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Together Toward Health: Amplifying Impact through Collaborative Partnerships

Evaluation Brief

Together Toward Health (TTH) is a statewide initiative that supports over 500 community-based organizations (CBOs) that reduce the spread of COVID-19 by strengthening education, testing, and vaccination access across California's most impacted communities. TTH is guided by a principle of equity to support under-resourced communities through culturally and linguistically appropriate education, awareness, and outreach. The initiative's commitment to ensuring the broad cultural and socio-demographic diversity of California is reflected in its community-based partners that represent and have experience engaging Black, Indigenous, People of Color, LGBTQ+, older adults, youth, low income, people with disabilities, people with limited access to healthcare (including those who are underinsured or uninsured), and essential workers of historically marginalized groups.

TTH is administered by Public Health Institute (PHI) and funded by over 20 philanthropic organizations. PHI implements TTH by providing technical assistance, support, and professional development opportunities to initiative-funded community-based organizations. Since its development in 2020, TTH has disbursed over \$33 million via 251 awards to 548 community-based organizations including churches, health centers, community centers, coalitions, and others. Funded organizations range from recently-formed grassroots organizations to well-established community-based organizations.

PHI engaged Harder+Company Community Research and Ross Strategic at the onset of the TTH initiative to evaluate its impact. The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data and narrative stories, to summarize TTH-funded activities, explore the implementation of the TTH model, and identify community-level impact of TTH funding on addressing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This evaluation brief outlines key findings from the work accomplished by the TTH initiative between December 2020 and May 2022. This brief is intended for a wide audience and focuses on the benefits of partnerships within the TTH initiative, including how partnerships amplified TTH and CBOs' impact on communities. A prior report focused on elements related to the TTH model, partnerships, centering equity, PHI's role as a coordinating body, and initial recommendations to inform ongoing efforts. Additional briefs explore topics such as successes related to workforce development and TTH's flexible funding model.

Together Toward Health Funders

Ballmer Group
Blue Shield of California Foundation,
The California Health Care Foundation
Crankstart Foundation
Genentech
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation
Heising-Simons Foundation
The James Irvine Foundation
Medtronic Foundation
The David and Lucile Packard
Foundation
The Sierra Health Foundation
Sunlight Giving
The California Endowment
The California Wellness Foundation
The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation
Tipping Point Community
Chan Zuckerberg Initiative
John & Marcia Goldman Foundation
Walter & Elise Haas Fund
The Weingart Foundation

Building Constellations of Partnerships Across California

The Together Toward Health initiative supported the collaboration of its funded CBOs with a variety of partners who worked together to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This brief describes the nature of those partnerships and the impact they had on communities. In this report brief, “partners/partnerships” is used in a broader sense to refer to relationships and collaboration that occurred between formal and informal contributors to the TTH initiative, including: funded CBOs, local health departments (LHDs), TTH staff, TTH funders, state agencies, and other organizations in the community such as faith-based groups, etc.

By fostering partnership and collaboration, TTH increased the impact of CBOs’ ongoing efforts to increase equity in communities across the state of California, while substantially increasing equitable access to vaccines, testing, and other resources. The impact of these partnerships highlights the importance of collaboration and networking in addressing public health crises in a way that is equitable and responsive to community needs.

TTH pursued partnerships and collaborative efforts to amplify its ability to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The creation of TTH reflects the partnership between PHI and over 20 funders, which pooled funding¹ and created TTH to strengthen their impact and distribute resources as quickly as possible to communities. One of the most salient challenges at the beginning of COVID-19 included a lack of coordination within regions in California to address the crisis in communities. In pursuing this goal, the TTH team understood that collaboration with key partners, would be critical to ensure the initiative would effectively reach community members and align efforts across the state.

