

# Coming Together, Not Apart

Inside the Work of Turning Conflict Into Collaboration

2 of 3



Produced in partnership with

**NEW  
PLURALISTS**

 **PACE**  
Philanthropy for  
Active Civic Engagement

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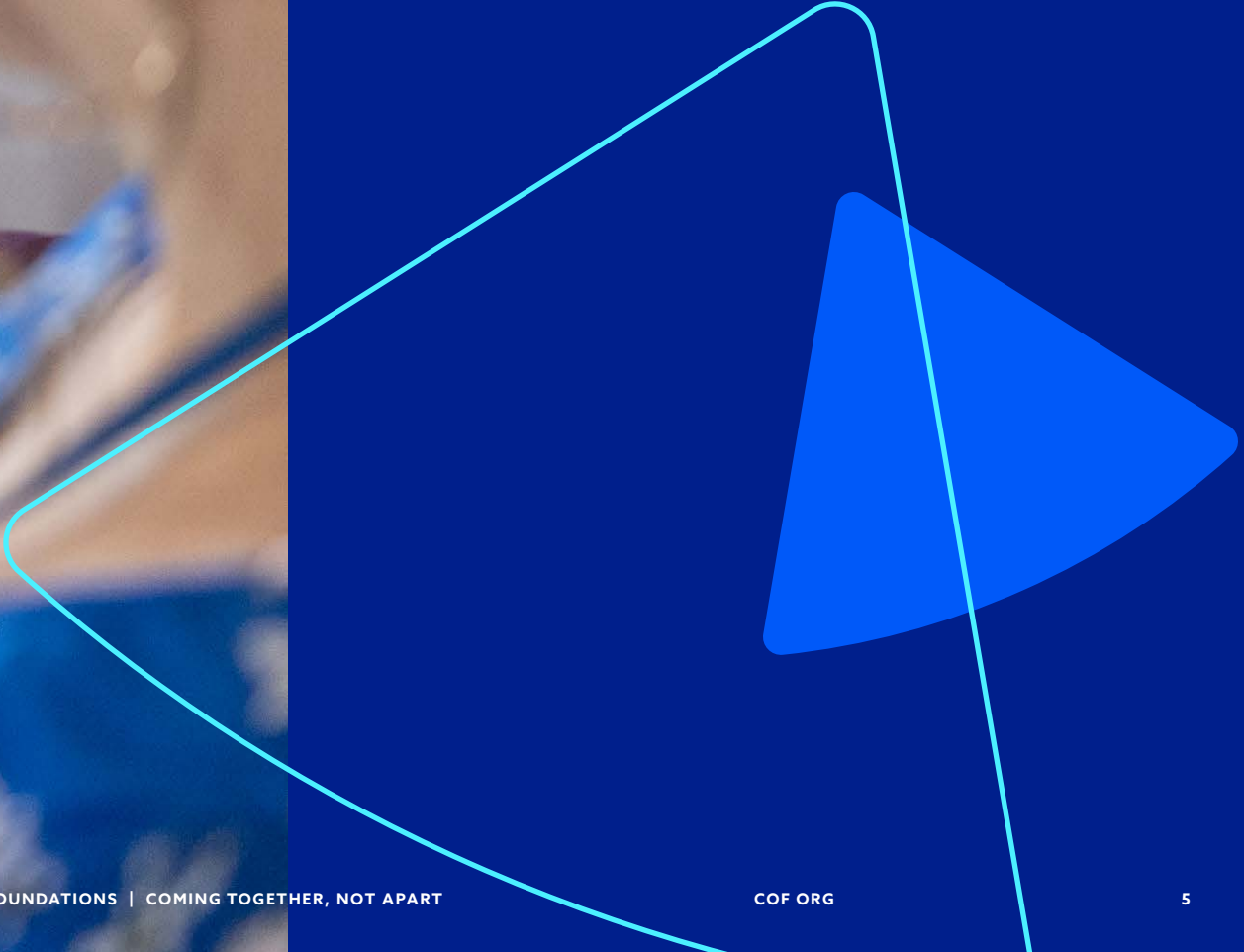
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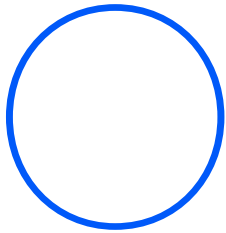




# Introduction







our first report in this series, “Coming Together, Not Apart: How Philanthropy Supports Connection in a Time of Dangerous Division,” focused on what philanthropy is doing to support the work to foster connections and collaborations across differences. This report focuses on

**how that work is done:** What are the underlying assumptions and causal linkages – often referred to as theories of change – behind efforts to foster belonging, build bridges, and find common ground? How is that work unfolding, specifically, and what constitutes success? How, given the long-term nature of this kind of work, is philanthropy measuring impact?

There are no easy answers, in part because this work involves cultural change, systems change, and even structural change. Organizations are using a variety of approaches, from facilitating dialogue to countering hate to strengthening democracy and more. Even within those approaches themselves there is variation – a project focused on countering political polarization and strengthening democracy might increase awareness and problem-solving skills at the mass level, while another might support “ingroup moderates,” meaning civic or political leaders who are resisting pressure from their parties or constituents to embrace extremes. Yet another might offset a politician’s efforts to exploit differences by offering other perspectives on how to cope with diversity.

But for as varied as this work is, it still has common core themes. First, it is predicated on **relationships**, meaning it involves individuals knowing other people and groups and having accurate perceptions of those groups’ beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. The ability to do relational work – especially

#### A Note on the Text

Work to connect and collaborate across differences manifests in many ways. That work includes strategies known in the field as belonging, bridging, building common ground, and conflict transformation, among others. These strategies then inform a variety of activities and investments, including countering polarization, combating hate, encouraging racial healing, advancing equity, fostering an inclusive democracy, and others. Key concepts and terms are summarized in the appendices.

For simplicity, this publication collectively refers to the above efforts as “work to connect and collaborate across differences” or “this work.”

across lines of difference – is not just about the ability or willingness of people to engage; it’s often dependent on “upstream” conditions, such as policy decisions and incentive structures, that either allow or systemically inhibit meaningful relationship-building. In terms of “downstream” impact, authentic connections across differences form a stronger commitment to address the social issue at hand – and often create new avenues for innovation to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Second, because this work is about people, human nature, and social norms, the ultimate goals are necessarily **long term**. While foundations typically work in grant cycles of three to five years, it takes 10 to 30 years or more to change culture and the systems that surround it, including developing inclusive communities. Given the need to assess progress in the interim, foundations are focused more and more on socioemotional, perceptual, or process-related human impacts like connectivity, beliefs, shared narratives, intergroup perceptions or empathy, belonging, agency, engagement, and the number of relationships across differences.<sup>2</sup> These matter in and of themselves, but they also correlate to stronger community outcomes like increased health and safety and greater community well-being.

