

**PEOPLE'S  
ACTION**

*the promise*  
OF A **PROGRESSIVE**  
**POPULIST**  
**MOVEMENT**



**Building a multiracial, race-conscious  
movement for bold change in rural  
and small-town America**

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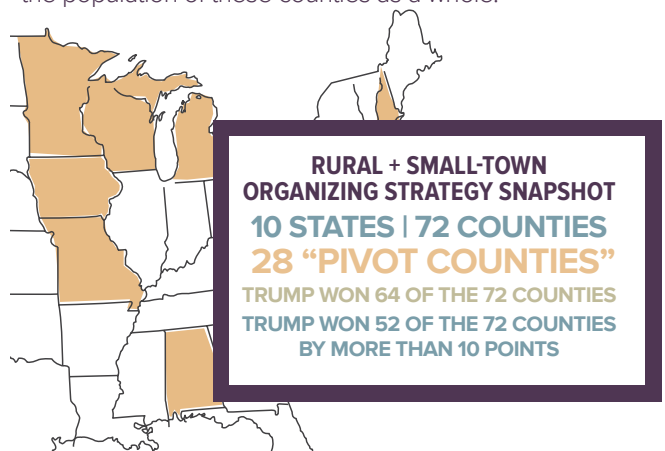
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The promise of democracy in the United States is at risk.** Building a country that works for all people requires building enough power to create a real transformation that allows all people to live with dignity. It requires that we build a multiracial and race-conscious progressive populist movement that can drive the changes we need and bridge the deep divisions that dominate our public life. At People's Action, we are committed to building a powerful cultural and political organizing strategy that will unite people across race, gender, class, and geography to advance a bold agenda that puts people and planet first.

**People's Action member organizations and our allies are launching an ambitious Rural and Small-Town Organizing Strategy in 72 counties in ten states across the Heartland, Rust Belt, Northeast and South.** Despite the stereotypical view of rural America, these places are not homogeneous and they include African American communities, American Indian Reservations and areas with significant immigrant populations. They also include 28 "pivot counties" (that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and went for Trump in 2016). Trump won 64 of the 72 counties and in 52 of the counties he won by more than 10 points. There is a moral and strategic imperative to invest in building people's organizations in these communities. It is urgent to address the pain and suffering in these communities and critical to shifting the balance of power at both the state and federal level.

**Of the more than 136 million votes cast in the 2016 election, 77,744 votes in three states—Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—effectively decided the election.** Trump had a margin of victory of 176,478 in the counties where People's Action member organizations are building their Rural and Small-Town Organizing Strategy in those same states. Building progressive organizing capacity in these counties creates a clear path to shifting the balance of power in those states and profoundly impact the future of the country.

Between September 2017 and April 2018, we knocked on more than 5,000 doors and documented 2,462 individual conversations through phone banks, door to door canvassing and conversations at community events like health fairs or after church services that are the basis of this preliminary report. These conversations give us insight into what these community members are facing and what moves them to action, but this is not fully representative of the communities we surveyed and the respondents are, in general, older, whiter and poorer than the population of these counties as a whole.



# KEY THEMES

## **Health, basic needs and education are key concerns.**

Among the people we spoke to, access to affordable, quality health care is the most common concern, followed by access to education and the ability to meet their families' basic needs. A large majority of respondents (67%) reported that access to health care was a major concern for them and 72% of people we spoke to believed guaranteeing affordable health care for everyone would help solve their community's problems. Many people spoke of daily struggles to survive, to provide and find the education and living wage jobs they need to secure a better life. The opioid crisis and fears around contaminated land and water were also significant themes. The animating struggles of rural and small-town America – and the most broadly popular solutions – are struggles around bread and butter issues.

## **Even in counties that voted for Trump, there is support for progressive solutions but anger towards government persists.**

In Down Home North Carolina's pilot canvass, when we asked who was responsible for the problems, government (and President Trump) topped the list. In this canvass, we sought to learn more about who people hold responsible for the problems they face, offering a list of choices including Trump, the two major parties, progressive ideas of "villains" (government is controlled by big money donors and corporations, Wall Street and rich people) and conservative ideas of "villains" (people on government benefits and immigrants). From this list, "government controlled by rich donors and corporate lobbyists" was by far the most blamed (81% felt government was "very responsible" (56%) or "somewhat responsible" (25%). Many people we spoke to expressed feelings of anger and betrayal by a government they felt was co-opted by the rich and had abandoned them. Conservative scapegoats ("immigrants" and "people receiving government benefits") were blamed the least among the people we surveyed.

In fact, as we saw in the data on preferred solutions, there is deep support for government actions that benefit people. The most popular solutions we discussed involved expanding government programs, strengthening the safety net and tightening regulations. In addition to the incredibly strong support for health care for all, a majority of the people we

spoke with believed that the following would be important steps to addressing the problems their communities face; improving schools (76%), expanding drug treatment (75%), protecting our land and water better (70%), investing in both infrastructure broadly (71%) and green jobs (59%). There was also broad support for solutions that tackle the power of the wealthy and big corporations: getting big money out of politics (70%) and taxing these groups (65%). Here again, the contrast with conservative solutions is startling: cutting government regulations (38%) and deporting immigrants (22%) were the least popular choices with people. In the largely deep-red counties where we canvassed, while the people we spoke to are skeptical and angry at a government that has failed to serve their interests, that does not mean that they are rejecting progressive solutions. In fact, the opposite is true; they strongly favor progressive policies.

## **There is significant hunger for collective action.**

Despite the difficult circumstances faced by many of the people we spoke to, there was incredible willingness and even eagerness to engage with their community. Nearly 90% of the people we spoke with agreed with the statement "When people come together in our communities, we can win changes that improve our lives" and fully one-third of respondents asked to be invited to a local community meeting. This eagerness did not always translate into high rates of voting, but we found undeniably fertile ground for organizing in these communities.

## **We saw an opening – and an urgent need – to address prejudice and racism.**

The problem of discrimination, prejudice and racism was a significant theme within our conversations. Only 15% of respondents said that immigrants were "very responsible" for the problems in their community while half of all respondents thought immigrants were not very responsible or not at all responsible. Of all the categories we asked about, these were the lowest levels of blame. White nationalists have targeted rural communities for recruitment, but our conversations revealed more people seeking connections and ready to build bridges with their neighbors.



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Invest in Progressive Infrastructure in Rural + Small-Town America:

There is a moral and strategic imperative to invest in building people's organizations in rural and small-town communities. There is a deep hunger to organize and take collective action; people's organizations create the space to build deep relationships across difference; develop a shared understanding and analysis of the world; create a shared vision and strategy for change; and build the power people need to make improvements in their lives.

## Develop Political Education + Leadership Training targeted to Rural Communities:

Successful popular movements throughout our nation's history have invested in training and popular education. We plan to develop a leadership development and political education program that will help strengthen community leadership capacity to: drive strategic campaigns; confront racial divisions; and build relationships across race and geography. In particular, there is a critical need to invest in the leadership of rural women as both healers and bridge builders in rural and small-town America.

## Race-Conscious + Multiracial Organizing:

People of color and Native Americans accounted for 75% of population growth in rural and small town America between 2000-2010. In fact, rural and small-town America is only 14% less diverse than the country as a whole. A powerful progressive populist movement must be both race-conscious and deeply committed to building multiracial alliances. People's Action member organizations and our allies across the country are committed to building powerful race-conscious strategies to "build a bigger we" and we intend to incorporate these strategies across rural and small town America, including alliance building towards recognition of legal and inherent tribal sovereignty.



Iowa Student Action fights against the investment in pipelines

## Culture + Narrative Strategy:

It is critical that we develop a coherent culture and narrative strategy that builds a sense of community and belonging and advances values that lay the groundwork for broader structural change. We believe that relationships — especially relationships where people build bridges across difference — can be a powerful source of culture change. People's Action and our affiliates are working closely with key partners to develop a cultural strategy that is grounded in the worldview and cultural language of these targeted communities and a communications infrastructure and platforms to reach a mass audience.

## Build a Bold Agenda:

There are a set of emerging strategic campaigns that shape a bold and progressive populist agenda that is both multiracial and race-conscious, can beat the politics of strategic racism and unite urban and rural communities around a shared vision and values. Across the country, People's Action member organizations and our allies are launching strategic campaigns that direct people toward the true source of economic decline and toward real solutions that deliver concrete improvements in people's lives. This bold agenda includes: Health Care for All; Covering the Basics: Housing, Good Jobs and a Living Wage; Universal Family Care; Clean Water; Clean Energy and Good Green Jobs; Ending the Overdose Crisis and the Failed War on Drugs; Respect and Sovereignty for Indigenous Nations; Supporting Family Farms, Food and Agricultural Justice; and Investing in Education and College for All.

## Movement Politics, Not Politics as Usual:

Creating transformative change in these regions and states requires a deep investment in civic engagement that expands the electorate and holds elected officials accountable around advancing an agenda that unites our communities rather than one that pits them against one another. People's Action and our allies are committed to doing politics differently and building a movement politics and a candidate pipeline across rural and small-town America that will help advance a multiracial populist agenda to put people and planet first. Through our rural and small-town organizing strategy we are organizing in 72 counties that include 34 congressional districts and over 100 state legislative districts. These places are critical to unite a new populist majority that can build durable governing power in key states and help shape the future of the country.



# OVERVIEW: PEOPLE'S ACTION AND THE RURAL + SMALL-TOWN ORGANIZING STRATEGY

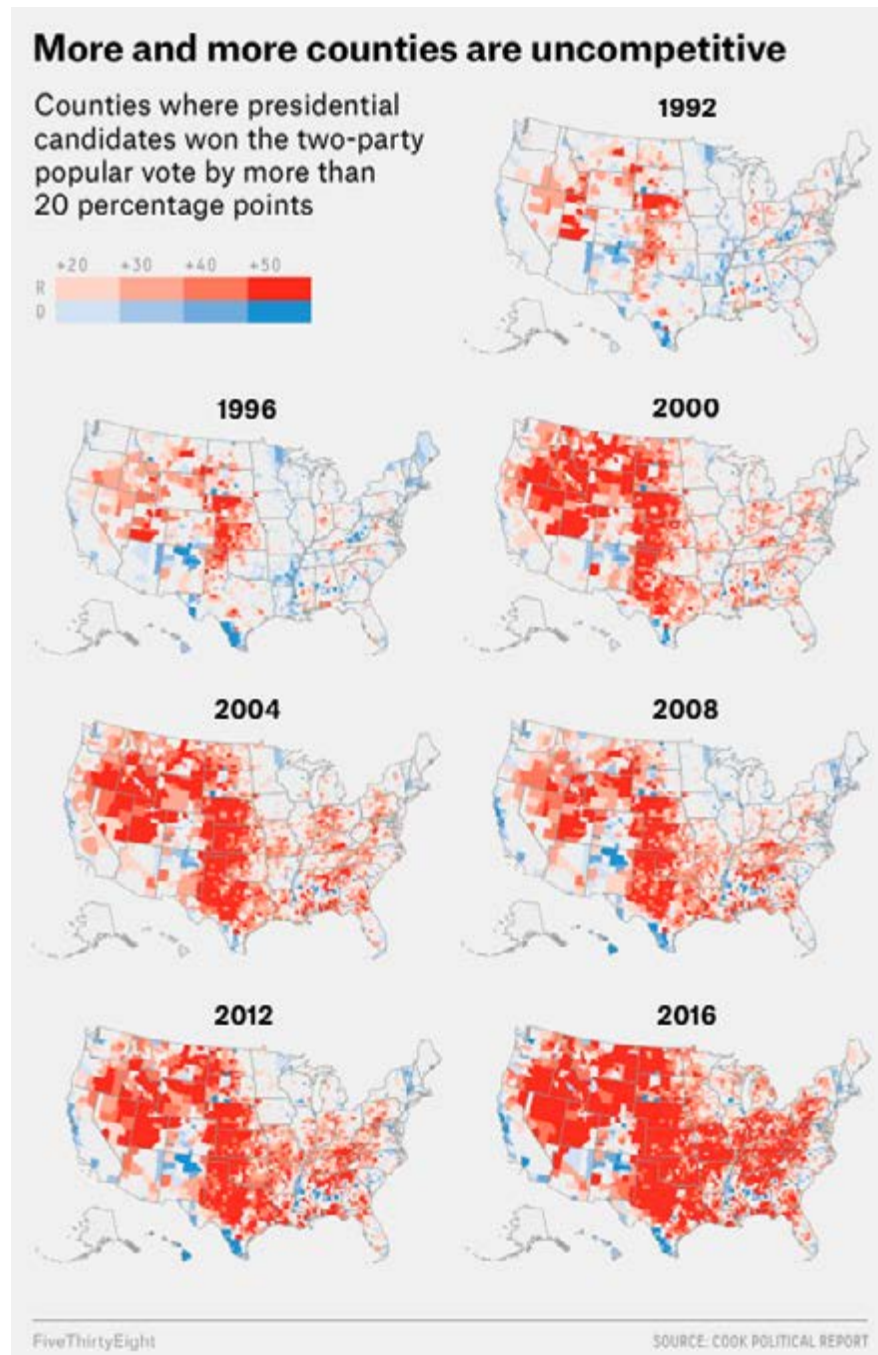
**People's Action is one of the largest multiracial, people's organizations in the country made up of 48 member organizations with 600 local staff in 30 states representing over a million grassroots leaders in communities and online.** Our mission is to build an America where we put people and planet first. Our strategy is to build powerful state-level community organizations; align members around a long-term agenda for racial, economic, climate and gender justice; and drive coordinated campaigns that win real change in people's lives, build power for communities, and shape an economy and a democracy that works for all of us. To build power for families and communities, we move people in large numbers through issue organizing campaigns and civic engagement – using base-building,

leadership development, direct action, large-scale grassroots and netroots action, and movement politics.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, People's Action member organizations across the Midwest, Northeast and South began meeting to develop a collective strategy to address the moral and strategic imperative to strengthen our work in rural and small-town communities. In November of 2017, People's Action member organizations and our allies at Missouri Rural Crisis Center and Land Stewardship Project met in Des Moines, Iowa to develop a collective vision and the strategy that is described in this report.



Economic decline, cultural resentment, and racial antagonisms have been exploited by the right to roll back progressive reforms, unleash incredibly open racism and threaten the future of pluralistic democracy in America. Reactionary forces have exploited these deep divisions by creating a series of false choices that pit people against one another, maintain corporate dominance and structural racial and gender inequality, and divide us from the global community. They have employed “dog whistle politics,”<sup>2</sup> and spent heavily in political campaigns to seize power in county seats and statehouses; they now control every major branch of the federal government. Reactionary right wing forces and the billionaires who back them have used their control of statehouses to consolidate their power and radically erode local democratic control through preemption, voter suppression and gerrymandering. In addition, established hate groups are organizing in these communities at levels not seen for generations.



Over the past year, many political observers have scoffed at the prospect of President Donald Trump’s reelection. Former White House strategist Steve Bannon was reported to give Trump a 30% chance at completing his term, while JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon – like many others – predicted that Trump would be the first one-term president since George H.W. Bush. Yet, recent data shows otherwise.

Internal polling by the Democratic group Priorities USA found the President’s approval rating had climbed to 44% in early February and Gallup finds that a narrow majority of Americans support his handling of the economy, while the new Republican tax law is getting more popular.<sup>3</sup> The parameters between now and 2020 remain unknown. The largest group in 2016 was neither Clinton voters nor Trump voters; it was non-voters.

Much depends on who turns out to vote and whether the Republicans succeed in incorporating the old industrial states of the upper Midwest into the solidly red Southern and plains states. If that is the case then their structural electoral advantages would very likely override the popular vote for another decade.<sup>4</sup>

“The 2016 election dramatically exposed a key electoral dynamic that has been developing for some time: that progressives have depleted connections to people outside major metropolitan areas,” Ben Goldfarb wrote in a recent analysis of rural civic engagement. “In stark contrast to the voting patterns of much of the 20th century, when farm/labor coalitions drove progressive policies at the state and federal levels, the urban/rural voter and cultural divide has unquestionably become an increasingly important factor in electoral and public policy outcomes.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> HANEY-LOPEZ, IAN. DOG WHISTLE POLITICS: Strategic Racism, Fake Populism, and the Dividing of America, Expanded... and Fully Revised Edition. OXFORD UNIV PRESS, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Vyse, Graham. “How Trump Wins Reelection.” The New Republic, 26 Feb. 2018, [newrepublic.com/article/14719/trump-wins-reelection](http://newrepublic.com/article/14719/trump-wins-reelection).

<sup>4</sup> Carl, Jeremy. “The New Red Wall?” National Review, National Review, 9 Aug. 2017, [www.nationalreview.com/2016/11/donald-trump-won-midwest-states-new-red-wall/](http://www.nationalreview.com/2016/11/donald-trump-won-midwest-states-new-red-wall/).

<sup>5</sup> “All the People, All the Places: A Landscape of Opportunity for Rural and Small-town Civic Engagement,” Ben Goldfarb, Advisor, New Venture Fund, 2018.



# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Although there has been considerable media rhetoric about a “rural revolt” or a surge for Trump by poor white voters that swung the election for Trump in 2016, the reality is far more complex. It is important to acknowledge that it was middle- and upper-income white voters who were most likely to support Donald Trump and that the typical Trump voter is actually a relatively affluent Suburban white man, not a low-income rural voter.<sup>6</sup> However, Trump’s overperformance in rural areas and small towns combined with Clinton’s underperformance, especially in the Midwest, were the keys to victory. There are 206 “pivot counties” that went for Trump in 2016 after going for Obama in both 2008 and 2012. In nearly all of the 206 pivot counties, Obama’s victory margin declined between 2008

and 2012, which foreshadowed the results in 2016. It is important to understand the broader context of this electoral shift. In many of the rural areas and small towns of these “pivot counties” and other areas where Trump performed better than expected there has been a long history of economic distress, life expectancy has been declining and the broader social conditions have been deteriorating for decades.<sup>7</sup>

“The bottom half of the adult population has thus been shut off from economic growth for over 40 years, and the paltry increase in their disposable income has been absorbed by increased health spending,” economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman wrote in a paper released shortly after the 2016 election.<sup>8</sup> In

addition, Brookings researchers have detailed the “prosperity paradox” dynamic that has emerged since 2000 as Republicans have increased their national electoral clout yet have steadily lost strength in the economic-powerhouse metropolitan counties. “The less-than-500 counties that Hillary Clinton carried nationwide encompassed a massive 64% of America’s economic activity as measured by total output in 2015,” Brookings researchers calculated. “By contrast, the more than 2,600 counties that Donald Trump won generated just 36% of the country’s output — just a little more than one-third of the nation’s economic activity.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f8fffa477bfc](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f8fffa477bfc).

<sup>7</sup> Monnat, Shannon M., and David L. Brown. “More than a Rural Revolt: Landscapes of Despair and the 2016 Presidential Election.” *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 55, 2017, pp. 227–236. doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.08.010.

<sup>8</sup> Picchi, Aimee. “Half of Americans Are ‘Shut off from Economic Growth.’” CBS News, CBS Interactive, 8 Dec. 2016. [www.cbsnews.com/news/half-of-americans-are-shut-off-from-economic-growth/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/half-of-americans-are-shut-off-from-economic-growth/).

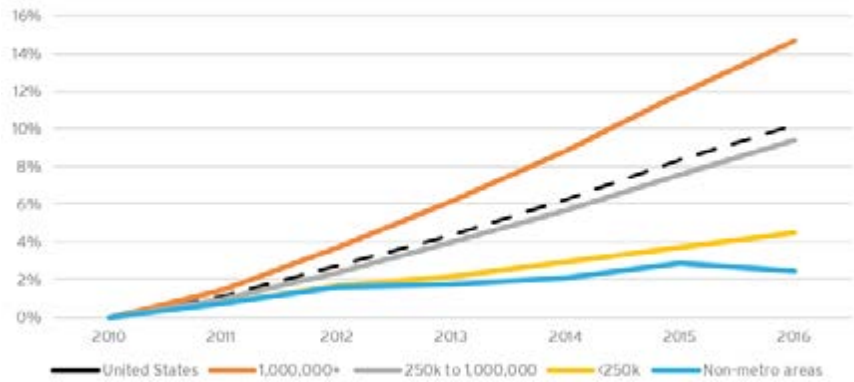
<sup>9</sup> Brownstein, Ronald. “The Prosperity Paradox Is Dividing the Country in Two.” CNN, Cable News Network, 23 Jan. 2018. [www.cnn.com/2018/01/23/politics/economy-prosperity-paradox-divide-country-voters/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/23/politics/economy-prosperity-paradox-divide-country-voters/index.html).



Speaking to the Wisconsin Farmers Union at their annual state convention in February 2018, John Ikerd, a rural economist who grew up on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri described this pattern as he railed against what he described as the “economic colonization facing rural America. A progression of laws protecting factory farms from public scrutiny and exempting industrial agriculture from environmental and public health regulations reveal a corporate strategy to turn rural areas into ‘agricultural sacrifice zones. The quality of life of rural and town residents alike is threatened by the relentless, unbridled corporate colonization of American agriculture.”<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 1B

**Employment by size tier**  
Percent growth from 2010



Source: Brookings analysis of Moody's Analytics data



*“Rural America is a colony and its economy is a colonial economy. The business of America has been largely and without apology the plundering of rural America, from which everything of value—minerals, timber, farm animals, farm crops, and “labor”—has been taken at the lowest possible price. As apparently none of the enlightened ones has seen in flying over or bypassing on the interstate highways, its too-large fields are toxic and eroding, its streams and rivers poisoned, its forests mangled, its towns dying or dead along with their locally owned small businesses, its children leaving after high school and not coming back. Too many of the children are not working at anything, too many are transfixed by the various screens, too many are on drugs, too many are dying.”<sup>11</sup>*

- Wendell Berry

<sup>10</sup>“The Economic Colonization of Rural America,” Rural News and Information, [www.dailyunder.com/economic-colonization-rural-america/2018/02/28/24068/](http://www.dailyunder.com/economic-colonization-rural-america/2018/02/28/24068/).