To begin these collaborative efforts, the TTH team first reached out to LHDs to make them aware of TTH and gather initial input about trusted organizations in each community. Upon gathering this information, TTH staff reached out to organizations with more information about the TTH funding opportunity, supported them in the development of their funding application, and worked to quickly provide funding. By leveraging partnerships with LHDs, TTH established networks of CBOs in multiple counties more quickly than if they had pursued traditional methods of contracting with LHDs (for example, by distributing funds through subcontracts or by releasing a Request for Proposals and waiting to receive and evaluate funding proposals). After CBOs joined the TTH initiative, TTH staff ensured that TTH-funded CBOs maintained communication with LHDs throughout the duration of their involvement with TTH. This ensured that CBOs had easier and more timely access to information about COVID-19 resources and efforts being pursued by LHDs to avoid duplication of efforts.

In addition to the initial partnerships with LHDs, TTH also connected with state agencies that oversaw COVID-19 response. By collaborating with these agencies, TTH had access to information about the state response to COVID-19 and was able to share this information with LHDs and funded CBOs (as permitted by the agencies). TTH was also able to share key lessons learned by CBOs with these state agencies, and vice versa. This ongoing opportunity to connect enabled, to the extent possible, alignment and a shared understanding of effective strategies to support the COVID-19 response.

“Perhaps the most valuable of lessons is the impact the organization can have when working together to leverage resources and services. [We] made very strong partnerships through the TTH collective and even formed a permanent collaborative. Our collective work will continue.”

- CBO

¹ For more information about the pooled funding approach please refer to the Together Toward Health brief: *Value of Pooled Funding and Multi-Funder Collaboration*.

The partnerships formed were diverse, numerous, and mutually beneficial.

Funded CBOs and LHD representatives shared numerous examples of partnerships that would not have been formed without TTH activities and funding. These connections were beneficial for the partners and the community being served. Examples of some TTH partnerships and associated impacts include:



CBO Partnerships – enabled CBOs from the same counties to work together and share resources in their local communities.



CBO-LHD partnerships – enabled CBOs to get the most up-to-date information about vaccination and testing resources in their local county. LHDs also learned more about local CBOs and increased their network of potential grantees.



CBO-cultural group partnerships – enabled CBOs across the state to share relevant materials and resources to serve important population groups such as the non-English speaking community, immigrant and undocumented community, and important racial and ethnic groups.



CBO-LHD-agricultural group partnerships – enabled CBOs and LHDs to support the needs of farmworkers who experienced barriers to testing and vaccination.



CBO-faith-based organization partnerships – enabled CBOs to collaborate with trusted faith leaders who supported COVID-19 messaging that reflected the values of different faith-based groups. This was especially important for reducing misinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccination.



TTH-CBO-government group partnerships – enabled TTH to receive up-to-date information about COVID-19 in the state of California. This also resulted in more resources for communities and additional funding opportunities for CBOs.

“[Thanks to the TTH Initiative,] we were really able to put the funds into the community in a way that was data-driven but also really grassroots.”

- LHD



TTH set up organizational infrastructure to nurture and cultivate partnerships. TTH took on the role of facilitating the development of partnerships by designating TTH support staff to oversee various types of partnerships. For example,

- Some TTH staff were designated as regional project managers in southern, central, and northern California regions. The regional project managers hosted or participated in meetings for each county in their region and were the primary contact for the funded CBOs and LHDs in these regions. They also often served as connectors across counties, who were serving similar populations. For example, in central California many counties were focused on supporting the farmworker population and TTH regional project managers were able to share strategies across counties and connect organizations doing the same efforts.
- TTH designated a team member who was primarily responsible for helping funded CBOs support tribal communities across California.
- The TTH director and deputy director served as the primary contact for funders and state agencies. They helped field questions received from funders and maintained regular contact with state partners.
- TTH designated a workforce and learning manager who was primarily responsible for supporting learning and professional development for all funded CBOs.

The design of this TTH organizational structure ensured that each of the TTH partners had an established contact for regular communication and support. As one funded CBO described, "The project has created infrastructure allowing us to have better relationships, so we're not working in silos. We're not duplicating services. We're not recreating wheels. We are better because we are better together." This intentional component of the design of TTH enabled partnerships to remain constant and to strengthen over the duration of the initiative.