These commonalities speak to the ultimate goal of the work to connect and collaborate across differences: an inclusive democracy where everyone belongs. Getting there requires a commitment to three societal outcomes: tolerance, pluralism, and social cohesion. As discussed in our first report, philanthropic and field leaders use countless strategies to achieve these goals, with three of the most prominent being **bridge-building**, **fostering belonging**, and **building common ground**. An additional strategy not covered in the first report but featured below is **conflict transformation**, which sees conflict as generative and a potential path to stronger relationships and collaborations. Other key concepts and terms are summarized in the appendices.

The project spotlights in the next section illustrate the ways these strategies complement each other, often blending seamlessly within a single project.

## Theories of Change

The first report in this series shows that funders focused on connecting and collaborating across differences are supporting many types of projects. This adaptability lets foundations work toward a variety of concrete goals, including fostering connection, facilitating dialogue, engaging in collaborative problem solving, building social cohesion, and many more.<sup>3</sup>

Behind these different projects are different **theories of change** that describe what goes into the project, what gets done, and how the world is expected to change as a result. By laying out the underlying logic and causal links that lead to an intended impact, a good theory of change allows implementors to focus their resources where they’re needed most, guides an actionable evaluation, and can help foster authentic buy-in with diverse stakeholders. It also helps ensure that those doing the work share a common understanding of how they can reach their ultimate intended outcomes.<sup>4</sup>



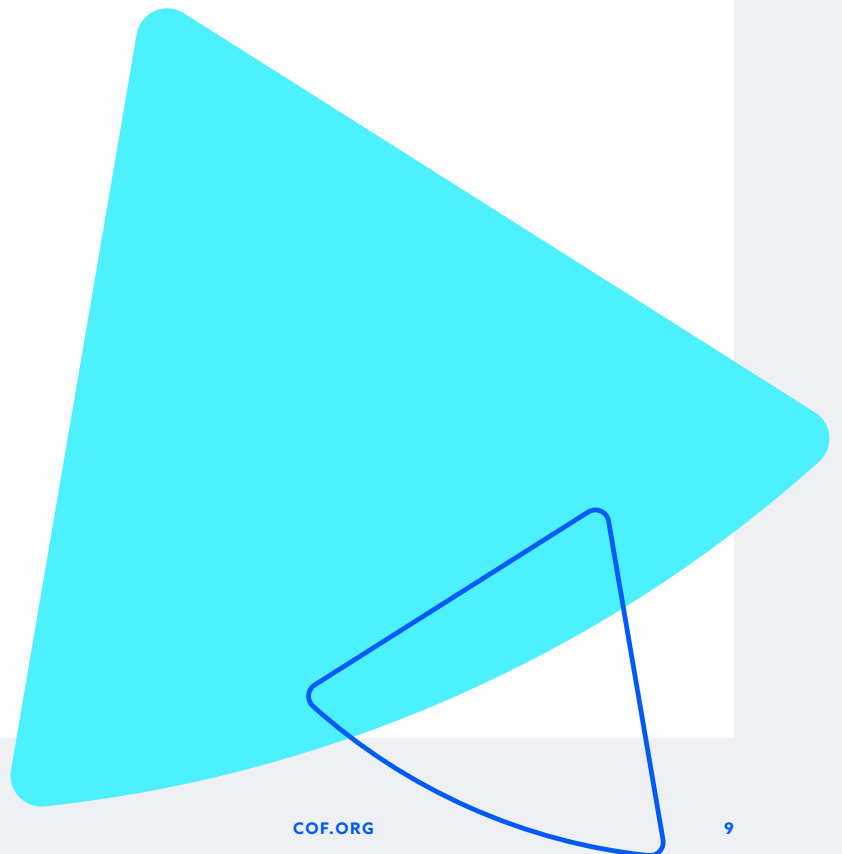




No two theories of change are the same, especially when it comes to work focused on connecting and collaborating across differences.<sup>5</sup> To understand why, consider:

- 1 What is the **context** in which we are operating? What do we already know to be true about the differences at play based on the data we have?
- 2 What preexisting **assumptions, biases, and perspectives** might stakeholders be operating under? Is there a preference to address the source of differences directly or to build trust and a larger “we” by starting with shared values and goals?<sup>6</sup>
- 3 What is the **scope** of the issue we are trying to address? Is it an acute conflict in a single community, or is it an entrenched, cultural issue impacting a broader swath of society?<sup>7,8</sup>
- 4 Given these factors, which approaches are **evidence-based** and known to be effective for navigating differences and which do we **hypothesize** might work and want to test?<sup>9</sup>
- 5 What **resources** are available to implement the project? Is there a gap between the amount or kind of resources available and what is needed?

To showcase the diverse ways of thinking, we highlight a few theories of change in our project spotlights in the next section.









# How the Work Happens: Project Spotlights

# The Buffalo Healing Initiative:

Bridging Divides in the Wake of Tragedy

FIELD BUILDER / NONPROFIT

## Resetting the Table

FUNDER(S)

## New Pluralists

THEORY OF CHANGE

**If we:**

**Train a diverse set of facilitators from the community**

**Then we can:**

- + Increase relationships across groups;
- + Build skills in facilitating dialogue across difference; and
- + Shift norms and procedures

**Which will result in:**

- + Increased capacity to solve local problems
- + Cohesion, resiliency to division; and
- + Culture change



Nestled at the edge of Lake Erie, Buffalo is the second-most populous city in New York, known for its heavy snowfall and a key role in the flour and steel industries of the 1800s. But the city made international headlines for tragedy in May 2022, when a white supremacist targeted black residents in a mass shooting that killed 10 people and injured three at a local supermarket. Shortly after that, a pregnancy clinic was firebombed, perpetuating a long history of targeted violence in the region.

Citing tensions that were near a “boiling point,” a local conservative evangelical pastor asked Resetting the Table (RTT) to help heal divisions across communities in Greater Buffalo. At the same time, a Black pastor close to the families of the shooting victims invited RTT to the city – while there already was an ecosystem of racial healing work in Buffalo, the pastor described a lack of collaboration across political differences.

