

BACKGROUND

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) is a \$1.9 trillion-dollar COVID-19 economic stimulus bill signed into law in 2021. A total of \$350 billion will directly go to states, cities, counties, U.S. territories and tribal nations. The funds are intended to be used to support pandemic response needs, including providing relief to households and businesses deeply affected by the pandemic – and must be spent by the end of 2024. [Click here for additional background on ARPA and its specific health care provisions.](#)

THE OPPORTUNITY

There is considerable flexibility in how the funds can be allocated, presenting communities with a unique and important opportunity to organize and demand the equitable and creative allocations of funds. In particular, advocates can urge decision makers to fund projects and communities that have historically been left out.

For many communities, this is a significant pool of money that can be used to rebalance power and change material conditions for those especially impacted by the pandemic. However, as with much of advocacy and organizing work, we have to struggle with how to create a space for public input and collaboration in a system that is not meant for that. What's especially difficult about these funds is that there isn't a requirement for public input or any form of public comment period. Because of this, advocates have to face decision makers that are not creating room for public input or disregarding community voices altogether.

Pushing for change and accountability is a priority because this is a unique opportunity for funding and resources. While uncomfortable, it is important for advocates and organizers to remember that this is the perfect moment to push and expand the imagination for what is possible and make those demands. The path forward may not be entirely clear, but that is what makes this moment perfect for effective and creative advocacy.

This toolkit illustrates how advocates can leverage ARPA funds to spur transformative change and address the unique needs of communities.

SECTION 1: ACTIONS ACROSS THE U.S.

The flexible nature of ARPA funds has generated questions among advocates and community members about the specific ways state ARPA funds may be used. While we do not have all the answers yet, we do know that advocates and champions across the U.S are working tirelessly to make sure that these funds are being used in a way that will benefit actual people. Although this toolkit will feature some incredible actions already taken by advocates throughout the country, we want to note that it is not too late for advocates to begin to engage on this issue. Below are examples of advocates' innovation in organizing for ARPA funding in their respective states and communities.

California

The California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, alongside coalition partners, wrote and delivered a [Racial Equity Framework for American Rescue Plan](#) sign on letter to California's Governor, Chair of the Senate Budget Committee, and Chair of the Assembly Budget committee. Noting that this is an unprecedented amount of federal dollars, the coalition called upon California's leadership to put a "down payment towards redressing the centuries-long disinvestment in BIPOC communities throughout California."

A notable provision that advocates requested was that 10% of ARPA funds go towards a racial equity innovation that would provide funding for initiatives to advance health equity and reduce healthcare disparities in communities of color. Other asks included a request for investment in basic income for residents that were not eligible for federal COVID-19 stimulus as well as investments in affordable housing, prevention of foreclosures, and funding to provide free access to highspeed broadband to residents.

TIP: Advocates should think about ways to align asks and priorities within coalitions in order to present a unified agenda when making asks. Much like CA advocates, advocates in other states should make asks grounded in a racial justice framework.

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Colorado

The Colorado Health Institute created an [ARPA Financial Map](#) to showcase how ARPA funds are being distributed in Colorado and to help decision makers identify funding opportunities. Governor Polis, Treasurer Young and legislative leadership hosted a series of eight regional meeting and 11 audience-specific meetings via Zoom to hear directly from hundreds of Colorado residents on how ARPA funds should be prioritized. Key asks from participants in the listening tour included using funds to support job creation and business growth, water storage, treatment and usage, and equity among the distribution of funds, among others.

In response to the listening tour, 350 Colorado, a local grassroots climate action movement, put together a blueprint outlining steps Colorado could take for [environmental justice](#). This plan also emphasized creating a sustainable energy economy utilizing the \$3.9 billion dollars in flexible ARPA aid the state received. Additionally, 350 Colorado was able to use this effort to engage their membership.

Additional Resources:

- [Build Back Stronger Colorado: Stakeholder Engagement Website](#)
- [Colorado Listening Tour Report](#)

TIP: Though public input is not required to determine funding priorities, some stakeholders, as seen in Colorado, are making an effort to gather some public input. Advocates can step in to address gaps in stakeholders' approaches to gathering community input by partnering with stakeholders to do outreach for listening sessions. Advocates could also engage their communities through surveys, community listening sessions, and/or other methods done in different languages and compensate participants to ensure their funding recommendations are led and informed by community voices.