TTH supported the cultivation of partnerships by creating formal and informal meeting spaces, which allowed partners to connect and have a shared sense of solidarity. To support the development of these relationships, TTH staff created different meeting opportunities for partners to network with one another and establish connections. Below are a few examples of key meeting spaces and partnerships they supported.



Monthly office hours for each county. Support collaboration between funded CBOs, other organizations and groups in the county, and LHDs. Partners in each of the counties shared resources, troubleshooted ongoing issues, and exchanged contact information to streamline their efforts where possible.

104 total meetings supported collaboration of an average of 10 attendees per meeting



Weekly meetings with TTH funders. Support collaboration between TTH staff and funders and offered connection opportunities for CBOs to spotlight their ongoing efforts.

26 total meetings supported collaboration and communication between funders

"This grant has been transformational not only for our agency and the relationships that we built internally but also the community relationships that we built. But it's also really been a step towards us helping to build capacity in our region."

- CBO



Learning communities. Support learning exchanges between CBOs serving specific populations including: farmworkers, youth, CA workforce, Latinx, Black/African American, Native/Tribal, Refugee/Immigrant, and Northern/Central/Southern CA. Cultivate spaces for sharing of resources and best practices, and offered general connection points for organizations doing similar work. Many learning community meetings were offered in English and Spanish.

Over 46 learning communities reached over 892 participants



Professional development and training opportunities. Offer opportunities for professional skill development resources needed to support the work of many community health workers. Over seven organizations offered trainings or workshops related to evaluation, grant writing, COVID-19 information, conflict resolution, trauma informed services, etc. Many trainings were offered in both English and Spanish.

Over 130 training and webinar opportunities provided 339 hours of informational material and reached over 5000 participants

These meeting spaces served as peer-sharing opportunities and provided a platform for CBOs to learn from each other’s successes and collaborate on how to overcome common challenges. Attending organizations often shared contact information to continue to share learning and resources beyond the TTH-hosted forums. These meetings were a crucial resource as they gave people the opportunity to connect during phases of the pandemic where traditional meeting venues were not available. This also enabled new connections between people and organizations that were not near each other or were not already part of similar networks.

- CBOs appreciated that these meeting spaces allowed them to connect on resources and receive up-to-date information.
- CBOs also shared that learning communities fostered a space where they could celebrate small wins and milestones achieved amidst the everchanging demands of the pandemic.
- Professional development and training opportunities offered resources to expand CBOs’ knowledge and skillset on key domains including communication, capacity building, service coordination, advocacy, outreach, evaluation and research, etc.
- Many CBOs also shared that the heavy burden of this work was often leading to burnout. However, in having the space to connect at the learning community meetings, CBOs found value in the shared experience of how difficult and emotionally exhausting it was to respond to this crisis.

Impacts of Partnerships: Amplifying TTH’s Success

The connections that funded CBOs were able to make with each other and with other organizations helped them amplify the success they achieved in their work with the TTH initiative. If CBOs, LHDs, and other groups had continued working in silos, as they had done in the past, they would have missed out on critical shared learning to address common challenges and barriers.

By partnering with other groups, CBOs were able to leverage resources to increase communities’ access to COVID-19 information, testing, and vaccines. Partnerships resulted in clear impacts for communities, such as

“The COVID-19 community workgroups ... allowed collaboration to take place in a quick and efficient manner. The network we started during the TTH grant will continue, and because of these groups there is a wider reach, greater potential for community engagement around the state, and more resources in total for [us] to offer our American Indian/Alaska Native community here in California.”

- CBO

increased access to:



COVID-19 information in various **languages**



Culturally-responsive information for different religious and cultural groups



Information about **vaccination and testing** opportunities



Transportation for vaccination sites

Shifting traditional power dynamics between partners helped build trust and was a critical component in partnerships' success in reaching communities. TTH-facilitated sharing, learning, and relationship building opportunities that enabled CBOs to connect with funders and LHDs in ways they normally were not able to. TTH's innovative structure that embraced fast, flexible funding was critical to enable these partnerships to be built on mutual understanding and respect. The TTH model centers CBOs as experts, allowing them to use money creatively and flexibly to adapt to their communities' needs and the shifting challenges of the pandemic.

