



SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT



**Organizing for Federal Funds:
Case Studies from Southern Organizers**

MAY 2023



ABOUT SEAP

SEAP is your partner and resource. We amplify the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work towards broadening economic power and building a more equitable future. Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to address these connections directly. SEAP focuses on 12 Southern states and marginalized/vulnerable populations within the region.

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INTRO

Federal funding programs have the power to boost economic growth, improve individual quality of life, and strengthen community resiliency. As the COVID-19 pandemic showed, federal dollars are especially important in times of crisis, as the federal government has the unique ability to leverage abundant resources. Recent waves of recovery funding were unprecedented in that they were directed not only to states and counties but also cities, Tribal governments, and individuals. Eligible uses for these funds were more flexible than in the past, which allowed for greater experimentation and learning.

An ecosystem of support is needed to ensure that federal funding implementation includes robust community engagement and delivers equitable outcomes. Governments, philanthropists, advocates, academics, membership organizations, direct service providers, community-based organizations, and residents each have an important role to play in the process. The following case studies tell the story of organizations that took the initiative to educate and organize their communities to advocate for equitable allocation and implementation of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funding (SLFRF).

These inspiring stories of action and impact shed light on how people can work together, through coordinated strategies, to ensure the needs of people most impacted are centered in the implementation of federal funding programs, now and moving forward.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES & NEEDS:



SOWEGA Rising has a mission of mobilizing people and resources to improve the quality of life for people in southwest Georgia. The issues they work on include economic justice, civic engagement, rural health, food justice, criminal justice reform and public safety, historic and cultural preservation, climate and energy justice, and racial equity.

Georgia Advancing Communities Together is a statewide membership organization that represents the state's nonprofit housing and community development organizations. Their mission is to build, support, and inform a statewide network of thriving organizations, professionals, and individuals advancing equitable housing and community development. Their goal is for all Georgia families to have safe & decent housing in vibrant neighborhoods.

Early in the pandemic, Albany, GA in Dougherty County was an unlikely COVID-19 hotspot. With a population of just 75,000, Albany had 659 cases for every 100,000 people in 2020, making it the second-worst outbreak of coronavirus per capita in the United States and the fourth-worst in the world. In March 2020, all intensive-care beds were full, and the six-month stockpile of protective equipment that Albany's hospital had prepared was gone in less than a week.

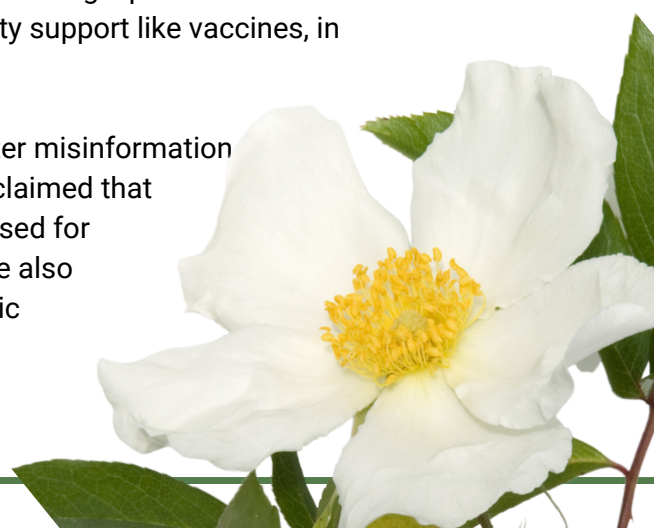
When Congress passed the American Rescue Plan a year later, SOWEGA Rising and Georgia Advancing Communities Together (Georgia ACT) knew this new wave of federal funding presented Southwest Georgia with opportunities that could not be ignored.

Engaging communities across Southwest Georgia, SOWEGA Rising and Georgia ACT quickly realized that most people simply were not aware, and many were even skeptical, that ARP provided millions of dollars that local communities could use to respond and recover from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19.

SOWEGA Rising and Georgia ACT joined forces with F.R.E.S.H. Communities, Fort Valley State University, along with numerous other partners, to launch the 3V (Vote, Vaccines, and Vision) Liberation Tour. The "vision" portion of the tour included town hall meetings in 42 different cities throughout South Georgia. Many of the cities on the tour were more rural, which, unlike Atlanta, were not used to receiving and creating plans to implement federal funding.