Indiana

Hoosier Action created and launched a [toolkit](#) that includes a digestible description of ARPA, a spreadsheet that highlights how much money is coming into each city/county in Indiana, and examples of how the money can be used. The toolkit also includes tips for attending a city council or county commission meeting, sample email, tips for writing an LTE as well as a sample LTE.

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TIP: ARPA funds live in a nebulous space; advocates could follow Hoosier Action's lead by helping folks better understand what these funds are, what possibilities lay ahead, and how people can plug in to demand community input in the process. A spreadsheet outlining how much money is going into each city and county, like the one Hoosier Action created, could be a great way to give people something concrete to rally behind.

Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) launched [an ARPA Toolkit](#), which includes a [model resolution](#) for cities, towns, and counties to adopt that centers equity, transparency, and community engagement to guide their decision-making process for ARPA funding.

TIP: Advocates could organize their communities and encourage municipal leaders to adopt similar resolutions. The toolkit also includes resources around equitable recovery policy options, community engagement guidance, among other tools.

Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) [released a Request for Information \(RFI\)](#) to gather community feedback and input on how to leverage ARPA's enhanced federal funding for Medicaid home and community-based services (HCBS). In addition to this, EOHHS shared a summary of the RFI responses, met with the HCBS community, and remained transparent regarding their strategy, process, and timeline for the funding moving forward.

TIP: Advocates in other states could encourage their respective state departments of Health and Human Services and other state agencies to follow similar protocols for ARPA's enhancing funds for HCBS but also ARPA funding initiatives more generally. Advocates could also engage their communities through surveys, community listening sessions, and/or other methods to ensure their funding recommendations are led and informed by community voices.

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New Mexico

During the November 2020 special legislative session, the New Mexico Worker Organizing Collaborative's (WOC) immigrant-based organizations (NM CAFÉ, Somos Un Pueblo Unido & EL CENTRO de Igualdad y Derechos) advocated for federal CARES funding to go towards a state-administered economic relief fund for undocumented immigrant workers left out of federal stimulus programs. This economic relief fund, and others designed by WOC partners for local governments, supported immigrant families who experienced economic stress (i.e job loss or reduced hours) during the duration of the public health emergency in the form of cash relief. Over 20,000 families received between \$465 and \$3,000 through programs administered directly by local and state governments. Knowing how essential cash relief is for the communities that fell through the cracks due to tax status or mixed immigration status, advocates are now seeking \$15.6 million dollars from ARPA to supplement this fund.

TIP: Advocates could follow in New Mexico's lead by urging their state leadership to establish cash relief programs for communities that were ineligible for federal stimulus programs. Knowing that ARPA funds have the potential to support power re-balancing, use this opportunity to advocate for programs/policies that are not only supportive, but also transformational.

North Carolina

NC Child created a [toolkit](#) advocates can use to advocate for ARPA funds for children and their families, caregivers and professionals. They also created an informative [video](#) that explains ARPA, how to engage with the process, and even includes tips for how to narrow your priorities and sample questions that people can ask decision makers. This video is particularly effective because it creates a different type of opportunity for people to engage with this material. Not all people have the time or ability to sit down and read an extensive written toolkit or policy memo; a short video increases the accessibility of your materials and allows more people to plug into your work.

Additional Resources:

- [Greensboro ARP Spending Simulator](#)

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TIP: When creating educational materials to share with partners and community members, advocates should consider several different ways to inform the community, such as utilizing storytelling, videos, graphics and translating materials to different languages to meet the different needs of different people who may not have the capacity to read extensive written toolkits, policy memos or English isn't their primary language.

Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania Health Access Network (PHAN) conducted community and stakeholder engagement work to ideate how to leverage ARPA funds. For example, PHAN and their coalition partners at the [Here for Us Campaign](#) organized community members and providers to discuss how to build cross sector, local collaboration to strengthen and re-envision social safety net programs in Montgomery County and advance equity and racial justice at the local level. This has included several ARPA Town Hall events and a visioning session. They drafted public process principles for Montgomery County to adopt in order to ensure the county centers community voices in ARPA funding decision-making through robust engagement strategies, such as community listening sessions, community leader convenings, public comment periods, and the creation of equity-related goals and metrics.