Representatives from LHDs shared that they embraced the shift in typical power dynamics in their partnerships as they supported CBOs to be a foundational part of the solution in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Through these relationships, LHDs asked CBOs for advice on which ideas would work and what needed to change in order to reach priority communities. Recognizing that LHDs were really listening and incorporating their input built CBOs' trust and motivated them to continue the partnership.

"With TTH, we were able to collaborate with organizations that we never would have reached out to... These are organizations that we never would have partnered with had it not been for TTH. Now, they know who to call if they have families that they're not sure what dialect they speak and we can assist them with that and then vice versa."

- CBO



Collaboration between TTH staff and various government agencies was mutually beneficial for both entities. As one PHI staff member described, *"We are also supporting the essential bridges between government and community organizations to more successfully meet the needs of community members now and hopefully into the future. Included in this has been our partnership with the Governor's office, CDPH, Office of Emergency Services, and others along the way to share information, resources, and opportunities. This, too, is a great example of the power of collaboration across sectors."* As a result of these successful partnerships, TTH staff could provide additional resources and timely information to community partners and CBO partners could support state efforts around COVID-19. For example, when vaccination started in California, the state collaborated with TTH CBOs to help ensure equitable access to vaccination. One state partner described, *"It was through the help of these CBOs on the ground just to get the vaccine out to their community that we were able to be successful. And so much so that this success echoed across the country and the Biden administration encouraged all the other states to do what we were doing, because it was very, very successful."* The success of these partnerships not only benefited communities needing services but it also served as a model for other states pursuing similar efforts.

The relationships that partners built with each other through their work with TTH had clear benefits. When CBOs encountered challenges in their work, they were more likely to reach out to LHDs early on to work through them. This collaborative problem solving was a shift from the top-down power dynamics of past interactions.

Under past efforts, CBOs' public health funding has typically come via LHDs, and is often restricted by requirements about how that funding can be used. Under the TTH initiative, this top-down relationship shifted to parallel efforts, with LHDs and CBOs working alongside one another. This change in the nature of their relationships was crucial to their successful COVID-19 response as LHDs relied more on CBOs and trusted their expertise. LHDs were able to hear feedback on which tactics worked or didn't work, and take advice on what would be received well by a priority community. One LHD shared that *they "couldn't possibly reach everyone without [CBOs]."* In places where LHDs did not have contact with a particular community, it was essential to rely on CBOs and trust their expertise to reach those areas. For example, one LHD shared that it began regularly checking in with a CBO to ask for advice on whether new ideas to reach its community were likely to work, what needed to change, who should be the face of a new campaign, etc. In another example, an LHD collaborated with farm owners to allow CBOs to come onto their farms to talk about vaccines with farmworkers (there had been resistance to this idea in the past). Later, when COVID-19 vaccine boosters became available, the farm owners actually reached out to the LHD to ask if the CBO could return again to do a vaccine clinic.

Input from CBOs enabled LHDs to develop culturally-appropriate messaging that was more likely to be received well. Some LHDs went on to invite CBOs to join them in capacity-building efforts for the future. This power shift benefits CBOs by providing better access to LHDs for future public health needs, such as when they need resources or want to host a clinic. Ultimately, this collaboration was mutually beneficial for both groups and allowed these partners to take equitable approaches in supporting the community.

Partnerships brought positive impacts to funded CBOs in ways that enabled them to increase their reach, complement one another's strengths, and help fill each other's gaps. Several CBOs said that before engaging in the TTH initiative they didn't even know who else was doing the same work as they were because they were so busy. The TTH initiative brought CBOs that had not worked together into a coalition, which enabled them to have a

"I feel like that's another really beautiful impact: that we are a multiracial diverse group of organizations that have banded together to really make an impact in stopping and slowing the spread of COVID in very marginalized communities."