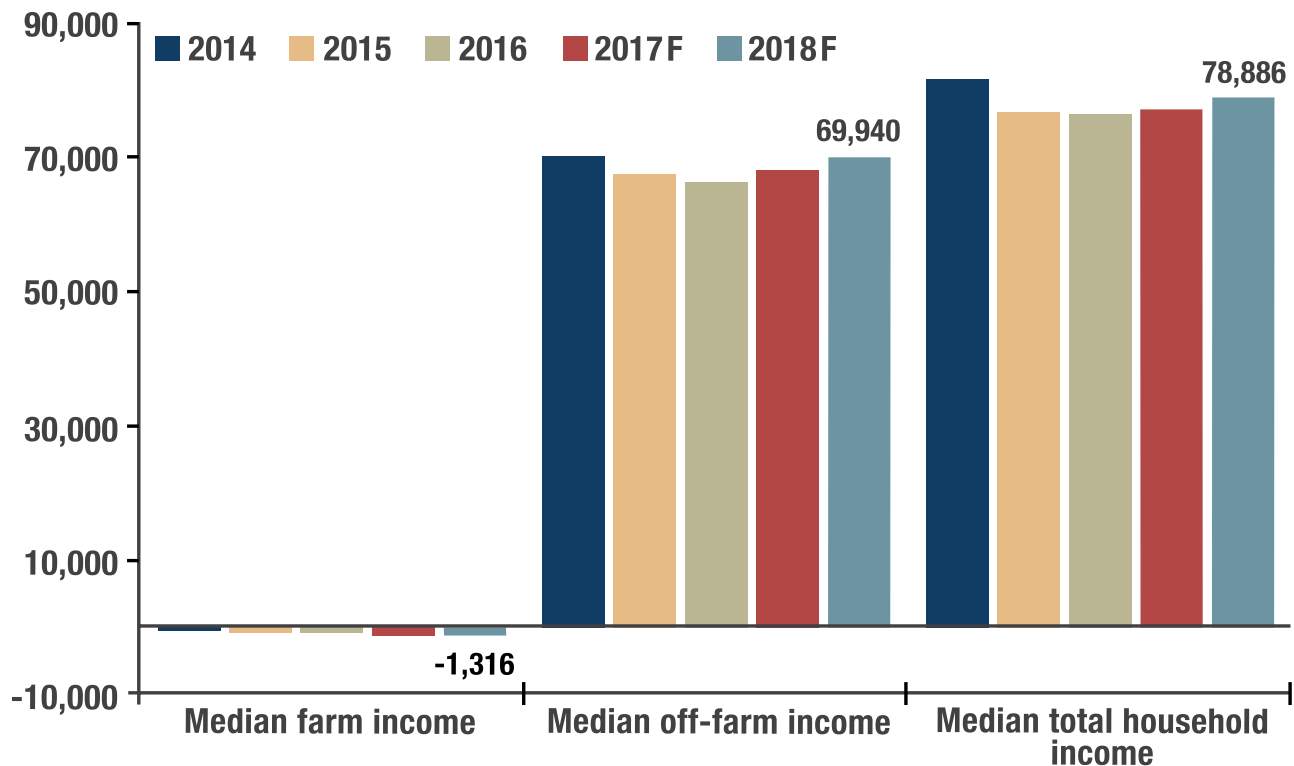
<sup>11</sup> Rich, Nathaniel, and Wendell Berry. “Southern Despair.” The New York Review of Books, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/).

In the 1980s, family farmers faced the worst agricultural crisis since the Great Depression. Farmers were evicted from their land, there were fights at grain elevators and the suicide rate soared. Since 2013, net farm income for US farmers has declined 50% and the median farm income for 2017 was negative \$1,325. The suicide death rate for farmers is more than double that of military veterans and some claim that this is an underestimate.<sup>12</sup> Rural areas are increasingly characterized by generational poverty. Of the 429 persistent poverty counties (counties with poverty rates of higher than 20 percent in the 1990, 2000 and 2010 census), 86 percent have entirely rural populations.<sup>13</sup>

Another major factor in the “prosperity paradox” is the decline of organized labor. Trump’s election was, as journalist Harold Meyerson wrote shortly after November 8, an “extinction-level event for American labor,” quoting an unnamed union official.<sup>14</sup> The forces that have contributed to the decline of labor in America are many, including automation; outsourcing; right-to-work laws; and failure to organize workers in new sectors. This decline has created an institutional crisis for progressive politics, where progressives are left scrambling to reconstitute their financial and volunteer resources. When Trump became president, he installed Neil Gorsuch on the Supreme Court, who almost certainly will deliver the deciding vote to debilitate public-sector unions later this term in *Janus v. AFSCME*.

### MEDIAN FARM INCOME, MEDIAN OFF-FARM INCOME, AND MEDIAN TOTAL INCOME OF FARM OPERATOR HOUSEHOLDS, 2014-18F

Dollars (nominal)



**Note: F = forecast.**

**Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and National Agricultural Statistics Service Agricultural Resource Management Survey. Forecast as of February 7, 2018.**

Media household farm income in 2017 is projected to be negative \$1,325.

<sup>12</sup> Why Are America's Farmers Killing Themselves in Record Numbers? The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 6 Dec. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/06/why-are-americas-farmers-killing-themselves-in-record-numbers](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/06/why-are-americas-farmers-killing-themselves-in-record-numbers).

<sup>13</sup> [www.ruraldataportal.org/docs/HAC\\_Taking-Stock-Conditions.pdf](http://www.ruraldataportal.org/docs/HAC_Taking-Stock-Conditions.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Meyerson, Harold. "Donald Trump Can Kill the American Union." The Washington Post, WP Company, 23 Nov. 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/23/donald-trump-could-kill-the-american-union/?utm\\_term=.4b3869f3c4b](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/23/donald-trump-could-kill-the-american-union/?utm_term=.4b3869f3c4b).

*"I am hopeful that working with Keystone Progress in the community can change that. Because I matter, the people who are involved matter. We stood up and that matters. When people take responsibility to try to do things to help others life better, especially the children. I don't want to see them go through the things we've been going through for generations. You can't just give up in life. That gets you nowhere. I've got to overcome my fear of speaking before the people and being vulnerable. We have to stand up and try to do things about it."*

- Terry Lavender,  
United Steelworkers and Keystone Progress



*"It used to be that there were more and better paying manufacturing jobs than now. We're seeing the prices of homes and rent go a lot higher because Philadelphia commuters – even NY commuters – are moving here to look for lower prices. I see higher costs for medical costs for utilities. Steelworkers still have pension but I see lots of people – family and friends – who lost traditional pensions and have diminished 401 K plans. Most people seem to blame the other party. Myself I blame Wall Street. I know one time that the Steelworkers played a larger role in the community. We're trying again to be a better community partner. A lot of different groups – we may have the same outlook and goals but now we're doing things separately. If we join together we'll get there faster."*

- Vonnie Long, United Steelworkers and Keystone Progress



Although these trends have played a major role in shaping the political landscape of rural and small-town America, it is critical to note how anxiety about the changing racial demographics of America contributed to Trump's success as a presidential candidate among White Americans whose race/ethnicity is central to their identity.<sup>15</sup> White working-class voters who said they often feel like a stranger in their own land and who believe the U.S. needs protecting against foreign influence were 3.5 times more likely to favor Trump than those who did not share these concerns. White working-class voters who favored deporting immigrants living in the country illegally were 3.3 times more likely to express a preference for Trump than those who did not.<sup>16</sup> As Arlie Hochschild describes in her seminal work *Strangers in their Own Land*, "I see that the scene had been set for Trump's rise, like kindling before a match is lit. Since 1980, virtually all those I talked with felt on shaky economic ground. It was a story of unfairness and anxiety, stagnation and slippage – a story in which shame was the companion to need."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "The Threat of Increasing Diversity: Why Many White Americans Support Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1368430216677304?journalCode=gpi&

<sup>16</sup> "Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump | PRRI/The Atlantic Report." PRRI, www.prii.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump/.

<sup>17</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press, 2018.



Political scientist Katherine Cramer has studied rural and small-town communities in Wisconsin, and defines this confluence of trends as resulting in a heightened “politics of resentment.”<sup>18</sup> This “politics of resentment” arises from the interaction of social identities, economic insecurity and emotions of resentment which leads people to understand their conditions as the fault of a “less deserving” social group rather than the broader social, economic and political forces. These dynamics are deeply racialized and serve to direct people’s attention away from broader structural forces. There must also be an honest assessment of the way that liberal elitism and paternalism has contributed to this pattern. Although this dynamic is often exaggerated by conservative propagandists, progressives must not fall into the trap of oversimplifying rural people as uneducated and racist or using working class voters or rural voters as proxies for white voters. Rural communities are complex, diverse and far from politically homogeneous. Goldfarb notes that “progressives must be willing to own the work we ourselves need to do to forge relationships and a deeper sense of understanding a respect, not simply try to ‘fix’ the other.”<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, reactionary groups across the country have capitalized on a void left by the lack of progressive investment in rural and small-town communities. A study by the USDA found that rural communities received between 6% to 7% of foundation grants awarded from 2005 to 2010 although they account for 19% of the U.S. population.<sup>20</sup> The lack of investment has meant that right-wing forces funded by ultra-rich donors and corporate interests have sent anti-government, anti-pluralist, xenophobic, and socially divisive rhetoric across rural America virtually unchallenged for over two decades. Although immigration has helped to stem population loss in many rural communities and created more jobs and economic growth, the power of this narrative has distorted this reality for many in rural and small-town America.<sup>21</sup>

Where progressive organizing might have offered working-class residents of rural communities opportunities for engagement, white supremacist and neo-Confederate groups have stepped in. Reactionary groups across the country more broadly have seized on the absence of progressive infrastructure to spur a backlash targeting the state’s most marginalized communities and shredding the safety net. The ongoing denigration of Native tribal sovereignty and the lack of investment on Indian Reservations deepens the racial divide. These events have created both a moral and political crisis in rural and small-town America. Rural America, even as it laments its economic weakness, still retains vastly disproportionate electoral strength.<sup>22</sup> There is no legitimate path to creating the type of governing power required to advance progressive change in our country—and in most states—without a much more robust multiracial, urban-rural coalition.

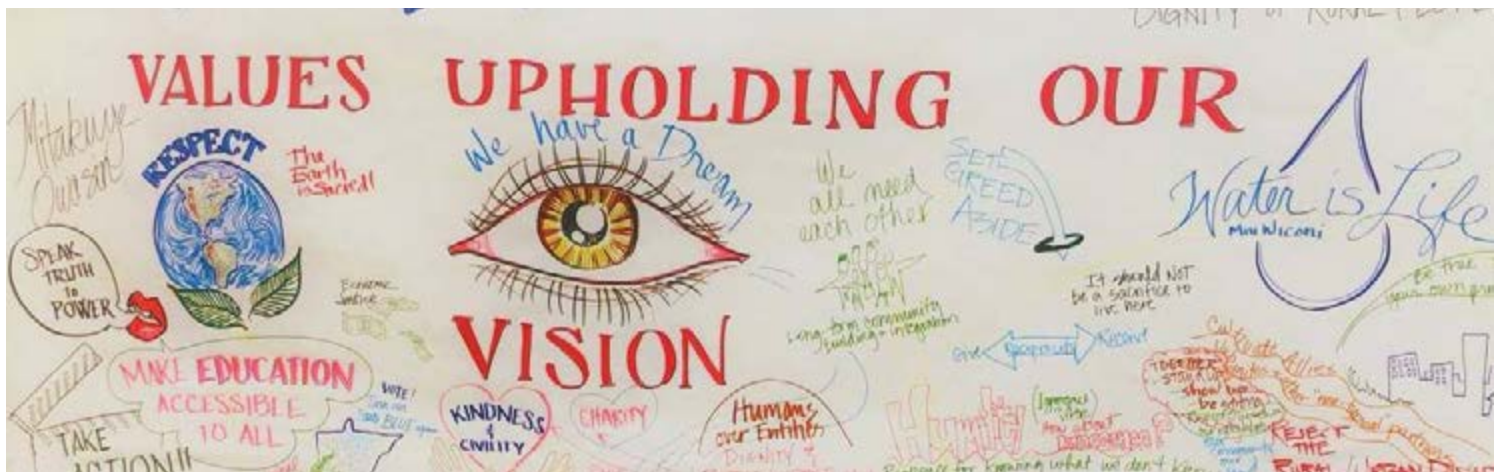
<sup>18</sup> Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Print. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucpl/books/book/chicago/P/bo22879533.html>

<sup>19</sup> “All the People, All the Places: A Landscape of Opportunity for Rural and Small-town Civic Engagement,” Ben Goldfarb, Advisor, New Venture Fund, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “Rural Gets Less Foundation Money,” Rural News and Information, [www.dailyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/](http://www.dailyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/).

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, Rick. “Immigration Brings Economic Benefits to Rural America.” *Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly*, 21 Apr. 2015, [nonprofitquarterly.org/2015/04/21/immigration-brings-economic-benefits-to-rural-america/](http://nonprofitquarterly.org/2015/04/21/immigration-brings-economic-benefits-to-rural-america/).

<sup>22</sup> Badger, Emily. “As American as Apple Pie? The Rural Vote’s Disproportionate Slice of Power.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 20 Nov. 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/upshot/as-american-as-apple-pie-the-rural-votes-disproportionate-slice-of-power.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/upshot/as-american-as-apple-pie-the-rural-votes-disproportionate-slice-of-power.html).



# A DIFFERENT VISION: BUILDING A MULTIRACIAL, RACE-CONSCIOUS POPULIST MOVEMENT IN RURAL + SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

“Unfortunately,” Lawrence Goodwyn the great historian of the Populist Movement has written, “history does not support the notion that mass protest movements develop because of hard times.”<sup>23</sup> Many of the trends that have brought us to this moment in history have been growing over the past 30 years and have been an enduring feature of American history. As Robert Borosage has written, “movements start only when reality and organizers begin to open people’s eyes.”<sup>24</sup> In the midst of some of the largest popular protests in American history over the last year in response to a Trump presidency—from Resist Trump Tuesdays and Indivisible to Black Lives Matter and Standing Rock and the protests against the Muslim Ban to the Women’s March and the March for Our Lives—many Democratic consultants and party leaders continue to struggle to find their identity and message. Party leaders continue to be divided around how to build a coherent vision and strategy to move the country forward struggling with the question: “Should Democrats shift strategy to focus on wooing back the working-class white voters who left them for Trump, or on broadening the coalition—people of color, Millennials and progressive whites—that gave President Barack Obama two terms? Or can they do both?”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. Oxford University Press, 1981.

<sup>24</sup> Borosage, Robert. “The New Populism.” *OurFuture.org*, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Garofoli, Joe. “Dems Struggle with Whether to Woo Back Whites or Broaden Coalition.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco Chronicle, 23 July 2017, [www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/Dems-struggle-with-whether-to-woo-back-whites-or-11307886.php](http://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/Dems-struggle-with-whether-to-woo-back-whites-or-11307886.php).



“Rural” and “working-class” in many of these discussions has become code for white and nothing could be further from the truth. “If one wishes to appeal to the working class—workers without bachelor’s degrees—then one wishes to appeal to people of color,” Algernon Austin of Demos has argued convincingly. “People of color make up 40% of the working class and their share of the working class is growing.”<sup>26</sup> The portrayal of rural and small-town America as exclusively white masks the facts that rural and small-town America are only 14% less diverse than the country as a whole and people of color and Native Americans accounted for 75% of population growth in rural and small-town America between 2000-2010.<sup>27</sup> The rural-urban binary itself is an outdated concept that does not accurately portray the true organization of American society. It is much more valuable to focus on the interface and interdependence between urban, suburban, small-town and rural communities.<sup>28</sup>

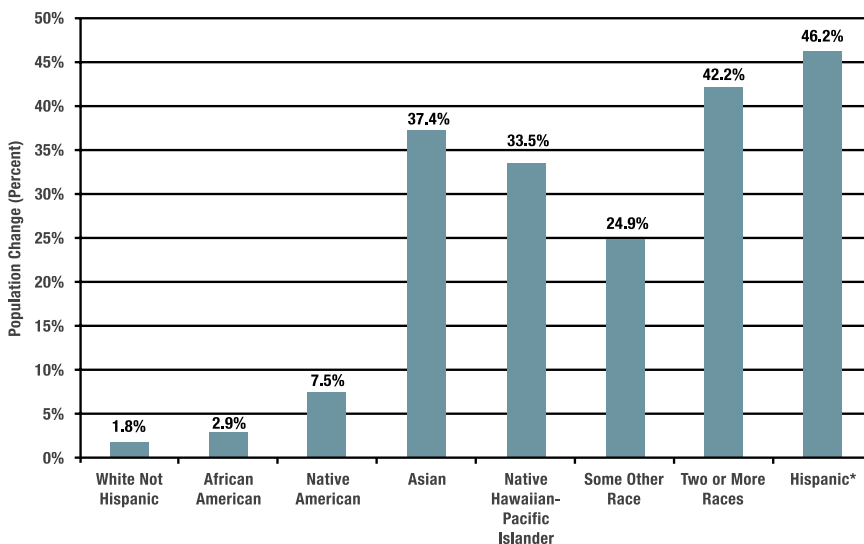
Populism has been claimed by both authoritarian and progressive leaders in the 130 years since its coining. The election of Donald Trump and trends in Europe has compelled many observers to question the legitimacy of populism.<sup>29</sup> But in rural and small-town America, where the idea began, the idea of populism is ripe for reclaiming. Promoting a resurgence of progressive populism in rural and small-town America requires investing in what is already happening on the ground across the country.<sup>30</sup> We believe that in order to build enough power to restore our democracy and advance a multiracial and race-conscious progressive populism, we need to develop a multi-year investment and strategy in building leadership in rural areas, suburbs and small-towns in a key set of Heartland, Rust Belt and Southern states and build alignment with grassroots leadership in metropolitan areas. A key element to organizing in the rural United States is acknowledging the critical role that the collective land ownership of hundreds of tribes, their governance and their role in the economic and social conditions. We believe that the only way to counter a politics of division is to drive a broad, inclusive economic agenda in conjunction with

organizing that respects cultural and religious differences. Without an agenda to make the economy work for working families in urban and rural communities, despair and anger will continue to rise and absent a broad based organizing strategy, the exploitation of divisions will continue. The organizing opportunity lies in multiracial bridge building, recognition of tribal sovereignty, political education, and building an agenda and narrative that directly confronts racial animus and divisive politics and recognizes and promotes interdependence and community control of the economy. Deep cultural and narrative work can create the context to build a robust agenda that unites urban, suburban and rural communities and helps to restructure our economy and restore faith in our democracy.

“From the New Deal to the Great Society and the Civil Rights Movement, every major progressive movement in the history of our country has combined effective urban and rural coalitions,” Dee Davis from the Center for Rural Strategies told a group of organizers assembled in Des Moines, Iowa who launched the People’s Action Rural and Small-town Organizing Strategy.

“So where is the hope for the future of rural America?” John Ikerd asked the farmers assembled in Wisconsin. “The hope is in the clarity that the world changes through local communities taking action...They must find ways to change our laws—including changing those who make our laws, if necessary. People must come together—farm and non-farm, rural and urban—as communities of necessity with a common interest and commitment to stopping the economic colonization of their communities.”

### RURAL & SMALL TOWN POPULATION CHANGE BY RACE & ETHNICITY, 2010



<sup>26</sup> 3 Mistakes in the Democratic Party’s Economics-Versus-Identity Debate.” Demos, [www.demos.org/blog/1/5/17/3-mistakes-democratic-party%E2%80%99s-economics-versus-identity-debate](http://www.demos.org/blog/1/5/17/3-mistakes-democratic-party%E2%80%99s-economics-versus-identity-debate).

<sup>27</sup> Housing Assistance Council Rural Research Brief, April 2012

<sup>28</sup> Monnat, Shannon M., and David L. Brown. “More than a Rural Revolt: Landscapes of Despair and the 2016 Presidential Election.” *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 55, 2017, pp. 227–236., doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.08.010

<sup>29</sup> Friedman, Uri. “What Is a Populist?” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 27 Feb. 2017, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/).

<sup>30</sup> “To Build a Progressive Populism, Look to Farm Country.” *Civil Eats*, 21 Dec. 2017, [civileats.com/2017/12/11/to-build-a-progressive-populism-look-to-farm-country/](http://civileats.com/2017/12/11/to-build-a-progressive-populism-look-to-farm-country/); Nichols, John. “How the Democrats Can Take Back Rural America.” *The Nation*, 24 Aug. 2017, [www.thenation.com/article/how-to-take-back-rural-america/](http://www.thenation.com/article/how-to-take-back-rural-america/).



# ABOUT OUR COMMUNITY LISTENING PROJECT

There is a sacred truth in organizing: no one knows a community better than the community itself. In the wake of the 2016 elections, thousands of think pieces and polls claimed to understand rural America, yet the vast majority failed to directly engage the communities they studied. People’s Action and our member organizations are committed to engaging deeply with the communities we serve, to listening to what they have to tell us and to following their lead. That’s why, as we started building out our work in rural and small-town communities in America, we began with an extensive community listening project.

