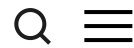




Tishman Environment
and Design Center



TISHMAN CENTER · JANUARY 30, 2025

NEW REPORT: "Shifting from Moment to Movement"



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**Blog Analysis &
Report Author:
Jennifer Santos**

Ramirez, PhD, Tishman Center's Senior Researcher

For decades, environmental justice community-based organizations (EJ CBOs) from historically disinvested communities have worked to improve public infrastructure through community-driven projects focused on sustainable development and resilience—including affordable housing, food justice, renewable energy, and public spaces. However, access to federal infrastructure investments has remained hindered by historic barriers such as racism, privatization, and gentrification. A lack of access to federal funding has been an ongoing struggle for EJ communities enduring generations of environmental harm. With the upcoming shifts in federal policy, especially under the Trump administration, this struggle is more evident than ever. However, the past four years also brought significant advancements in federal environmental justice policy under the Biden administration, particularly through initiatives like Justice40, which mandates that 40% of the benefits from climate and clean energy investments go to disadvantaged communities. Along with landmark legislation (e.g., Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act) and

creating a White House EJ Advisory Council, these efforts paved the way for unprecedented federal support for environmental justice and frontline communities.

Three years ago, the Community First Fund (CFF), a funder intermediary established by two women of color,

embarked on a mission to ensure that the federal government was held accountable to the Justice40 mandate and that federal funding would flow to the groups that needed it the most. In 2022, they asked the Tishman Center to assist in identifying the challenges and gaps in federal infrastructure funding for local EJ organizations and the communities they represent. My role as the research lead on this project allowed me to witness firsthand the groundbreaking work CFF did to close these gaps between federal agencies, community-based organizations, and other sectors and to hold federal agencies accountable to the Justice40 initiative. I discovered a compelling example of the deliberative and



Photo: CFF organizing a meeting with EJ leaders and Biden administration staff members during a national convening in Washington, DC, March 8-9, 2023. Source: Communities First Fund

inclusive efforts needed to establish multi-sector collaboration to build equity in federal grant programs and to foster powerful relationships among EJ groups from different communities.

In environmental justice, storytelling is not just a tool; it's an essential strategy that brings to life the values and victories of our movement. Stories transform data and observations into narratives that resonate with people, inspire action, and create a deeper understanding of complex environmental issues impacting under-resourced, vulnerable communities. Recognizing the transformative power of this story, we felt compelled to capture the multi-dimensional approach of CFF's work, which we detailed in our latest report, "[Shifting From Moment to Movement](#)."

CFF led a multi-phased facilitative approach that was as strategic as it was inspiring. The first phase involved the establishment of the Communities First Infrastructure Alliance (CFIA), which brought together key players from the public and private sectors around a shared vision to integrate environmental justice principles and priorities into new federal grant programs. This alliance was crucial for uniting public and private stakeholders around a shared vision to embed EJ

principles into federal initiatives like the Thriving Communities program.

In the second phase, CFF recruited well-known EJ movement pioneer Angela Mahecha (who currently serves as Tishman’s EJ Disrupt Design Fellowship Director) to connect with anchor EJ organizations throughout the

US. CFF and Angela focused on listening, co-learning, and resource mobilization, drawing diverse grassroots groups together with federal agency staff and Biden officials to navigate and inform the federal grantmaking landscape.

The last phase of CFF’s organizing strategy involved ramping up engagement and organizing community groups –supporting these groups to form powerful strategic partnerships and EJ projects *that won hundreds of millions of dollars in funding* to EJ CBOs through competitive government grant programs.



Through these phases, CFF adapted its strategy as needed and exemplified different facilitative roles with key actors and groups to develop relationships across sectors and increase access to federal funding for EJ community-based organizations. As we define and describe in our report, these roles were *Advocator*, *Weaver*, *Negotiator*, *Culture Broker*, *Activator*, *Modifier*, and *Catalyst*. Each role cultivated a robust ecosystem of involvement, empowerment, and support for EJ organizations, priorities, and solutions.

By telling the story of CFF's innovative approach, we highlight the outcomes of their efforts and provide a replicable model and blueprint for others to follow—especially for those with the resources to do this work in the next four years. As the landscape of federal policy and investments continues to evolve, recent gains in support for environmental justice projects are already being threatened. The continued implementation of the federal Thriving Communities programs will undoubtedly face hurdles, necessitating further support and engagement with EJ groups and communities.

We hope this research report reflects recent achievements and calls on all EJ advocates to keep the momentum going. In this

challenging new era, we must
ensure that our stories inform and
transform the policies and practices
that affect our lives and our planet.



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