

Inland Empire Community Foundation

POLICY AGENDA

2023-24 Legislative Session



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INTRODUCTION

The Inland Empire (IE) is one of the fastest growing metropolitan regions in the country, and is home to a quickly growing population of more than 4.5 million residents. The region is projected to rise to a population beyond 7 million by 2050 with tremendous cultural and racial diversity.¹

With this rapid growth, the Inland Empire needs to invest in solutions to historic issues to become a region of choice and opportunity for all residents. However, public and private investment lags significantly behind other regions and the state. According to the Foundation Center, the IE receives about \$31 per capita in philanthropic investments, just a fraction of the \$139, \$272, and \$745 in Orange County, Los Angeles County, and the Bay Area, respectively.² The Inland Empire Community Foundation deeply committed to growing resources and influencing change that address inequities that contribute to some of the challenges facing the IE community.

Beginning in 2018 with a new CEO, IECF's Board of Directors sought to identify ways the Foundation can have greater impact for the region – which included establishing a policy and advocacy arm. In 2020, IECF identified 5 policy priority areas based on conversations with nonprofit partners. These are: Education Equity, Inclusive Economic Development, Housing, Health and Climate and the Environment. In 2021, IECF held its inaugural Policy & Engagement Forum which brought together funders, nonprofits, and the policy community to collaborate on regional policy and budget priorities. The 2022 Summit did the same, expanding to hold small group convenings on critical policy issues around the 5 categories of need. The following policy objectives are the result of the 2022 summit small group work and ongoing conversations with leaders in each of these areas. In the 2023-2024 legislative session, we are optimistic that public leaders continue to acknowledge the great assets and community in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Strengths exist in the region that can be leveraged to address barriers to a vibrant, prosperous, and shared future and use this moment to create a lasting tangible difference for people in the Inland Empire region. We hope that you will join with us in collaboration and partnership to advance our vision of a vibrant, generous and just region with unlimited opportunities.

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EDUCATION EQUITY

In order to truly address opportunity gaps in the region, investing in equitable outcomes of our cradle-to-career systems of education is fundamental.

The region lags significantly behind coastal regions and the state when it comes to bachelor's degree attainment, with a growing 21 percent of adults having graduated college which is still behind the 35 percent statewide average. This is driven by the fact that only 1 in 10 Latino's in the region graduate, despite making up over half of the population.

Although the region has above statewide average interest in postsecondary education campuses are increasingly struggling to meet the demand in the region.³ By 2030, the IE could be facing a shortfall of between 22k and 39k qualified students without easy access to a local college education based on modeling by Growing Inland Achievement

(GIA). Increasing postsecondary educational degree attainment by closing equity gaps in recruitment, retention and on-time graduation must be done to improve conditions and advance the regional workforce economy.⁴ This, alongside supporting the 25 percent of the region's adults who attended some college but did not complete a degree are key to socioeconomic advancement. These strategies and more are fundamental to reaching the Governor's goal of 70% educational attainment statewide in which the Inland Empire is ripe for investment and innovation as crucial to attaining this goal.⁵

Access to Early childcare in the Inland Empire is among one of the lowest in the state with about 17 percent of children in working families for whom a licensed childcare space was available prior to the pandemic, compared to 24 percent average across California.⁶ About 38 percent of 3 and 4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool or transitional kindergarten in the Inland Empire, about 10 percent below the California average.⁷

Educational success starts early. With the state goal of universal preschool by 2025, the Inland Empire must expand the childcare workforce and facilities to meet demand. As these numbers are pre-pandemic, we expect the situation to have become worse as San Bernardino County reports that between 2010 and 2018, there was a decrease of 6 percent licensed center-based spaces and a 40 percent decrease in licensed home-based spaces. Many more closed their doors permanently in 2020 as a result of the pandemic.⁸ In order to effectively ensure that our children are off on the right foot in their journey, and parents receive the childcare support needed for full economic freedom, the region needs to expand, diversify and invest in the childcare workforce and facilities.

To ensure that learners are prepared for lifelong success, equitable P-12 outcomes focused on postsecondary opportunity & career access and preparedness is a priority for IECF. Increasing early and equitable access to career technical education (CTE), dual enrollment, and other strategies proven to strengthen career pathways provide strong opportunities upon graduating with a high school diploma.

