YOUR VOICE.  
YOUR RECOVERY.

The ARP Activist Playbook: 
Connecting & Engaging with Local Leaders

A how-to guide designed by the Southern Economic Advancement Project to assist community activists and nonprofits in connecting and engaging with their local leaders and elected officials (mayor’s office, city council, county commissioner, governor’s office) as they strategize how their communities will use the incoming American Rescue Plan (ARP) funding.
In March of 2021, President Biden introduced the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP or ARPA), designed to stimulate the economy further as Americans recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with several other recovery initiatives, the act includes $350 billion in direct funding for state and local governments through the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program.

The SLFRF program allows for spending to “address systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to the unequal impact of the pandemic” and includes guidance from the US Treasury to consider spending that focuses on equitable outcomes.

Key aspects of the state and local recovery funds include:

- **Small cities get money as well.** SLFRF are provided to every town and county in the US, no matter how small. For many smaller cities (local governments serving under 50,000 people, labeled as Non-Entitlement Units or NEU’s), this may be the first time receiving and administering federal funds.
- **There’s a longer timeline than previous pandemic assistance.** The flexible timeline for spending the money is notable. Most state and local governments will receive two tranches of money: May 2021 and June 2022. Officials have until the end of 2024 to make spending decisions/plans and until the end of 2026 to spend the funds.
- **There’s greater flexibility in funding categories.** Leaders can use SLFRF for a tremendous range of recovery programs and projects. Examples of expenditure categories in the Treasury’s guidance include public health, mental health, food programs, direct cash transfers, rent aid, eviction prevention, cash assistance to the unemployed, job training assistance, aid to nonprofit organizations, education aid to high poverty districts, child care, affordable housing, violence interventions, early learning, and community health navigators. Other eligible uses include water and sewer infrastructure, broadband expansion to underserved areas, or revenue replacement to offset pandemic impacts on local budgets.

With so many options and competing needs, the process of setting spending priorities is critical. Community engagement will be fundamental to suitable SLFRF investments and equity goals, which means SLFRF is a fresh and valuable opportunity for activists and nonprofits already excelling in these areas. To secure an equitable, community-based pandemic recovery, activists need to be aware of the SLFRF opportunity, informed about the particulars of this program, and energized to be effective and successful advocates.
1. **KNOW YOUR STUFF** - Staying up to date is the first line of defense when the nudge to make a difference hits your heart. Before you or your organization attempt to apply for funding or suggest where or what sector you would like prioritized for funding, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- **How much is your city receiving in funding?** Knowing how much money your city or state receives will help shape your spending ideas. You’ll also have insight into how much you can comfortably request or propose an idea. This [interactive online tool from the National League of Cities (NLC)](https://www.nlc.org) provides a complete list of the allocations headed to metropolitan cities and non-entitlement local government units.

- **Are your proposed areas/sectors/ideas already in the city’s spending plans?** Many cities, counties, and states have begun planning how to spend ARP funding, and your city may already have spending ideas for your suggested area of concern. If available, be sure to browse your city’s website for the latest ARP planning and spending movements. Doing this brings you up to speed and allows you to tweak any ideas based on your city’s current ARP plans. If no information is available, make that an issue of concern when reaching out to your leaders.

- **Be engaged!** Being active and present in community events and city council meetings can help you establish a stronger voice, so when you’re ready to present your proposals or requests, you are perceived as reliable and assured.

**Sidebar Note:** Keep in mind, the crux of ARP is keeping an eye toward equity and engaging the community in the spending process, so information should be readily available to the public.

Don’t shy away from asking your officials about the current process regarding ARP for your community. Questions to ask include, but are not limited to:
- How will funding decisions be made?
- Who will get to participate?
- Where and when can interested residents get updates/info?
2. **FIND YOUR VOICE** - Before asking for funding or heading to your local officials with your ARP spending ideas, establish ways to make your voice stronger. Doing so will help you come across boldly, clearly, and strategically.

- **Data is your best friend** when setting out to connect with local leaders. Being able to hit them with solid points as to why your proposed area or sector deserves priority spending will make a real difference.
  - **Example: Advocating for a Recreational Center in Low-Income Housing Communities** - Going to your leaders and requesting a recreational hub is one thing; going to them with data showing that - “x” number of low-income children lack outlets for expression or stimulation of their social development, which contributes to “y data” (lower health outcomes, school performance, etc.) in “blank” neighborhood - makes a stronger case for your proposal.