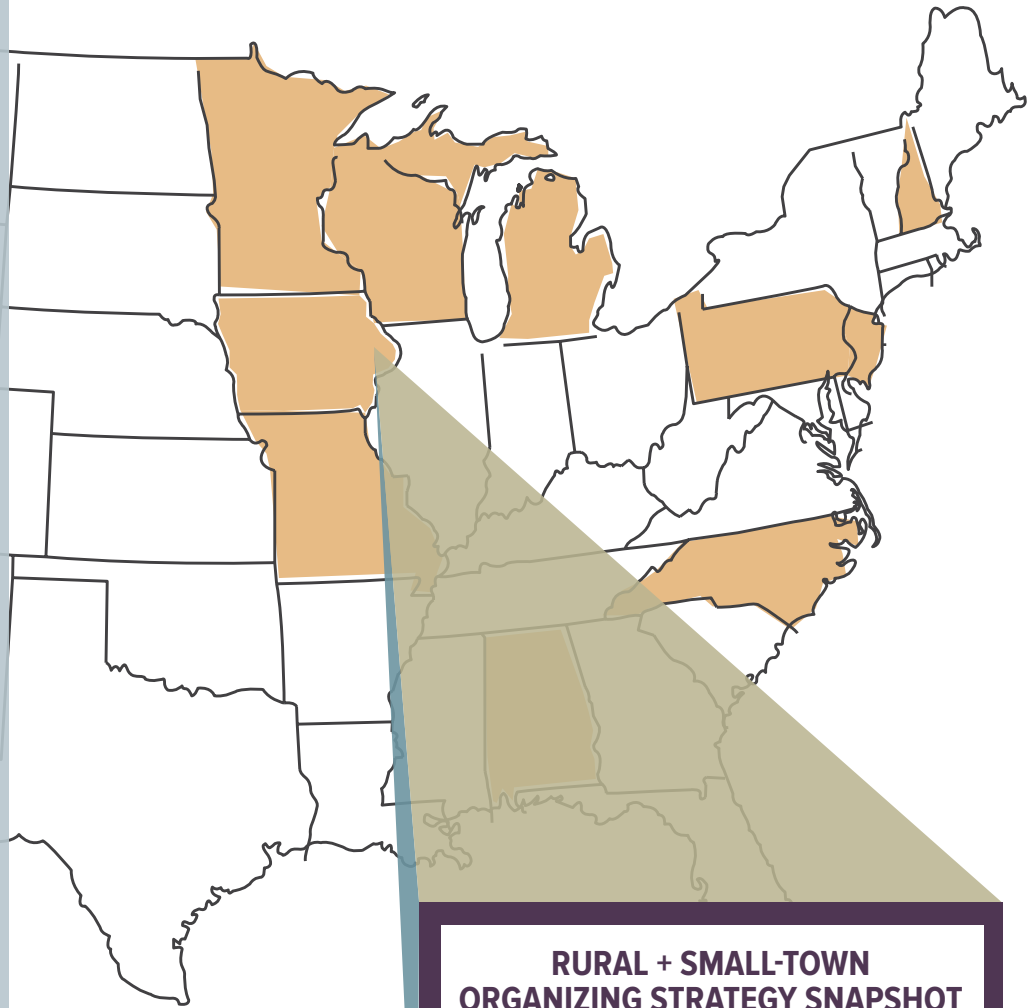
People’s Action member organization Down Home North Carolina piloted the community listening project with a canvass of residents in rural Alamance and Haywood counties.<sup>31</sup> In February 2018, we expanded the project with People’s Action state partners and allies in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, New Jersey, New Hampshire, and Alabama. We talked with residents from 72 key counties in these states, identified as critical to build power if the progressive movement is to win real changes that improve people’s lives.

<sup>31</sup> “No One’s Ever Asked Me Before: Conversations from Rural North Carolina.” Down Home NC, 26 Mar. 2018, [downhomenc.org/report/](http://downhomenc.org/report/).

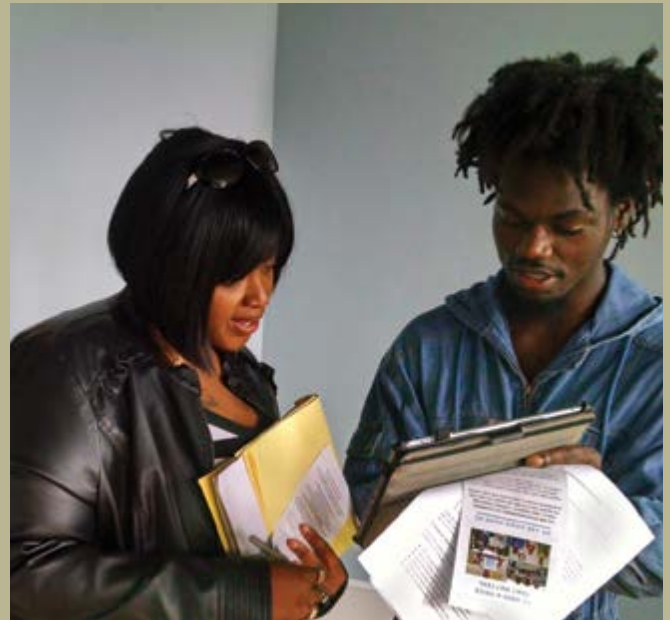


These communities include 28 “pivot counties” (i.e. counties that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 but voted for Trump in 2016) and 51 counties that Trump won by more than 10 points. The counties are primarily rural and the majority have poverty rates far above the national average. These are communities on the front lines of profound economic and political shifts including the rise of automation, the decline of family farming and local small businesses, the hollowing out of the social safety net, the dismantling of public institutions such as hospitals and schools, and the stripping for profit by corporations.

We asked residents in these communities to answer a series of questions about problems facing them and their communities. While the survey’s primary purpose was to identify and engage potential community leaders (and as a result was oriented more towards progressive ideas than conservative ones), analyzing the survey answers has provided insight into key areas of concern within these communities, and also into which of the proposed solution areas hold interest for residents. We believe the progressive movement can, and should, learn from the voices and experiences of small-town and rural residents.



**RURAL + SMALL-TOWN  
ORGANIZING STRATEGY SNAPSHOT**  
**10 STATES | 72 COUNTIES**  
**28 “PIVOT COUNTIES”**  
 TRUMP WON 64 OF THE 72 COUNTIES  
 TRUMP WON 52 OF THE 72 COUNTIES  
 BY MORE THAN 10 POINTS



Between September 2017 and April 2018, we knocked on over 5,000 doors and documented 2,462 individual conversations through phone banks, door-to-door canvases and conversations conducted outside of community events like health fairs or church services. The observations in this report are drawn from the 1,078 surveys that were completed in March 2018 as part of the coordinated national launch of this process.

These conversations give us insight into which problem areas resonate with people in these communities' lived experience, and might have the potential to move them to action. It also gives us a picture of the types of people willing to engage with our volunteers; people who are in general, older, whiter and poorer than the population of these counties as a whole. It is important to stress that this canvass was designed as an organizing tool and was therefore not conducted among a representative sample. The average age of those we spoke to was 64 years old (58% were 60 years or older) and they were predominantly white (86%). Overall, most of the people we spoke with were low income or very low income. Fully one third did not disclose their income or provided non-numeric responses like "poor," "comfortable" or "scraping by." Of those that did share their income, nearly one in five (18%) earned less than \$25,000/year and just over half (51%) earned less than \$50,000/year.

The survey included five questions as catalysts to conversation: we began by asking people what problems most concerned them (allowing them to answer in their own words, without prompting), and then gave them a curated list of issues and asked them to rate how much they worried about each.

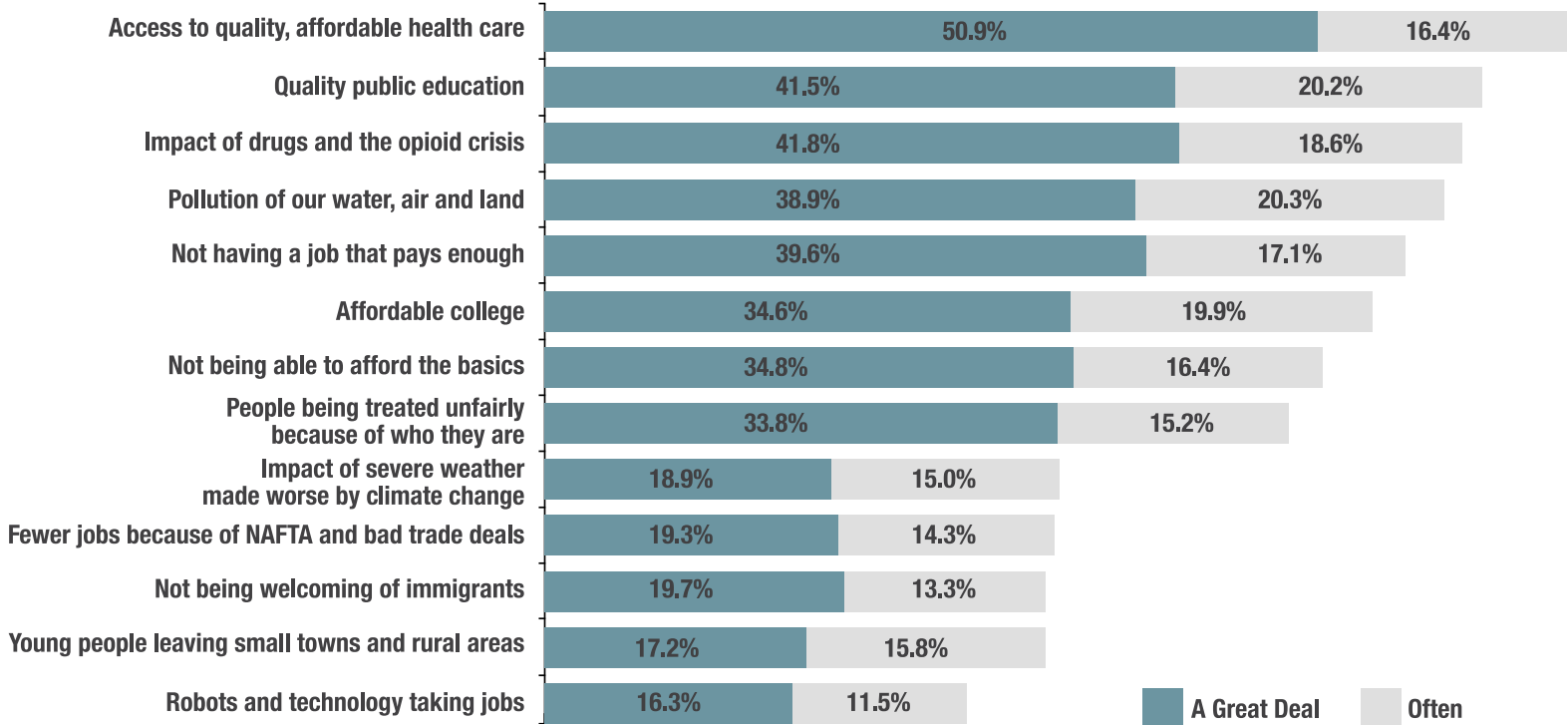
This was followed by presenting them with a list of groups/people who could be considered responsible for these problems, and asking them to rate how responsible felt each of them were. Then they were presented with a list of solutions and asked to rate how much impact each would have in addressing problems in their communities, and which issue/s they would most want to work with others in their community to improve. They were also asked whether they believe that people acting together can win changes that improve lives, and were invited to join a local meeting to work on the issues they care about with their neighbors.

In addition to these questions focused on problems in the community, we asked people about where they get their information (news) and for some basic demographic information. After our conversations, those community members who expressed an interest in attending a community meeting received follow-up calls from organizers to invite them to join a grassroots organization in their area. Once we had collected the records of each conversation, we matched community members with their voter file wherever possible.

The themes and trends we discuss in this report are a preview at what we've learned so far. We offer these learnings to the progressive movement as an opportunity to open new lines of inquiry, create new space for movement building and to challenge us all to listen first. Beginning in the summer of 2018, we will add community listening circles to our work in order to delve deeper and have a more nuanced conversation about the problems that impact our communities, whom we hold responsible, and the solutions that inspire people to organize.



## HOW MUCH DO THE FOLLOWING CONCERN YOU, YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR COMMUNITY?



*“There are a lot of people that don’t have a job — they have skills but they don’t have anywhere to use them because they don’t have options. Most folks do what they have to do to survive around here.*

*I’m struggling just like everyone else is. I struggle to pay my rent, to keep food in the fridge, to keep my lights on. I live on SSI because I am totally blind and have health issues, but I don’t want people to feel sorry for me. I know what it’s like to go without food for weeks, and there are a lot of people that know that struggle. When people tell me that I can’t do something I am going to prove them wrong. Some people don’t have sympathy for others, but we need to learn how to help others and care for each other.”*

- Sam Wilds, Down Home North Carolina

## HEALTH CONTINUES TO TOP THE LIST OF CONCERNS

**The majority of respondents reported that access to healthcare is a major concern for them (67%), with over half saying it concerned them a great deal (51%).** This was true regardless of race or income range. Women were significantly more likely to cite healthcare as a major concern (57% versus 42% of men). Concern also increased slightly with age, peaking among people who were just slightly too young for Medicare.

Healthcare was also one of the most common responses to the open-ended question about problems facing the community. In particular, many respondents spoke about the high cost of healthcare and the impact of hospital closures in

their communities. Hospital closures have risen sharply in recent years and have had a devastating impact on rural communities: not only dealing a crushing blow to local economies by eliminating thousands of good paying jobs, but also risking people's lives by making emergency services and even basic care inaccessible.<sup>32</sup> Hospital closures have also been linked to the rise in maternal mortality in the U.S.<sup>33</sup> Since 2010, 83 hospitals in rural areas have closed, including nearly 20 hospitals in the 10 states that are part of the Rural and Small-Town Organizing Strategy.

When asked about solutions, 72% of people said they believe guaranteeing affordable healthcare for everyone would help solve their community's problems. Lower income respondents were much more likely to say this (72% of those earning under \$25,000/ year rated this the most important solution versus 47% of those making over \$200,000/ year). Women also demonstrated higher levels of support for universal healthcare (63% compared to 51% of men). Younger people, people of color and people in states that have not expanded Medicaid were also more likely to express support for healthcare for all.

**Most people we spoke to about the dangers posed by contaminated land and water also talked about the issue in the context of their fear for the health of their families, rather than in terms of environmental damage.** Like healthcare, both pollution and opioids are of greater concern to women, however, dissimilarly, there are pronounced differences across race: 57% of African Americans cite drugs and the opioid crisis as a something they worry about "a great deal" (compared to only 41% of white respondents), and 57% worry about pollution "a great deal" (compared to 37% of white respondents).



<sup>32</sup> Wishner, Jane, et al. "A Look at Rural Hospital Closures and Implications for Access to Care: Three Case Studies." The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 21 Apr. 2017, [www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/a-look-at-rural-hospital-closures-and-implications-for-access-to-care/](http://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/a-look-at-rural-hospital-closures-and-implications-for-access-to-care/).

<sup>33</sup> Mincer, Jilian. "More Hospital Closings in Rural America Add Risk for Pregnant Women." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 18 July 2017, [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-health-care-rural/more-hospital-closings-in-rural-america-add-risk-for-pregnant-women-idUSKBN1A30C5](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-health-care-rural/more-hospital-closings-in-rural-america-add-risk-for-pregnant-women-idUSKBN1A30C5).



*“I was born addicted to drugs. The longest I was ever clean from drugs was when I was born to the day I turned 13. That’s when I started using and I haven’t been clean for very long since. I still use methadone every day so I’m technically not clean now, even though I get it through a legal clinic. That’s why I wanna help people. From my life in the drug world, all the stuff that I’ve lived — going to jail, going to drug court — I know how it works, I know how people feel. I know what to look for. The person walking down the street looking sick isn’t the addict, they are the person trying to get better.*”

*The people profiting off of our struggles are pharmaceutical companies, doctors, pharmacies. It’s the big businesses. A lot of [the opioid crisis] goes back to Big Pharma and doctors that over prescribe. I had a prescription to opioids that led to my addiction. It’s affected a lot of people in such a bad way that... I don’t have words for how bad it is. And if someone doesn’t take responsibility for what’s happening, then we’re going down a dark path. Teenagers are being held responsible for this crisis and getting thrown away when they get caught with drugs.”*

Most people we spoke to about the dangers posed by contaminated land and water also talked about the issue in the context of their fear for the health of their families, rather than in terms of environmental damage. Like healthcare, both pollution and opioids were of greater concern to women, however, dissimilarly, we saw pronounced differences across race: African Americans cited drugs and the opioid crisis as a something they worried about “a great deal” 57% of the time (compared to 41% of white respondents). African Americans also chose pollution as something they worried about “a great deal” 57% of the time (compared to 37% of white respondents).

This is in keeping with the wealth of evidence that people of color are exposed to pollution and contamination at much greater rates than whites, even after accounting for income. Even the Trump Administration’s embattled EPA found that people of color are disproportionately exposed to particulate matter and other dangerous pollutants. The 2018 report from the National Center for Environmental Assessment found that African Americans were exposed to 1.5 times as much particulate matter as whites, and that Latinx people were exposed at 1.2 times the rate. This same study found that the proportion of exposure was only partially explained by proximity to polluting facilities, meaning that these facilities actually polluted more when located in communities of color.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ihab Mikati, Adam F. Benson, Thomas J. Luben, Jason D. Sacks, Jennifer Richmond-Bryant, “Disparities in Distribution of Particulate Matter Emission Sources by Race and Poverty Status”, *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 4 (April 1, 2018); pp. 480-485.



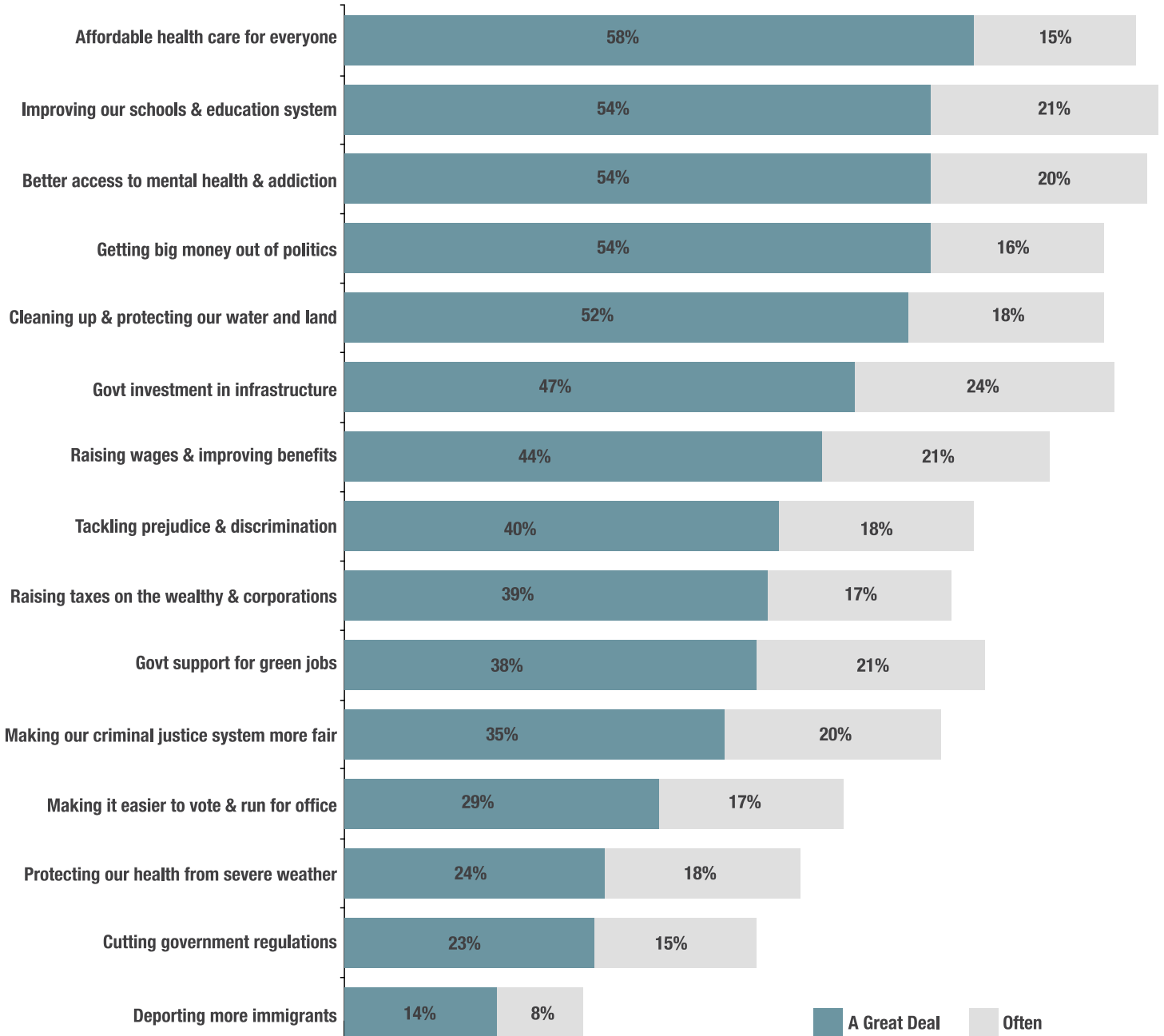
*“I’m an environmentalist – being a steward of the land means wildlife, conservation. My family’s been involved in water quality for 30 years. I was trained on how to take water tests. My water came back with the highest E.coli count they have. My only recourse was to take them to court.*

*Missouri Rural Crisis Center was one of the few who listened to us when we started to fight the hog barns. They help people trying to protect our homes. They promote stewardship. They liked my attitude – I’m not afraid to stand up to a senator or representative.*

*Government works best when it is closer to the people. Local control is key to protecting homes from corporate owned factory farms. MRCC is very good at organizing people. We can change things. We stopped a beef check-off tax, which would have made cattlemen’s association rich at the cost of farmers. Every time I go into town people tell me I love what you’re doing. Keep it up, you’re doing the right thing.”*

- Darwin Bentlage, Missouri Rural Crisis Center

**HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK THE FOLLOWING SOLUTIONS WOULD HELP SOLVE THE PROBLEMS YOUR COMMUNITY FACES?**







## EDUCATION WAS ALSO A CORE CONCERN

Concern about accessing quality education was also a prevalent theme in our community conversations, from public schools to vocational job training. Quality public education is the second most commonly cited problem (behind healthcare), and improving public school systems is also the second most popular solution (again, second to healthcare). Sixty-one percent of the people we spoke to said quality public education is something that concerns them “a great deal” or “often.” More than half of respondents (56%) are similarly concerned about access to affordable college or job training.

This is consistent with many opinion polls and surveys which find that education is consistently at, or near, the top of the list of priority issues for Americans. Interestingly, when we asked people to name the biggest problems in their community or to name the issues they most wanted to work on, the lack of education broadly, and on government and governance in particular, was a common theme. It seems that many people we spoke to believe poor education to be a direct cause of many of the other problems in their community, not just a stand-alone concern.