Priority Areas

- Advance equitable P-12 outcomes focused on higher education & Career Access and Preparedness;
- Increase bachelors and associates degree attainment by closing equity gaps;
- At the high school level, increase early and equitable access to career technical education (CTE), dual enrollment and other strategies proven to strengthen cradle to career pathways;
- And expand, diversify, and invest in the Childcare Workforce to meet the state goal of universal early childcare education by 2025.

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INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Inland Empire is one of the fastest growing regions in California, however, with its growing human capital, the economy has yet to fully adapt to being inclusive and sustainable for all. As long as low-wage jobs continue to grow in the region, Riverside and San Bernardino counties will continue to be among the lowest paid among the 50 largest US counties pre-pandemic with roughly one-third of the population living in poverty.⁹ This poses as an equity issue as Black and Latino workers make upwards of roughly 60% of the population of the region but are a disproportionately higher share (71 percent) of all people living in struggling families. Like many underestimated communities, economic vulnerability contributes to why we see 37 percent of working adults and over half of the children in the Inland Empire belong to families who are struggling to make ends meet, which remains higher than pre-2008 recession rates.¹⁰ Income and wealth building opportunities are essential to close persistent racial, gender, and economic equity gaps that are sustained by recurring barriers that must be addressed.

To reverse the downward trend and protect residents from the threat of automation, the region must build an economy that prioritizes creative social and technical solutions to be on a path to a more prosperous, sustainable, and secure future that allows for working families to thrive. We support tools and strategies to advance economic justice to touch the root causes of long-term systemic hurdles in community development. A just transition, that maximizes social and economic opportunities of climate action while providing increasingly mobile economic opportunity, is paramount to the future of a successful economy.

Priority Areas

- Increase investments in businesses and local governments connecting environmental sustainability and climate resilience to infrastructure and job growth;
- Expand access to and availability of multiple forms of capital and technical assistance for BIPOC and women's businesses (both for profit and nonprofit); Continue advocating for federal, state, and private funding to support projects that will build the region's inclusive economic and workforce development infrastructure;
- And help resource community-based organizations playing critical roles in workforce development, youth mentoring, and soft and hard skills formation.

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HOUSING

The Inland Empire has long been a stronghold of affordable living. However, with the state's housing crises reaching new heights, that affordability is becoming further out of reach, extending the challenges to a once modest housing environment. The pandemic exacerbated this trend. Within just 1 year from 2020 to 2021, vacancies fell and rents in the Inland Empire rose by about 8 percent with several renter management firms citing the region as seeing the largest rent increase in the nation.¹¹ This happened while rents were falling, and vacancies increased in urban strongholds such as Orange County and Los Angeles while workers were fleeing the crowding and expenses of coastal communities. We saw the same 8 percent drop in local households being able to afford to purchase a median-priced home in the region from 39 percent in 2021 to 31 percent in 2022, still more affordable than the state average of 24 percent.¹² However, this relative affordability does not translate to true affordability.

According to the California Budget Center, the Inland Empire is among the regions in California with the highest housing burden (41.5 percent) and severe housing burden (20.4 percent) second only to Los Angeles. Housing burdened residents pay over 30 percent of their income on shelter costs and severely burdened pay rates exceeding 50 percent of housing income.¹³ Additionally, the Regional Housing Needs Assessment released by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) indicates that more than 300,000 units need to be built in the Inland Empire to meet demand.¹⁴

To address the housing crisis in the Inland Empire, we propose exploring solutions that can be applied at a regional level and taken to scale with a focus on production such as building capacity for the redevelopment of publicly owned land. Inaccessibility to affordable housing is a large contributor to the homelessness crisis ravaging the region and state.

Expanding funding as well as coalitions and partnerships is crucial for community education, engagement and advocacy for housing resources and plans. We hope concerted action would escalate proper comprehensive wraparound supports to provide pathways for people experiencing homelessness to comfortably get into affordable housing and on a path to homeownership.

Priority Areas

- Support and invest in scalable strategies that increase affordable housing units and ensure equitable access to new homeowners;
- Build local capacity for the redevelopment of publicly owned land at scale through new policies and investments;
- Support coalitions and networks that can ensure the education, engagement and advocacy for housing resources and plans;
- And increase funding and comprehensive services to support to those experiencing homelessness.

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HEALTH

A healthy community is central to a thriving region. We are deeply reminded of this fact as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Health disparities were made clear as the system failed to effectively protect those who were most vulnerable including other factors that contribute ultimately to individual physical and mental health. Community health professionals made strides in collaborative innovations that must be sustained to maintain accessibility for those who need it the most.