These organizations didn't wait for people to come to them, they met people where they gathered in barber shops, parking lots, and other community forums to develop strategic plans for how residents would like to see ARP funds spent while providing critical community support like vaccines, in partnership with local health departments and hospitals.

As the tour went on, it became more and more challenging to counter misinformation about how ARP funds could be used. Even elected officials falsely claimed that these funds were more restrictive than they are and could only be used for water, sewer, and infrastructure improvements. The political climate also made it difficult to generate bipartisan support and develop strategic plans for ARP funds should be spent.



Educating people about the true purpose of ARP empowered everyday residents to advocate for targeting these funds to address racial and economic disparities and support underserved communities. The 3V Liberation Tour helped people realize that not only were ARP dollars more flexible than they thought but there were also additional dollars coming from the state's ARP allocation and the bipartisan infrastructure law that could be used specifically for infrastructure.

This deep community work by SOWEGA Rising, Georgia ACT, and their partners generated invitations from city council members across the state to present how ARP dollars can and should be used. As a result, jurisdictions used the funding to support after-school programs, boost salaries for essential workers, invest in affordable housing, and pilot small business recovery programs. Their advocacy even helped divert \$2 million in ARP funds away from sewer projects into more community-based programming.

Now, community leaders have asked these organizations to continue supporting the development of strategic plans and advocacy efforts to hold elected officials accountable for addressing the needs of people most impacted by COVID-19 by listening to the needs of residents and implementing plans to make the best use of federal, and all public funding.

What is your advice to local governments on engaging Black communities in rural areas?

"Governments should listen when engaging Black communities in the rural South. Just listen. Then create policies based on what the community says. Government officials work at the pleasure of the people, but oftentimes in Black communities, governments feel they know best and often miss it. SOWEGA Rising believes that the solutions to community problems can be found within the people in the community. When we listen, engage and empower citizens, we see amazing things happen in rural Black communities."

The NC Congress of Latino Organizations (aka The Latino Congress) is a statewide, membership-led organization that builds power among Latino institutions and their leaders to advance social, racial and economic justice. The Latino Congress works for the public good by coalescing training, and organizing Latinos across religious, racial, nationality, class, county and neighborhood lines. Their membership consists of more than seventy congregations, community associations, unions and nonprofits in North Carolina representing more than 100,000 individuals.

The NC Congress of Latino Organizations (Latino Congress) works in five North Carolina counties and their cities- Durham; Raleigh, Cary, Wake; Chapel Hill, Orange; Winston-Salem, Forsyth; and Charlotte, Mecklenburg. In 2022, the organization conducted a series of listening sessions, which lifted up some of the most pressing needs in each of these counties. In Forsyth, it was bilingual personnel in schools. For residents of Wake County, it was more public funding for affordable housing. In Durham, people talked about the need for bilingual personnel in the police department. In each of these places, the Latino Congress gathered people together, in churches and community centers, to develop clear plans of action for how they were going to hold their elected officials accountable for meeting the needs of people most impacted by these issues.

One of the biggest opportunities that the Latino Congress promoted to address these issues was the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (SLFRF). The American Rescue Plan Act provided each of the counties millions of flexible SLFRF dollars to address the health and economic impacts of COVID-19: Durham County received \$62 million, Forsyth County received \$74 million, Mecklenburg County received \$216 million, Orange County received \$4 million, and Wake County received \$216 million.

The most challenging part of engaging and mobilizing communities in response to this historic opportunity was figuring out how to translate the information in a way that resonates with people. Once communities started to understand the magnitude of the opportunity, the Latino Congress helped local groups develop clear proposals for how the money should be spent to meet community needs. In addition to information sessions, the Latino Congress led communication trainings to help local leaders successfully advocate for community investments. This work has resulted in:

- \$20 million investment in Forsyth to hire new bilingual staff, social workers, and counselors. The Latino Congress continues to engage and support communities through trainings and support and holding officials accountable for spending ARP funding to address community needs.
- The Latino Congress also won \$250,000 in ARP funds from Orange County Commissioners, to provide property tax relief to low-income homeowners. This pilot property tax relief program offers the most funding per household of any program in the state to help low-income homeowners who are struggling to stay in their homes because of their property tax burden. With rising property taxes as one of the main drivers of displacement of low-income homeowners in Orange County, this program is a critical tool for preserving existing affordable housing in this community.
- In Cary, Wake County, Latino leaders participated in a grassroots campaign to secure funding for affordable housing. Leaders participated in a public forum with Town Council candidates, canvassed neighborhoods, and marched with hundreds to the polls on election day. Ultimately, the Cary Town Council allocated \$9 million of the ARP funds to support affordable housing.





