

Advancing Housing Affordability in California

A Funder Playbook from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and The James Irvine Foundation

Executive Summary

FEBRUARY 2026

NPA STRATEGY

Message from the Program Directors

We are pleased to share this report with you on the lessons learned from the investments in housing affordability that the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and The James Irvine Foundation have made over the past eight years.

Since 2017, CZI and Irvine have collectively invested over $325 million in solutions to California's affordable housing shortage. This report is meant to share what we have learned through these efforts with new and existing funders—whether local, regional, statewide, or national—who are considering entering or deepening their housing affordability grantmaking.

Inside this report, you will find:

- Past strategies that have delivered impact
- Shared lessons from our grantmaking experience
- Promising and clear entry points for new funders
- Remaining gaps identified by our peers and by the field itself

Considerable progress has been made in California, and the fruits of recent investments are still emerging. Like many shifts in philanthropic program strategy, our institutions' transitions to more focused investments are not intended to reflect a shift in our understanding about the importance of this work or the opportunities for meaningful impact that continue to exist. CZI will continue a housing focus in the Bay Area, and Irvine will look for opportunities to embed housing affordability into existing programs.

We invite you to read this report with an eye toward how your own philanthropy can contribute to lasting solutions. At a time when housing affordability is top of mind in California and across the country, it is also being recognized as essential to public health, economic success, educational opportunity, and civic participation. We also believe the lessons from our work in California have national relevance; the same funding strategies and innovations here can be adapted to meet local needs elsewhere. By applying these approaches, funders across the U.S. have the opportunity to deepen their housing commitments, strengthen regional ecosystems, and drive lasting impact in communities well beyond California.

California's housing crisis remains urgent, but with collective commitment, we can continue to build a future where everyone has a safe, stable, and affordable place to call home.

With appreciation and urgency,

Jennifer Martinez
Chan Zuckerberg Initiative

Rajib Guha
The James Irvine Foundation

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Over the past eight years, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) and The James Irvine Foundation (Irvine) have partnered with community leaders, advocacy organizations, and public agencies to test innovative housing solutions, seed new policy advocacy infrastructure, and expand affordable housing opportunities for Californians throughout the state.

By 2026, CZI will have invested more than $275 million in housing affordability and homelessness prevention solutions, impacting over 428,000 households and unlocking nearly $8 billion in public funding. Irvine contributed more than $50 million between 2017 and 2025 to protect the rights of low-income residents, preserve existing affordability, and unlock housing with deeper affordability. The Foundation's investment approach was informed by extensive learning and engagement with peer funders (including CZI), experts, and advocates and focused on building the collective capacity of the field to advance bold solutions to address the state's housing affordability crisis for low-income Californians.

Together, Irvine and CZI's grants and investments demonstrate how strategic philanthropic support can leverage public funding, stabilize families in unstable housing situations, and change the systems that influence affordable housing outcomes. Their funding approaches were also geographically complementary. While CZI and Irvine collaborated closely on statewide efforts like Roadmap Home 2030 and the Community Ownership for Community Power Fund, their regional priorities differed. CZI concentrated primarily at the statewide level and on the Bay Area, Irvine invested more deeply in Los Angeles, and both organizations partnered on strategic investments in other regions such as the Central Valley and Orange County. These coordinated investments helped build the foundation for a stronger, more coordinated housing movement across California.

Summarized below are key themes and frameworks that guided the CZI and Irvine investments in housing affordability. New funders have the opportunity to play a decisive role in sustaining and growing the progress that has been made, so that housing becomes the foundation for opportunity, equity, and thriving communities throughout California.

Advancing Production, Preservation, Protection, and Prevention Policies

CZI and Irvine's grantmaking builds on a simple but powerful framework that articulates the solutions needed to advance affordable housing outcomes:

- **Production** – building more homes people can afford
- **Preservation** – keeping existing homes affordable and community-owned
- **Protections** – stabilizing residents and preventing displacement
- **Prevention** – reducing homelessness inflow

A core theory of this funding approach was that solutions must move on multiple fronts. Production is essential as an ongoing, long-term solution while preservation and protections are necessary for immediate stability for households under pressure. Prevention ensures that families on the brink do not become unhoused in the first place. When funders support all four pillars, they deliver both urgent relief and long-term impact.

Housing Affordability Impact Cycle

CZI and Irvine's experience shows that housing progress follows a repeatable cycle:

- **Power Building** by resourcing communities to organize, lead, and set their own agendas
- **Policy and Advocacy** that turn community priorities into policy reforms and ballot wins
- **Implementation** to ensure policy wins are implemented equitably, with mission-driven organization and public agencies funded to hold decisionmakers accountable
- **Iteration and Scale** through research, evaluation, and public/private systems that sustain implementation

Research and narrative change are throughlines across this cycle, shaping strategies with evidence and sustaining public will. Philanthropy plays its most catalytic role when it supports the full cycle, especially the "unseen" work before and after policy passage—organizing, capacity building, and enforcement—so that wins on paper become sustainable outcomes in communities.

Catalytic Capital and Coordinated Advocacy

Traditional housing finance is slow, fragmented, and risk-averse. Philanthropy has proven it can shift these dynamics by seeding pooled and catalytic funds, supporting innovative construction solutions and homes on publicly-owned land, and advancing community ownership models like land trusts and co-ops. Impact investments, including program-related investments (PRIs), use financial instruments such as equity, debt, and guarantees to attract private and institutional capital while piloting models the market has historically viewed as too risky.