- **Storytelling has power.** The pandemic impacted many that we call family, friends, or neighbors. Nothing creates a stronger punch than persuading elected officials to understand that they serve real people facing real problems. Tell stories on all appropriate platforms available and in creative ways that capture the attention of your intended audience. Questions to consider in your storytelling may include, but are not limited to:
  - Did the pandemic make it harder for you to feed your family?
  - Did your neighbor lose their home due to the housing/eviction crisis?
  - Did someone close to you pass away due to unsustainable healthcare policies in your city/state?

- **Provide examples** of how other city leaders engage with their communities around ARP spending and planning. Pulling best practices and ideas from cities and towns comparable to yours can work to your advantage by showing what is and what isn’t working. Visit [SEAP’S ARP Equity & Engagement News](https://www.southstrong.org) tracker for examples of how other communities are spending local recovery funds across the South. If your city leaders can see similar municipalities succeeding with a plan or policy, they may be more receptive to adopting it.

**Tip:** Recently, the SEAP, Fair Count, and the National Conference on Citizenship released its 4th edition of the Pandemic to Prosperity: South report. The report is packed with current and reliable data that can be highly supportive of your proposals.
3. **FORM YOUR TEAM** - Whether you are tackling your ARP spending advocacy solo or with a team, collaborating with like-minded individuals or local community organizations can only help!

- **Assembling allies** will help you pave your agenda, and working with others will bring a fresh perspective and strengthen your proposal. By connecting with other activists and community members, you’ll have direct insight into how your proposal or idea will impact the community you are seeking to help.
  - See the ‘Action From Orgs Like Yours’ section on page 7 of this guide.

- **Finding resources** will help support your plan. There are tons of resources available right at your fingertips regarding ARP. Whether you’re looking for quick FAQs to learn more or technical assistance, the SEAP has you covered with an ARP Toolkit. The SEAP has also published a model resolution that holds leaders accountable for spending ARP funds justly and equitably.

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**Playbook Spotlight:** The Committee for a Better New Orleans recently introduced our model resolution to the New Orleans City Council. The board unanimously **passed the resolution**!
4. **PRESENT YOUR VOICE** - Here is where the rubber meets the road - presenting your ideas and proposals to local officials and leaders. This is your or your organization’s opportunity to make a substantial difference in your community’s pandemic recovery.

- **Letters** are an excellent way to formally convey the needs of the community. When drafting a letter of your ARP spending proposal, be sure to state your wants and needs clearly (don’t forget the supporting stories and data) and submit them to all necessary leadership and committee members.

- **Community Meetings** that activists strategically plan out have a better chance at sticking with officials. Don’t get discouraged that many local leaders and elected officials are not hosting in-person meetings, as virtual meetings are an option. Invite them to join and listen and participate! While planning how to present your proposals, be sure to take time (holidays, local events…) into consideration - it can make a real difference in how, when, or even if they follow up with you.

- **Social Media is powerful.** Many of your local leaders and elected officials are social media users. If you can’t reach them through letters, emails, or even community meetings, make some noise on social media. Even after meeting with them, tell the public on social media. It can serve as an extra layer of transparency and put a fire under elected officials to respond or make moves.

- **Organize** your community members who may not be as in the know on how to engage or may seem disconnected from the matter. Remember, the general public does care about their community but often does not know about the issues that affect them most. Try gaining access to a voter file platform to utilize various means of organizing like phone banking, texting, postcards, or mail (to name a few) and reach others who may want to join!

- **Testify** to your local officials more formally through public testimony. If your local council or board offers a public comment period during their meetings, use that as an opportunity to share any collected stories, data, and proposals you or your organization may have. These meetings are often recorded and live-streamed, and your remarks are logged in their official record, too!

**EXTRA! EXTRA!** Sharing out to your local media outlets is another excellent way to present your voice and ideas. You can easily catch the attention of both the public and local leaders.
THE PLAYBOOK: STEP FIVE - REACHING BEYOND THE LOCALS

5. REACHING BEYOND THE LOCALS - Taking your voice to the next level, the federal level, may seem like a daunting and unobtainable task; however, there’s a way to build up to this moment that is not so intimidating. Rule #1: don’t be intimidated. Your officials work for you!

- **Build relationships** with someone in your community who knows how to contact the elected official you need to reach in Washington. Start by researching and networking with your inner circle, community leaders, and local elected leadership and their staff, which goes back to being present at the local level and having relationships within the community you serve. Also, keep in mind that many representatives and senators often return home after their time in Washington. Stay in the know to build your opportunity to connect!