## HUNGER FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION DESPITE BARRIERS

Throughout our conversations, it was clear that many respondents are not only willing to take collective action; they are hungry for opportunities to engage. When asked if they agreed that, “when people come together in our communities, we can win changes that improve our lives,” nearly 90% of people agreed. One in three people also asked to be invited to a local follow up meeting. Rural and small-town areas have too often been dismissed by the progressive movement as either hopelessly conservative or too difficult to organize. Yet, as any veteran organizer will attest, this is a noteworthy level of community responsiveness.

This hunger to fight for a better life is, perhaps unsurprisingly, most acute among respondents who are struggling to keep their families’ afloat. Respondents who are the least concerned about affording the basics and putting food on the table are half as likely to want to attend a community meeting (18% compared to 34% of those who worry “a great deal” about affording the basics). A similar pattern emerged among respondents who cited low paying jobs, the opioid crisis, college affordability, and

contaminated air and water as acute concerns (they were more eager to attend a community meeting). There was also strong support for solutions that focus on shifting power into the people’s hands and make systems more accessible. For example, there was widespread support for “getting big money out of politics” (70% believe this would have “a great deal” or “some” positive impact), and also for making it easier to vote and run for office (46%).

The openness towards collective action was also evident when we asked people who they blame for the problems we were discussing. Many people gave answers like “everyone” or “all of us are responsible,” and talked about the need to build stronger communities and “get active” in order to “change our collective circumstances”. Similarly, when we asked people which issues they would be most interested in working on improving, many people expressed enthusiasm for systemic changes and solutions like “electing new people,” “ending corruption” or “creating greater economic equality,” in addition to naming specific issue areas like education, health or raising wages.



***“I’ve changed my perspective on residents of Alamance County, because of the stories that I’ve heard. I sat in homes with people that didn’t look like me. I sat in homes with people who were older than me, who were younger than me. But we all have very similar issues. I think I’m more shocked to know that we get along way more than the media would like to portray. I feel like Down Home has give me an opportunity to use my voice. I know that it’s given a lot of people in Alamance County, and will grow to give a lot more people the opportunity to be heard and use their voice and to impact each other in a positive way. And fight for things that matter to us most. That’s why I’m a member of Down Home.”***

- Kisha Peña, Down Home North Carolina

It is telling that while those struggling to survive expressed significantly more interest in attending meetings in order to work towards solving the problems facing their communities, according to the voter participation data we were able to obtain they were much less likely to vote regularly. This is especially true in states with obstacles to voter participation such as voter ID laws or a lack of early voting options. Financial and housing instability are serious barriers to political participation: people who move frequently, have unstable housing or who work low wage jobs with unpredictable hours have trouble securing the right ID or getting to the polls. These issues disproportionately affect voters of color in myriad ways. For example some voter ID laws dictate that forms of identification that voters of color are less likely to possess are accepted.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to these structural barriers to political participation, we also observed severe disillusionment and anger directed towards a government that many respondents described as having “abandoned” them. Many talk about politicians and political parties that appear during election cycles only to disappear immediately afterwards. People reported feeling “used,” “tricked” and that “the government works only for businesses or the wealthy.” Several people also brought up feeling ignored in favor of urban areas, which they feel dominate political attention. Our conversations reveal that, at least among the voters we spoke to, this lack of participation is not an indication of apathy or lack of community engagement (in fact, these people expressed the most willingness to show up and the most dedication to creating change in their communities), but rather reveal that the combination of disappointed hopes and barriers to participation have shut many low-income rural residents of the political process. This supports our hypothesis that rather than walking away from organizing in rural areas, we should be doubling down on community-centered relational strategies. We cannot continue to simply pop-up during election cycles, we need to make long-term investments in these communities.

The potential of this kind of work to engender solidarity and collective action is beautifully illustrated by the transformative impact of conducting these conversations has had on the members of our organizations. Down Home North Carolina leader Kisha Peña from Mebane, North Carolina, described how engaging in the organizing has impacted her: “I’ve changed my perspective on residents of Alamance County, because of the stories that I’ve heard. I sat in homes with people that didn’t look like me. I sat in homes with people who were older than me, who were younger than me. But we all have very

similar issues. I think I’m more shocked to know that we get along way more than the media would like to portray.”

Kisha’s experience is not an isolated occurrence, but was echoed throughout the conversations we had and the experiences of our volunteers. While listening and connecting is not enough to address the very real struggles our communities face, the act of listening itself can be transformative. In communities that have experienced decades of disinvestment and disregard by their government, the opportunity to be heard and connect to other people who are struggling with the same problems can transform community members’ outlook and their path forward.



***“I’ve known what it’s like to be hungry. Not be able to buy a prom dress. Not be able to get a license because my single mom couldn’t afford it. Whereas a lot of the people I know always had enough money; they came from two parent households, the dad had a really good job and the mom stayed home. It’s changed. I’ve got a college degree but if you don’t have a grandparent who can watch the kids, you can’t afford the childcare. We don’t have pensions. My husband has to work for retirement for both of us. I take odd jobs to have any spending money.*”**

***The election of Donald Trump flattened me. I couldn’t believe that a man like that could be elected to the highest office. So corrupt – in everyone’s face. What he says about women. I’d always thought I’m not qualified to get involved, that’s it’s not my job to make change. But after Trump was elected I didn’t feel like that any more.”***

- Kari Snyder, Michigan United

<sup>35</sup> Herbert, J. Gerald and Danielle Lang. “Courts are finally pointing out the racism behind voter ID laws.” Washington Post, 3 August 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/08/03/courts-are-finally-pointing-out-the-racism-behind-voter-id-laws/?utm\\_term=.af122606d373](https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/08/03/courts-are-finally-pointing-out-the-racism-behind-voter-id-laws/?utm_term=.af122606d373)

## AN OPENING — AND A NEED — TO ADDRESS PREJUDICE AND RACISM

In the community listening project conducted by Down Home North Carolina, “prejudice and racism” was one of the most frequently cited concerns by people of all races, and there was significant support for pursuing solutions to address prejudice and racism, even among white respondents. While this might seem encouraging at first glance, further probing revealed the picture to be more complicated. In the course of our conversations we heard from many white respondents that what they see as the root of the problem is prejudice against white people or Christians, not the systemic racism experienced by people of color (particularly African Americans).

As we expanded to other states, we sought to gain a better understanding of how the communities we were engaging understood prejudice and racism and who they believed was most impacted by it. In the second round of conversations, we asked people if they believed that, “people being treated unfairly because of who they are” was of major concern to them, and then asked them to specify who they were thinking about.

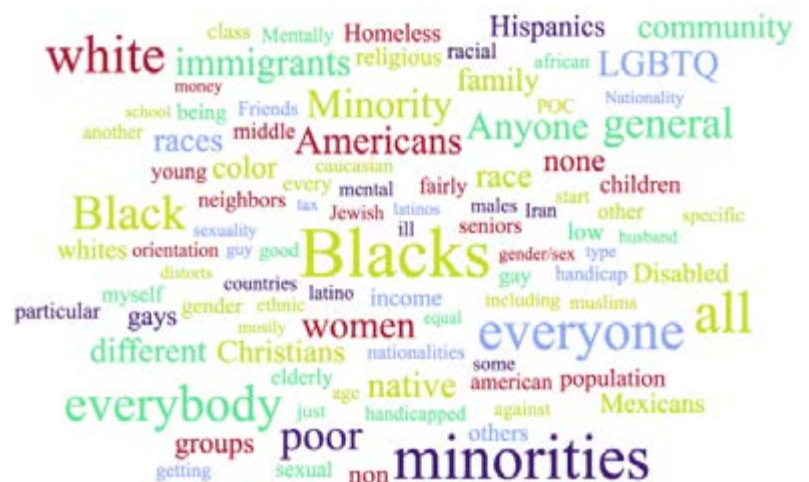
Asked in this way, distinct differences across race appeared: 76% of African Americans and 67% of Latinxs we interviewed reported that prejudice is a problem in their community “often” or “a great deal” of the time, (versus 46% of whites). Among those white respondents who identified racism and prejudice as a problem, the majority identified People of Color as being treated unfairly, although many also cited other marginalized groups such as LGBTQ people, women, disabled people and various religious groups.

Still, a significant minority said that they believe whites or Christians experience unfair treatment (either in combination with other groups or alone). Within that group, some people spoke about their experiences of prejudice (for example feeling discriminated against as a “redneck” or as a poor white person) as experiences that shaped them, and motivated them to speak out about unfair treatment and connect to others who felt marginalized (including people of color). While this group talks about racism using language that is unfamiliar to most on the left, we believe there is a strong foundation for multiracial solidarity and the building of an understanding of how white supremacy has hurt white people as well as people of color.

Although one-third of respondents said that being “unwelcoming to immigrants” is a something that concerns them “a great deal” or “often,” and 29% said immigrants are “not at all” to blame for the problems in

their community, nearly 43% said that immigrants are “very much” (15%) or “somewhat” responsible (28%). When asked if “deporting more immigrants” was a solution they would support, one in five respondents answered affirmatively.

People we spoke with frequently expressed a longing for a higher sense of togetherness in their communities and many white respondents showed support for addressing racism. A significant minority of white people even in predominantly white communities rated prejudice and unfair treatment as a core concern and recognized racism in their responses. Nearly forty percent of white respondents rated tackling prejudice and discrimination as a solution they supported a great deal. This is significantly lower than support among People of Color (over 70% support), but it clearly demonstrates an opening to address racism through our organizing. The election of Donald Trump and the rise of the “alt-right” have emboldened white supremacists to openly embrace their racist views and spurred them to recruit new members among poor and working class white people in this country. The progressive movement cannot afford to ignore this racism or attempt to paper over it with class-only approaches to organizing. We must address racism and white supremacy head on and build deep solidarity in these communities through exposing the ways that white supremacy has been used as a tool to divide working people from each other. We certainly have work to do, but our conversations tell us that there is a foundation of understanding, desire to connect and belief in collective action that we can build upon.



# WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

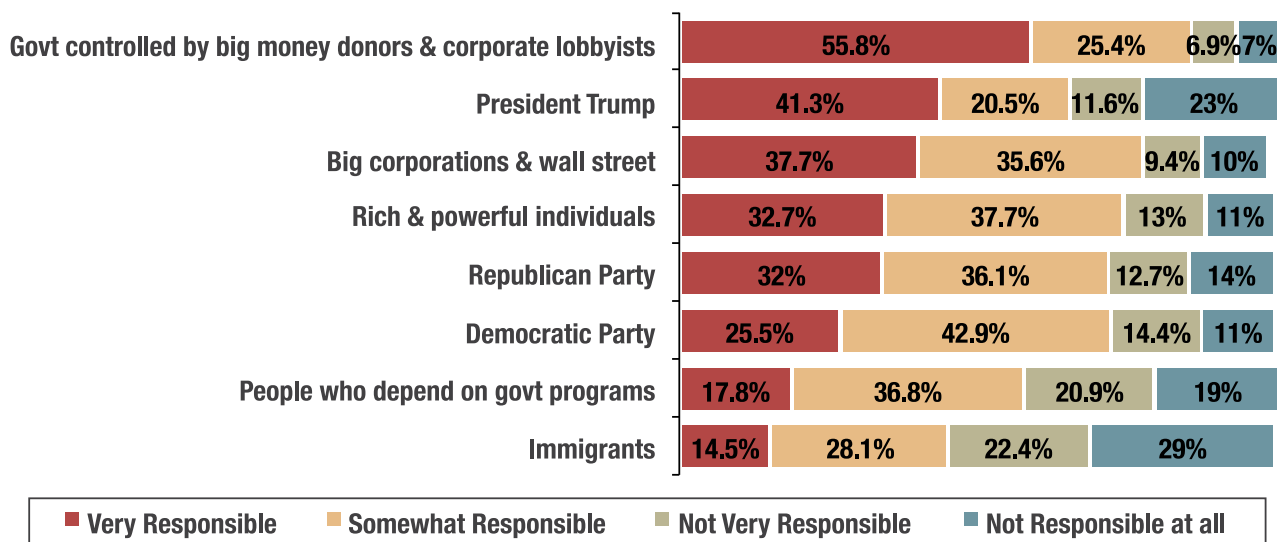
## EVEN IN COUNTIES THAT VOTED FOR TRUMP, THERE IS SUPPORT FOR PROGRESSIVE SOLUTIONS BUT ANGER AT GOVERNMENT PERSISTS.

In Down Home North Carolina's pilot canvass, government (and President Trump) were most often selected as responsible for the problems facing the community. In the nine-state survey, we offered the list of options in the table above. Eighty-one percent identified "government controlled by big money donors and corporate lobbyists" as either "very" (56%) or "somewhat" (25%) responsible, 71% blame "rich and powerful individuals," and two-thirds blame "Wall Street and big corporations." Many people expressed deep feelings of betrayal and anger towards a government they felt had abandoned them and been co-opted by the rich.

The "villains" of Conservative populist frames also received their share of blame, but to a far lesser extent (55% hold that "people who depend on government programs" are responsible for the problems in their community, with 18% saying they are "very" responsible), while immigrants, another favorite target of conservative populism, are the group least likely to be considered responsible (42% believe they are responsible at "some" level, while 15% hold them "very" responsible). These findings reveal that while both progressive and conservative populism appear to be at play among people in rural communities, the progressive story that government controlled by the wealthy and big corporations is most to blame, is more resonant.

Progressive solutions (like government intervention to benefit people) are also revealed to have appeal among the people we spoke to. Solutions involving the expansion of government programs, strengthening the safety net and tightening regulations were commonly identified as having the potential to help solve the problems facing the community: "improving schools and the education system" (76%), "better access to mental health and addiction treatment" (75%), "protecting our land and water" (70%), investing in both infrastructure broadly (71%) and green jobs specifically (59%) all ranked highly. There is also broad support for solutions that tackle the power of the wealthy and big corporations: "getting big money out of politics" (70%) and raising taxes on these groups (65%). Here again, the contrast with traditionally conservative solutions is pronounced: cutting government regulations (38%) and deporting immigrants (22%) were the least popular choices among the people we spoke to. Although there is clearly anger and disillusionment in our current government, cutting government involvement and intervention did not resonate strongly with the people we interviewed. While the people we spoke to clearly feel that the government we have is not working; the role that government should play is still contested ground.

## HOW RESPONSIBLE ARE THESE GROUPS FOR THE PROBLEMS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?





## PRESIDENT TRUMP REMAINS A POLARIZING FIGURE

President Trump elicited strong reactions from the people we spoke with. Just over 40% of people said they believe Trump to be “very” responsible for the problems in their community (with an additional 21% holding him “somewhat” responsible). However, while Trump was second only to “government controlled by lobbyists and donors” on the list of those to blame, he had the second highest number of respondents say that he was “not at all” responsible for the problems in these communities (23%). Anecdotally, we encountered a good number of strong supporters of President Trump who were vocally behind the President and felt that he was unfairly maligned or even the victim of a conspiracy among “the elites.” However, we encountered more people who were horrified by the President’s behavior and policies, and were motivated to become politically active because of him. In addition, we had several conversations with Trump voters who were hopeful that the President would deliver on his promise of jobs and infrastructure investments, but who were disillusioned with the lack of change, the scandals, and his focus on tax cuts that benefited only the very wealthy.

## WE DID NOT FIND A WAVE OF HATRED TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS OR THE POOR

From chants of “build the wall,” to the Muslim ban, to mass ICE raids, anti-immigrant sentiment and attacks on immigrants have been on the rise since the election of President Trump in 2016. However, despite this heavily publicized anti-immigrant activity, we found little evidence that this xenophobia is widespread in rural America. That is not to say it was absent; there was undeniably strong anti-immigrant sentiment among a minority of the people we spoke to (including threats of violence and the use of racial slurs), but overall, animus towards immigrants was much lower among the people that we surveyed than is traditionally presented in the media, especially given the skew in our sample towards older white people. Only 15% of respondents said that immigrants are “very” responsible for the problems in their community, while half of all respondents thought immigrants are “not very” or “not at all” responsible. Of all the categories we asked about, these were the lowest levels of blame. In fact, 33% of respondents believed not welcoming immigrants to be one of the core problems in their communities. Younger and non-white people were even less likely to blame immigrants.

This does not in any way lessen the impact of ICE raids ripping apart families or contradict the very real racism and xenophobia experienced by immigrants every day. But it does suggest to us that efforts to scapegoat immigrants for economic ills have not taken root broadly among the people we spoke with. If we invest in building deep solidarity in these communities, we have an opportunity to push back against the targeting of immigrant communities in an even more impactful way.

Another group often blamed for economic and cultural ills by the reactionary right are people who receive government benefits. In an effort to understand how far this message has penetrated, we asked respondents whether “people who depend on government benefits” are to blame for the problems their community faces. Again, while a handful of people responded with the classic (and racially coded) right-wing talking points, the majority of people we spoke to rejected this idea or at least demonstrated a weak allegiance to it. Less than one in five people (18%) said that people who depend on government programs were “very” responsible for the problems in their community, and 40% said they were “not at all” or “not very” responsible for these problems. Just over a third of respondents (37%) held people on benefits “somewhat responsible” for problems in their community.

# A NEW PATH FORWARD

*“Get that great majority back together, I think, and it would be unstoppable. There is really only one set of successful politics for an age of inequality like this one, and it naturally favors the party of Roosevelt. Trump succeeded by pretending to be the heir of populists past, acting the role of a rough-hewn reformer who detested the powerful and cared about working-class people. Now it is the turn of Democrats to take it back from him. They may have to fire their consultants. They may have to stand up to their donors. They will certainly have to find the courage to change, to dump the ideology of the Nineties, the catechism of tech, bank, and globe that everyone now knows is nothing but an excuse for an out-of-touch elite. But the time has come. History is calling.”<sup>36</sup>*

- Thomas Frank

<sup>36</sup> Frank, Thomas, et al. “Four More Years.” Harper’s Magazine, [harpers.org/archive/2018/04/four-more-years-2/](https://harpers.org/archive/2018/04/four-more-years-2/).

**HISTORY IS CALLING FOR US TO BRING THAT GREAT MAJORITY—THE MULTIRACIAL POPULIST MAJORITY—TO CONFRONT THE AGE OF INEQUALITY AND TO BUILD A MOVEMENT POLITICS THAT WILL PUT PEOPLE AND PLANET FIRST.**



There are six core components of our strategy to build a progressive, multiracial and race-conscious populism that can unite urban, suburban, small-town and rural America around a bold agenda to build an economy and society that works for everyone.



Build People's Organizations -  
Invest in Organizing



Political Education  
+ Leadership Training



Race-Conscious + Multiracial  
Bridge Building



Culture + Narrative Strategy



Build a Bold Agenda



Movement Politics + Governance



## BUILD PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS

The first and most important component is investing in relationship-building in key rural and small-town communities that have been marginalized by the massive economic and demographic changes in their region. It is critical to build relationships that are grounded in radical empathy through deep listening that allows people to trust one another in spite of differences. “For me, courage is stepping outside of our clubhouse, knocking doors, and talking to our neighbors,” says Jonathan Smucker of Beyond the Choir and Lancaster Stands Up. “If we’re not intentional, it’s too easy to get comfortable taking action with like-minded people.”

People’s Action member organizations and our allies are engaging more than 10,000 residents in rural and small-town communities in key states in

conversations through door-to-door canvasses and other outreach mechanisms over the first six months of this project to build a clear analysis of the worldview of these communities and the most urgent issues impacting their lives. We plan to build 15 new chapters in targeted counties by the end of 2018. We are documenting these conversations to help shape the public understanding of the challenges facing these communities and the most effective strategy to engage their interests. “The most powerful thing we can do is listen to people,” says Joel Lewis of Citizen Action of Wisconsin who has helped build a new organizing co-operative in the north-central region of the state. “I have found when we have done deep canvassing and really invested time in engaging people we can build trust and begin to find common ground.”

This initial phase of work is critical to building long-term organizing infrastructure that will help sustain community engagement and collective action to reshape the worldview in these communities and have a tangible impact on people’s lives. We will organize a series of deep canvasses over the next three years to continue to refine and strengthen our narrative and strategic agenda in these targeted regions. People’s organizations create the space for people to build deep relationships across difference; develop a shared understanding and analysis of the world; and create a shared vision and strategy for change. They are profoundly democratic spaces that are the foundation of any popular movement.

Joel Lewis of Citizen Action of Wisconsin canvassing with co-op member North Central Organizing Co-op member Rita Pachal.



(Left) Joel Lewis of Citizen Action of Wisconsin canvassing with co-op member North Central Organizing Co-op member Rita Pachal. (Below) Lancaster Stands Up mass meeting



## POLITICAL EDUCATION + LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Successful popular movements throughout our nation's history have invested in training and popular education. Our leadership development and political education program will help build the core community leadership needed to drive strategic campaigns, confront racial division, and lead toward relationships and alignment across race and geography. Our Political Education and Strategic Practice Team is developing political education curriculum to help expose the false jewels of hate and division and point toward true solutions and structural reforms and the decision-makers who have the power to unlock them. By understanding our history and the forces that shape our movements, we will be better able to build durable organizations that are both ready to seize strategic moments and durable enough to win change that lasts.

## RURAL WOMEN AS POLITICAL HEALERS + BRIDGE BUILDERS

Through both our research and organizing experience, it is clear that women will play a critical role as both healers and bridge builders in rural and small-town America as they do across the world.<sup>37</sup> People's Action will build a cohort of rural women leaders within our Political Healers Leadership Development Project, designed to invest in the leadership of women, especially women of color, create space for different forms of leadership within our movement and lift up strategies that create healing, transformative change.

From Fannie Lou Hamer to Dolores Huerta to the women who bring comfort and food in times of tragedy, women often hold leadership roles grounded in healing, community and transformative change. We define a political healer as someone who brings cultural trauma into public memory. From #SayHerName to women in New Orleans using blue umbrellas to remember the devastation of Katrina to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina marching for their stolen children, political healers take trauma and injustice that has been systematically erased and make it impossible to ignore.