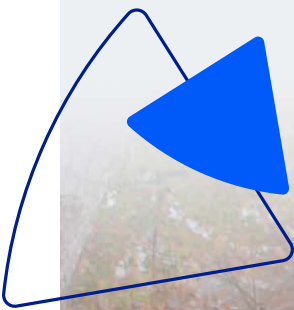


Both of these leaders were looking to find ways to transform deeply rooted trauma and distrust, a search for solutions that would seed RTT's Buffalo Healing Initiative. Through the initiative, RTT set out to help community leaders in the region build local "healing across divides" infrastructure with three main components:

- 1 A "bench" of ideologically and racially diverse local leaders, trained in dialogue facilitation and capable of reducing tension and forging trust across strong differences;
- 2 Forums for residents to gather, connect, and problem-solve across silos; and
- 3 A network of local faith, government, and sports influencers who promote pluralistic principles in the public narrative.

## Training and Dialogue to Build Trust

The first step in the process, recruiting a diverse set of local leaders for the dialogue training, quickly met a formidable challenge: mistrust from across the spectrum. Many leaders were suspicious not just of one another, but also of "bridge-building" in general. They worried that it would require them to leave a part of themselves or their interests behind. RTT's first task, then, was to help them to





see that bridging could help them build the world they wanted. But they were suspicious, too, of RTT and its funder, New Pluralists, as organizations that were outsiders to the community. Some asked, “Who is this New Pluralists? What is their real agenda?” said Melissa Weintraub, co-founder and co-CEO of RTT.

RTT addressed this suspicion by conducting a four-month listening campaign. First, they recruited trusted messengers from each target community. Then, working alongside them, they engaged a diverse group of over 200 residents to better understand these communities’ perceptions, concerns, and hopes about charged issues in Buffalo.

The relationships they built through the listening campaign slowly established trust and connection. As described by Weintraub, “When we show people we understand their concerns and what they value and want to achieve, that we understand why they’re suspicious of us, and we’re not afraid of their suspicion – when we make room for all of this, they begin to trust.”

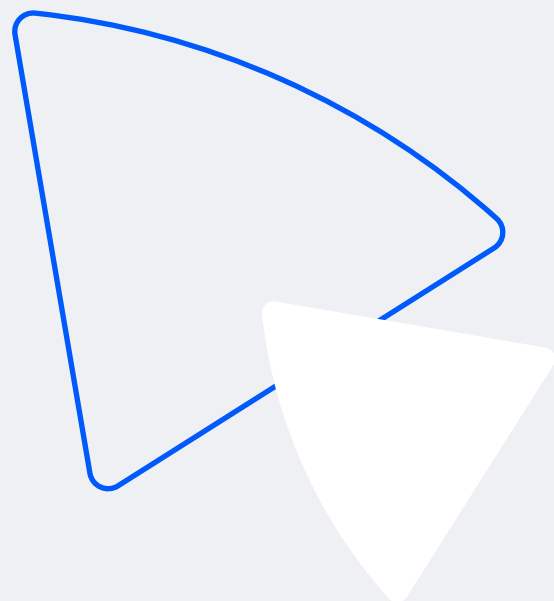
The deep listening campaign also led to another pivot: Many of the leaders RTT spoke with didn’t feel ready to interact across such intense divides. So RTT redesigned the program, with the first six months focused on training three affinity groups separately:

- 1 A conservative group that consisted primarily of white evangelical and Catholic leaders;
- 2 A multiracial, multifaith group whose political leanings ranged from center-left to center-right; and
- 3 A coalition of progressive community leaders and activists of color.



We saw light bulbs go off in each other’s eyes ... RTT helped us see each other whole—not as we were conditioned to see each other, but as who we truly are and how we truly wish to be seen.”

– Joint letter from Buffalo participants  
**Dan** (a White Evangelical pastor) and  
**Kelly** (a Black, progressive community leader)



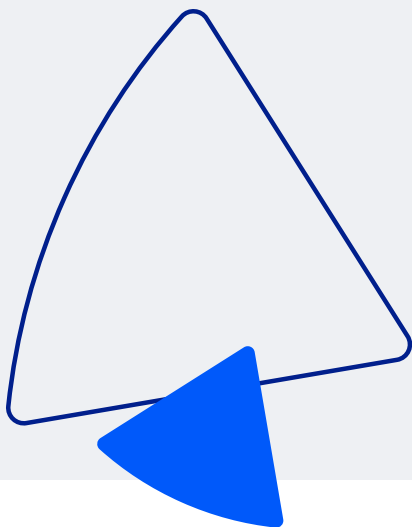
Each group worked on its own internal divides, often called intragroup work, while building the will and skill for engaging across stronger lines of intergroup difference. Training programs – focused on six core skills and several troubleshooting interventions – included multiday retreats, full-group training sessions, coached practice sessions in pairs, and one-to-one consultations with RTT trainers and staff. As people experienced the work in their own contexts, Weintraub said, they realized that “it wasn’t lip-service,” that courageous dialogue can strengthen communities and problem-solving, and they craved stretching further out of their comfort zones.

RTT then brought a subset of all three groups together for an additional “train the trainers” program that focused on learning how to coach their own constituents and community members. The resulting work ranged from a program bringing together conservative Southern Baptist and progressive-leaning Jewish communities, to a workshop crossing generational divides within Black communities, to a training for Protestant clergy. The trainees have several additional programs in motion targeting a wide variety of contexts, from the City Council to schools, nonprofits, businesses, evangelical megachurches, and historic Black churches.

## Problem-Solving and Public Narrative

In addition to ongoing forums for dialogue and skill-building across differences, RTT and local leaders have formed two task forces, or “healing action groups,” to take action together across divides on important issues: one focused on violence prevention in the wake of the 2024 election and beyond, and the other focused on food access and hunger.

The next phase of the project will mobilize those who help shape norms in the community, such as leading clergy and sports figures, through storytelling and public events. Buffalo Bills players are being recruited for their appeal as role models who can help build a shared sense of “we” that is bigger than any one workshop or forum. Aided by a public relations firm, these leaders will use their public platforms to show moral leadership and promote empathy, pluralism, and healing.





## What Has Success Looked Like?

RTT collects written evaluations from every training and interviews trainees and partners. At the individual level, RTT wants to see increases in motivation to engage and work together and an ability to communicate constructively across differences. It also measures mindsets – how trainees see their counterparts, how they value pluralism, etc. – and behavior (for example, how trainees use the tools they've learned within their institutions).