In 2023, the Latino Congress is working to secure funding for mental health in Orange County and funding to help shelter the homeless in Durham and Wake County. The organization is also working to support low-income people at risk of losing their home and advocating for \$9 million to support home repair assistance, a 300% increase from last year's budget.

What is your advice to local governments on engaging Latino populations?



Local governments should identify strong Latino institutions (churches, nonprofits organizations, soccer leagues, etc.) and invite the people these institutions serve to meet with them to learn what issues are impacting the daily lives of the Latino community as well as brainstorm possible ways to address those issues so they can take the right action.



Arkansas Public Policy Panel is a statewide organization dedicated to achieving social and economic justice by organizing citizen groups around the state, educating and supporting them to be more effective and powerful, and linking them with one another in coalitions and networks. The Panel seeks to bring balance to the public policy process in Arkansas.

The Panel connects different regions of the state by building alliances and coalitions among diverse grassroots groups, nonprofits and institutions to help develop local and state policies that improve Arkansans' quality of life. The Panel serves as a convener, advisor and information clearinghouse for members of these alliances. The Panel produces reports on a wide range of issues including the academic achievement gap, the state's unfair tax code, and the impacts of the natural gas industry.

The Arkansas Public Policy Panel has roots that reach back to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Working in schools, and across a wide range of public policy concerns such as civil rights, farm sustainability, consumer education, environmental protection, and tax policy, the Panel has developed a uniquely Arkansan organizing strategy focused on local group autonomy, relationships, flexibility, strategic planning, and networking across issues and geography.

When federal funding trickled down to states and local communities as a result of ARP and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Panel created a new position: the Federal Relief and Infrastructure Spending Campaign Coordinator. In Arkansas, motivating people to advocate around education funding has been particularly difficult as many are focused on a very active legislative session. Recognizing that advocacy in Little Rock looks very different than more rural parts of the state, where it is much more difficult to get information about how federal funding is being spent, the Panel developed flexible strategies to engage disparate communities around the state.

Early on, the Panel focused on gathering and packaging information about federal funding opportunities that could benefit local communities. The Panel produced reports and [data visualizations](#) to educate and engage communities around RFP opportunities, but they quickly realized that local organizations didn't have the grant writing capacity needed to apply for and administer federal funding. In response, the Panel reoriented its strategy toward connecting organizations throughout Southwest Arkansas to partners and resources like Community Development Corporations to provide the necessary support to nonprofits.

One of the bright spots in Arkansas is the wave of investments made to update the state's water infrastructure. ARP dollars are being used in every single county to fund water projects, which is a huge need across the state. To help people identify which water projects are active and which ones are on pause, the Panel created [this visual](#) to support advocacy to ensure these projects achieve equitable results. Other investments like lead pipes replacement, asbestos removal, broadband, and brownfield cleanups are things communities have been demanding but were previously blocked due to lack of funding. Now, these projects are possible because of flexible federal funding. Moving forward, the Panel will continue to monitor water projects, make sure broadband expansion reaches the rural communities that need it most, and push for more robust environmental justice initiatives.



Engage Miami builds the civic engagement of young people across Miami-Dade county. They have both a 501(c)3 and a 501(c)4 organization to maximize their advocacy impact. They engage in civic education, voter engagement, and issue organizing to ensure the issues young people care about are heard.

Engage Miami has been engaging young people to make their political voices heard since 2015, which is no small feat given that their members are mostly transitory college students. Their model - which includes members and member-leaders, who are paid for their time - ensures that young people's historically excluded voices are heard in the political advocacy process.