The Political Healers Leadership Development Project is based on a proven political education and leadership training program created by Arique Aguilar, the Womxn\* of Color Organizer from TakeAction Minnesota, in order to develop the leadership of womxn of color in Minnesota in a way that speaks to the experiences of and deep motivations for making change held by womxn of color. The project builds a race, gender and class analysis that contextualizes the talents, strengths, experiences and inherent contributions of womxn of color in this movement in a healing and power-building frame.



<sup>37</sup> "Rural Women 'Powerful Catalysts for Sustainable Development', Agents against Poverty, Hunger, Women's Commission Told, as General Debate Concludes | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." United Nations, United Nations, [www.un.org/press/en/2012/wom1897.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/wom1897.doc.htm).

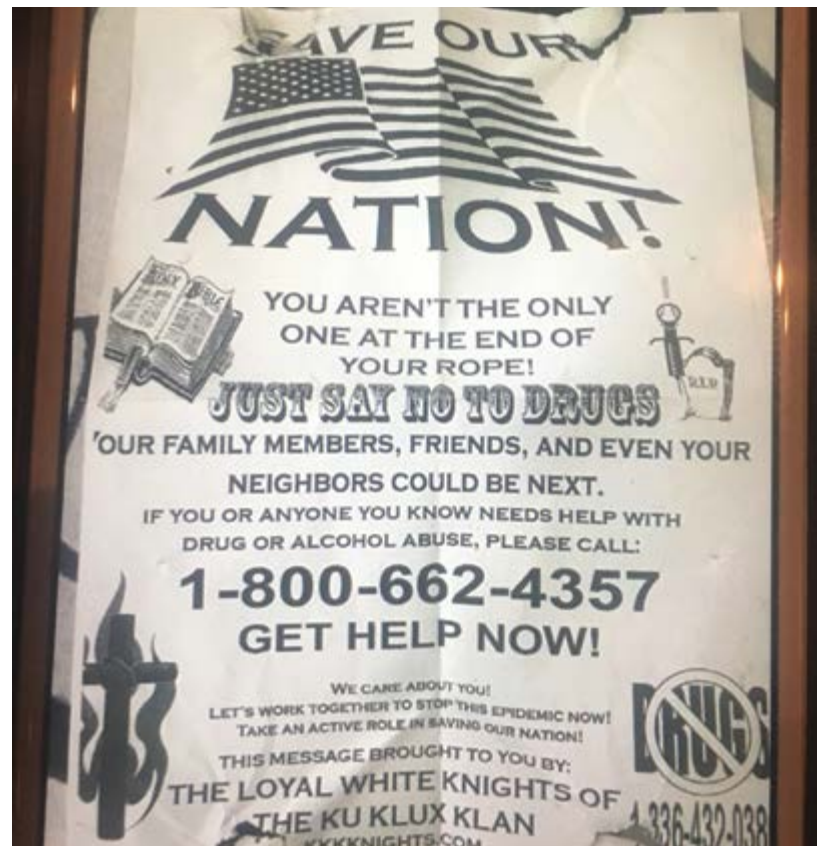
## RACE-CONSCIOUS + MULTIRACIAL BRIDGE BUILDING STRATEGIES

The ways in which race has been used as a strategic force throughout American history to consolidate power and wealth have been well-documented. “Time and again, racist ideas have not been cooked up from the boiling pot of ignorance and hate,” Ibram X. Kendi wrote in his recent study of the history of racist ideas in America. “Time and again, powerful and brilliant men and women have produced racist ideas in order to justify the racist policies of their era, in order to redirect the blame for their era’s racial disparities away from those policies and onto Black people.”<sup>38</sup>

OJ Semans Sr of the Native Organizers Alliance and Four Directions Vote is all too familiar with this trend. “We like to say that we’re the ones government and corporations practice on when they steal from the people,” Semans Sr. says. “Then they do it to everyone else. Most Americans are seeing that now – how it adversely affects their health, their living, union busting. All of this is happening because people are not becoming active soon enough to stop that kind of change.” Semans Sr. invokes the Lakota phrase *Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ* (We Are All Related) as an antidote to using race as a tool of division. “This is a part of our culture we have been teaching for centuries--it is how we are raised to understand our connection to each other.”

“The conditioning that occurs in a society that allows you to dehumanize another doesn’t come naturally to human beings,” says Eric Ward, a long-time civil rights strategist and director of the Western States Center. The “alt-right,” white nationalists and neo-Nazis are often called hate groups, Ward says, but that may not be entirely accurate. “They’re using hate in an attempt to seize government institutions and power, so they can put in place their vision – an America free of people of color and Jews. They don’t bring racism, homophobia or bigotry to town. They organize the bigotry that’s already there.”

Any attempt to build a powerful progressive populist movement must be both race-conscious and deeply committed to building multiracial alliances. “We have found the enemy, and it’s not us,” People’s Action founder Gale Cincotta famously said years ago and it has never been more true. People’s Action member organizations and our allies across the country have developed powerful race-conscious strategies to “build a bigger we” and we must incorporate these strategies across rural and small-town America. The failure to build multiracial alliances in working-class communities means that we continue to cede ground to the surge of white nationalist and “alt-right” organizing that is aggressively advancing uncontested in many communities.



“Save Our Nation”: Loyal White Knights organizing around the opioid crisis in rural North Carolina.

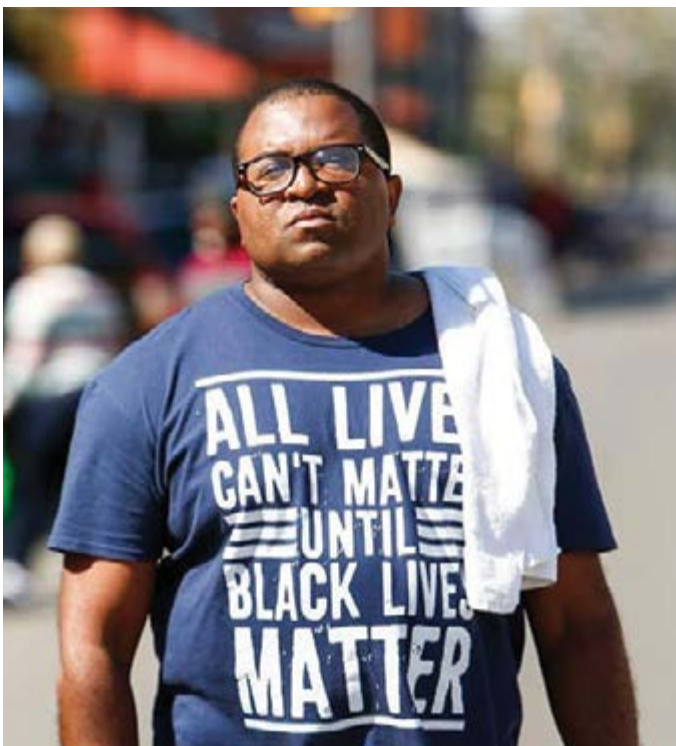
<sup>38</sup> Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Nation Books, 2017.

Across the country, people's organizations in rural and small-town America are having difficult and powerful conversations about race that are helping to build powerful and durable relationships.

- In Minnesota, the Land Stewardship Project teaches rural farmers who are largely white about the legacy of colonialism and genocide.
- The Missouri Rural Crisis Center is bridging gaps between urban and rural, young and old, and consumers and producers through their Growing the Local Food Chain in Missouri Program, which builds unity, knowledge and skills of urban and rural youth and their families around food and farming and through their Black/Rural Power Building Project, which brings together black and rural communities to strategically engage in organizing and voter engagement in ways that build long-term understanding, relationships, leadership and power.
- In Iowa, hundreds of rural and suburban leaders turned out in force at the Capitol to rally against anti-immigrant legislation after years of investing in building relationships between newcomers and long-time residents.
- In Alamance County, a diverse group of white, African-American and Latinx community leaders are all working together to fight against the Alamance County Sheriff's participation in the 287(g) program and the long history of racial profiling and harassment.

These strategies require intentionality and deep commitment to building trust and solidarity. Our experiences confirm what researchers have found: there is great hunger for this type of multiracial bridge-building but most local communities lack the capacity and infrastructure to develop these types of powerful strategies.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Beider, H., Harwood, S., & Chahal, K. (2017). "The Other America": White working-class views on belonging, change, identity, and immigration. Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, UK.



***“After high school, I joined the Army. I was in Iraq for 15 months. It increased my activism. Iraq made me realize that I fought for the rights of all Americans, not some. We have politicians who act as though there’s no such thing as police brutality, racism, sexism, xenophobia. I fought for the rights of all Americans. I’m an activist with Hometown Action because they touch on the important issues, like racism and sexism. We bring them to the attention of local politicians by canvassing in our neighborhoods.”***

- Travis Jackson, Hometown Action



Missouri Rural Crisis Center “Growing Local Food Chain in Missouri Program” brings together urban and rural youth and their families.

## CULTURE + NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Reactionary forces have internalized the lesson that “politics are downstream from culture.” The expansive investment by the corporate elite in building communications infrastructure that taps into our biases has been well-documented and has helped to shape our fundamental ideas about how we think about our own identity, racial diversity and the role of government and market.<sup>40</sup> The Mercer family is reported to fund organizations with over 145 staff who work full-time to generating content for more than 2,200 websites that are all dedicated to advancing their worldview and political agenda.<sup>41</sup>

People’s Action and our affiliates are working closely with key partners to develop a cultural strategy that is grounded in the worldview and cultural language of these targeted communities. We are developing significant online infrastructure and platforms to reach a mass audience. We currently have a significant online reach in the targeted states and will build off existing advertising, social media, and related data and research and conduct an analysis of how people in the targeted communities get their information; what initial messages and messengers are most effective in the initial engagement of people; and which narratives drive new meaning making around declining economic conditions and weaken or neutralize racism, white supremacy, misogynistic and anti-government viewpoints.

It is critical that we develop a coherent narrative strategy that builds a sense of community and belonging and advances cultural values that lay the groundwork for broader structural change. In partnership with the Pop Culture Collaborative, we are working with our research partners, Sightful and the Center for Rural Strategies, Our Story and Ryan Senser to develop a research and learning plan that will shape our culture change strategy. We are beginning by organizing and facilitating deep listening circles in six small-towns across America. Our goal is to expand our capacity to mobilize a broader range of American people around a message of inclusion and belonging. We want to build bridges across urban and rural communities and begin to heal some of the divisions that are threatening the fabric of our democracy.

We believe that relationships – especially relationships where people build bridges across difference – can be a powerful source of culture change. The goal of this project is to learn how to listen more deeply, document more powerfully and use the tools of popular culture to amplify these stories at a scale that can help to change the worldview of communities and reach mass audiences. But real change cannot happen through story alone. Real change requires decisive and conscious action, the breaking of habits, and new ways of being with each other. It requires us

to be vulnerable, to have the hard conversation, to reach across the aisle. Real culture change means we have to walk our talk. What we learn in the field will need to be incorporated at a deep level into the culture of our organizations.

At the heart of this project is the concept of the “listening circle.” A listening circle is a space where everyone is welcome; everyone is heard; and everyone is witnessed in their story. The process creates a real “we space” of collective relating and deep empathy. The experience itself is transformative and inspiring. We will create an actual experience of belonging that begins to re-weave the social fabric. We will complement the learning from the listening circles with small group discussions or “triads,” where three friends with differing political or social perspectives come together for a guided discussion. We will be listening to hear how they bridge their differences to maintain a friendship and how they make space for their differences. In the coming months we will be finalizing the design of the research and training People’s Action leaders to facilitate groups like these in the future. This research will help inform our culture and narrative strategy and build out the platforms and infrastructure to communicate our values and stories to more than 500,000 people in our target counties over the next three years.

<sup>40</sup> Mayer, Jane. “The Reclusive Hedge-Fund Tycoon Behind the Trump Presidency.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 26 Oct. 2017, [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/the-reclusive-hedge-fund-tycoon-behind-the-trump-presidency](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/27/the-reclusive-hedge-fund-tycoon-behind-the-trump-presidency).

<sup>41</sup> Presentation by Guy Cecil, Priorities USA at “Cross-Movement Convening” organized by the Center for Community Change in December 2017.



*"I initially became involved with Land Steward Project as a mentor to beginning farmers. The thing I love is that they are a true people's organization – they look to their members to lead. The majority are rural people, many are farmers or have some agricultural ties.*

*I appreciate that they have not shied away from controversial issues- like racial justice and racial equity. Our members were lifting up more concern after Barack Obama was in office – we saw racism becoming more apparent.*

*Within our agricultural system there are a lot of inequities. Not a lot of people of color are land owners – more involved as laborers, not as farmers and owners. For us, this is a core value; we can't move forward if we leave so many people behind. This takes connecting the dots for some folks. It's not on their radar. They ask, how does that relate to beginning farmers? We've done racial justice training within organization to get educated about history and the current situation. We've got rural chaplains to talk about race in their communities. We say we want to live in a vibrant communities with different cultures. People tell us, "now that you talk about it I can see what you are saying."*

*We've made connections with the Red Lake tribe. They are their doing amazing work on food sovereignty – producing their own food. Taking food back into their own hands. We've asked, "How can we help? What can we learn from you?"*

- Laura Frerichs, Land Stewardship Project

We don't merely want to find the most powerful message or narrative, we want to find the most powerful ways of being in relationship with more people.

# PEOPLE'S ACTION

Unlike most research projects on the left (politics, organizing, advocacy), the People's Action Project is unique in its goal – rather than focusing on shifting opinion in the short-term, through messaging, we are focusing on learning what is necessary to build long-term, high-value relationships with the people we need to win the states, long-term.

People's Action will come away "holding the keys" to authentic relationships with people (voters) that have eluded the purely message-focused political establishment. Relationships that are tied to organizations, rooted in long-term bonds, networked for narrative-reinforcing story sharing and defined by sustained action and activism.





## BUILD A BOLD AGENDA

How did Maine, a state under the rule of two-term, Tea Party Governor Paul LePage, “America’s Craziest Governor” and “Donald Trump before Donald Trump before Donald Trump became popular,”<sup>42</sup> become a beacon of the progressive movement? By building a bold, populist agenda and taking it directly to the voters.

In the past several years, Mainers have voted overwhelmingly to raise the minimum wage, tax the wealthy to fund public education, and become the first state to expand Medicaid at the ballot box. These citizens initiatives have done especially well in the precise places where Democrats have been losing ground – the so-called “white working class” demographics and regions of the state. This November, voters in Maine – the state with the oldest population in the nation – will vote on universal homecare for seniors and people with disabilities, funded by closing a tax loophole for the wealthy. This is a critical initiative to bridge the rural-urban divide and transform the way we care for each other.

The experience of Maine is one example of a set of emerging strategic campaigns to shape a bold, progressive populist agenda that is both multiracial and race-conscious and can beat the politics of strategic racism and unite urban and rural communities around a shared vision and values. Across the country, People’s Action member organizations and are our allies are launching strategic campaigns that direct people toward the true source of economic decline and toward real solutions that deliver concrete improvements in people’s lives. Recent polling by the Congressional Progressive Caucus reinforces this strategy as they found that bold and progressive policies and messages resonate with both base voters and to persuade swing voters.<sup>43</sup> These campaigns will be designed to shape understanding and worldview and build bridges across race and geography. This agenda will be lifted up through strategic campaigns, mainstream and social media, popular culture, and meetings with candidates for local and national office, with particular emphasis on early Presidential Primary states and key swing states.



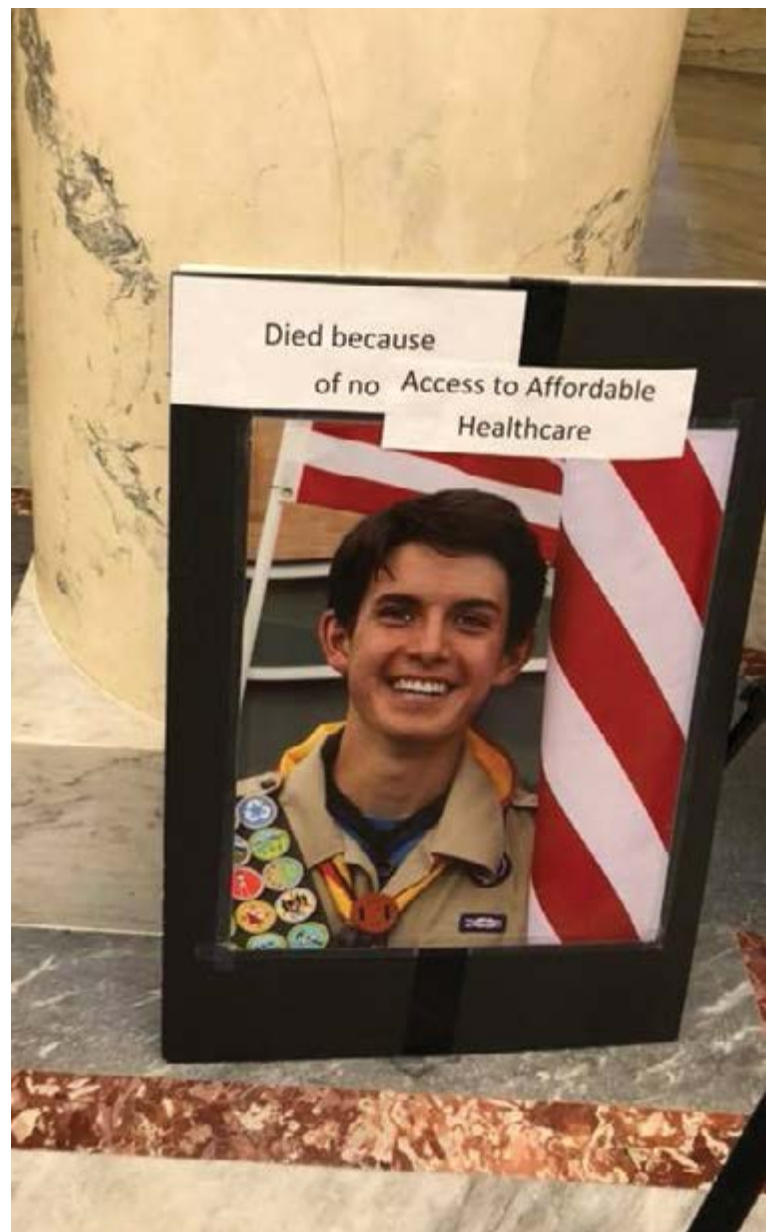
Mainers for Health Care celebrate becoming the first state to expand Medicaid at the ballot box in November 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Woodard, Colin, et al. "How Did Mild-Mannered Maine Get America's Craziest Governor?" *POLITICO Magazine*, 8 Jan. 2014, [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/paul-lepage-maine-governor-crazy-101923](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/paul-lepage-maine-governor-crazy-101923).  
<sup>43</sup> [jason@weareprogressives.org](mailto:jason@weareprogressives.org), "Progressive Caucus PAC Leaders, Lake Research Partners, and Leading Progressive Organizations Held a Press Call to Highlight the Popularity of Progressive Policies in 2018 Battleground Congressional Districts." *Progressive Caucus, Progressive Caucus*, 20 Mar. 2018, [weareprogressives.org/progressive-caucus-pac-leaders-lake-research-partners-leading-progressive-organizations-held-press-call-highlight-popularity-progressive-policies-2018-battleground-congressional-d/](http://weareprogressives.org/progressive-caucus-pac-leaders-lake-research-partners-leading-progressive-organizations-held-press-call-highlight-popularity-progressive-policies-2018-battleground-congressional-d/).

## HEALTHCARE FOR ALL

Across the country, rural and small-town communities have organized to help defeat repeated attempts to strip away their healthcare and are advancing local and state expansions of healthcare. Healthcare is becoming a more and more resonant issue across our country. United under the imperative, “Kill this bill before it kills us,” our member groups mobilized tens of thousands of grassroots leaders in urban and rural areas who put their elected officials on speed dial, bird-dogged them at fundraisers, spoke up at town halls and devoted countless hours to defeating repeal of the Affordable Care Act. People’s Action member groups organized nearly 800 actions and events to help stop the repeal. This year, groups across the country are continuing the fight for Medicaid Expansion and against the work requirements. We are also seeing a shift of sentiment in favor of a national health plan. A March 2018 Kaiser Health Tracking Poll finding that six in ten (59%) favor a national health plan, or Medicare-for-all, in which all Americans would get their insurance from a single government plan – including a majority of both Democrats and independents and about one-third of Republicans. While our groups are still fighting the defensive fight to preserve the health care that we have through the ACA, we’re also now ready to take up the rallying cry for what we really need: healthcare for all.

In November 2017, 60% of Maine voters supported the initiative to expand Medicaid and now 70,000 people in Maine will get health insurance coverage. The measure prevailed all over the state, including many of the same places where Trump won in 2016 and where LePage has been winning for years. Health care is clearly an issue that cuts across political persuasions and unites urban and rural communities. Jesse Graham, director of Maine People’s Alliance which played a critical role in moving the ballot measure reflected that “we can split Trump’s base if we take on fights that will improve the lives of people who are struggling economically.”



United Vision for Idaho organizes a die-in to push for Medicaid expansion in March 2018.



