focus to spend time internally educating the staff and board on equity, anti-racism, disability, justice, gender-expansive learning, and intersectionality so that there is shared vocabulary that is used within and outside the organization.** Key resources in this learning can be (with compensation) the communities EHF already partners with and/or peer organizations, like the Inatai Foundation. This education requires continuous reflection and building this learning into their operations and systems. We have outlined a few recommendations below with this in mind.

- Communities are starting to see the shift within EHF and understand it takes time to realize and operationalize the framework, but it will not happen if all levels of leadership, board, and staff—including contractors—are not spending the time to build real relationships with the community. It is crucial that they continue to listen and spend time in the community. Recognizing that not all EHF staff are from the communities they are serving, we recommend that EHF build in and operationalize meaningful opportunities for staff and leadership to be present in the community. Community partners want to see EHF at their events and/or at their organizations. Many are looking for a relationship before and beyond funding.
- In the continued grounding of equity and centering those with lived experiences in the community, EHF needs to spend time discussing what lived experiences are, why they matter, and how this learning applies to their relationships with the community. Based on those discussions, it could be helpful to create some practices and/or approaches that all staff will use in their work with communities. This would allow the EHF team to collectively activate these approaches in their work with the community and share what worked well and what may not have worked as well. Additionally, the community members can also give feedback on their approaches and how they can best be adapted for different experiences and groups in real-time.
- Based upon past harms and strained relationships shared by community partners, we strongly recommend that EHF incorporates a trauma-informed model/approach that addresses support for community healing and restorative practices as an opportunity to build the right relationship that honors peoples' lived experiences, diversity, and equity. Given the challenges shared by participants, there needs to be a discussion with the community on how EHF could best be serving those most impacted and how to make the most of their ability to monitor their work with the community for transparency and accountability—including transparency in who they are funding.
- Community partners have expressed that one strength of a funder is being a connector and convenor of people at many different levels within the community. Therefore, they would like to see EHF continue to be that connector and provide and invest in spaces for convening, both physical spaces and in hosting virtual spaces for community partner organizations. A curated space where leadership can gather to share thoughts and insights hold tough conversations to do better, create processes, be creative in resource sharing, and be in solidarity as leaders of organizations. Furthermore, it can be a space to support coalition building and/or to share key technical assistance and infrastructure-building resources and training.
- In line with giving community partners a space to connect, EHF has an opportunity to conduct a landscape analysis of Northwest Washington and share who EHF is funding and what the organization was funded for. This not only allows for transparency and creates accountability with the community, but it promotes opportunities for partner collaboration, advocacy, and innovation while identifying existing initiatives that are already in exploration or existence. As one community partner stated, *"Don't reinvent the wheel."*
- Continue to build on the Equitable Economies Community Advisory Committee (CAC) as a community-led strategy model to ensure EHF creates community-led feedback loops on efforts and actions that EHF takes with their portfolio. Many have described the CAC as a critical approach to supporting communities and a space that not only listens to the community but co-creates with the community and activates decisions together that impact communities. Several people described the committee as a suitable space to have complex discussions. Many participants used the phrase "safe space" to describe the committee. The CAC provided space for mutual accountability and transparency. How can EHF build on the approaches of this model across their organization?

Focusing on **Listening Deeply** and **Building Connections**



- Are we, as a team, spending enough time in community, how do we know?
- How is our value of trust showing up in our conversations and meetings?
- Are we being transparent, honest and showing gratitude?
- How are we celebrating unexpected learning and failures together?
- How are we managing conflict and disagreement?

Summary

Empire Health Foundation is in a pivotal moment to operationalize their Equity Healing Framework in everything they do (internally and externally). This is a welcomed shift from community members, one they have begun to see through leadership and staff changes over the last few years, but right now, it's mostly theoretical or unclear on how the framework will be put into practice. We have outlined some initial recommendations above for Empire Health Foundation, several of which build on what has already been started (i.e. CAC and Empire's role as a critical connector, etc.). Additionally, in reflecting back on the values and Equity Healing Framework, we have pulled out the two key elements, **listening deeply and building connections** as focal points for review and discussion to create collective practices across Empire (EHF's equity healing framework). Considering these two elements are foundational to the rest of the framework and they are directly connected to rebuilding trust in the community, we see an opportunity for the Empire team to build out a reflective and reparative practices across the organization by collectively discussing key guiding questions. We have provided some initial questions to help further ignite deep learning and practices among the EHF team and then with questions that we heard from community that connect back to the framework. The feedback to these questions can help ground Empire as a team, identify actions and practices to institutionalize across Empire and finally, create reciprocal feedback loops with community in strengthening their relationships with them.