In Buffalo, the training and dialogue programs have had many positive results:

- 1 A diverse group of leaders have gained actionable skills, tools, and confidence in facilitating honest, difficult conversations across divides;
- 2 People who did not embrace pluralism or who were suspicious or skeptical of it understand the value of this work;
- 3 Community leaders have come to see each other's suffering, humanity, and aspirations for the first time;
- 4 Lasting relationships and trust have been forged across stark lines of difference among leaders and across the communities they represent;
- 5 Community leaders have discovered common goals across ideological, racial, and religious divides and worked together for the betterment of their community;
- 6 Community leaders have stood together in opposition to targeted violence and spread their messages through widespread news coverage, sermons, and a widely circulated statement that was supported by a diversity of communities; and
- 7 They have also begun to speak out, leading skill-building workshops for and across their constituencies, publishing podcasts and op-eds, giving sermons about the importance of bridge-building, and hosting a press conference that was covered by numerous news outlets.



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Going toward differences rather than commonalities attracted both conservatives and progressives with strong convictions. We let people know they didn't have to compromise their values to come into the room. ...This is especially compelling to people who are passionate about issues and beginning with deep distrust of each other."

**Melissa Weintraub**, Resetting the Table



# The Common Ground Framework:

Building Parks Programs and Strengthening Community Relationships

## NONPROFITS

**Trust for Public Land and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council**

## FUNDER

**Walmart Foundation**

## THEORY OF CHANGE

**If we:**

**Bring together diverse residents in the design and programming of parks**

**Then we can:**

**Build a sense of connection, understanding, empathy, and a larger "we"**

**Which will result in:**

- + Reduced prejudice and increased social cohesion**
- + Increased trust in local government; and**
- + Broader public engagement in civic and social issues**



The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is driven by the belief that parks are more than a springboard for individual health and well-being—they are spaces for people to come together to build a collective vision of the future. So, when the Center for Inclusion and Belonging (CIB) at the American Immigration Council invited national civic organizations to learn about intergroup contact, building common ground, and fostering cultures of belonging,<sup>10</sup> TPL jumped at the opportunity.

Studies have shown that in cities with better parks, there are on average 26 percent more social connections between people with low and high incomes, and residents are 60 percent more likely to volunteer.<sup>11</sup> But as with any other initiative, park programs that are not intentionally designed for inclusion and belonging may not achieve those goals. The community of practice that CIB was creating – an outgrowth of its local “Communicating Inclusion” trainings and its “Belonging Begins With Us” storytelling program – was an opportunity for TPL to build on its belief that parks can play a role in helping to reverse toxic polarization, racism and discrimination, distrust, and social isolation in American society.



In cities with better parks, studies have shown that there are on average 26 percent more social connections between individuals with low and high incomes, and residents are 60 percent more likely to volunteer.”

– Trust for Public Land



In 2023, TPL translated learnings from the program into a guide, the “Common Ground Framework,”<sup>12</sup> to help park directors and community-based organizations design programs that build meaningful connections and collaborations across differences in their communities. In addition to training park practitioners on the conditions for effective intergroup contact,<sup>13</sup> TPL launched a pilot program to brainstorm with directors in eight cities across the nation: How might they each create those conditions, by either tailoring existing programs or building new ones? They worked to identify projects, figure out how to staff them, and find non-extractive strategies to measure impact. TPL also created an internal academic center to translate the social science and deliver the trainings.

## Working in Pairs to Bring Baton Rouge Together

Ultimately, the pilot programs resulted in a variety of public projects. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, participants formed a community planning council with members who matched the demographics of the area, from race to residence to income. The council members received up to \$2,000 for participating in eight meetings. Each member was intentionally paired with someone from a different social background or identity, and each pair was given a \$1,500 budget to plan a park event together – deciding on goals, choosing a location, inviting their networks, and designing a program that would promote friendly interactions among participants.

While this model set the stage for building contact across difference, it was not a linear process. Early in the development of the council, TPL was asked to help facilitate ground rules and community agreements that would enable challenging conversations about race and income. With this focus on relationships and trust-building, the group bonded closely, and many of the pairs developed strong, enduring relationships across widely diverse social backgrounds.

“Parks have the potential to bring our country together at a time when so many forces are pulling us apart,” said Cary Simmons, TPL’s director of community strategies. “By leveraging parks as social infrastructure, we can create beautiful outdoor spaces that bring people together, spark dialogue, and equip residents with the tools they need to get more involved in their communities.”



## What Has Success Looked Like?

For each of its eight pilots, TPL asked its program participants and managers to complete surveys that assessed:

- 1 Frequency of interaction with community members that live in a different neighborhood;
- 2 Previous interactions with local government;
- 3 Trust that the local government is doing what's right for the community; and
- 4 Willingness to invite a friend to a local event that will bring together people from different backgrounds.

What stands out in the results is that people who would not otherwise know one another are building authentic relationships, often bringing their social networks along as well. Among more than 500 participants across TPL's eight pilot cities, more than 50% experienced an increase in intergroup contact, with individuals and groups that had not previously talked to each other reporting feeling tightly bonded and engaging in everyday plans like getting their kids together. It's a critical piece of the puzzle, as a recent national survey finds that a majority of Americans want to get to know each other across differences but aren't sure how.<sup>14</sup>

But building connections across differences is not the only beneficial outcome so far. After just five meetings, data shows a spike in participant trust in local government for several of the pilot projects. TPL hopes to dig deeper over the next couple of years to see how this new project-based identity might influence other civic pathways, such as advocating around local issues or running for local government offices.

In addition, a common goal across all eight pilot projects was to collect feedback on the community park system, a process that had tended to skew toward wealthy or white people. But in these projects, the entire community, including traditionally marginalized and excluded populations, is weighing in on how to spend tens of millions of dollars of local park funding.



After just five meetings, data shows a spike in participant trust in local government for several of the pilot projects..."





# One Small Step:

Personal Conversations to Build Political Bridges

## FIELD BUILDERS

**StoryCorps, More in Common**

## FUNDER(S)

**Walmart Foundation, the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, Kansas Health Foundation, Solidarity Giving, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, The Hearthland Foundation, The Marcus Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Chris Anderson and Jacqueline Novogratz, the Robins Foundation, New Pluralists, Schwab Charitable Fund made possible by the generosity of Present Progressive Fund, and the FThree Foundation**

## THEORY OF CHANGE

**If we:**

**Facilitate conversations  
between people with  
opposing beliefs**

**Then  
we can:**

**Build relationships,  
empathy and  
understanding**

**Which will  
result in:**

**The ability to  
identify common  
ground**

In a time marked by deep political and ideological polarization, opportunities for meaningful dialogue across differences are rare. StoryCorps' One Small Step (OSS) initiative, launched in 2018, aims to help by fostering conversations between people with opposing beliefs. "Our dream is to convince the country it's our patriotic duty to see the humanity in people with whom we disagree," said Dave Isay, founder of StoryCorps.<sup>15</sup>

The program's goal is simple: to encourage participants to connect as individuals, rather than as representatives of opposing sides. These conversations focus on personal stories, shared values, and life experiences rather than political positions. A typical opening prompt asks participants to share how their upbringing has shaped their values. "The goal is not to debate but to get to know one another as people and, in the process, remember our shared humanity," Isay said.