*"I've lived in a very small-town of 2,000 called Phippsburg, on the Maine coast north of Portland all my life. My great grandmother was the first generation born here, from Ireland. I have some Native American ancestry; my family's been here since the 1700s.*

*In 2004, I got stage-4, triple-negative breast cancer. I was not supposed to survive. I was on MaineCare, the Medicaid program and they yanked me off. I was forced to move to Massachusetts in 2006, where Romney had passed the state plan, to get health insurance to finish my treatment.*

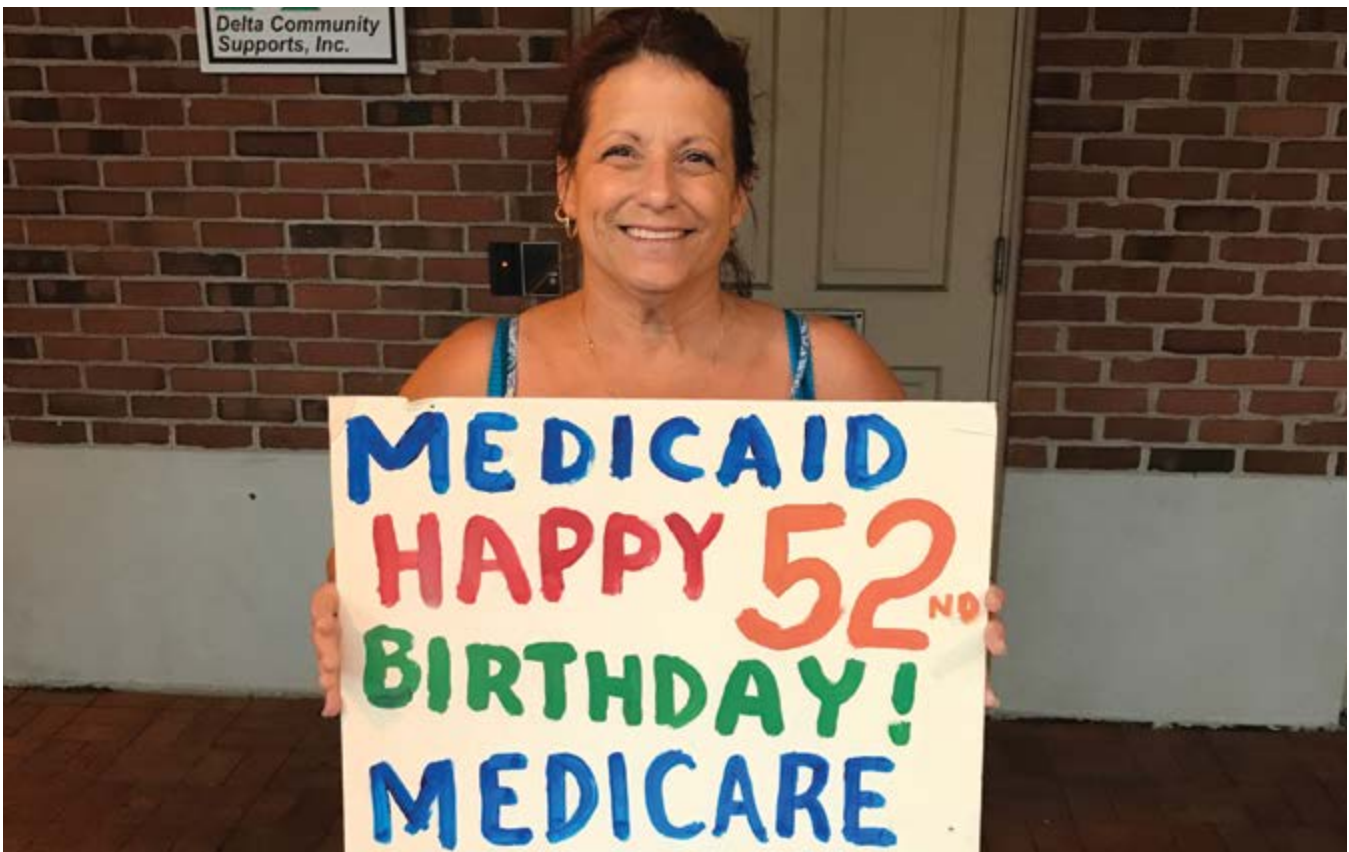
*When I came back to Maine in 2011, I still could not get any kind of health care. I called [Senator] Susan Collins and my Congress office and couldn't get any help. I went without insurance for three years. I saw article about Governor LePage not expanding Medicaid and left a comment on Facebook. I said: "I don't understand you people! Why can't you do like Massachusetts?"*

*We've been trying to get LePage to expand Medicaid; there are 70,000 Mainers with no coverage. The legislature passed it, but the Governor vetoed it 5 times. So we wrote a citizens' initiative. I collected signatures on election day, we got it on the ballot. I door-knocked in my town, called people. And it passed in 2016.*

*Before I started with Maine People's Alliance I had a lot of anger issues – a lot of bitterness with the State of Maine. I didn't know how to speak for myself; I didn't know the procedures to make change. Maine People's Alliance taught me how to write speeches at public hearings, how to talk to my legislators, how to get other people involved. What I like is if they say they're going to do something, they've always come through.*

*And I've met people with a whole different set of values. Who look at things in a more positive way. It's brought home a whole new awesome community. I don't feel quite so alone anymore."*

- Brandy Staples, Maine People's Alliance



*"I've lived in NJ since 1981, in a town on the water. I moved here from Youngstown Ohio. I started cleaning houses on the water and back bay – worked my rear off to make a decent wage. I turned it into a small business, with a few employees. That's until Sandy came and wiped out 98% of the homes we cleaned. I lost my home too. I had a 1,000 sq. foot home on a concrete slab – and contaminated water came up to my windows. We had to start all over again. I always knew I wanted to be involved with an organization. But never thought I'd be with one as powerful as NJOP. It's not a service organization – it's a power organization. We work with legislators. We got legislation passed for rental assistance. We got foreclosure forbearance – so banks can't foreclose if people are behind because of Sandy. Lots of people – my neighbor – are still not home.*

*Last year I fought to stop them from taking away my health insurance by repealing the Affordable Care Act. I am on Medicaid expansion. I met a 64-year-old woman who is waiting tables just for health care.*

*I'm an old school Republican – a progressive Republican. But today I don't see any Republicans I can trust. What changed my mind was how our Governor abandoned us after Sandy. I now believe more progressive. We should have college education free, at least 2 years; why should people have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to better themselves? Why should people pay \$1,000 a month for health care? We should have access to it and afford it. It took me many years to see the light. Sandy did it as I met other people. The big money have their thumb on the back of the working class. They try to divide us by race and by class. If you try to raise yourself up they'll try to keep you down.*

*I'm glad I went through Sandy because it's made me a stronger person. Now I've got a fellowship training to be a full time organizer. Let's get everybody back home. And not let the people in DC take away my health insurance.*

- Jody Stewart, New Jersey Organizing Project

## COVERING THE BASICS: HOUSING, GOOD JOBS + A LIVING WAGE

In the Blue Ridge Mountain range of the Appalachians in North Carolina's mountain west, one of the first campaigns won by the newly formed Haywood County chapter of Down Home North Carolina was a "living wage" ordinance for Waynesville city workers. There is broad support across rural communities for campaigns that support increasing wages and improving access to good jobs. Strategies around health care; universal family care; ending the overdose crisis; college for all; and clean energy and water all have the capacity to create good jobs that pay a living wage.

In addition to good jobs, safe, affordable housing is a critical need in rural America. Rural America, especially Indian country, face a triple housing crisis: rising costs, a lack of rental units and dangerously degraded housing stock. The relatively high poverty rates in rural areas, aging population, lack of lending options and crumbling infrastructure have left many rural residents living in unsafe conditions.<sup>44</sup> Fighting for safe and affordable housing must be part of a bold rural agenda.



Down Home North Carolina leaders in Haywood County celebrate the passage of Living Wage Ordinance for Waynesville city workers.

<sup>44</sup> White, Gillian B. "Rural America's Silent Housing Crisis." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 28 Jan. 2015, [www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/rural-americas-silent-housing-crisis/384885/](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/rural-americas-silent-housing-crisis/384885/).



## UNIVERSAL FAMILY CARE

In the face of rapidly-shifting demographics and persistent attacks on the workers in the care economy, Universal Family Care emerged as an urgent and obvious opportunity to address the needs of the care workforce, family caregivers, people with disabilities and seniors. A growing number of states, including Maine and Michigan are advancing these strategies through the legislature and at the ballot box.

Family care insurance should lay the foundation for the more robust industry of well-trained, fairly compensated care workers that our country so desperately needs, and ensure our families can afford care to focus on what really matters: being there for our loved ones while meeting our full potential at work. The bedrock work of caregiving continues to be invisible and vastly undervalued. We can no longer sensibly plan for an economy in which a third of all productive work

is done in the home, yet registers no outside economic value. No social or economic progress would be possible without our largely invisible army of care workers and family caregivers; care is the work that makes all other work possible. It is simply untenable to imagine a way forward without fundamentally re-imagining a care infrastructure that values caregivers as a critical resource. Universal Family Care can help keep our families whole and our economy pitched to the future. We have come to realize that addressing the family care challenge – long-term care, childcare and paid family leave – is critically important; all represent equally critical parts of a new care infrastructure that our families urgently need. The solution must be more than the sum of those challenges. Families do not experience care needs in silos.

As with any bold new program of this scale, building a national family care program will take vision, leadership, pragmatism, research, an organized constituency and funding to succeed. And we all stand to benefit. American businesses stand to recoup as much as \$33 billion per year in the lost productivity of working family caregivers. Employees who would otherwise drop out of the labor force to become full-time caregivers can come back to work. The United States is currently losing approximately \$3 billion a year in costs due to childcare-related absences alone. A significant share of expenses and waste in our healthcare system is also concentrated at end of life. Good non-medical care for our growing aging population can support better chronic illness management, preventing unnecessary hospital re-admittance and creating better health outcomes and well-being.

## CLEAN WATER

Access to clean water is a human right, and it is our demand for every community and every family. No community should see its water contaminated or stolen by private interests. And yet, across the country, crumbling infrastructure, industrial runoff, factory farming, extractive industry and climate impacts are poisoning our water and threatening our communities' health. The recent decision to stop providing bottled water to Flint residents while simultaneously allowing Nestle to drain and sell Michigan's aquifers perfectly encapsulates the water crisis we face.

Mining, fracking and pipelines are responsible for widespread deadly contamination. There are more than 15,000 abandoned and highly toxic uranium mines; 75% are on Native and Federal lands. Navajo women living near the uranium mines are up to 8 times more likely to have a child born with a birth defect than the national average. Fracking has been proven to contaminate even deep groundwater with salt and deadly chemicals including diesel, benzene and methanol. Since 1986, there have been more than 8,000 significant pipeline spills which have caused over 500 deaths and spilled more than 3 million gallons or 200 barrels a day. Despite the nearly constant leakage, only 139 federal inspectors are charged with monitoring over 2.6 million miles of pipeline, half of which is over 50 years old. We must hold polluters responsible.

In Wisconsin, nearly 1.7 million people drink from unregulated water wells—nearly half of which, studies suggest, is contaminated at levels above health standards. In Iowa, from 2014 to 2015, water in more than 1,700 public water systems, serving over 6.7 million people, was contaminated with nitrate at or over an average of 5 ppm, the increased cancer risk level.<sup>45</sup> Even as our population has risen and the climate crisis stresses water systems, federal spending on water utilities has been slashed by 75% since 1977. At the same time, public water systems are being increasingly privatized and poor communities are in danger of being priced out of a fundamental human right: water. The fight for clean water is a fight for survival in urban and rural communities and a fight around the role of government in our communities.

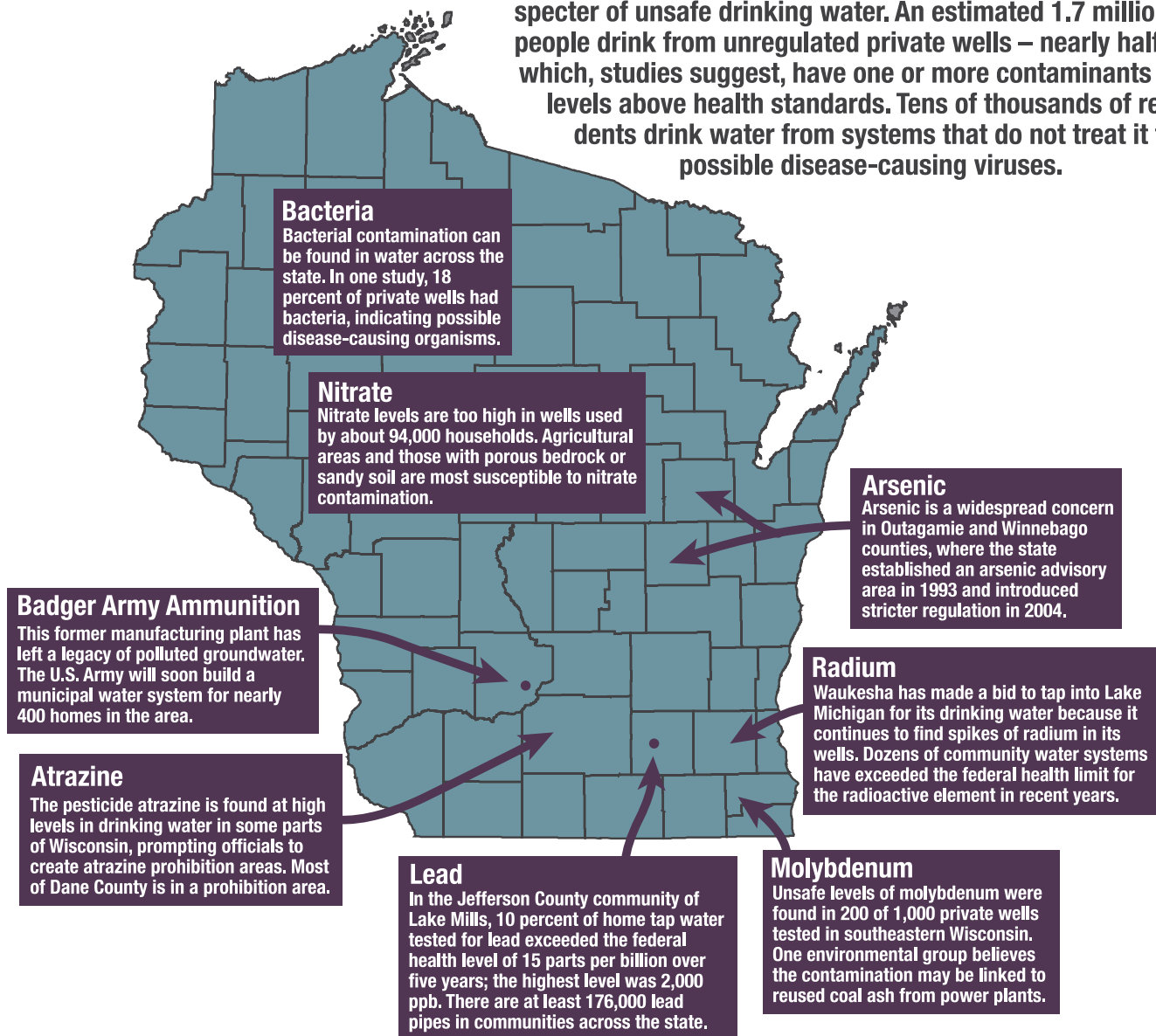


<sup>45</sup> "Iowa Cities Struggle to Keep Farm Pollution Out of Tap Water." EWG, [www.ewg.org/research/case-study-iowa-cities-struggle-keep-farm-pollution-out-tap-water#WtWq1dPwY6h](http://www.ewg.org/research/case-study-iowa-cities-struggle-keep-farm-pollution-out-tap-water#WtWq1dPwY6h).

# WHAT'S IN OUR DRINKING WATER?

## Examples of contaminants across Wisconsin

Hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin residents face the specter of unsafe drinking water. An estimated 1.7 million people drink from unregulated private wells – nearly half of which, studies suggest, have one or more contaminants at levels above health standards. Tens of thousands of residents drink water from systems that do not treat it for possible disease-causing viruses.



CREDIT: Katie Kowalsky/Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism

SOURCES: "Private drinking water quality in rural Wisconsin," *Journal of Environmental Health*, 2013; Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, draft technical review for Waukesha's proposed diversion of Great Lakes water, 2015; Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Drinking Water Database; Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection website, atrazine prohibition areas; town of Merrimac administrator Tim McCumber.



## CLEAN ENERGY + GOOD GREEN JOBS

The ‘green energy revolution’ is well underway with solar, wind and renewable energy continuing to grow and energy efficiency technology increasing rapidly. However, the benefits of clean energy and energy efficiency are not reaching low-income people, communities of color, non-homeowners, rural Americans and Native Americans. Our communities pay the highest energy costs, breathe the dirtiest air and are most at risk as the climate crisis increases flooding, drought, heat and super storms. In particular, Rural Electric Co-ops (RECs) arose from rural people working together to bring electricity to rural areas, yet REC member-owners now pay some of the highest prices for electricity, RECs are the most coal dependent utilities and far too many serve big energy interests, not rural communities. People’s Action member organizations across the country—including Wisconsin and Iowa—are building clean energy campaigns that reject the false choice between jobs and health and focus on bringing clean energy and green jobs to the hardest hit communities.

In Illinois, Fair Economy Illinois (FEI, comprised of People’s Action affiliates The People’s Lobby, Illinois People’s Action and ONE Northside) worked with allies including environmental justice groups, traditional green groups and labor to win a major expansion in clean energy and fend off an historic rate hike that would have crippled low-income families in Illinois. The Future Energy Jobs Act, which passed on the final day of the legislative session in December 2016, puts Illinois on target to significantly increase renewable energy investment, dedicating \$750 million to solar, energy efficiency and green jobs training programs located in and serving low-income communities.<sup>46</sup> Specific investment will be set aside for environmental justice communities most heavily impacted by the old, dirty energy economy. FEI’s grassroots campaign built a campaign with rural and small-town leaders from downstate Illinois and Chicago based groups, put racial and economic justice at the center of the debate, secured major investments in clean energy and green jobs in low-income communities and ultimately secured the bill’s passage.

***“Today we’re currently fighting an open-pit sulfite mine, 42 miles away from the current reservation. They use acid to extract gold and zinc in the sulfite bearing rocks. EPA has labeled it the worst mining. They want to put the mine 150 feet short of the Menominee River, which forms a natural border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. It’s where we come from as a people They want to put in a huge open-pit. Where there are many of our cultural artifacts, including three prehistoric burial mounds. Many, many things that are going to be decimated.***

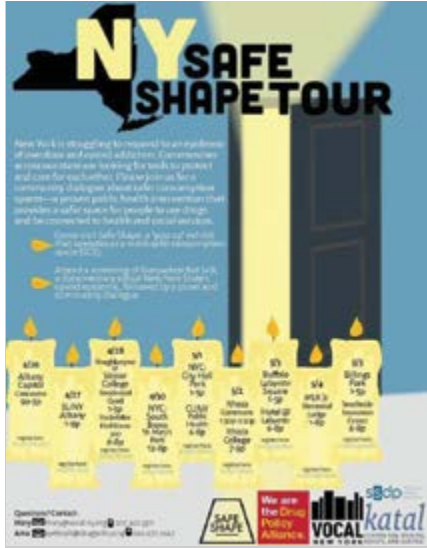
***We’ve been lobbying in DC and in the state capital. We’re working with Front 40 group of landowners; they’re mostly old White guys. The first public meeting that we were at they said, where have you guys been?! Thanks for jumping in. They knew we carried a big stick. ”***



- Guy Reiter, Native Organizers Alliance

<sup>46</sup> Mulady, Kathy. "People's Action Institute Praises Illinois Future of Energy Jobs Act Passage." People's Action, 7 Dec. 2016, peoplesaction.org/2016/12/peoples-action-institute-praises-passage-of-the-future-of-energy-jobs-act-2/.

## END THE OVERDOSE CRISIS + THE FAILED WAR ON DRUGS



The overdose crisis has the potential to be one of the great uniters or dividers in American politics. “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but belonging,” says Marty O’Brien, founder of Grace Street Recovery Services in Lewiston, Maine. Rural white communities are being ravaged by a drug epidemic in a way that parallels the crisis that communities of color have experienced for decades. The “End Overdose New York” campaign is a powerful model of how to build a multiracial, race-conscious strategy that can unite urban, suburban and rural communities across race and class by focusing on the common pain of the overdose crisis. When the opioid epidemic became a feature in the daily headlines, Voices of Community Activists and Leaders New York (VOCAL-NY)—a statewide grassroots membership organization that builds power among low-income people affected by HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, the drug war, homelessness, and mass incarceration in order to create healthy and just communities—built on their long-standing work fighting the drug war in New York City with communities of color and reached out across race and geography in the state to build a coalition to address a growing crisis of this moment with a grounded

understanding of where the crisis came from and the diversity of people impacted in this moment.

End Overdose NY is a campaign committed to ending New York State’s overdose crisis with a public health and justice approach led by a diverse set of stakeholders including VOCAL-NY, Drug Policy Alliance and the Harm Reduction Coalition. The coalition opposes criminalization investments in law enforcement. It also opposes ineffective interventions, like unproven treatment programs. The coalition is diverse geographically (upstate/downstate, rural/urban/suburban), racially and in how people come to the issue (active and former users, harm reductionists, people in recovery, families who have lost loved ones, service providers and policy advocates). “For decades, when it’s come to the war on drugs,

they’ve always separated people that use drugs, people in recovery, family members, and advocates,” Cassandra Frederique, the New York State director of the Drug Policy Alliance declared at a statewide rally. “The game is up. There’s no wool over our eyes anymore. We, together, represent all the communities that are impacted. We’re letting you know that we, together, will end overdose in New York. And you can’t play us against each other anymore.” People’s Action member organizations in nine states are working closely with VOCAL-New York, Drug Policy Alliance and the Harm Reduction Coalition to build a state-by-state and national strategy to end the overdose crisis and war on drugs and use a public health approach that focuses on the protecting the value of life and ending mass incarceration.



***“The drug war has long led to deaths, prison sentences and poverty in communities of color. Here in New York, these same drug war consequences are now plaguing white and rural communities. Newspapers and politicians are talking about these issues like they’re different; like what happened to my community is different than what’s happening to theirs. It’s like people WANT us to stay divided. We aren’t allowing the powers that be to divide us. We are organizing white, black and brown communities, in rural, urban and suburban communities to come together, first to tackle overdose, then to end this failed drug war altogether. We aren’t going to sit back and watch these white communities die. We’re going to stand with them. And in doing that, we’re going to demand and build a movement, with us at the forefront, where these communities stand with ours.”***

- Robert Suarez, VOCAL-NY leader

## FAMILY FARMS, FOOD + AGRICULTURAL JUSTICE

One of the most important environmental, economic and social issues confronting agricultural communities is the future structure and practices of the livestock industry. The issue is whether livestock will be dispersed across the countryside on a variety of farms typified by local family ownership managing diversified farm operations; or produced in large, energy- and capital-intensive confinement facilities that concentrate the animals and their wastes in vast quantities and concentrate economic power, wealth and control in the hands of a few absentee investors and shareholders. At stake is the future of large parts of America's rural environment, the health and prosperity of rural communities, economic opportunity for farm and rural families, and far-reaching questions about food safety and affordability.

