



# **THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT**

**2019 EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORT**

**BY FRONTLINE SOLUTIONS**

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Fighter League retreat in Merida Mexico / photo credit Rudi Navarra

Special thanks to The Solutions Project grantee partners, funders, trustees, consultants, and staff who shared their perspectives through key informant interviews and surveys.

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Graphic design by danielle miles.

## FOREWORD FROM THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT

### Dear Colleagues,

The report you are about to read was created to assess the impact of The Solutions Project's grantmaking in the 2019 calendar year. This evaluation was prepared by longtime partners and third-party evaluators, Frontline Solutions. Given their record, we are confident that their research methods and analysis align with our 100% Commitment to Justice. The results demonstrate grant dollars primarily supporting people-of-color and women-led organizations working on climate justice, clean energy, food, water, soil and a Just Transition to a regenerative economy.

The Solutions Project started our grantmaking in early 2015 and decided in 2016 to measure our philanthropic impact. We brought in Frontline Solutions to produce a baseline evaluation for our grantmaking in 2017. Every year thereafter we have collectively measured and assessed our progress. It gives us great pride to look back at our partnerships and grants in 2019 and see that we have:

- Met our 100% Commitment to Justice supporting 95% people-of-color and 80% women-led organizations in just one year;
- Invested our dollars in 20 states and territories across the U.S. with particular focus on Georgia and California as two distinct demonstrations of our theory of change;
- Taken particular effort to ensure Indigenous communities were supported across Navajo, Oglala Lakota, Hopi, and Houma tribes;
- Supported the majority of grantee partners with integrated programming, such as media and narrative support as well as "connect" resources that increased their influence and power across sectors;
- Leveraged cultural moments and celebrity influence to increase our grantee partners' impact; and
- Moved rapid response dollars to partners engaged in movement moments or ecosystem capacity building to advance a Just Transition for all.

This evaluation is part of our story of partnership with a diversity of frontline leaders innovating in climate solutions. From Oglala Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota to the communities of Comerío, Carolina and Humacao in Puerto Rico, we learn so much about what's possible for our collective future from you.

In Solidarity,



**Sarah Shanley Hope**  
Executive Director  
The Solutions Project



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout 2019, Frontline Solutions conducted a third-party evaluation to measure the effectiveness of The Solutions Project's grantmaking process. Data was collected from The Solutions Project's internal systems and through surveys and interviews with The Solutions Project's grantee partners, staff, peer funders, consultants, and philanthropic trustees. The primary findings in each of four indicator areas are summarized below:

**INVEST** *Right bet, right time:* The Solutions Project funds organizations working on the frontlines of equity and climate issues across the United States, with a particular emphasis on California and Georgia. Rapid response grants have gotten quicker since 2017. The Solutions Project has dramatically increased the proportion of giving to women- and people of color-led organizations in 2019, in keeping with its 100% Commitment to Justice.

**INSPIRE** *Building narrative infrastructure and platforms for influence:* Celebrity voices continue to be a major asset that The Solutions Project brings to the field of just transition. Grantees noted the impact of narrative training and support, but some reported that they do not have the capacity to take full advantage of these supports.

**CONNECT** *Strong organizations connected to a rich ecosystem:* Grantees achieved major wins in 2019, despite gaps in capacity. Grantee partners reported that The Solutions Project has connected them to new funders and organizations. Funders described staff as being collaborative and helpful. Stakeholders encouraged The Solutions Project to continue to clarify and define its role within the ecosystem.

**PARTNER** *Meaningful and supportive grantee/funder/intermediary relationships:* The Solutions Project's relationship with grantees is marked by trust and communication. Grantees felt that they could be transparent and open with The Solutions Project staff and were satisfied with application and reporting processes. Trustees were satisfied with their role in strategy and decision making. Although responsive communication with grantees has improved since 2017, there is opportunity to similarly improve communication with other partners.