- CBO

greater impact in slowing and stopping the spread of COVID-19 in under-resourced communities.



In some cases, CBOs that had historically competed over funding resources shifted to trusting and relying on one another instead. Some LHDs observed that they noticed previously-competitive CBOs were beginning to lean on one another's complementary strengths through their work with TTH. Where there had been broken trust or damaged relationships in the past between LHDs and CBOs, TTH catalyzed relationship building. For example, one LHD shared that in their work under TTH they began to actively listen to understand where CBOs had experienced barriers with government agencies in the past and worked to avoid those issues. In another example, one CBO shared that their work under TTH was the first time they experienced LHD leadership actively asking to hear their ideas and that this transformed the way they operate, as they now continue to meet weekly with the LHD and even have begun applying for grants together with the LHD as part of their new vision to move forward continuing to address health inequities in partnership.

CBOs were able to complement one another's work through their partnerships. One CBO partnered with organizations that provide food to community members, which were periodically shutting down due to COVID-19 outbreaks among staff. Through the partnership, these organizations were able to share staff and keep operating even during staff COVID-19 outbreaks. This type of collaboration quickly filled gaps in services for the community. The collaborative learning spaces that TTH hosted allowed previously disconnected CBOs to form relationships with each other, share innovative solutions to common challenges, and build upon each other's success.

Lasting Impact: Partnership Success Beyond TTH Funding

Collaboration between different CBOs, as well as between LHDs and CBOs, is key to addressing public health crises in a way that is equitable and responsive to community needs. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented public health challenge and is an ongoing need. Strong, numerous, relationship-based partnerships are a key ingredient for continuing to support communities during this pandemic and will be key in future public health challenges as well.

New networks and coalitions have formed through the TTH initiative that promise to continue delivering benefits into the future. CBOs that TTH funded have begun to meet with collaborators and discuss opportunities to address other public health issues. For example, 11 CBOs formed a new coalition during their work with TTH and they shared that by partnering together to form the coalition, they were able to hire a community health worker and create a committee to hire people to help the community. The connections between the agencies made it possible to work as a team, learn from each other, share, collaborate, and move health equity forward – and they shared that they are still looking for more ways to collaborate.

Some funded CBOs continue to share resources using the tools that TTH provided for them. For example, though direct funding has ended for these CBOs, the TTH Native-led learning community is actively coordinating to meet without the facilitation of TTH.

CBOs have built skills to work with one another which will impact their activities into the future. One CBO shared that they had never worked with another organization with the same community focus as they had, and after forming partnerships through TTH they “can’t believe” they weren’t connecting with those organizations before. TTH created infrastructure that allowed them to form those relationships, stop working in silos, and stop duplicating work. Instead of spending time duplicating efforts, CBOs can use strategies and best practices of other partners.

CBOs and LHDs are working on other public health initiatives beyond the focus of the TTH initiative, and several said they anticipate continuing to collaborate with nonprofits they normally wouldn’t have worked with. For example, in Merced County, CBOs are now working in partnership with the county government on a new dental hygiene initiative.

The value of emotional connection for those who are doing this hard work promises to bring benefits into the future. While experiencing burnout and high turnover, CBOs in these partnerships are now able to connect as they experience the same challenges. Funded CBOs shared that this component of connecting with other organizations was an unexpected but important benefit; discussing shared challenges helped make them feel less alone in grappling with the huge challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some shared that the emotional and psychological benefits of these relationships is helping them remain in their roles when they otherwise might have sought employment in a different field. These intangible benefits of the partnerships formed through the TTH initiative promise to continue to serve the field of public health into the future.

TTH’s efforts to foster partnerships and encourage collaboration increased the impact CBOs’ efforts had on their work to increase communities’ access to vaccines, testing, and other resources. The relationships formed lay the groundwork for future collaboration and continued benefits to the field of public health.

“We are now poised to morph into a health equity alliance to tackle other health initiatives, whether that be chronic disease, whether that be emergency response, or whether that be language justice.”

- LHD