But corporate control of the livestock industry and corporate-backed factory farms are not the only issues driving farmers and rural communities down. When we look around the countryside, we see things we know are not right, and that do not fit with the future we want for ourselves and the generations to come. We know that our concerns are connected to those of people in all parts of the country, and we know we need to work together to solve them. It is hard for us to look around our rural communities and see things that go against our values:

- We see the land being degraded, rivers and lakes polluted, drinking water depleted, and extreme rains, temperatures and droughts becoming "normal."
- Huge companies controlling seeds and chemicals, buying grain and processing livestock are making large profits, while paying farmers less. This is making it harder for farmers to both succeed and take care of the land.
- People in our communities are left out and left behind. We have seen before that times of economic uncertainty can fuel division, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racist acts and policies, and we see these threats again.

- Our local businesses and family farms struggle or close, while large corporations that are not invested in our communities take over, or abandon us if there is not enough profit to be made.
- Health insurance premiums and deductibles are unaffordable, while hospitals are closed and services cut in our communities.
- Young people are told that opportunity is somewhere else.

Across the Heartland, our member organizations and allies are committed to fighting for a farming system that cares for farmers and the land, supports strong communities, and makes healthy food available to everyone. Our health is connected to the health of the soil, the well-being of the land and the way we grow food. When agriculture runs through family farms, our communities can prosper. But when the land, our farms, our food are corporate controlled, our wealth is extracted, our land and water depleted and polluted, our bodies sicken, and our democracy dies. More farmers – African-American, Native American, newer immigrants, and white – need secure access to land, and farmers must be able to succeed economically while caring for the land. We must prioritize small and moderate-sized farms and invest in local and regional food systems that make healthy food accessible to everyone. We need to fight for state and federal farm and food policies that support independent family farmers, challenge corporate control over the marketplace and agricultural system, and ensure access to affordable, high-quality food raised by independent farm families. Every day, hundreds of family farmers and rural citizens are standing up and speaking out in their communities. They are fighting for clean water and clean air, family farms, and healthy rural communities. They are building a powerful voice for justice, fairness and democracy in rural America.



Patchwork Farms



(Above) Farm owners, Betsy Allister and Andrew Ehrmann, along with LSP farmer organizer Tom Nuessmeier are touring their farm and talking with Rep. Ellison about federal farm policy as part of the #OurFarmBill campaign by Land Stewardship Project to ensure that the Farm Bill actually supports stewardship and justice on the land

## RESPECT + SOVEREIGNTY FOR INDIGENOUS NATIONS

Native tribes are critical to the fabric of rural and small-town America. We honor the wisdom and resilience of Native Tribes and peoples and their critical leadership in our collective movement. We demand that all levels of government honor treaty obligations and respect tribal sovereignty. We will not forget the painful realities of colonization and genocide and the ongoing impact of structural racism and we will stand alongside indigenous people for full realization of tribal sovereignty. From environmental justice to health to economic development to state violence to voting rights, we demand that Tribal Nations and indigenous communities get the resources, investment and legal rights to ensure the protection of their treaty, legal and inherent rights to protect their land and resources, culture and sacred sites for the health and wellbeing of all.



## INVEST IN EDUCATION + COLLEGE FOR ALL

Public schools, universities and colleges are often anchor institutions in rural communities. As the link between higher education and prosperity grows ever stronger, governments at the national and state levels are advancing policy decisions that could weaken these critical assets, and the economic future of the rural communities and United States as a whole.<sup>47</sup> Education at all levels is a fundamental right that enables everyone to live out their full potential. But the function of public universities in America is increasingly shifting from educating students to padding the pockets of America's private sector at the expense of our communities.

With government austerity on the rise and funding for higher education generally in decline, the cost of higher education has been shifted from states to students, families, and faculty. While in 1980, roughly 60% of university funding came from state governments, by 2015, state funding had fallen to an average of 12% of university budgets with students and families paying an increasing share of expenses.<sup>48</sup> In the past 30 years, tuition has gone up by 310% at public universities and 243% at community colleges.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, students wanting to extend the rewards of education beyond their K-12 years are increasingly saddled with debt, faculty are forced into part-time positions, and college admissions offices chase after wealthy students who boost school endowments.<sup>50</sup> Public education, which progressives have long considered a human right, is increasingly a highly contested public good. This must change. Student Action and People's Action are committed to making higher education free as a way to preserve the right to an education and as a critical part of a vision of a new economy. Universities and community colleges have also become recruiting grounds for the "alt-right" and white nationalist groups which increases the urgency of organizing on college campuses in rural communities.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Austin, John C. "Tale of Two Rust Belts: Higher Education Is Driving Rust Belt Revival but Risks Abound." Brookings, Brookings, 31 Jan. 2018, [www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/12/19/tale-of-two-rust-belts-higher-education-is-driving-rust-belt-revival-but-risks-abound/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/12/19/tale-of-two-rust-belts-higher-education-is-driving-rust-belt-revival-but-risks-abound/).

<sup>48</sup> "Starving the Beast" Takes a Hard Look at the Defunding of Public Universities." Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 15 Sept. 2016, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-cap-doc-starving-the-beast-review-20160912-snap-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-cap-doc-starving-the-beast-review-20160912-snap-story.html).

<sup>49</sup> [trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/tuition-and-fees-and-room-and-board-over-time-1976-78\\_2017-18-selected-years](https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/tuition-and-fees-and-room-and-board-over-time-1976-78_2017-18-selected-years).

<sup>50</sup> Douglas-Gabriel, Danielle. "Top Public Universities Are Shutting out Poor Students, Report Says." The Washington Post, WP Company, 26 Oct. 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/26/top-public-universities-are-shutting-out-poor-students-report-says/?utm\\_term=.b5ae89d6f1e](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/26/top-public-universities-are-shutting-out-poor-students-report-says/?utm_term=.b5ae89d6f1e).

<sup>51</sup> Kotch, Alex. "How Charles Koch Is Helping Neo-Confederates Teach College Students." The Nation, 28 Mar. 2018, [www.thenation.com/article/how-charles-koch-is-helping-neo-confederates-teach-college-students/](http://www.thenation.com/article/how-charles-koch-is-helping-neo-confederates-teach-college-students/).



## BUILD MOVEMENT POLITICS, NOT POLITICS AS USUAL

Creating transformative change in these regions and states requires a deep investment in civic engagement that expands the electorate and holds elected officials accountable around advancing an agenda that unites our communities rather than one pits them against one another. People’s Action and our member organizations are building power so we can “co-govern” with elected officials to ensure that their values and priorities are enacted in the public realm and to ensure that the promise of our democracy is restored and we adopt policies that address structural racism and inequality.

The deep distrust of government in marginalized working-class communities in rural and small-town America requires that community organizations be at the center of any engagement strategy. “Breaking through these voter’ skepticism in the political system will be challenging, and will take time,” pollster Guy Molyneux has argued. “Community organizations and non-elected community leaders must be the ‘tip of the spear’ as progressives seek to engage white working-class communities.”<sup>52</sup>

People’s Action and our allies are also building a new candidate pipeline of trusted community leaders who have a deep commitment to movement politics. Across the country, we are recruiting and training 500 community leaders to run for office up and down the ballot between now and 2020. On Tuesday, April 3, 2018 at least 49 Citizen Action of Wisconsin Organizing Co-op members were elected to local office running on a bold platform for progressive change in Wisconsin.<sup>53</sup>

In Merrill, 25 year old Citizen Action North Central Wisconsin Co-op member Derek Woellner was elected Mayor in a stunning upset of a two term incumbent. In Eau Claire, Citizen Action Western Wisconsin Co-op played a major role in electing 9 members, creating large progressive majorities on the County Board and City Council.<sup>54</sup> In Wausau Hmong Small Business Owner and Citizen Action North Central Wisconsin Co-op member Mary Thao was elected to the City Council. Similar to the experience in Virginia’s gubernatorial election in 2017, the powerful slate of grassroots candidates down ballot across the state helped to propel Judge Rebecca Dallet to the Wisconsin State Supreme Court and as the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel noted, “It was the first time in 23 years that a liberal candidate who wasn’t an incumbent won a seat on the high court.”

“The sweeping victories of highly progressive Citizen Action members across the state shows that grassroots political power still trumps dark money and big spending special interests,” said Robert Kraig, Executive Director of Citizen Action of Wisconsin. “The blue wave which is sweeping across Wisconsin has major implications for the November elections.”

In southwest Pennsylvania, People’s Action member organization Keystone Progress worked with with labor movement allies and other partners to help defeat Rick Saccone in the special election for Congress.. “There are two major conclusions to be drawn from [Democrat Conner] Lamb’s victory in Pennsylvania,” wrote Robert Borosage in the days after the special election. “First,

even in a growing low-unemployment economy, working people are looking for someone who will stand with them. A bold progressive economic agenda beats the Republican attempt to use top-end tax cuts, deregulation and attacks on government to cover their remorseless assault on workers. Even Trump's tariffs and posturing about trade didn't make the difference in this very red district. Second, the turnout in the race showed once more that Democratic voters are mobilized and energized. Democrats came out in larger numbers than Republicans which usually does not happen in off-year or special elections. Even a massive effort by outside conservative groups could not counter that passion."<sup>55</sup>

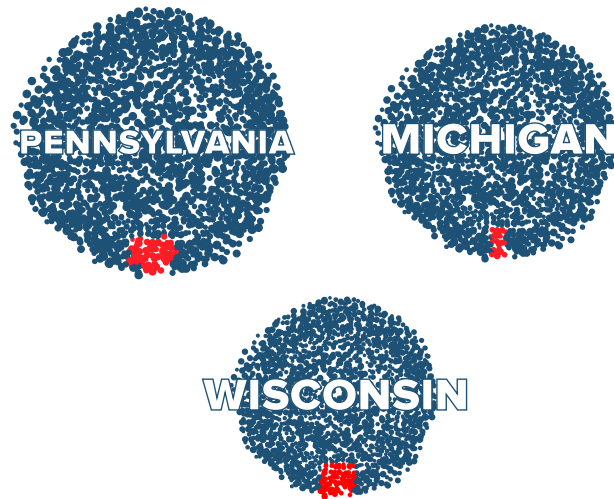
The passion is being stoked by a combination of powerful grassroots organizing and bold and progressive candidates who are embracing a more populist agenda. Cathy Glasson is a progressive populist candidate in Iowa whose campaign slogan is "Everybody In, Nobody Left Out," has captured that combination of powerful grassroots organizing and a more bold populist agenda. "There's a debate in the Democratic Party about how to win in Trump era. The bottom line is we can't move forward using half-measures and tinkering around the edges on issues," she says. "We need a bold progressive movement. We're gonna lose in 2018 if we don't give people a reason to stand in line to vote again—that reason is single-payer, \$15, and union rights."<sup>56</sup>

Jess King is a progressive populist candidate in rural Central Pennsylvania. The mostly rural district is populated by people who feel like they have been left behind by national politicians from both parties. "I think we're at a moment of choosing between a racially and culturally economic diverse coalition that does an inclusive populism versus that right-wing populism that's emerging," King says. Progressives in rural places need to reshape the narrative about how policies of both parties have failed their communities, she says. "It's sort of a terrifying moment, but it's also very hopeful, and full of opportunity and promise," King says.

The Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University has reported that there is an unprecedented surge of first-time female candidates running for office up and down the ticket and at least 79 women are exploring runs for Governor.<sup>57</sup> There are also a record number of Native Americans running for office this year, including Idaho State Representative Paulette Jordan who is running for Governor and would become

the first female Governor in Idaho history and the first Native American Governor in the history of the country.<sup>58</sup>

People's Action member organizations and our allies are launching an ambitious Rural and Small-Town Organizing Strategy in 72 counties in ten states across the Heartland, Rust Belt, Northeast and South. Despite the stereotypical view of rural America, these counties are not homogeneous and they include African American communities, American Indian Reservations and areas with significant immigrant populations. They also include 28 "pivot counties" (that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and went for Trump in 2016). Trump won 64 of the 72 counties, and in 52 of those counties he won by more than 10 points. The majority of these places are classified as persistent poverty counties. There is both a moral and strategic imperative to invest in building people's organizations in these communities. It is urgent to address the pain and suffering in these communities and critical to shifting the balance of power at both the state and federal level.



**Of the more than 136 million votes cast in the 2016 election, 77,744 votes in three states--Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin--effectively decided the election.** Trump had a margin of victory of 176,478 in the counties where People's Action member organizations are building their Rural and Small-town Organizing Strategy in those same states. There is a clear path to shifting the balance of power in those communities in a way that would profoundly impact the future of those states and the entire country.

<sup>52</sup> "Mapping the White Working Class: A deep dive into the beliefs and sentiments of the moderates among them," Guy Molyneux, The American Prospect, December 20, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> [https://www.citizenactionwi.org/caw\\_progressive\\_platform\\_2018](https://www.citizenactionwi.org/caw_progressive_platform_2018)

<sup>54</sup> [https://www.citizenactionwi.org/citizen\\_action\\_members\\_win\\_local\\_elections\\_across\\_wisconsin](https://www.citizenactionwi.org/citizen_action_members_win_local_elections_across_wisconsin)

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/03/16/opening-new-way-democrats-run-and-win>

<sup>56</sup> "Labor Leader Runs for Iowa Governor on Progressive Populism." The American Prospect, [prospect.org/article/labor-leader-runs-iowa-governor-progressive-populism](https://www.americanprospect.com/article/labor-leader-runs-iowa-governor-progressive-populism); Prynard, "Iowa Democrats Release Initial Candidate Caucus Result Numbers," Iowa Starting Line, 17 Feb. 2018, [iowastartingline.com/2018/02/17/iowa-democrats-release-initial-caucus-result-numbers/](http://iowastartingline.com/2018/02/17/iowa-democrats-release-initial-caucus-result-numbers/).

<sup>57</sup> Alter, Charlotte. "A Record Amount of Women Are Running in the 2018 Elections." Time, 18 Jan. 2018, [time.com/5107499/record-number-of-women-are-running-for-office/](http://time.com/5107499/record-number-of-women-are-running-for-office/).

<sup>58</sup> [www.indianz.com/News/2018/03/19/a-record-number-of-native-candidates-are.asp](http://www.indianz.com/News/2018/03/19/a-record-number-of-native-candidates-are.asp).

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Across the country, People's Action and our allies are committed to doing politics differently and building a movement politics and a candidate pipeline across rural and small-town America that will help advance a multiracial populist agenda that will put people and planet first. Through our rural and small-town organizing strategy we are organizing in 72 counties that include 34 congressional districts and over 100 state legislative districts. These places are critical to both expand and unite a new populist majority that can build durable governing power in key states and help shape the future of the country.



Jess King, candidate for Congress, Pennsylvania and member of Lancaster Stands Up



State Representative Paulette Jordan is running to become the first Native American Governor in United States history and first female Governor in the history of Idaho. Native American Governor in United States history and first female Governor in the history of Idaho.



Mary Thao, Citizen Action of Wisconsin organizing co-op member won her election to Wausau City Council along with 48 other organizing co-op members. Thao is the first Hmong woman elected to city council in Wausau history.



Cathy Glasson, a progressive populist candidate for Governor in Iowa



Nancy Coffey, Citizen Action of Wisconsin organizing co-op member won her election to county board in April 2018.

# CLOSING SUMMARY

History is indeed calling us. And the future is unwritten. The choices that we make in the coming months will shape the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and that election will determine the next decade if not longer.

“Since the mid-1980s, pundits, journalists and liberal leaders have thrice declared the right wing dead in the United States,” Eric Ward reminds us. “Despite these grand pronouncements, right wing movements successfully continue to undercut the fundamentals of our democracy, largely by demonizing working poor, minorities and immigrants. White nationalism won’t be defeated by wishing it away, it will only be marginalized by direct competition for the constituencies it seeks to organize. Claiming white nationalist is in decline in the United States is like passengers on the Titanic arguing that the ship wasn’t sinking. It’s untrue and puts our democracy at risk.”

This fight is about who gets to be considered a human being in this country. If we want to preserve our democracy we need to engage all the people that are suffering in all the places that struggling and bring them into the circle of belonging. We have to stop treating voters like commodities and build a movement to do politics differently.

“Our society doesn’t need rural people just for their number of votes,” says Mark Schultz of the Land Stewardship Project. “They are needed for their vision and values and the solutions they bring. When we don’t ask for that—when we don’t involve them then those values are denied and instead what is promoted is a right-wing corporate agenda rather than the kind of society that they want to build and that we need.”

When we don’t ask for that we miss the wisdom of tens of thousands of grassroots leaders—of every race, gender, color and creed—from rural and small-town communities who are fighting against the devastation of their livelihoods and water and land and destruction of all that they hold dear by the consolidation of corporate power and greed and the scourge of white supremacy.

As Iowa farmer and Iowa CCI leader Barb Kalbach says “we are from different cultures. But it’s the same thing—it’s people versus power. Because someone with power is dictating how you are going to live. We have to speak truth to power. It’s not your neighbor that’s making your life miserable. It’s someone that’s in power. We are all the same in that.”

The work in the coming days will not be easy. It will require courage and sacrifice and discipline. It will require real leadership. People like Brigid Flaherty know about courage and sacrifice and struggle. After the 2016 election she and Todd Zimmer left their previous lives behind to sacrifice and struggle to build Down Home North Carolina, a new organizing effort in rural working-class communities in North Carolina.

In the fall of 2017 Down Home North Carolina knocked on over 4,000 doors in rural communities in western and central North Carolina. They wrote a report about their work and they called it “No One’s Ever Asked Me Before” because that was what they heard time and time again during their listening campaign. “I’m here to tell you, as I was driving down those back roads, sitting in those living rooms and on those front porches, no one ever asked me to deny a living wage; no one ever asked me to give tax breaks to billionaires and multinational corporations; no one ever asked me to transfer wealth off of the backs of working people or allow big money to influence our election,” Flaherty says.

“They say we are a divided nation, but in terms of justice, they asked me about raising the minimum wage, improving access to job training, restoring the vote for people with former felony convictions, expanding healthcare, ensuring humane immigration, wanting healthy food, getting more money for public education and ending racism and prejudice. Do not underestimate the decency of rural and small-town communities. We are seeing the beauty of these extraordinary multiracial communities who are ready to stand up for justice and that makes me hopeful for the kind of future we can have for this country. The fight for dignity, inclusion, and security, that’s what this shared struggle is all about.”

Sam and Lois know about shared struggle. Sam and Lois are leaders in the Haywood chapter of Down Home North Carolina. Lois is an African American woman, born in Appalachia, who has suffered the injustices of the drug war after being incarcerated for drug use. Sam is a white man, born in Louisiana but living in Haywood now, who also suffered the injustices of the drug war after being incarcerated for drug use. Through their shared work to end the overdose crisis with Down Home, they have become “partners in crime” as they like to say because together they are fighting side by side to end the failed drug war.

The future is unwritten and together we can become authors of our next chapter. A future where we learn from the mistakes of the past. A future where we refuse to allow race to be used as a strategic force of division and instead we are guided by the Lakota phrase Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ (We Are All Related). A future where we reject the lies of scarcity and racial hierarchy. A future where we put people and planet first. People’s Action and our allies have a plan to build a movement powerful enough to write this next chapter.

“The challenge of building a multi-racial, race conscious poor and working class is significant,” shares George Goehl, director of People’s Action. “But if my life has taught me anything it is this: We have found the villain in this story and it’s not each other. These systems were created by people, and they can be re-imagined and remade by people. By uniting poor and working class communities across race and place - we can let the re-imagining begin.”



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Rural and Small-town Organizing Strategy Brain Trust

We have built an advisory council of some of the top leaders and thinkers from social movements, policy, popular culture, media, politics and academia to support the strategy and execution of this work and are grateful for their guidance and support of this project. Some members of the brain trust include: Ai-jen Poo, National Domestic Workers Alliance; Alicia Garza, Black Futures Lab; Arlie Hochschild, author of “Strangers in their Own Land”; Dee Davis, President and Founder, Center for Rural Strategies; Davy Rothbart, Writer, This American Life, and Documentary Filmmaker; Eric Ward, director, Western States Center; Hahrie Han, the Anton Vonk Professor of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara; Jim Hightower, Author and Commentator, Hightower Lowdown; Laura Quinn, CEO, Catalyst; Schuyler Brown, Strategy Director and Founding Partner, Sightful; Tom Hallaran and Dr. Daniel Beckmann, Co-Founders, iB5k; and Tracy Van Slyke, Strategy Director, Pop Culture Collaborative.

## Supporters

We are grateful for the support of the Ford Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, 11th Hour Project and the Pop Culture Collaborative for their support of this work.



# ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILES

Below are profiles of the community organizations participating in the Promise of a Progressive Populist Movement Summit on April 24, 2018 at the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

## **Hometown Action (Alabama)** [www.hometownaction.org](http://www.hometownaction.org)

Launched in January 2018, Hometown Action is organizing in small-towns and rural communities across Alabama. Our communities have been struggling for decades as local industries have become obsolete, only to be replaced with a fraction of the jobs in lower paying sectors. Our young people struggle to find work in their hometowns and are forced to move to the city or leave the state. We are experiencing an opioid epidemic at the same time our rural hospitals are closing at record rates. Decades of political corruption and disinvestment have led to crumbling schools, insufficient social services, and widespread feelings of hopelessness that exacerbate racial, class, and political tensions. We are fighting to revitalize our communities through multiracial working class organizing that addresses everyday issues facing our local communities. Already dozens of volunteer leaders are building regional chapters in Central Alabama (containing Jefferson, Shelby, Bibb, and Chilton counties) and the River Region (containing Montgomery, Elmore, Autauga, and Lowndes counties) where members will develop issue campaigns that take on the rich and powerful corporations that are destroying our communities. We are building a true grassroots movement that develops small-town and rural leaders who will transform our political system, bridge the urban-rural divide, and create the communities we deserve.