The initiative operates on several levels, including place-based programs in Richmond, Virginia; Columbus, Georgia; and Wichita, Kansas. These communities act as laboratories for fostering local dialogue and building bridges in areas marked by specific divides, such as urban-rural tensions or racial issues. In each community, OSS forms partnerships with local and national organizations—religious, educational, civic engagement, media, and others—that help expand awareness of OSS and its offerings. On college campuses, OSS helps students navigate conversations around their differences while empowering them to lead with empathy.

As a third pillar of its approach, One Small Step amplifies these individual dialogues through social media and national radio and television, creating change through a mechanism called "indirect intergroup contact."<sup>16</sup> "Narratives shape peoples' views of society, what they think their role in it is, and what they think is socially possible," says Jon Gruber, strategy lead at Einhorn Collaborative, a partner organization that has supported StoryCorps in the past. By showcasing conversations that transcend divisions, OSS challenges the prevailing narrative that ideological divides are insurmountable.

With a digital platform launched in 2024, anyone in the United States can now participate. OSS will match them with a conversation partner and guide the conversation by video.<sup>17</sup> These conversations, like their in-person counterparts, are archived at the Library of Congress, preserving their legacy for future generations.



When people share the stories that inform who they are, what their values are ... that is what success looks like."

– Jonathan Webster, One Small Step

## Recruitment Challenges as Demand Grows

One of the program's biggest obstacles has been recruiting participants across the political spectrum. "Getting people to talk across divides requires getting people on either side of the divides to engage," said Jonathan Webster, managing director of One Small Step. "And it's been harder to drive participation from conservatives." To address this, OSS has partnered with faith-based organizations, businesses, and Cumulus Radio, home to conservative hosts like Mark Levin and Dan Bongino. A partnership with the NFL is also in the works.<sup>18</sup>

Despite growing demand, OSS also faces challenges in scaling its efforts, partly because, as Webster acknowledged, "The work won't be relevant unless it empowers people and engages issues that matter within local communities." In Richmond, for example, OSS brought program alumni together for a community mural-painting event, exemplifying how dialogue can foster local engagement.





## What Has Success Looked Like?

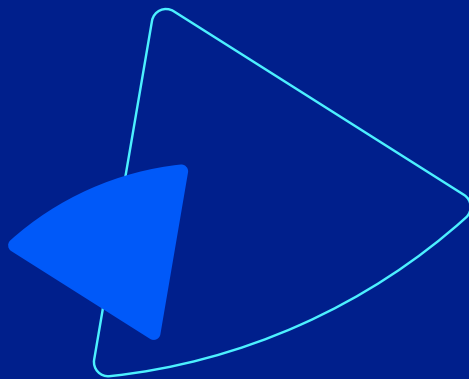
Since the program's inception, more than 5,900 participants from all 50 states have engaged in OSS conversations, with many reporting lasting changes in their perspectives and attitudes toward those with differing beliefs.

Research highlights the program's impact:<sup>19</sup>

- 1 Increased empathy: Participants report feeling less cynical about the possibility of connecting across differences and more open to seeing the humanity in others, even those with opposing ideologies.
- 2 Reduced polarization: Participants show a greater willingness to reconsider their perceptions of others, with measurable reductions in the perception gap, the tendency to perceive people across the political divide as being more extreme than they are on a range of issues.
- 3 Media amplification: Exposure to OSS stories through radio, television, and social media has been almost as impactful as direct participation. Listeners and viewers report shifts in their attitudes toward others and an increased willingness to engage in meaningful conversations themselves.

There is good reason to believe that conversations like these hold value for most Americans. Research from More in Common has shown that most Americans belong to the "exhausted majority," a group that is relatively unengaged, does not rely on social media for news, and feels that its voice is drowned out by the extremes on both sides.<sup>20</sup> People in this group are fatigued by polarization and eager to connect and collaborate across differences.<sup>21</sup>

"If more Americans see this content, it can reduce the extent to which they see cross-partisans as a threat, decrease their vulnerability to conflict entrepreneurs who frame U.S. politics as an 'us vs. them' reality, and increase their willingness to engage in such conversations themselves," Gruber said.



# National COVID-19 Testing:

When Common Ground Helps Save Lives

FUNDER AND PROJECT LEAD

**The Rockefeller Foundation**

THEORY OF CHANGE

**If we:**

**Convene people  
from competing  
viewpoints**

**Then  
we can:**

**Build relationships,  
empathy and  
understanding**

**Which will  
result in:**

**Innovative policy  
solutions**

In early 2020, COVID-19 tore through lives and livelihoods across the globe. As the United States scrambled for solutions, the crisis exposed the nation's vulnerabilities. States differed in their approach to masking and testing, creating inconsistency in access and outcomes. Communities of color and families with lower incomes faced the harshest impacts, from higher infection rates to economic devastation. This wasn't just a policy issue – for millions of people it was deeply personal, particularly in communities already wary of the medical establishment.

The primary reasons for this crisis were insufficient testing infrastructure and data and government polarization. Competing interests also got in the way, said Eileen O'Connor, then-senior vice president of strategic communications and policy at The Rockefeller Foundation. Government officials, for instance, represented populations with vastly different partisan divisions, socioeconomic challenges, and pandemic-related needs. For example, since Miami's economy is built on tourism, its pandemic response needs were shaped by a constant population flow; in other areas, population movement may not have been a factor at all. In addition, some governors, and the populations in some states, were fiercely resistant to mask mandates.

In late March 2020, months after the virus had spread in Asia and Europe, only 1 million tests were being conducted per week in the United States – far short of what was needed to inform virus containment. Supply chain disruptions, underfunded laboratories, and unbalanced access made



Disagreement isn't failure  
— it's the starting point  
for innovation."

– **Eileen O'Connor**, formerly  
The Rockefeller Foundation





things worse. The Rockefeller Foundation, long committed to using science and technology to advance the greater good, knew that the only way to stop a pandemic was with data and the only way to get data was through testing.