The evaluation yielded the following recommendations for The Solutions Project's grantmaking:

- 1 Increase staff capacity for both Invest and Inspire.
- 2 Continue to make progress towards the 100% Commitment for Justice.
- 3 Maintain the flexible, multi-year nature of support and the quick turnaround for rapid response grants.
- 4 Lean into The Solutions Project's strength of leveraging celebrity voices.
- 5 Shift narrative capacity building efforts to direct narrative support.
- 6 Continue to develop the organization's identity and niche.



## METHODOLOGY

In 2019, Frontline Solutions conducted an evaluation of The Solutions Project’s investments. Data was collected from 40 grantee proposals, reports, and timestamps recorded in The Solutions Project’s internal systems. Frontline also conducted surveys and interviews with grantee partners, staff, funders, and philanthropic trustees.

These included:

- 13 grantee partner interviews
  - 2 philanthropic trustee interviews
  - 4 funder interviews
- Surveys and interviews with 5 staff and consultants

### Categories of Indicators

The Solutions Project and Frontline engaged in a series of co-working sessions in 2016 to design an evaluation plan for measuring the process and impact of investments, starting in 2017. Categories of indicators have since been adapted to reflect The Solutions Project’s emerging model. The current evaluation cycle is designed to measure the effectiveness of The Solutions Project’s grantmaking process and grantee partner satisfaction. Frontline’s findings for each of the following core areas are presented in this report:

INVEST	<b>Right bet, right time:</b> Leaders of grantee organizations are primarily people of color, women, and working on the front lines. Grantmaking is timely, flexible, and concentrated in California and Georgia, with additional giving towards promising work within a Just Transition narrative.
INSPIRE	<b>Building narrative infrastructure:</b> Mainstream narratives are influenced and compelling stories of impact are amplified. Grantee organizations occupy greater platforms for influence and tell their stories more effectively. Communications collaboratives are seeded and nurtured.
CONNECT	<b>Strong organizations connected to a rich ecosystem:</b> Leadership capacity and political influence of frontline communities are increased. Thriving ecosystems are cultivated at the intersection of multiple sectors.
PARTNER	<b>Meaningful and supportive grantee/funder relationships:</b> Grantees feel that they can be transparent and open with The Solutions Project staff and are satisfied with the application, approval, and grantmaking process.



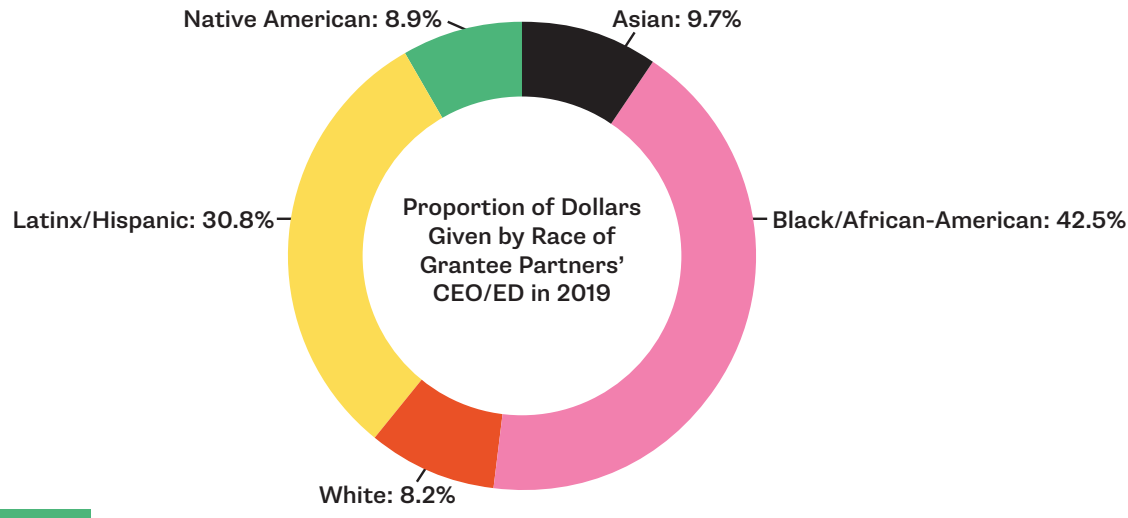
## INVEST: RIGHT BET, RIGHT TIME

Frontline climate organizations are fighting for a just transition to clean energy while also building power for communities. Many of these organizations work in under-resourced regions. They have the local solutions and the strong leadership that are needed to fight climate change, but need access to timely, reliable funding. Furthermore, climate philanthropic dollars in the US overwhelmingly go to organizations that are not led by women or people of color. There is a need for nimble, flexible giving to diverse frontline leadership.