- **Cold Calling & Emailing** is not dead, although it is not the first choice in connecting with someone you have never met. ARP spending is a top priority for America at the moment, and federal leaders expect to hear from the public. To increase your chances of a response, have each person from your gathered team/organization send separate emails. Also, research the official you are hoping to have amplify or support your idea. Doing this will ensure you aren’t reaching out to someone whose focus is healthcare, asking for support on crime mitigation.

CONNECT WITH U.S. TREASURY

If your team or organization has concerns regarding the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds program, please feel free to email US Treasury officials at slfrp@treasury.gov.

**Note:** Even if you don't receive a response, the Department of Treasury will review your email and determine whether or not to take action.
The petition called for an “equitable, transparent, community-centered, community-driven process that results in an equitable outcome.” They both delivered the petition to the City Council and organized an event/press availability on the steps of the city’s council building.

- The Pittsburgh United coalition organized a petition with other community groups after learning the city council began making ARP spending plans without community input.

The Back in the Black coalition was organized around research by activists in Durham to hold steadfast to the Biden Administration’s dedication to equity through Executive Order 13985, the legislation of ARP, and independent research on closing the racial wealth gap.

- The coalition has centered around demanding that local leaders spend 45% of ARP funds on Black-led projects. They also organized existing community groups in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood to join, used online resources, and went directly to city and county governments with their demands.

Along with passing SEAP’s ARP Model Resolution, the city of New Orleans also established a task force aiming to leverage a wide range of federal funds to advance an ambitious program for renewing the city’s infrastructure.

The five aspects of infrastructure the task force focuses on are Case Management, Community Services, Workforce, Economic Recovery Investments, and Public Health. Public Health.
Hello/Greetings [official name],

I am [name], [position/title] of the [organization name]. I hope this email finds you well and serves as a springboard for future advancing conversations regarding the [city/town name] community. My team and I noticed your recent/sitting stance on [issue].

We would like to show our support [or propose an idea] on how we believe local leaders of [city/town name] can allocate our share of incoming State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) through the American Rescue Plan (ARP).

Recent data from the [source] shows that [data on the issue] in our state/town. These unprecedented funds will help us change the narrative for our communities.

We support the spending opportunity of allocating [dollar amount] toward [issue/initiative/program]. [Explanation of support 2-3 sentences].

OR

We’ve gathered community input on this issue, and our results/proposal are/is as follows: [Proposal Idea/Supportive Description]

My team would be honored to discuss our proposal either in person or via an online conference call. We know the [data support: x amount of residents] can benefit from our proposal. Your support of allocating SLFRF to this initiative will create a more sustainable community that will equitably recover from the pandemic.

My team is available [provide open dates/times]
We look forward to hearing from your office.

With the community in mind,
[Sign Off]
Our organization is aware that [data/statistics]. We feel this impacts our community in a way that doesn't justly represent what our community needs. OR These numbers only prove that the [city/town name] community is/isn't in support of [issue].

We would like to seek a change through the equitable and transparent spending of incoming ARP allocated to our town in the amount of [SLFRF amount].

We know that with your support of [issue/proposal idea], we can create a recovery for our [city/town name] residents that places people before politics.

[Quote or overall statement that drive home’s your organization’s mission]

Call to Action: For our team, connecting with your office is a top priority to ensure SLFRF spending opportunities and plans represent every community of [city/town name] during this pandemic's recovery.
RESOURCES

SEAP:
ARP Equity and Engagement Map
Model Resolution
Public Engagement Memo
How to Tell Your City’s Recovery Story

National League of Cities:
Local Fund Calculator: By Municipality

National Association of Counties:
Allocation: County by County

State Nonprofit Associations ARP Resources:
National: National Council of Nonprofits
Florida: Florida Nonprofit Alliance
Georgia: Georgia Center for Nonprofits
Kentucky: Kentucky Nonprofit Network
North Carolina: North Carolina Center for Nonprofits
South Carolina: Together SC

More state-based nonprofit associations that do not feature a resource page for ARP funding but exist as outreach opportunities:
Alabama: Alabama Association of Nonprofits
Louisiana: LANO
Mississippi: Mississippi Alliance of Nonprofits and Philanthropy
Tennessee: Momentum Nonprofit Partners
Virginia: Center for Nonprofit Excellence
West Virginia: West Virginia Nonprofit Association

Selected Local Nonprofits that are active on ARP:
Atlanta, GA area: Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta
New Orleans, LA: Committee for a Better New Orleans
Across West Virginia: West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy
Across North Carolina: NC Justice Center
Durham, NC: Communities in Partnership

US Treasury Guidance for State/Local Fund:
State Funding
Guidance Page
Interim Final Rule
Fact Sheet
FAQs
Quick Reference Guide