In April 2020, the foundation launched the **National COVID-19 Testing Action Plan**,<sup>22</sup> a comprehensive, bipartisan strategy to expand testing capacity, bridge political divides, and ensure equitable health outcomes. The first step: convening experts from health, science, technology, and government to align on a path forward. Acting as facilitators themselves, The Rockefeller Foundation officials brought together over 150 people from various corners of society, from scientists and engineers from the private sector to public health officials, leaders at national drugstore chains, researchers, doctors and nursing organizations, and economists and businesspeople.

"Philanthropy plays an important role in filling gaps when the political system is polarized," O'Connor said. "Our work is to unite people around the common good – whether it is addressing COVID-19, mental health, or climate change – by remaining neutral and focusing on collective solutions."

Acting as a **neutral convener**, The Rockefeller Foundation worked to keep the group's focus on the problem at hand: stopping the pandemic, which built consensus and set a precedent for responding to future crises.

In one key moment, public health officials and economists debated fiercely on whether to prioritize polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, which are known for accuracy but take longer to process, or antigen tests, known for speed but less precision. The Rockefeller Foundation facilitated the discussion, ultimately incorporating both approaches into its strategy: PCR to detect early disease in the vulnerable and rapid antigen tests to detect contagiousness, helping people isolate and limit COVID's spread.

The result was the **1-3-30 National Testing Strategy**, designed to:

- 1 Increase testing capacity from 1 million tests per week in March/April 2020 to 8 million within eight weeks, then to 30 million tests per week within six months;
- 2 Establish a nonpartisan Pandemic Testing Board to coordinate efforts and resources across sectors
- 3 Create a COVID Community Healthcare Corps to expand testing access in vulnerable communities; and
- 4 Leverage partnerships with federal and state governments, private sector leaders, and grassroots organizations.

## Forging Partnerships Across Sectors

To drive systemic change that would last beyond the pandemic, the Rockefeller Foundation worked to forge partnerships in government, business, and community organizations:

### 1 Private Sector Engagement

- + Launched the National Testing Action Program with 21 diagnostic companies like Abbott Laboratories and Thermo Fisher Scientific to scale up testing supply chains. This accelerated the production of affordable testing kits, ensuring availability nationwide.
- + Through Project ACT (Access COVID Testing) and partnerships with eight states, testing providers, and distributors, raised \$33.8 million to deploy 6.7 million free COVID-19 tests to vulnerable Americans.

### 2 Government Collaboration

- + The Rockefeller Foundation worked closely with White House and federal agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the National Institutes of Health, as well as state governments to align testing goals.
- + Created the State and Territorial Alliance for Testing (STAT) helped synchronize efforts across more than 40 states and territories and ensure that tests were available in high-need areas.
- + Signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the federal government to place 140,000 COVID-19 tests in K-12 schools to accelerate the implementation of nationwide school testing and the safe return to schools.

### 3 Local Grassroots Connections

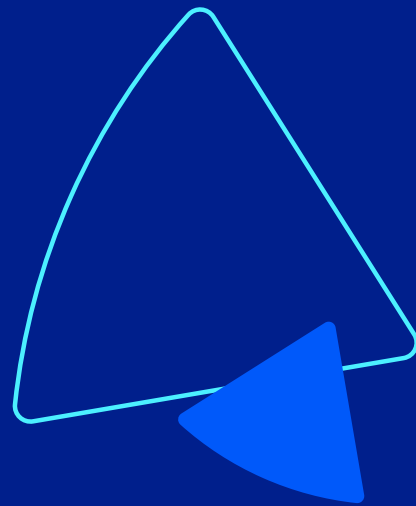
- + In California, the Navajo Nation, and the White Mountain Apache Reservation, as well as in New Orleans, Baltimore, Miami Beach, and Tulsa, the foundation partnered with community, academic, and humanitarian relief organizations to increase testing in underserved neighborhoods. These groups were pivotal in building trust within communities of color, ensuring equitable access to healthcare.



## What Has Success Looked Like?

The Rockefeller Foundation's efforts yielded measurable success:

- 1 Weekly testing rose to over 25 million by late 2020, enabling schools and businesses to reopen.
- 2 Gaps in testing between white communities and communities of color improved significantly in places where The Rockefeller Foundation engaged local partners.
- 3 The Rockefeller Foundation's recommendations shaped federal guidelines on pandemic testing, including \$10 billion in federal investments in school-based testing through the American Rescue Act, helping to create a more cohesive national strategy.
- 4 Wastewater surveillance hubs, which tracked the presence of the virus in communities, and integrated data dashboards became models for public health infrastructure.





# Community Bridge Builders:

Bold Vision and Collaboration Drive  
Belonging in Lancaster County

FUNDER

**Lancaster County Community Foundation**

THEORY OF CHANGE

**If we:**

**Bring together diverse groups in ways that honor their differences**

**Then we can:**

**Build connection, understanding, empathy, and a larger “we”**

**Which will result in:**

- + Increased social cohesion and belonging; and**
- + Reduced prejudice**

In a state like Pennsylvania, where 80% of the population is white, Lancaster City stands out: While the county demographics mirror the state's, in Lancaster City, the urban and historic county seat, nearly 50% of residents are people of color and more than 49 native languages are represented in local schools.

Recognizing tensions between groups, the Lancaster County Community Foundation launched the Community Bridge Builders Program in 2022.<sup>23</sup> The program challenges leaders to find ways to decrease hate and prejudice while promoting appreciation for varying perspectives.

"Here, like many communities, we're a microcosm of the country," said Tracy Cutler, the foundation's executive vice president. "Our charge is to embolden extraordinary community among all of our residents, with our many differing perspectives. Since we all live in the same geography, we have to be able to collectively make progress."

Through grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$25,000, the foundation aims to foster "thriving communities" where mutual respect and shared strengths drive collective progress.