TIP: Advocates could host ARPA Town Hall events to engage communities and push local counties to adopt community-engagement driven processes for making decisions around ARPA funding.

Texas

Every Texan created a [toolkit](#) for Texas cities and counties to support Texas localities in making community-driven, data-informed decisions for an equitable recovery. Their toolkit features information on ARPA funding allocations, examples of how funds have been utilized, community engagement principles, and additional resources.

TIP: Advocates could create a landing page with data, information, and resources about ARPA and how it could impact various localities.

Virginia

Advocates in Virginia, including Virginia Poverty Law Center (VPLC) and Virginia Organizing, called on the Virginia General Assembly to distribute ARPA funds for an equitable recovery. Virginia received \$4.3 billion in federal relief through ARPA. Advocates have calculated and broken down how funds should be allocated. Advocates' priorities include affordable housing, family and child welfare, food assistance, unemployment insurance, broadband and utilities infrastructure, language access, school funding, utility debt relief and strengthening tenants' rights. VPLC provided an [update](#) on how some funds were ultimately distributed in regards to their priorities, noting how some priorities were successfully funded, such as language services, while other priorities, like affordable housing, were not. [CASA](#) also engaged members through general assemblies to identify priorities and began local campaigns, like in Princeton County, to secure ARPA funds to make resources more accessible.

Additional Resources:

- [Equitable Rescue & Recovery: VPLC Budget Priorities for 2021 Special Session](#)
- [Letter to Virginia General Assembly on ARPA Priorities](#)

TIP: Advocates could engage and organize members at the municipal or county level to have more specific and localized campaigns, as priorities may shift from municipality to municipality or from county to county. Advocates could track and provide updates as decisions are being made about funding distribution to keep community members involved beyond initial input and in identifying potential next steps, such as meeting with stakeholders, hosting rallies or doing a social media campaign.

Wisconsin

At the municipal level, Milwaukee, WI will receive \$394 million in direct aid. [Mayor](#) Barrett has created a leadership team that is in charge of leading efforts to identify pathways to allocate funds. However, Mayor Barrett has already identified key priority areas for funding, as well as preliminary decision-making guidelines. The municipal government will educate the community on ARPA fund distribution through a dashboard on its website and is currently seeking community input through a [survey](#) provided in English, Spanish and Hmong. At the state level, Gov. Tony Evers recently announced a [\\$250 million investment](#) in housing, transit, child care, and health care projects. Of that \$250 million, \$50 million will be awarded in grants to local and tribal governments or nonprofit health care organizations for “health care building projects focused on increasing access for low-income, uninsured and other underserved communities, including boosting their ability to respond to future pandemics.” Grassroots leaders have been at the center of engaging community members on the potential impact of ARPA funds. Opportunity Wisconsin, Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC) and Citizen Action of Wisconsin held a [roundtable discussion](#) on housing, evictions, green jobs, climate change mitigation, and how ARPA funds can support sustainable and affordable housing.

TIP: Advocates could also engage their communities through surveys, community listening sessions, and/or other methods to ensure their funding recommendations are led and informed by community voices. Advocates should also put pressure on elected officials to create a public input process.

Multistate Example: ARPA Funds to Support Immigrant Communities

Undocumented communities and mixed-status families were originally left out of the CARES Act. ARPA funds now present a chance for state, local, and tribal governments to respond to the unique needs of immigrant communities by providing assistance to individuals regardless of immigration status. [California](#), [New York](#) and [Illinois](#) have established funds that will give excluded workers, including undocumented workers, direct economic assistance that they were ineligible for in previous stimulus packages. All three states are already setting examples of how ARPA funds can be used to push beyond the status quo thanks to the efforts of state advocates. In NY, these requests were realized thanks, in part, to advocates who led hunger strikes and held marches in support of excluded and immigrant workers.