At the same time, coordinated funding across nonprofit legal entities has sustained advocacy: 501(c)(3) organizations educate the public and generate research and 501(c)(4)s mobilize grassroots campaigns and lobbying. Together, these structures create durable advocacy capacity rather than periodic campaigns.

Investing in the Ecosystem

Housing affordability is increasingly recognized as essential to economic mobility, public health, educational success, and civic participation. Core capacities such as grassroots organizing, narrative leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and long-term innovation need sustained support to keep the

housing movement growing. The following areas represent key opportunities for funders to strengthen and sustain this ecosystem:

- **Tenant Support and Homelessness Prevention:** Funders can extend their impact by supporting direct services that meet immediate needs—such as eviction defense, rental assistance, and homelessness diversion—while building a broader continuum of housing stability and prevention.
- **Narrative Shift and Public Will:** Sustained investment in narrative and communications infrastructure helps shape public understanding of housing as foundational to health, opportunity, and equity. Effective strategies include storytelling, social media, data visualization, and long-term narrative research.
- **Innovation and Capital:** Philanthropy can catalyze sustainable housing solutions by using flexible capital—such as program-related investments (PRIs), guarantees, and recoverable grants—to back pooled and catalytic funds, CDFIs, and financing tools that remove barriers to innovation, attract new lenders, and recycle funds for future use.
- **Power Building:** Investing in grassroots and regional power building ensures that residents most affected by the housing shortage can influence the policies and systems that shape their communities.
- **Cross-Sector Alliances:** Housing progress depends on collaboration across health, climate, labor, and economic justice movements. Building big-tent coalitions broadens legitimacy and strengthens political will for systemic reform.
- **Regional Capacity:** Strengthening civic infrastructure in the Central Valley and Inland Empire—regions historically underrepresented in housing advocacy—remains a high-leverage opportunity for statewide impact.
- **Statewide Systems and Long-Term Change:** Coordinated statewide strategies and sustainable public funding are essential to achieve durable, scalable housing solutions. Funders can help advance policy alignment, narrative cohesion, and public support for long-term revenue sources such as a future statewide housing bond.
- **Data Infrastructure:** Modern, coordinated housing data systems are essential to transparency, accountability, and effective implementation.

Key Strategies for Funders Advancing Housing Affordability

Grantmakers entering the field can meaningfully advance housing affordability by recognizing its intersection with their missions. Housing-related work does not require a standalone institutional program;

it requires collaboration among program leaders, aligning existing portfolios with the housing issues they already touch. For new funders in housing affordability, several lessons stand out:

- **Convening and Collective Strategy**: Regular convenings allow funders to share priorities, exchange expertise, and identify partnership opportunities. Through listening tours and ongoing dialogue, funders build relationships, surface opportunities, and foster alignment that reduces duplication and expands collective impact.
- **Funder Organizing and Collaboratives:** Collaborative efforts show how philanthropy can move beyond individual grantmaking toward pooled and joint funding. Through network-based strategies, funders can leverage shared expertise, coordinate investments, and scale proven solutions.
- **Applying Cross-Sector Research to Housing:** Housing is deeply interconnected with health, education, climate, and economic justice. Funding applied, cross-sector research helps funders align their missions while advancing housing affordability.
- **Capacity Comes First**: Multi-year, general operating support allows organizations to pursue advocacy, implementation, and community engagement simultaneously. Leadership development, as an extension of capacity building, is also an essential component of organizational sustainability.
- **Developing and Sustaining Leadership:** Leadership development is vital to building long-term resident power. Funders can expand programs that train tenant and community leaders, particularly in rural and suburban areas, while supporting mentorship, succession planning, and wellness initiatives that prevent burnout and sustain leadership pipeline
- **A Long-Term Horizon for Systems Change:** Systemic changes require time and continuity. Funders can drive lasting results by committing to long-term strategies that strengthen coalitions, field infrastructure, and align near-term advocacy and preservation work with decade-long systems-change goals.

These strategies ensure that philanthropy has more scalable and replicable options than funding individual projects, including the opportunity to strengthen the systems that determine long-term affordability.

The Road Ahead

As CZI and Irvine narrow and transition how they fund housing affordability, their years of investment and learning have underscored the importance of sustained support for housing efforts.

Housing affordability is a prerequisite for economic mobility. When half or more of a low-wage worker's income goes toward rent, gains in wages, cash benefits, or safety net assistance programs are quickly erased. Federal disinvestment has deepened the affordability challenge, limiting upward mobility for California's low-income workers and placing strain on regional economies. For funders focused on economic opportunity, investing in housing affordability strengthens their missions.

Housing affordability also continues to be widely recognized as fundamental to public health, educational success, and civic participation. For funders working in adjacent areas such as climate resilience, health equity, or youth well-being, this moment presents both an urgent need and a powerful opportunity to expand impact. Without continued philanthropic investment, vital capacities—grassroots organizing, narrative leadership, cross-sector partnerships, and long-term innovation—risk being under-resourced.

There are tremendous opportunities for funders from all fields to support strategies to help communities and advocates build power, win policies, support implementation, and scale what works—in ways that are adapted to local contexts and with research and narrative change woven through.

California's housing affordability needs remain pressing, but the lessons of the past decade demonstrate that bold, coordinated philanthropy can leverage public will, unlock resources at scale, and deliver safe, stable, and affordable homes. The invitation is open: new funders can play a decisive role in ensuring that housing becomes the foundation for opportunity, equity, and thriving communities throughout California and in their own regions.

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