## Opportunities and Challenges in Community-Sourced Innovation

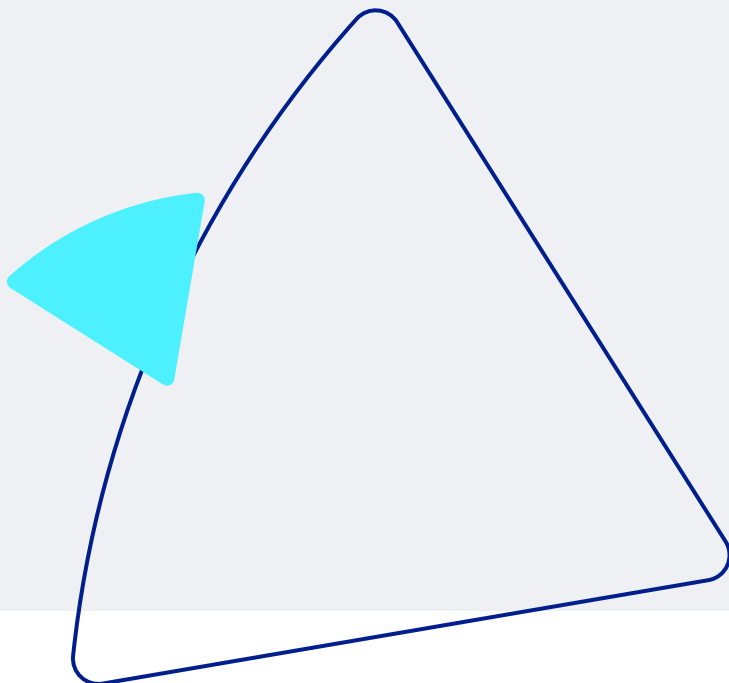
So far, initiatives in the program have included affordable housing, education, access to healthcare, and reproductive rights. The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce hosted a workforce re-entry summit, connecting formerly incarcerated individuals with educators and private employers. Lancaster in One Room, hosted by Hourglass Foundation, connected a representative group of citizens to deliberate solutions to affordable housing. The local recreation commission and Church World Services created the Lancaster Unity Cup, a soccer tournament celebrating new and diverse Lancaster residents.

The foundation also supported the first-of-its-kind Racial Equity Profile illustrating concrete disparities in areas like income and education levels, as well as a racial justice institute through the YWCA, which provides education sessions across the county. The programs focus on equity and bridging differences in real time, and they encourage social innovation directly from the community.

"We knew we didn't have the answers," Cutler said. "But we believe our community knows what it needs. We're asking them to bring us ideas for bridging and connecting."

However, the abstract nature of bridging work made measuring outcomes more challenging than in a typical grant program. Skepticism about the program's effectiveness added another hurdle. "A lot of this bridging work feels intangible," Cutler noted. "While it's hard to have measurable outcomes today, it's a longitudinal investment that we believe will yield real impact in our community over time."

Cutler said building trust and sustaining engagement in unfamiliar spaces requires ongoing effort. "Equity and bridge-building can feel like they're on opposite poles, but they don't have to be," she said. "Anytime we're following our own agenda, we run the risk of making things worse. We are constantly asking ourselves, 'Who else needs to be in this conversation?'"





## What Has Success Looked Like?

Success was evident in both tangible and intangible ways. The workforce re-entry summit and the Unity Cup outcomes demonstrated the power of connection and built a sense of community for traditionally marginalized populations. Surveys showed that deliberative dialogues on affordable housing changed perceptions about the local supply of housing and what it might take to address the issue: Not only was there widespread agreement on specific approaches, but participants also agreed that it was “very important” to have discussions with people we disagree with on important issues. Additional survey results from the Virtual Reality experience “Traveling While Black,” confirmed the power and value of newer immersive technology to impact individual understanding and strengthen ties to marginalized and underrepresented communities of Lancaster.

The initiative also fostered a sense of shared responsibility. In addition to receiving grant dollars for projects, grantee partners participated in cohorts focused on personal skill-building through a “Conflict, Culture and Communication” training led by local conflict mediation firm Advoz.

So far, the foundation reports that 13 organizations have received grants, with a total of \$325,000 invested in programs that have directly impacted more than 1,400 individuals across diverse communities.







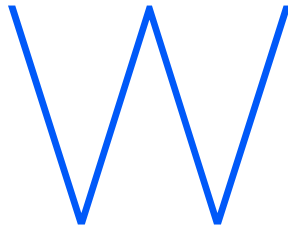




- Listeners ask 1 or 2 Follow-up questions for a total of 2-4 questions.
- Speaker and FTT Coach answer questions. Decide together following listening questions.
- Speaker answers one Follow-up question.
- Rotate roles and repeat.

# Key Takeaways





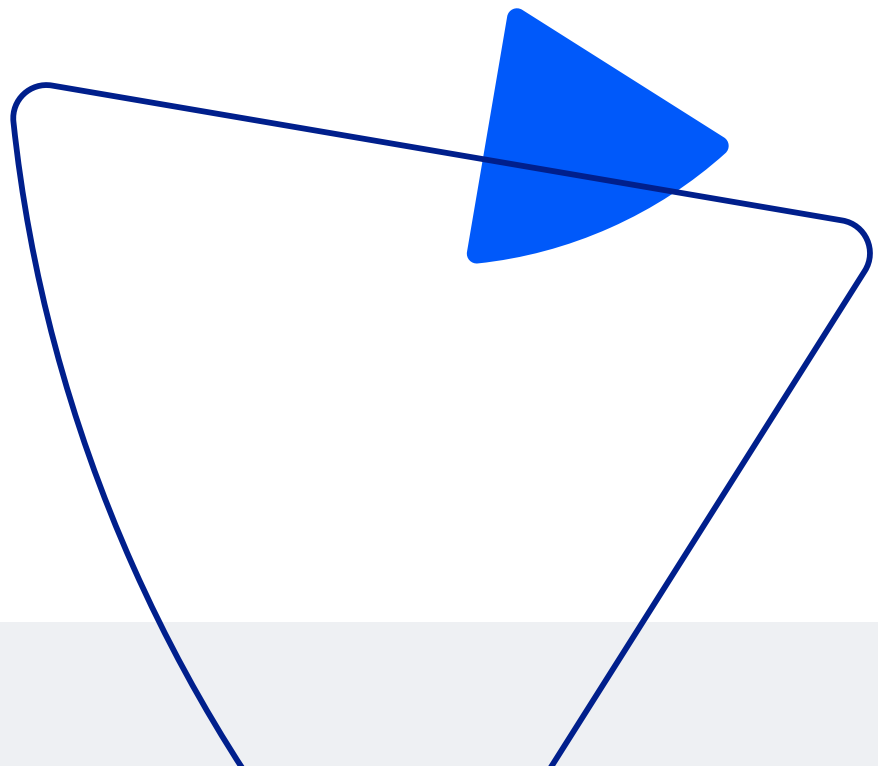
While the project spotlights illustrate diverse approaches to connecting and collaborating across differences, several key themes unite them.

## Takeaway #1

### Planning Is Key, but So Is Flexibility

The work of transforming relationships across differences is far from linear, and both funders and their partners are finding that success often hinges on their ability to change course as needed. In Buffalo, for example, when Resetting the Table used a listening campaign to understand local needs and build trust, it found that trainees weren't ready to engage across differences and redesigned its training approach. Rather than bring groups together at the outset (intergroup work), it focused on the divides within affinity groups (intragroup work) as a way to build the skills for connecting across intergroup differences later in the process.