### What we learned

From the perspective of grantee partners, funding remains one of the most valued supports provided by The Solutions Project. Compared to larger funders, The Solutions Project is closer to the ground and more attentive to power, race, and gender dynamics. Furthermore, The Solutions Project is more willing to fund small, historically overlooked organizations. The Solutions Project was described by one peer funder as taking an “ecosystem view”, serving as an early funder to scrappy, impactful organizations. Grantees noted that the flexibility of capacity building grants and the speed of rapid response grants has allowed them to lead in the ways that they know are best. Rapid response grants have gotten speedier in the past two years, with an average of 17.7 days from application to approval in 2019 (down from 22 days in 2017). Giving spanned the continental United States and Puerto Rico, with a greater concentration of grants in California and Georgia to support movements for change. Overall, more than one-third of grantees in 2019 were first-time grant recipients from The Solutions Project.

In early 2019, The Solutions Project announced its 100% Commitment to Justice, with the promise to invest 95% of its resources in leadership of color and 80% in organizations led by women. Grantees, peer funders, and other partners praised The Solutions Project’s move towards funding people of color- and women-led organizations, noting that The Solutions Project is setting a critical example in the field of climate-focused philanthropy. In 2019, the vast majority of grants were made to an organization led by a person of color (84.8%), representing a substantial increase from 46.5% in 2017. The total proportion of dollars given to an organization led by a person of color was 91.8%, and the total proportion of dollars given to an organization led by a woman or non-binary person was 78.6%.





### Size and number of grant awards in 2019

Capacity Building  
**27**  
grants  
\$550,000 total

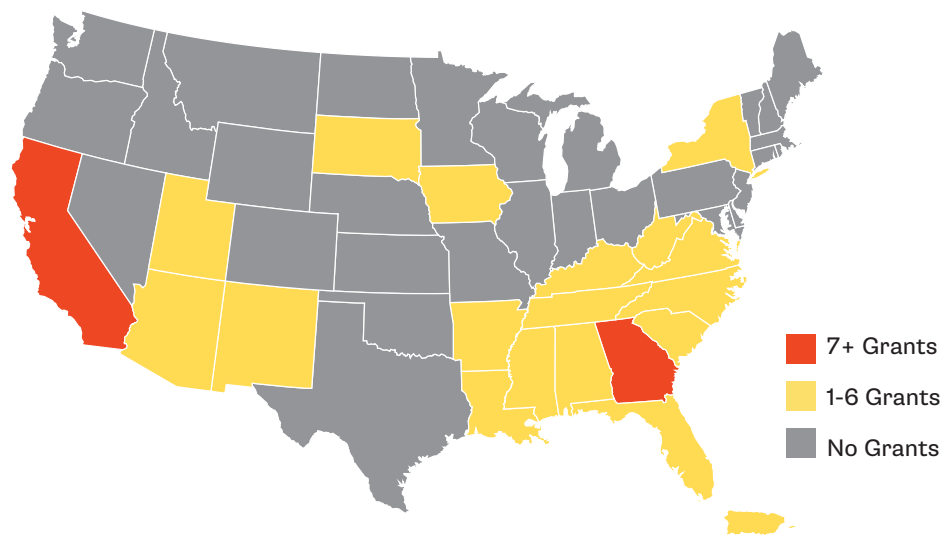
Rapid Response  
**13**  
grants  
\$63,000 total

Fighter League  
**6**  
grants  
\$60,000 total

### Rapid response grantmaking timeline



### Geographic location of grantee activities



### MOVING FORWARD

The Solutions Project has made substantial progress towards its 100% Commitment to Justice, but has room to support even more women of color-led organizations to get beyond the 80% threshold by 2020. Movements need long-term, sustained support, and The Solutions Project will continue to be an integral partner by providing rapid response grants and multi-year general operating support to organizations on the front lines.