They empower their members to get into the nitty-gritty on complicated issues that aren't typically explained to the median community member—much less young voters. Importantly, Engage Miami trains its members on the way the county budget in Miami-Dade County is structured. Given that budgets are typically dense, technical documents, they are building the educational tools to make sure that budgets are easily communicable. One tool is a well-researched, thorough infographic that explains where the money comes from and how it's allocated across the county's priorities. Engage Miami uses a "train the trainer" model, where members learn not only how to understand the budget, but also how to teach others. Members are also taught how to use their voices as citizens to engage in the public comment period.

Advocacy around the county budget has proven to be an empowering tool for Engage Miami's members. Members go from a surface-level understanding of their local government to a relationship with county supervisors and mayoral staff. These connections allow members to have direct access to advocate for the things they care about—an empowering process. Member leaders also survey communities on their priorities and ensure that they're communicated back to local officials. This creates a cycle of engagement beyond college campuses to broaden the number of voices heard.

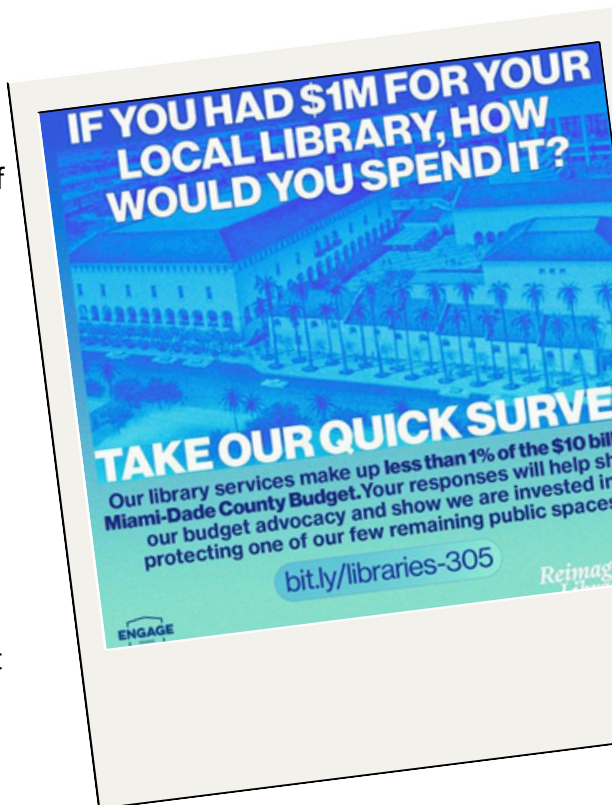
The influx of ARP funding created additional opportunities for Engage Miami members to advocate for new, important priorities. In Miami, this coincided with historically high property taxes given the rising cost of house prices. Combined, this meant that Engage Miami could identify places to spend new revenue, not just reallocate existing dollars.

Through their member leaders' research and community engagement, Engage Miami identified libraries as a core advocacy opportunity. Libraries offer resources throughout the community, are used by residents of all ages, and are important public spaces. And as Florida has increased their banned book policy, libraries offer a place for residents to still access important knowledge. When members realized how little libraries are funded—less than 1% of the county budget—they got to work.

Engage Miami's advocacy campaign around libraries is ongoing, including surveying community members and meeting with local officials. They'll also continue their budget education work, and are building a workbook to help members and the community more deeply understand future budgets, including how federal funding from ARP and the Inflation Reduction Act can be used to support community-driven priorities.



Currently Engage Miami has been conducting weekly canvasses and surveys, as well as researching where funding for increasing renewable energy and climate resilience in public libraries can come from, including using this federal funding to support implementation of the county's climate action plan. Engage Miami is collecting surveys from community members to identify what services and additions residents would like to see that would increase their usage of their local public library. More than 500 surveys have been collected via digital and in person outreach, and the findings will be shared with County staff and commissioners. The Member Budget Research Taskforce has been identifying historic library services and funding, examining recent prior year budgets, and identifying what services and programs neighborhood libraries currently offer as well as the funding sources that support those offerings. The campaign's goals are to identify \$10 million in the county budget to support solar installation; increase funding for social workers, staff, and services; and implement the county's stated climate adaptation priorities by making libraries highly visible as green community hubs that resource and support neighborhood priorities.



What is your advice to local governments on engaging youth?