StoryCorps, too, saw the need to add new tactics in its One Small Step conversations when it became clear that finding participants with more politically conservative viewpoints required more effort. In this case, new partnerships are helping OSS make inroads with its recruitment. With the Bridge Builders Program in Lancaster County, flexibility was built in, with minimal restrictions on grants and ideas sourced directly from the community.



## Takeaway #2

### This Work Takes Time, and Resources

Being able to adapt sometimes means investing more than planned. The pivot that Resetting the Table made in Buffalo, for example, meant more work—and more time, said Melissa Weintraub, RTT's co-founder and co-CEO. Still, it's not negotiable: "Pluralism work requires not skimping on relationships, and relational work is not a programmatic output," she said. "Sometimes getting 40 people into a room may be more of a lift than mobilizing thousands of like-minded people. It can be harder, and it's not just about scale."

The COVID testing project also moved more slowly than its leaders might have liked. "We struggled with speed in some areas, and we didn't move fast enough on some initiatives, which is something we're constantly reflecting on," said Eileen O'Connor, who was then the Rockefeller Foundation's senior vice president of strategic communications and policy. "But overall, we measure success by whether the connections we create lead to scalable solutions, whether we've met specific outcomes, and whether we've filled in the gaps where the public and private sectors have failed to act."

## Takeaway #3

### Measuring Success Is a Work in Progress

Everyone doing the work of relational change recognizes its importance, but showing impact is decidedly more difficult than in other kinds of work: Sometimes a problem that seemed intractable is solved through collaboration across differences, as in the COVID-19 testing example; other times the new networks and relationships are themselves the "results," and they pay off in the long term by laying the groundwork for future collaboration. As the project spotlights showed, practitioners and funders are taking varied approaches to measuring impact when outcomes are less tangible. Surveys and interviews of participants track changes in attitudes and perceptions: how they see "the other side," how motivated they are to connect and collaborate across differences, how much trust has been built. Their actions as well show the impact of this work, manifesting in how frequently they interact with community members from a different neighborhood, as seen in the Trust for Public Land's parks project.

As the field matures, identifying best practices will require more attention to measurement, especially as funders evaluate their work with grantees and partners. Above all, the field needs assessment strategies that enable us to gauge comparative impacts—and to identify successes, mixed results, failures, and unexpected harms.









# Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this work, an inclusive democracy where everyone belongs, is a long-term one that charts a course to systems change through relationship-building. But as the varied case studies show, the change process can begin when people are truly invested in connecting and collaborating across differences. As communities continue learning what works, foundations are doing their part with flexibility and a dedication to investing in the approaches that match the goal and context.

There is no one right way to the future we seek. As this nascent field matures, we hope the dynamism and honest reflection we've seen in this work will continue to make it as vibrant, nuanced, and holistic as the relationships we seek to build. More than that, we expect to see human creativity forge paths we can't anticipate now - approaches as varied and complex as our society and its challenges.





Since this field is still nascent, not everyone who could contribute to this work recognizes themselves in the conversation yet."

**Alison Grubbs**, New Pluralists

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Key Concepts

1. **Abundance mindset** – An outlook that does not view life or society as competitions and assumes there are enough resources to go around. A contrast to a “scarcity mindset” and an antidote to a winner-take-all mentality, adopting an abundance mindset allows for more generous and equitable problem-solving.<sup>83</sup>
2. **Belonging** – Associated with thriving behavior, belonging refers to the quality of fit between oneself and a setting.<sup>84</sup>
3. **Bonding** – Building relationships and social capital within an identity group that is homogenous on some dimension.<sup>85</sup>
4. **Bridging/Bridge-building** – Two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines of difference (such as race and/or power dynamics) in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity.<sup>86</sup>
5. **Building Common Ground** – An intentional activity and dialogue that allow participants to share discover their commonalities.<sup>87</sup>
6. **Dialogue** – “A process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others’ concerns into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other’s valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other.”<sup>88</sup>
7. **Intergroup contact** – Meaningful engagement between people from different social groups, such as those from different racial, ethnic, religious, or national groups, that research shows can reduce prejudice and increase social cohesion.<sup>89</sup>
8. **Othering** – Treating people from another group as essentially different and generally inferior to the ingroup.<sup>90</sup>
9. **Pluralism** – A philosophy that recognizes and affirms diversity of backgrounds, belief systems, and lifestyles, allowing for different groups to maintain their identities while existing within a more dominant group. It has also been interpreted more expansively to mean a full embrace of difference, not merely coexistence, as a valuable source of creativity and prosperity.<sup>91</sup>
10. **Polarization (ideological)** – The divergence of political attitudes away from the center and toward ideological extremes.<sup>92</sup>
11. **Polarization (affective)** – The tendency for partisans to dislike, distrust, and/or dehumanize those on an opposing side.<sup>93</sup>
12. **Social Cohesion** – The strength of relationships and sense of solidarity among members of a community.<sup>94</sup>
13. **Social identity** – A person’s sense of who they are based on their group membership.<sup>95</sup>
14. **Threat** – (Intergroup) The perceived or possible danger believed to come from competition between groups for group-level resources (“tangible threat”), or the perceived or possible danger to an ingroup’s integrity, e.g., their beliefs, norms, or values (“symbolic threat”).<sup>96</sup>
15. **Trust** – The reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something; one in which confidence is placed.<sup>97</sup>



## Appendix 2 Alternative Words Describing This Work

### Alternative Frames for “Bridging” and/or “Building Common Ground”

Finding common identity in shared humanity; expanding the circle of care and concern	Conflict transformation	Difficult conversations
Social connection with people across divides	Civil discourse	Leadership
Belonging	Coalition-building	Pragmatism
	Solidarity	Redefining collaboration
	Complicating narratives	Working across difference

### Alternative Terms for “Pluralism” and/or “Tolerance”

Agency	Empathy; understanding	Shared vision
Equality	Community; civic engagement	Social connection

### Alternative Terms for “Belonging” and/or “Social Cohesion”

Belonging	Connectedness	Social capital
Common good, common ground	Depolarization	Social fabric
Community	Positive sentiment across lines of difference	

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## References



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Diversity  
Celebrate  
Individuality

//

Our dream is to convince the country it's our patriotic duty to see the humanity in people with whom we disagree."

**Dave Isay**, StoryCorps