## INSPIRE: BUILDING NARRATIVE AND COMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE

Frontline organizations create stories that have the potential to impact mainstream narratives on what is possible in fighting climate change and advancing a just transition towards a regenerative economy. When connected with media platforms and equipped with the tools to tell their stories effectively, the potential for these organizations' influence grows exponentially. Funders also have the opportunity to impact the narrative within philanthropy on frontline leadership and community solutions.

### What we learned

In 2019, The Solutions Project staff served as panelists and presenters on topics such as frontline innovation in clean energy, the funding landscape for climate in the Southeast, and media messaging to support grassroots movements. The Solutions Project staff were also active in writing blogs, op-eds, and thought pieces on 100% clean energy and a Just Transition.

Grantees highlighted that celebrity voices leveraged by The Solutions Project in 2019 have brought attention to their messages, stories, and efforts. Peer funders remarked that the ability to engage celebrities, influencers, and cultural leaders is one of the biggest strategic advantages that The Solutions Project adds to the field of Just Transition. Staff and trustees noted the need to broaden the bench of these voices, and to cultivate a deeper commitment and alignment with The Solutions Project's mission and priorities.

About half of grantees reported receiving strong narrative support from The Solutions Project, such as training, coverage of consultant fees, and social media support. However, gaps in capacity prevent many grantees from taking advantage of the full range of media and narrative support that The Solutions Project has to offer. Consultants and staff reported that narrative supports have been more successful when delivered as direct services rather than training or capacity building endeavors, noting that some grantee partners do not have the time or resources to put their new skills into practice.

**“In addition to [the training] being useful and usable, it was really **empowering** to see that the messages we had developed were working.”**

- Grantee partner

### MOVING FORWARD

The Solutions Project has an opportunity to diversify and deepen the bench of celebrity voices committed to just transition. Grantee partners would benefit from organization, prioritization, and streamlining of narrative supports, with a focus on direct services.





## CONNECT: STRONG ORGANIZATIONS CONNECTED TO A RICH ECOSYSTEM

When funders support the capacity of organizations and help connect them to an ecosystem rich in leaders, strategies, and perspectives, locally-rooted movements and ideas are better able to scale. Frontline spoke to staff, grantee partners, trustees, consultants, and funders to ascertain The Solutions Project's influence on the larger ecosystem and grantees' capacity and sense of connection to a broader movement.

### What we learned

Grantee partners on the front lines struggle with gaps in capacity--particularly in general operating support and staff capacity. Despite chronic under-funding, grantee partners have achieved wins in many areas in 2019, such as passing local, state, and national bills, installing renewable energy systems in just transition communities, and commencing public-private partnerships.

Grantee partners reported that The Solutions Project's efforts to broker relationships with other funders and organizations have been valuable for broadening their networks of collaboration and support. Grantees noted that The Solutions Project has vouched for them with other funders, which has lent credibility to their strategies and causes. Two-thirds of organizations interviewed reported that they feel very connected to a movement beyond their organization's individual work.

Other funders reported that The Solutions Project staff are collaborative, quick to share ideas and insight, and willing to push the field of philanthropy towards equity and justice. Funders and trustees provided feedback that The Solutions Project has made progress in identifying its core strengths, but that there is continued need for the organization to identify its niche within the broader ecosystem. Notably, The Solutions Project's ability to recruit celebrity voices to elevate the messages and stories of frontline communities and contribute to the broader narrative on just transition was lifted up by nearly all stakeholder groups as the most unique asset that The Solutions Project brings to the ecosystem.