The uninsured population, although shrinking, persists. The IE is in the bottom third of counties in California for percentage of insured residents. However, even for those who are insured, there is still an accessibility crisis as an estimated 1.3 million people live in an area that has a shortage of primary care providers.¹⁵ Additionally, About 37 percent of people in the Inland Empire live in an area that has a shortage of mental health professionals, this is 13 percent higher than the state average and a critical area of concern.¹⁶ For those who are able to access care, for the majority-minority population, their care providers often do not look like them which can serve as a unique barrier. For example, although Latinx people make up over 50 percent of the population, Latinx physician and RN underrepresentation are extremely pronounced in the region with less than 10 percent of physicians and less than 15 percent of Registered Nurses identify as Latinx.^{17,18,19}

As the world transitions into an endemic era of COVID 19, the healthcare and social service ecosystem must continue to adapt to the needs of our communities and residents. This includes diversifying the workforce to look more like the region by expanding work-based learning opportunities available to youth in the region among other strategies. This would seek to achieve representative primary care providers (Physicians and Registered Nurses) to the disproportionately Black and Brown population that they serve in the Inland Empire. We aspire to address multiple forms of healthcare accessibility as a central component to a flourishing community.

Priority Areas

- Grow and diversify the health care workforce through strategies such as expanding work-based Learning opportunities;
- Advocate for funds that will support coalitions and networks to expand the impact and reach of health care providers and nonprofits;
- Expand mental health resources, especially for children;
- Develop and invest in efforts to reduce infant and maternal mortality for Black and Brown women and babies specifically.

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CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

The Inland Empire is a vast region that spans across multiple landscapes including suburbs, valleys, high and low-elevation deserts, and numerous mountain communities. However, like many other communities, the IE faces threats to its natural environment and growing population including rising temperatures, air pollution, wildfire threats, the loss of agricultural land, and inadequate water infrastructure. There are over 1 million people in the IE living in communities that are designated as vulnerable populations severely burdened by negative environmental factors.²⁰ As the vitality of our environment affects our health, the region is ranked #1 for the worst air quality in the nation by the American Lung Association, leading to increased rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease.²¹ With multiple factors threatening the health of our ecosystems and natural resources, the IE needs to invest in and prepare for a climate-impacted and carbon-neutral future now.

Collaboration, sharing best practices and policy changes are critical to the sustainability of our environments including energy, water, fire and air. As the state has set some ambitious renewable energy goals, the region needs to expand best practices around localized renewable energy goals for jurisdictions in the region who have yet to strategize for sustainability ordinance adoption. Additionally, cross-jurisdictional collaboration is required to maintain water resiliency and it has been identified that it may be time for a larger region and statewide long-term water resiliency plan. Protecting our communities from the dangers of wildfires is paramount, as it can be incredibly

devastating. Riverside and San Bernardino counties are at 'very high,' with Riverside County specifically singled out as having the most properties at risk from wildfire.²²

While the nation and globe are at a critical juncture in protecting our planet, we need to do our part. It is important that we invest in organizations and strategies that are vital to the response to climate and disaster resilience solutions for the region, and provide lifesaving innovative strategies, and resources, for the natural environments and its inhabitants.

Priority Areas

- Expand best practices around localized renewable energy goals for jurisdictions that have yet to strategize around sustainability ordinances; Advocate for financial and workforce resources to build the infrastructure needed for long-term water resilience;
- Support statewide efforts for long-term water resiliency planning;
- Support investments that will expand net-zero carbon use while growing good jobs; transitioning existing workers, and ensuring low-income communities can access green technology and infrastructure;
- Advocate for investments and land use planning that will help the IE build a more resilient food system;
- And expand investments into nonprofit organizations to become part of climate and disaster resilience solutions for the IE.

CONTACT US

OFFICE OF POLICY & ENGAGEMENT

The objective of the Inland Empire Community Foundation's Office of Policy & Engagement is to address inequities in the Inland Empire by creating greater policy capacity in the region through collaboration, uplifting community-based organizations and their ideas, and amplify a greater voice and influence on policymakers and the region's major institutions. In an effort to be a global community partner, the Inland Empire Community Foundation's policy priorities will include: Education Equity, Inclusive Economic Development, Housing, Health, and Climate & Environment. Follow us or contact us at:



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SOURCES

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