## **Beyond the Choir** [beyondthechoir.org](http://beyondthechoir.org)

Our name captures the core of our mission: to build movements capable of winning real change, we need to do more than just “preach to the choir.” Beyond the Choir partners with grassroots organizations to craft resonant messaging, plan strategic campaigns, and mobilize larger bases of support. Starting as an inquiry into why progressives so often talk to ourselves, we have developed a training program that helps organizers and leaders to better understand and navigate the current populist landscape. This analysis is part of what led us to create the Veterans Organizing Institute, as we understood that veterans come from diverse demographics, are predominantly working class, hold a range of political views, and many are hungry for opportunities to develop into progressive leaders. This analysis is also baked into our emerging program to support grassroots organizing in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas, too often neglected by progressive forces. Since the 2016 election, BTC has played a key role in launching and sustaining Lancaster Stands Up (LSU), a new local formation in Pennsylvania that has been demonstrating one of the strongest organizing ground games in the nation. BTC helped to shape LSU’s structure and strategies, and has provided ongoing training and significant staff time. We are now in a process of expanding our training program to support grassroots organizing work across Pennsylvania.

## **Citizen Action of Wisconsin** [www.citizenactionwi.org](http://www.citizenactionwi.org)

Citizen Action of Wisconsin is a power-building organization with a statewide reach. Through our grassroots organizing, strategic communications, and actionable policy research, we have for over 35 years built a statewide base of activists and leaders. Our cutting edge organizing co-operative model has enabled a major expansion of our work in rural areas. Our overarching goal is to build a community of interest between impoverished people of color communities, and working people in suburbs, medium sized cities, and contiguous rural areas across the state. Wisconsin is an ideal laboratory for such an approach. It has the fastest shrinking middle class in the nation, among the worst racial disparities, and rapidly declining economic opportunity in its rural regions. Because Wisconsin lacks a dominant urban center, governing power can only be built by breaking down the urban/rural suburban divides which are constantly exploited on behalf of reactionary economic and fiscal policies. Citizen Action is a leader on health care, economic justice, the preservation and expansion of voting rights, and increasingly on a just clean energy transformation. We are organizing are work around an a bold 8 year issue platform that was written with hundreds of our members across the Wisconsin.

## **Down Home North Carolina** <http://downhomenc.org/>

Down Home North Carolina was launched in June 2017 with a mission to build the power of the multiracial working class in North Carolina’s small-towns and rural areas. DHNC is a base-building, membership-led organization. For too long, working North Carolinians in small-towns haven’t had an organization that they lead, that truly represents them, and that fights for their issues with the urgency they require. Such an organization is necessary if North Carolina is ever to achieve a measure of racial, economic, and gender justice. DHNC is building chapters, starting in two counties: Alamance, in the state’s central Piedmont region, and Haywood, in the Appalachian mountain west. Both counties have: 1) high rates of unemployment, poverty, and low-wage work, the product of a decline in manufacturing; 2) documented incidents of recent white supremacist recruitment activity; 3) are close to major urban areas in North Carolina and could be brought into relationship with urban-based groups. The chapters are developing local leaders to lead their efforts to win issue campaigns identified by the local chapters and increase voter engagement. From the beginning, the chapter leadership is multiracial, as we seek to build deep relationships among working people in North Carolina that bridge divides and will connect with organizing working people in more urban areas of the state.

## **Hoosier Action (Indiana)** [www.hoosieraction.org](http://www.hoosieraction.org)

Hoosier Action organizes working people across rural and small-town Indiana. We build chapters of rural voters, students, low wage workers, and progressives aligned around working families agenda. Founded in 2017 by a fifth generation Hoosier, we aim to build progressive infrastructure throughout Indiana. We focus on the issues that matters most to our members – primarily confronting the opioid crisis, predatory lending and debt, wages, healthcare, and the social safety net. Additionally Hoosier Action has built out a strong electoral program focused on the 9th Congressional District and pulling out of the State super majority. In 12 short months we have engaged thousands of Hoosiers and signed up hundreds of members to fight for the Indiana We Deserve. Indiana has been largely abandoned by progressive infrastructure and as a results has suffered dramatically. In the last ten years Republicans have gained super majorities in both legislative houses and the Governor's seat, average annual income has fallen by nearly \$15,000 ,small farm land has been swallowed up by industrial farming operations, and electoral integrity has been eroded through enacting strict voter ID laws and ruthless gerrymandering.

**Iowa CCI – Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement** [www.iowacci.org](http://www.iowacci.org)

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement is a forward-thinking, agenda-setting, speak-truth-to-power community organizing group that knows how to mobilize lots of everyday people to stand up for what's right and put pressure where it needs to be put to win policies that put people and planet first. For more than 43 years, our mission has been simple: everyday people, when given a chance, can be a powerful force for justice. Our 4,500 dues-paying members across the state are rural and urban, young and old, black and white, immigrant and life-long Iowans. We carry a shared belief that you don't have to stand by and just let things happen. We view this troublesome time as a clear call to action and an opportunity to build political power to shape the Iowa we want and need to see. Our current member-led organizing campaigns include: Clean Water/Stop Factory Farms; Fight for \$15/Workers Rights; Racial Justice/Stop Racial Profiling/Immigrant Rights; Building a Clean Energy Future; Health Care for All; and supporting electoral work to change "business as usual" politics. As the first-in-the-nation caucus state, we take our role to put populist progressive issues and values at the center the national political debate very seriously.

**Keystone Progress** [www.keystoneprogress.org](http://www.keystoneprogress.org)

Keystone Progress builds community power throughout Pennsylvania to win real improvements in people's lives, with deep organizing, online communications, direct action, and elections. With subscribers across all communities in the state, Keystone Progress is transforming PA by calling on all people to take action. Change is impossible in the commonwealth without working in rural communities and small-towns. Less than 20% of Pennsylvanians live in the state's 5 largest cities, compared to 40% of New York State residents dwelling in the 5 boroughs of New York City alone. Wherever we organize, we center the dismantling of systems of oppression, including racism, patriarchy and xenophobia. Our work in small-towns and rural communities like Coatesville, Williamsport and Erie serves to overcome barriers between working families in different places, and build bridges on a foundation of mutual self-interest.

**Lancaster Stands Up – Pennsylvania** [www.lancasterstandsup.org](http://www.lancasterstandsup.org)

Lancaster Stands Up was born out of an emergency community meeting in the wake of the 2016 election. Founded on a commitment to the common good, we are bringing everyday working people into the political process, building independent political power to challenge the elite interests that have rigged our economy and our democracy. We stand with the most vulnerable in our society as we strive to overcome the forces of racism, sexism, prejudice, and hate. We believe the time is ripe for everyday Americans—of every race and creed, immigrant and native-born, sisters and brothers—to stand up together as one united people.

We use values-based language to articulate an inclusionary populist vision. We believe that in today's America we need to mobilize people along both economic populist frameworks and social justice frameworks, especially centering racial justice. We embody this analysis in the issue fights we choose, the language we use to frame our fights, the neighborhoods we prioritize for our door-to-door canvass, and the leadership and membership we prioritize developing.

Over the past year and a half, LSU has mobilized thousands on critical issues like immigration, health care, and racial justice, and has onboarded hundreds of new people into volunteer roles, and developed a Congressional district-wide (PA-11) door-to-door canvass. Led by a multiracial and multi-generational 12-person coordinating team, Lancaster Stands Up has had unprecedented success in a traditionally conservative region that went for Trump.

**Land Stewardship Project – Minnesota** [www.landstewardshipproject.org](http://www.landstewardshipproject.org)

Land Stewardship Project (LSP) is a people's organization of 4,150 member households based in rural Minnesota. At the core of all our work are the values of stewardship, justice and democracy. Led by a 12-member board and eight active steering committees of LSP member leaders, LSP's strength comes from the ground up. Our work has a broad and deep impact: ranging from major federal farm policy wins to arguably the nation's most effective beginning-farmer program, and from local and statewide organizing campaigns that stop corporate-backed factory farms and frac sand strip-mines, to being one of the leaders in our state in forging a powerful new progressive movement – one that is multi-racial, statewide, able to take on corporate power, and effective. Our members are family farmers, nurses, truck drivers, teachers, small business people, students, retired people and thousands of others. We love the land and our communities, and organize against corporate control, structural racism, and an economy that enriches some while depleting the health and extracting the wealth of the rest of us. We are committed to building our base and driving a new public narrative. Our purpose is to achieve the power with our allies to win the changes on the land, in our communities, in public policy, and in our economy that we need for the health of the land, economic and racial justice, and a shared prosperity.

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**Maine People's Alliance** [www.mainepeoplesalliance.org](http://www.mainepeoplesalliance.org)

Maine People's Alliance (MPA), founded in 1982, is one of the largest community organizations in America. One-in- thirteen Maine households receives our newsletter. Our 32,000 dues-paying members come from 170 towns, and live in every Maine county. At peak capacity, MPA has face-to- face conversations with over 1,000 Mainers a day and can reach hundreds of thousands online each month. Small-towns and rural areas make up most of Maine's landscape, from northern mill towns dominated by forestry related industry to coastal communities dominated by lobster and seasonal tourism. MPA works hard to involve members from all parts of the state and all walks of life to build a more just and democratic society. MPA currently has 30 staff and hundreds of active volunteer leaders. Over 9,000 members took actions with us in 2017. Our Maine Beacon news site regularly reaches tens of thousands of people by promoting shareable content.

**Michigan United** [www.miunited.org](http://www.miunited.org)

Michigan United is a statewide coalition fighting for the dignity of all people, an economy that works for the many, a participatory democracy that is strong, and a society that protects our civil rights. We know a stronger, people-powered Michigan is possible through developing leadership of those directly impacted by injustice, deep civic engagement that mobilizes voters, and on-going campaigns that achieve meaningful change for our communities. Michigan United has built power principally by organizing working class and low-income people in African American and Latino communities in several of Michigan's biggest cities (Detroit, Kalamazoo, Flint, and Grand Rapids). We develop leaders to run issue campaigns related to immigrant rights, ending mass incarceration, environmental justice, and universal family care.

In 2016, 2017 and 2018, in order to build power to enact progressive policies statewide we expanded our organizing to majority – but not exclusively – White working class and low-income people who live in suburbs that border some of these cities and rural towns. By focusing on communities where the balance of power is contested in Michigan, we have begun to shift the states' politics to advance efforts for economic, racial, social and environmental justice. In 2016, Michigan United leaders transformed politics-as-usual to lead a movement politics campaign for State Representative Darrin Camilleri in White, working class Downriver Detroit. They did long-form, conversation-based canvassing in support of the economic vision of Universal Family Care, which would create a public option and benefits to support taking care of children, elders, and people with disabilities. In a second round of canvassing on the same issue, they endorsed Camilleri for State House Representative. Camilleri won, and his district was the only one in Michigan to vote for both Trump and a Democratic candidate for State House Representative in November 2016! We proved that movement politics where candidates lead on progressive issues can win.

As part of the "resistance" whirlwind in 2017, new leaders engaged in Michigan United trainings and actions in Oakland County to lead the fight for the Affordable Care Act, to pressure Representative David Trott to retire from Congress in 2018, and to build sustained organizations of community members going through leadership development and initiating their own campaigns, including a Medicare for All campaign. Our leaders in Flint, Michigan and the surrounding small, working class towns have built a multiracial coalition fighting for just water policy and accountability in the city and state government. They have won important campaigns to demand a just water contract and developed leaders who are now running for state house representative of Flint and another nearby district.

**Missouri Rural Crisis Center** [www.morural.org](http://www.morural.org)

Founded in 1985, the Missouri Rural Crisis Center (MRCC) is a statewide farm and rural membership organization. MRCC represents independent family farmers, rural families and their communities and citizens concerned with our food supply, the environment and democracy. Our mission is to preserve family farms, promote stewardship of the land and environmental integrity and strive for economic and social justice by building unity and mutual understanding among diverse groups, both rural and urban.

MRCC members work to address social and economic justice in rural America through democratic engagement and advocacy. Through MRCC, thousands of rural Missourians have been empowered by increased opportunities to participate in public policy formation and to advocate for a more just and democratic society. Our issues include: family farm agriculture, food security, environmental justice, rural healthcare, economic development that creates good jobs and standing up for and utilizing our democratic power and institutions.

MRCC is bridging gaps between urban and rural, young and old, and consumers and producers through our Growing the Local Food Chain in Missouri Program, which builds unity, knowledge and skills of urban and rural youth and their families around food and farming; and through our Black/Rural Power Building Project, which brings together black and rural communities to strategically engage in organizing and voter engagement in ways that build long term understanding, relationships, leadership and power.

**Native Organizers Alliance** [www.nativeorganizing.org](http://www.nativeorganizing.org)

The Native Organizers Alliance is dedicated to building the organizing capacity of Tribal leadership, Native organizers and community groups. It also provides a forum for tribes, Native organizers and organizations to work in collaboration with each other, share best practices, and promote their work with non-Native national allies. The Native Organizers Alliance (NOA) supports grassroots-driven social change particularly to advance the health and welfare of rural and urban communities and reservations across Indian Country with the long-term goal of achieving full, legal and inherent sovereignty. NOA works closely with tribes and Native organizations to develop plans, execute campaigns and provides ongoing on the ground support. NOA has developed and leads a six-day Native Organizing Training annually to provide culturally appropriate training rooted in Traditional Indigenous Knowledge. Since NOA's founding, hundreds of Native leaders and organizers have participated in the culturally based, unique Native community organizing trainings. NOA is a strategic partner of People's Action Institute.

**Ohio Organizing Collaborative** [www.ohorganizing.org](http://www.ohorganizing.org)

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Formed in 2007, the Ohio Organizing Collaborative (OOC) is an innovative statewide organization uniting community organizations, faith institutions, labor unions and policy groups across Ohio. We are a coalition of 20 organizations with members in every major metropolitan area across the state, working on issues including criminal justice reform, defense of healthcare and safety net programs, police accountability, and equitable public investment.

It is our mission to organize everyday Ohioans, building transformative power for social, racial, and economic justice in our state. To achieve these ends, OOC manages a diverse portfolio of issue organizing, non-partisan electoral programming, leadership training and movement building work – employing a broad range of techniques, including faith-based, worker-led, neighborhood-based, student-led, and constituency organizing models.

**Rights & Democracy New Hampshire** [www.radnh.org/](http://www.radnh.org/)

Rights & Democracy is a member-led, grassroots organization that is uniting people in communities throughout Vermont and New Hampshire across multiple, interconnected issues, including economic, racial, social, environmental, health care and community justice. Through the Grassroots Democracy Initiative, we are reaching out to small, rural communities who, for too long, have not had true political power. Through one-on-one conversations, community roundtables, and candidate forums, their solutions will be placed front-and-center to the state's decision makers and lead toward building true, lasting power in these communities. Already, we have surveyed more than 350 people in rural New Hampshire and we are in the process of holding roundtable discussions that are focused on the interconnected issues of the opioid epidemic and economic injustice. The stories and information we collect from these deep conversations will inform two upcoming forums for New Hampshire congressional and gubernatorial candidates.

**United Vision for Idaho** [www.uvidaho.org](http://www.uvidaho.org)

United Vision for Idaho is Idaho's largest and only coalition dedicated to social, economic and environmental justice; rooted in the core principle that far more unites us than divides and we must work together to build a movement for long-term systemic change. Across the spectrum of our diversity, we work to advance our shared goals of justice. Together, we are powerful force to dismantle systemic discrimination, create policy change, win real improvements in people's lives and transform the political landscape of Idaho. In all its many forms. This is rooted in our belief that long-term change happens when different constituencies work together. When we are really organized, real change is possible - not just now, but for future generations to come. Through education, leadership development, civic action, direct action, and policy change, we challenge systemic discrimination. We not only advocate for policies that promote equitable distribution of power, wealth, and opportunity, we work as coalition to see them realized.

**VOCAL-New York** [www.vocal-ny.org](http://www.vocal-ny.org)

Voices of Community Activists and Leaders is a statewide grassroots membership organization that builds power among low-income people affected by HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, the drug war, homelessness, and mass incarceration in order to create healthy and just communities. They accomplish this through community organizing, leadership development, public education, direct services, participatory research and direct action.

# APPENDIX: TABLE OF TARGET COUNTIES

STATE	TARGET COUNTIES	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	% OF ALL FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LINE	TRUMP %	CLINTON %	2016 % MARGIN OF VICTORY
AL	Shelby	4.6	5.6	73.4	23.1	50.3
IA	Dallas	2.2	3.5	51.3	41.6	9.7
IA	Grundy	3.8	3.3	66.7	27.3	39.4
IA	Hamilton	3	7.5	58.6	35.8	22.8
IA	Hardin	3.4	4.7	62.1	32.9	29.2
IA	Story	5.2	5.2	39.1	51.3	12.2
MI	<b>Calhoun*</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>12.8</b>	<b>53.6</b>	<b>41.1</b>	<b>12.5</b>
MI	Kalamazoo	7.3	10.2	40.5	53.3	12.8
MI	<b>Macomb*</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>53.6</b>	<b>42.1</b>	<b>11.5</b>
MI	<b>Monroe*</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>58.4</b>	<b>36.2</b>	<b>22.2</b>
MI	St. Joseph	6.6	12.1	62.6	31.7	30.9
MN	<b>Beltrami*</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>40.8</b>	<b>9.8</b>
MN	<b>Blue Earth*</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>43.4</b>	<b>3.7</b>
MN	<b>Chippewa*</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>60.9</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>28.9</b>
MN	<b>Clay*</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>46.5</b>	<b>44.6</b>	<b>1.9</b>
MN	<b>Fillmore*</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>57.1</b>	<b>35.3</b>	<b>21.8</b>
MN	<b>Freeborn*</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>55.3</b>	<b>37.9</b>	<b>17.4</b>
MN	<b>Houston*</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>53.4</b>	<b>39.4</b>	<b>14</b>
MN	<b>Itasca*</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>54.6</b>	<b>38.1</b>	<b>16.5</b>
MN	<b>Kittson*</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>57.1</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>22.3</b>
MN	<b>Koochiching*</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>56.5</b>	<b>36.5</b>	<b>20</b>
MN	<b>Lac qui Parle*</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>59.8</b>	<b>33.9</b>	<b>25.9</b>
MN	<b>Mahnomen*</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>47.8</b>	<b>44.8</b>	<b>3</b>
MN	<b>Mower*</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>50.2</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>7.9</b>
MN	<b>Nicollet*</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>3.1</b>
MN	<b>Norman*</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>52.6</b>	<b>39.1</b>	<b>13.5</b>
MN	<b>Rice*</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>47.9</b>	<b>44.8</b>	<b>3.1</b>

# APPENDIX: TABLE OF TARGET COUNTIES

STATE	TARGET COUNTIES	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	% OF ALL FAMILIES BELOW POVERTY LINE	TRUMP %	CLINTON %	2016 % MARGIN OF VICTORY
<b>MN</b>	<b>Swift*</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>8.8</b>	<b>59.6</b>	<b>33.8</b>	<b>25.8</b>
<b>MN</b>	<b>Traverse*</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>58.6</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>23.4</b>
<b>MN</b>	<b>Winona*</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>46.9</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>2.9</b>
MO	Boone	4.6	9.3	43.4	49.3	5.9
MO	Buchanan	6.5	14.1	59.9	33.8	26.1
MO	Callaway	5.6	9.6	68.2	26.1	42.1
MO	Greene	5.8	12.5	60.6	33.2	27.4
NH	Belknap	5.1	7.3	56	39.2	16.8
<b>NH</b>	<b>Hillsborough*</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>47.4</b>	<b>47.2</b>	<b>0.2</b>
NH	Rockingham	4.9	3	50.5	44.7	5.8
<b>NH</b>	<b>Sullivan*</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>48.8</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>2.7</b>
NJ	Atlantic	11.8	12.1	45.3	51.5	6.2
NJ	Cumberland	9.9	14.9	45.7	51.0	5.3
<b>NJ</b>	<b>Salem*</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>40.3</b>	<b>15.3</b>
NC	Alamance	6.9	13.8	55.2	42.3	12.9
NC	Camden	11	8.6	71.4	25.6	45.8
NC	Chowan	13.4	18.8	56	41.7	14.3
NC	Franklin	8.2	12.2	54.6	42.8	11.8
NC	Haywood	6	13.3	62.5	34.5	28.0
NC	Jackson	5.1	15.3	53.9	42	11.9
NC	Montgomery	8.8	16.4	61.8	35.9	25.9
NC	Nash	9.5	12.2	49.3	49.1	0.2
NC	Perquimans	10.6	12.6	62.8	34.7	28.1
<b>NC</b>	<b>Richmond*</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>54.2</b>	<b>44.1</b>	<b>10.1</b>
NC	Stanly	10.3	12.3	74	23.8	50.2
NC	Swain	7	15.4	59.5	36.5	23.0
NC	Tyrell	12.9	17.7	56.9	41.5	15.4

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NC	Washington	16	19.4	41.9	57.1	15.2
PA	Butler	5.2	5.4	66.7	29.2	37.5
PA	Chester	5.3	4.3	43.3	52.6	9.3
PA	Lycoming	7.3	10	70.5	25.7	44.8
WI	Brown	5.3	8.6	52.7	41.9	10.8
<b>WI</b>	<b>Buffalo*</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>58.5</b>	<b>36.6</b>	<b>21.9</b>
WI	Calumet	2.6	5	58.1	36.5	21.6
WI	Chippewa	4.2	7.5	56.9	37.7	19.2
WI	Dunn	5.5	7.1	52.1	41	11.1
<b>WI</b>	<b>Lincoln*</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>57.7</b>	<b>36.9</b>	<b>20.8</b>
WI	Marathon	4.8	7.9	56.7	38.5	18.2
WI	Oconto	5	6.6	66.5	29.5	37.0
WI	Oneida	5.1	6	56	38.9	17.1
WI	Outagamie	3.7	6.3	54.2	40.1	14.1
WI	Portage	6.2	6.4	45.4	48.6	3.2
WI	Rusk	4.9	11.9	64.9	30.9	34.0
WI	St. Croix	4.1	3.5	55.8	37.4	18.4
WI	Wood	5.7	7	57	37.7	19.3

\* Indicates a pivot county (county that Trump won in 2016, that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012)