The RCLLC team really enjoyed the time and opportunity to build a relationship with the Empire team on this project. We not only listened to community members as they shared their candid hopes and thoughts of the foundation, but we also had a chance to hear similar concerns and hopes from the Empire team, so we know there is great opportunity to repair and grow, together. We appreciate the Empire team for being courageous and thoughtful in taking a "pause" and the willingness to being open to listen to the community and to our team.

Organizational questions from community - reciprocal relationships

- How does EHF define accountability? How is it showing up in their work?
- How is EHF being accountable to community? And how does community hold EHF accountable?
- How do we know the decisions you are making are rooted in community values?
- How does EHF define transparency? How is it showing up in their work?
- How can EHF be more transparent in their grant making approaches?
- How is the framework operationalized throughout all levels of EHF and the Board?

COMMUNITY + INTEGRITY + TRUST + COMPASSION + UNCONDITIONAL LOVE



Recommended Readings & Resources

Inatai Foundation

<https://inatai.org/insights/>

Communities most impacted by inequities should be at the center of developing solutions. Inatai is committed to lifting up and learning from the lived experiences and practices of others. As communities share wisdom and insights from their lives and work, they are reexamining what they thought they knew and articulating how they will approach their work. Inatai is also dedicated to sharing what they are learning in order to strengthen the collective efforts toward racial justice.

[Living Language Guide](#) - The Living Language Guide serves as a resource for staff and board to establish a shared understanding of the language we use for our work together. It is also a resource for partners to gain a deeper understanding of our values and worldview.

Kataly Foundation

<https://www.katalyfoundation.org/#program-areas>

The Kataly Foundation moves resources to support the economic, political, and cultural power of Black and Indigenous communities, and all communities of color. By transforming our relationship to capital, the planet, and each other, we will redistribute and redefine wealth in a way that leads to transformation, abundance, and regeneration.



Resource List

The following recommended readings and resources are provided to EHF for additional learning opportunities around Indigenous Research and Evaluation, as well as a deeper dive into the Equitable Evaluation Framework.

S01E01: Indigenous Insights- Making Introductions

<https://gladysrowe.com/s01e01-indigenous-insights-making-introductions/>

An Indigenous evaluation podcast with Gladys Rowe provides insights into her journey.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Evaluation: Improving Philanthropy Practice

<https://www.firstnations.org/publications/indigenous-data-sovereignty-and-indigenous-evaluation-improving-philanthropic-practice/>

Learn how the global Indigenous Data Sovereignty Movement is transforming power dynamics when it comes to data, research, and evaluation by centering those impacted.

The Ideas Behind Indigenous Data Sovereignty and The Importance of Trust, Agency, Humility, and Community

<https://player.fm/series/good-tech-fest-podcast/the-ideas-behind-indigenous-data-sovereignty-and-the-importance-of-trust-agency-humility-community>

A podcast with special guest Rebecca Rae, a Jicarilla Apache researcher, evaluator, and co-learner discusses the ideas behind Indigenous Data Sovereignty and the importance of trust, agency, humility, and community.

ASU: Indigenous Data Sovereignty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXghvb6lPRI>

A seminar presentation on Indigenous Data Sovereignty and data governance that engages in a reinvention of processes and practices associated with Indigenous data.

Episode 2: The Origins and Elements of the Equitable Evaluation Framework

<https://www.equalmeasure.org/episode-2-jara-dean-coffey-marcia-cone/>

A podcast with special guests Jara Dean-Coffey and Marcia Cone of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative discuss the origins and elements of the Equitable Evaluation Framework, the importance of context in philanthropic work, and the necessary evolution of evaluation and philanthropy in the U.S.

Lessons from the Learning Pathway: A Journey to Decolonizing Evaluation

<https://learningpathwaylessons.blogspot.com/?m=1>

Learn how one organization utilized the Learning Pathway to decolonize evaluation and support new and emerging evaluators conducting evaluation in ways that reflect community worldviews and values.

The Equitable Evaluation Framework (2023)

https://www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_aab47695b0d2476d8de5d32f19bd6df9.pdf

An evolved and latest version of the Equitable Evaluation Framework that includes new elements



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