“Young people have strong values and a clear vision for how they want to improve their communities, but often lack access to information about how local government impacts the everyday lives of residents through transit, housing, zoning and budget decisions, and resourcing cultural programs, among so much more. Local governments can bring to life how important these decisions are in fun and educational ways. Don't be afraid to hire a digital native from Gen Z to run your social media—the Milwaukee Public Library

system has an excellent account. Governance doesn't need to be stuffy and bureaucratic—increase representation and show how departments can practice inclusion, access, and increase connection with young residents. Partner with youth organizations and schools to conduct outreach and show how investments in community can make a difference in our everyday lives. Be welcoming when a young person shows up to a local government meeting to give public comment and thank them for showing up even if you disagree with their points. It takes a lot of bravery and shows that they care about their community, and that should always be valued and welcomed!”

Committee for a Better New Orleans works to create fertile soil for grassroots organizations. They work with community-led organizations, foster civic engagement, and seek to build a more transparent government. They provide training, resources, leadership development, and coordination across New Orleans' nonprofit community and civic leaders.

New Orleans faced an onslaught of challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, their economy is highly dependent on tourism, which disappeared almost overnight. Then, they were found to have some of the worst racial equity outcomes in terms of who was dying from COVID-19. Finally, Hurricane Ida hit in December of 2021, one of the strongest hurricanes ever to hit New Orleans. This is on top of existing tensions between grassroots organizations and city leaders. There were decades of distrust, high crime, budget cuts, and stalled projects across the city.

Like many crises, this one opened an opportunity. CBNO was able to use the increased attention from city leaders on equity to pass the South Strong SEAP model resolution, followed by a city ordinance to create an equity dashboard on ARP spending.

Simultaneously, they were giving grassroots leaders the tools to navigate and advocate ARP funding. They built resources like webinars, data, and trainings to ensure that community members knew how much money was coming and to demystify the complex budget allocation process.

Unfortunately, early wins stalled out. The process proved to be less transparent and more exclusive than they hoped. CNBO filled the gap by providing translation between opaque government processes and community members.

Similarly, the original projection of the distribution of ARP funds was equity-focused, investing across community needs. But as priorities shifted and crime rose in the news, the distribution shifted. While public safety (primarily NOPD) was originally slated to receive \$42 million, they ended up with \$266 million—the vast majority of ARP dollars.

CBNO found that much of this was a lack of process. While the intentions around equity were clear, the process to execute those intentions was found lacking. And while they're disappointed in the outcome of the ARP funding, they did begin to build a foundation for the future by rebuilding coalitions that had weakened during the pandemic.

They've coordinated more than 70 partners to design a better public process and sent community-driven proposals for a more equitable allocation of the second tranche of ARP dollars. This has shown the city that the community is engaged, organized, and coordinated.

Moving forward, they've turned their attention to IIJA funding. This is critical, given that much of IIJA will be competitively awarded. CBNO believes NOLA can be a competitive applicant, particularly building upon the missteps of ARP funding. They've already built a framework that links organizations' priorities together with federal funding, and have begun training community members on the process.



One Voice's mission is to ensure an equal voice for traditionally silenced communities. When One Voice's work is done, we envision a Mississippi with healthy vibrant thriving neighborhoods, schools, economy, and most importantly families. The goal is to enable civic engagement in the formation of public policy through leadership development, research support, training, and technical assistance.

One Voice grew out of the work undertaken by the Mississippi State Conference NAACP in response to housing, education, civil rights, and other related policy advocacy needs facing historically disadvantaged communities in the wake of the 2005 hurricanes. That work revealed significant needs within the non-profit sector.

One such need was access to current and relevant data required to do effective policy analysis. Another need was stronger connections between trained and networked community leadership and non-partisan, community-based structures through which broad public involvement could be organized and sustained. One Voice, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, was formed to address these needs.

In 2021, after the passage of ARP, SEAP started working with One Voice and the Mississippi NAACP to produce a [Mississippi-focused ARP toolkit](#). The goal was to expand the organizations' advocacy effort and ensure that federal funds are spent appropriately and equitably.

This toolkit galvanized elected officials and NAACP branches throughout the state. In Jones County, the ARP toolkit was instrumental in blocking a potential Title VI Civil Rights Act violation. Because of the support One Voice provided Supervisor Travares Comegys (the lone Black supervisor on the board), the local NAACP, and other community members, Comegy's district received \$1,000,000 instead of the \$100,000 originally proposed.