Additional Resources:

- [Supporting Immigrants by Maximizing Opportunities in the American Rescue Plan](#)¹
- [Administering relief programs without an immigration test, when possible](#)

TIP: As advocates continue to engage with community members to identify funding priorities, advocates must include the input of different immigrant communities, including those of Black, Asian, Caribbean and Latinx immigrant communities.²

SECTION 2: MENU OF ORGANIZING TACTICS

Highlighted below are innovative tactics and best practices that you can consider that may be particularly effective in this moment. For the suggested in-person tactics, please consider personal safety around COVID-19 and make assessments informed by the CDC's guidelines around social distancing, wearing masks, and other safety protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Hybrid models for meeting/convening

As we all continue to navigate organizing in the age of COVID-19, we know that some people are itching to return to in person events while others want to maintain the increased reach that virtual gatherings allows. If you are thinking of this, consider a hybrid approach that allows you to keep the best of both worlds. You can plan a COVID-safe event that has the ability to support and engage people both in-person and virtually. Alternatively, you can separate in person and virtual events and plan the same event in different formats. See some tips for facilitating hybrid meetings from Beth Kanter [here](#) and tips for virtual gatherings from the Stanford Social Innovation Review [here](#).

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Conveying Urgency to Elected Officials

Organize community members to meet with elected officials on the state and local level and share their ideas for spending ARPA funding to benefit their communities. This could include scheduling constituent legislative meetings, hosting a legislative briefing elevating community voices, or attending elected officials' Town Halls and office hours.

Letters to the Editor / Op-Eds Elevating Community Voices

Consider writing Letters to the Editor (LTEs) or Op-eds to local and state media outlets advocating publicly to decision makers to engage community members in conversations about ARPA funding. Work with your own community members and support them in writing their own LTEs and Op-eds, sharing how they would like to see ARPA funding spent to address their community needs.

- [Sample ARPA Op-Ed Template](#)
- [Sample ARPA Letters to the Editor Template](#)

Using Public Projections

Consider creating a public projection installation to convey your message visibly in a community. For example, in Texas, [the Sick of It Texas campaign](#) coupled a digital Medicaid vigil event with small, outside in-person [community vigil projection](#) events in seven cities across Texas with the message: "Expand Medicaid. Save Lives."

Culture jamming/brand jamming

Culture jamming/brand jamming involves taking existing imagery, branding, or relevant cultural moments and "jamming" or flipping them in order to elevate your own messaging. Culture jams or brand jams often retain just enough of the existing branding/imagery to help capture people's attention or to push through a subversive message. Consider using culture jamming/brand jamming in a social media campaign or on a flyer to either build your base. For example, if a decision maker you are trying to influence is running for re-election, you can brand jam their re-election campaign imagery with your own messaging. As with any tactic, please make sure you do an adequate assessment of risk or seek legal guidance before incorporating culture jamming/brand jamming into your campaign. Additional resources on this tactic below:

- [Culture Jamming: Subversion as Protest](#)
- [The New Culture Jamming: How Activists Will Respond to Online Advertising](#)

Creating a virtual gathering space

Lean in into your digital organizing toolbox and create a virtual gathering space. Facebook, Slack, Signal, and WhatsApp are just a few examples of social media and messaging platforms that can be leveraged to build community. Just remember that your virtual gathering space shouldn't just be a space to do information dumps. Figure out a way to actively engage people and foster authentic relationships. See how mutual aid groups leveraged Slack during the COVID-19 pandemic [here](#).

Block Walks, Block Parties

Consider canvassing door-to-door or on a city sidewalk, a local park, or another community area to engage communities about ARPA, solicit feedback, and get community members involved with ARPA funding-related campaigns. For example, in Texas, the Sick of It Texas campaign held [Block Walks for Health Care](#) where they door knocked and engaged community members about health care, health insurance, and accessing care when uninsured.

Parades/Marches

Parades and marches have been a cornerstone of organizing and movements. During the pandemic, advocates throughout the country implemented a fresh take on parades/marches in order to continue demonstrating while complying with physical distancing protocols in the form of car, truck, and bike rallies. Teachers have also been using this [tactic](#) to connect and cheer their students up. As you are thinking about tactics for your campaign, consider planning a car, truck, and bike parade/march/rally with signs and music.