### FIGHTER LEAGUE PILOT PROGRAM

In line with the 100% Commitment to Justice, The Solutions Project partnered with the Movement Strategy Center to provide Fighter League grants and capacity building to women leaders of color fighting to advance climate justice in the Gulf South. Designed through a community-based, participatory process, the Fighter League program was created to help these leaders grow, heal, and step more fully into their own leadership. The pilot cohort launched in 2019, and included:

- **6** awards to women of color leaders from 3 regional collaboratives
- **\$10,000** unrestricted provided to each individual recipient
- Mentorship, healing and cohort-based leadership development

Funding through the Fighter League program allowed recipients flexibility in creating a project to support their own leadership in their own communities. Recipients' use of the funds was wide-ranging, from setting up a Black-run urban farm to developing curriculum on nature-based learning and environmental justice. Partners, funders, grantees, and trustees described the Fighter League as filling a critical need for holistic leadership support in the Gulf South, where philanthropic giving is notoriously limited to disaster relief and is often not sustained over time. In interviews, stakeholders encouraged The Solutions Project to fully own, expand and elevate the Fighter League program in order to ensure legitimacy and longevity of the program.



“I don’t think of them as solely a funder. They build trust and relationships with their grantees, and prioritize historically dis-invested communities.”

- Funder



Philanthropic Trustees and Atlanta grantees / photo credit Stacey Heras

“I continually hear from organizations that Solutions helps to leverage the role of influencers for the field. Continuing to leverage and organize these influencers is a real added value.”

- Funder

### MOVING FORWARD

The Solutions Project can continue to fill a major need for grantee partners by connecting them to a broader network of funders and partners. Although The Solutions Project has made substantial headway in identifying its strengths, there is still room for the organization to further solidify and communicate its unique role within the broader ecosystem. Innovation such as the Fighter League program has shown great promise and should either be fully owned and implemented by The Solutions Project or handed off to aligned partners.



## PARTNER: MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

The strongest, most fruitful grantee/funder partnerships are defined by transparent and open communication. Accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness are key in the grant application, approval, and reporting process. Furthermore, community representation in funding decisions reflects a funding organization's trust in grassroots organizations to drive strategy. Frontline interviewed grantee partners to gather perspectives on their relationships with The Solutions Project, and interviewed trustees to ascertain their sense of influence and decision-making authority within The Solutions Project.

### What we learned

The Solutions Project was described as an accessible and supportive partner to grantees. All grantees indicated that The Solutions Project staff are helpful, supportive partners of their work. Staff from The Solutions Project were described as trusted co-strategists and allies. Nearly all of grantee partners interviewed in 2019 (92%) reported that they would feel comfortable reporting a negative outcome of a grant-funded activity to The Solutions Project. This represents a nearly 50% increase from 2017.

All grantees partners who were interviewed reported satisfaction with the ease and relevance of The Solutions Project's grant application process and the speed of the grant decision and payment process. Two-thirds reported satisfaction with the ease and relevance of reporting requirements. Staff were praised as being willing to adjust processes to meet the needs of grantee partners.

The majority (85%) of grantee partners reported receiving responsive communication from staff in 2019. This is a substantial improvement from 2017, when nearly a quarter of grantees requested better follow-up communication after the completion of their grants. By contrast, 2019 grantee partners who were no longer receiving funding from The Solutions Project noted that their relationship has continued to be supportive and productive despite funding ending. Similarly, grantees who have continued to receive funding expressed appreciation for a clear continuation of the grantmaking relationship.

When asked how The Solutions Project could improve as partners, most grantees lifted up the need for more funding. However, others highlighted a desire to enter into long-term, strategic conversations with The Solutions Project. One grantee partner noted that such strategic conversations with The Solutions Project staff were previously cut short due to staff transition, leaving the organization feeling that the time and energy spent had come to nothing.



Wahleah Johns of Native Renewables on Navajo / photo credit Camille Seaman



Nearly all grantee partners indicated that they would feel comfortable receiving a request for feedback from The Solutions Project about how to strengthen the partnership. Grantees also presented a range of ideas about how they could contribute to The Solutions Project's impact, including vetting potential grantees, providing community-level perspectives and solutions, and serving as partners in developing training and curriculum. More than half of grantee partners interviewed had connected other organizations with The Solutions Project for grantmaking purposes.