One Voice still receives calls for the toolkit and trainings from partners and continues to support ARP and federal fiscal recovery throughout the state.



FoodShare South Carolina's mission is to "increase access to, knowledge of and consumption of vegetables and fruit through community-led projects." It is a project of the School of Medicine at the University of South Carolina. FoodShare operates in 19 counties across the state, working in collaboration with local leaders to expand nutritious food access through food box distribution, technical assistance and advocacy for better food policy.

Pre-pandemic, FoodShare's model did not include advocacy. They were focused on getting healthy boxes of food into communities and building the relationships with local stakeholders to do so. They had an ambitious goal to be in 34 counties across the state, and expansion of core programming was their primary focus. FoodShare relied both on public funding - their food boxes are SNAP eligible - and private funding, including from a healthcare company foundation who saw their food distribution as a meaningful public health intervention.

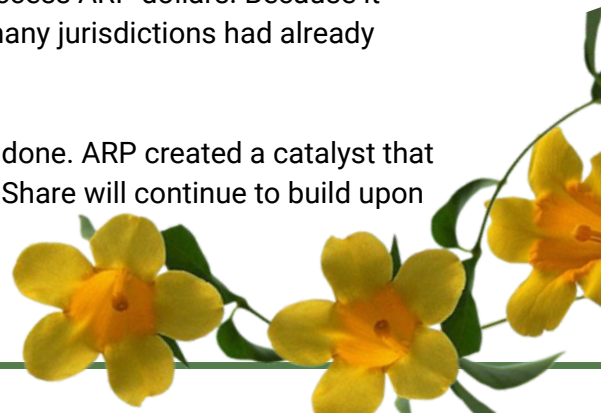
With the infusion of resources offered by ARP funding, FoodShare saw an opportunity to increase their advocacy across the state. Many of their distributors are small, local nonprofits or churches that didn't view advocacy as in their wheelhouse, lacked the capacity to build an advocacy program, or didn't see a direct connection to their core work. ARP changed this, as it put flexible dollars on the table that were going directly towards funding local COVID-19 programming. As FoodShare began to offer advocacy as a form of technical assistance, they found that engaging local officials wasn't top-of-mind for many organizations. The ARP dollars provided an opening for FoodShare to start the conversation around engaging in advocacy on the local level.

One immediate need was to build basic communication materials, and FoodShare saw these as an entree into advocacy. FoodShare worked with communities to create concise one-pagers and videos of their programming. Many organizations were building relationships with local officials from scratch, and being able to communicate the impact of their food security work was critical. They also learned that while local cities didn't seem to be investing in nonprofits, counties were more receptive to their messaging.

FoodShare also found that being able to access a relatively small amount of money - maybe \$1,500 or \$2,000 - could have an exponential impact on their partners. This learning demonstrated the importance of continuing to engage with public funding sources - small dollar impact means these organizations are strong candidates for becoming subgrantees of larger funding streams.

As with many small organizations, members of FoodShare often only have one or two people working on their programs. This limits their ability to engage in advocacy, and in some cases, meant that they didn't have the capacity to engage as deeply as would have been needed to access ARP dollars. Because it took a while to ramp up, once advocacy efforts started to take shape, many jurisdictions had already allocated their ARPA dollars.

But organizations are now paying attention, and there is still work to be done. ARP created a catalyst that moved many member organizations into the advocacy space, and FoodShare will continue to build upon this foundation to increase food access, including through SNAP.



What is your advice to local governments on engaging nonprofits?

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“Meet with them! Reserve time in your weekly schedule to meet face-to-face with nonprofit leaders and take action on their suggestions for local policies and changes. They know what is best for our communities and work closely with folks in need to shape advocacy messaging on important issues.”

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HOW IS SEAP HELPING?

SEAP focuses on broadening economic power in the 12-state Southern region. We constructed the [Federal Funding Outlet](#) to assist local governments and advocates in seizing the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act. In the Outlet, we gather best practices and resources, and we provide toolkits and guides on equity and engagement. Additionally, SEAP secured microgrants for several of the organizations featured in this report and works to spread their learnings about ARP organizing across the South. If your organization is interested in organizing around ARP, start with SEAP’s [Local Funds Tracker](#) to view the dollars still on the table in your city and county.

Learn more by visiting www.theseap.org