**“We have been able to use [The Solutions Project staff] as a sounding board for real advice and strategy about how to leverage our work. Their role has been as an allied strategist.”**

- Grantee partner

Trustees feel that they are an integral force in decision making at The Solutions Project. They reported that coming together allows them to reflect on the greater climate ecosystem, which helps them in leading their own organizations. Lack of direct communication between the trustees and the board of directors was highlighted as a potential area of concern. Although The Solutions Project has markedly improved its communication with grantee partners, several other stakeholders noted that receiving feedback and communication from The Solutions Project has taken longer than expected at times. This is likely due to low staff capacity, particularly in the context of staff turnover and transitions in the past two years.

**“The conversation and inclusion of the trustees has been stellar. I feel really engaged with the organization.”**

- Trustee

### **MOVING FORWARD**

The Solutions Project has successfully improved responsive communication with grantee partners, and has the opportunity to extend that success to communication with other stakeholders. Future transitions in staff or structure should be carefully planned to preserve as much continuity as possible for grantees. There is also opportunity for greater communication and alignment between the board of directors and trustees.



## INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Solutions Project has seen substantial success in meeting the recommendations outlined in the 2017 evaluation, including cultivating stronger and clearer communication with grantee partners, reducing the average time for rapid response grants, and giving a larger proportion of grants to women leaders of color. In synthesizing the findings and data summarized in this evaluation report, Frontline Solutions developed the following strategic insights related to The Solutions Project's grantmaking in 2019 as well as recommendations for moving forward:

- 1** Increase staff capacity for both Invest and Inspire. Hiring an additional full- or part-time staff member for each of these organizational areas is necessary to realistically enact the recommendations outlined below. Adding a staff member is particularly important for grantmaking functions: Grantees should have regular contact with at least two staff members in order to ensure relationship continuity during any future organizational transitions. Staff additions are also necessary in order to allow for more responsive communication with partners, consultants, and other funders.
- 2** Continue to make progress within the 100% Commitment for Justice. The Solutions Project has made a remarkable commitment to fund women leaders of color. The organization should continue to name and own this commitment, encouraging other philanthropic institutions and intermediaries to make similar pledges. In order to remain on track with this commitment, the importance of leadership of women of color must be front and center in every investment conversation and decision. The Fighter League program is a key emblem of The Solutions Project's commitment to women leaders of color and therefore must have a clear path forward.
- 3** Maintain flexible, multi-year nature of support and the quick turnaround for rapid response grants. Although not unique to The Solutions Project, reliable, flexible, timely funding is characteristic of the organization and critical for frontline grantee partners. The Solutions Project's value as a funder is linked to how it funds, and maintaining and enhancing these components should be at the forefront of any grantmaking strategy.
- 4** Lean into The Solutions Project's strength of leveraging celebrity voices. Broaden the bench of celebrity voices by working with current high-profile supporters to recruit friends and allies. Work to deepen the commitment of current celebrities and board members by providing touch points of collaboration between the board and trustees. Continue to provide opportunities for grantee partners to have their messages and stories shared by celebrities through statements, public appearances, or social media activity.
- 5** Shift narrative capacity building efforts to direct narrative support. Because The Solutions Project funds organizations that are often underfunded by mainstream philanthropy, many of these partners cannot take advantage of capacity-building supports. Wherever possible, the Inspire team should provide direct support in addition to training efforts. Where capacity building is possible, organize, streamline, and simplify resources so that they are increasingly accessible and usable for grantee partners.
- 6** Continue to develop the organization's identity and niche. As an organization that provides a diverse array of supports, The Solutions Project faces the challenge of continuing to define its identity as an organization and to identify the types of supports that will most effectively support the field. As The Solutions Project clarifies its identity, this clarification must also be communicated to grantees, partners, and the broader ecosystem.



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