MANUEL PASTOR:
Good to be with you. My name is Manuel Pastor and I am director of USC Equity Research Institute at the University of Southern California, one of the hosts for this event, this webinar series on community power and community power building. This session today is “The Power to Transform Communities.” And you definitely want to be part of the other conversations that are going to take place as well.

We want to acknowledge the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Both for the Lead Local project, which informs this webinar series, and for the webinar series as well. You will note that there is a chat function. That will be closed in a while. But it is open right now for you to introduce yourself to other people who are online. We will open up the Q&A function so that you can submit questions to the panelists who will be here.

I know what we really should begin with is the definition of community power. However, because we know that Jeopardy is now in search of the host again and apparently they are talking about LeVar Burton who should be the host -- if they had done that there would be the problems that were in the last few weeks -- I’d like to take lasting change for $500. What does it say? “The ability of communities most impacted by structural racism to develop, sustain, grow and organize bases of people who act together collectively through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, change mindsets, influence and make decisions, and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision-makers that change systems and advance health equity.”
How did you fit that in that little square? Probably couldn’t. The question that would prompt that answer is: “What is community power?”

What we’re going to do today in this conversation is provide some insights on how community power catalyzes and creates and sustains the conditions for healthy communities. We want to unpack the practices that are core to developing and sustaining community power that could impact health and racial equity, and provide insights into how we could actually measure community power so that those of us like me, who embrace numbers, who feel much more secure when we have data, can understand that the art of organizing is also science of organizing. That the art of community power, which is about building relationships, is also a science in which we can measure and explore what kind of measures help us understand how power impacts communities.

I am super glad to have with us today two of our colleagues in this Lead Local effort. We will learn more about that in a minute. We have Lili Farhang, who is a co-director of Human Impact Partners. They have, for very long time, conducted policy-focused and participatory research to evaluate the health impacts of a range of policies, helping to expand the definition of what is a health policy. In this particular effort, Lead Local, they worked with Right to the City Alliance to do a survey of public health departments and how they partner with community power building groups.

We also have with us Paul Speer. He is Professor and Chair of the Department of Human and Organizational Development at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. They did a lot of work on the landscape of literature around community power and equity, enough to explore the different ways that we could measure power. Lili is my sister in organizing, Paul is my brother in nerddom. I’m glad to have both parts of my soul brought together by these panelists.

Let me start by framing this and posing a question. The last couple of decades have seen big change in the way we think about health. We’ve seen a shift to the structural determinants of health, of looking at the environments in which people are born, how they grow up, how they work, and how that actually impacts their health.

That has been a big move within health research and within public health to understand the structural determinants of health. What’s been really exciting in this project, and in the last couple of years, is to understand what Lili calls the ‘causes behind the causes.’ That is what we call looking at what determines those structural determinants of health. Looking at the constellation of political power that leads to poor built environments. Looking at embedded structural racism which leads to obesity, diabetes, the lack of parks in communities, etc., to really understand the constellation of power behind the structural determinants. Those are the rules and regulations, institutional policies and practices, cultural norms and values, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, transfobia, ableism that lead to disparities in power and influence and wind up creating the conditions that are those structural determinants in the first place.

In this Lead Local effort, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation brought the three of us together along with the Right to the City Alliance, Caring across Generations, and a couple of other key organizations--Change Elemental, which partners across sectors to try to disrupt and transform systems of inequity and build capacity among leaders for change, and also Hari Hahn and the P3 Lab, which is now at the Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University. I’m sure Hari would not be upset if I plugged her new book, Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in 21st Century
America. It's really key. Those are other partners that worked with us and 40 community-based power building organizations from 16 different places, including 10 cities, two metro regions, and four states, to understand the role of community power building in changing structural determinants.

That was the project as a whole. I want to start with our partners here representing all those other partners as well to ask a few questions. Lili, I will start with you. I actually always hate this question when people ask me, what's the one thing you are taking away? I always say, I am taking away that you need to think about more than one thing. Nonetheless, I will ask you this.

Can you tell us from this effort to study community power building, to contribute to power building organizations, to look at it in so many different state and local locales and terrains, what is the big thing you learned for the prism of Human Impact Partners?

LILI FARHANG:
Thanks, Manuel, thanks, Paul. Thanks RWJF for supporting this initiative. I'm glad to know I inherited a new sibling. My family, my three current siblings, will appreciate knowing there's a new one.

Let's see, what is the one takeaway? Let me start by saying that RWJF’s northstar goal was understanding how community power catalyzes, creates, and sustains conditions for healthy communities. I think because that was the northstar question, they really centered community power building organizations through the process, and rightly so. Human Impact Partners had a unique role in that context. We are not a community power building organization; we are, I think, one of the only organizations in the constellation you described that kind of squarely thinks of ourselves as part of the health ecosystem.

Our role was different from power building groups. We don't organize impacted people. You'll hear from amazing organizers and folks from community power building organizations in the subsequent webinars in the series. We like to think of ourselves as health institution organizers, or health practitioner organizers. We are constantly seeking ways to move those sectors to approach their decision-making differently, to approach the resource allocation differently. Our work in Lead Local and with Right to the City in particular, we produced a couple of primers or products. One focused at the intersection of health and housing justice. Really trying to build the case for folks who weren't familiar with the ideas of community organizing, and community power building, particularly in the housing justice space. The other primer was about governmental public health and its relationships in particular with community power building organizations. Both of those products were geared toward trying to make the case to people in the health ecosystem that there is a role for them to play in supporting community power building in some way. I think that in a lot of ways these were some of our biggest takeaways.

If I was to separate out, I say would say the health ecosystem--governmental public health, health care providers, Medicaid plans, academic institutions, health systems, all those things that think of themselves as part of who creates health--cannot be left off the hook of this conversation. They control massive resources and have an incredibly large impact in determining health and health inequities. What our takeaways really were --is how can you take these lessons of Lead Local, which is primarily geared toward showing the power balance is a goal in and of itself, to these other institutions who kind of don't see themselves as part of that project?
I think for philanthropy, coming away from Lead Local, funding those kinds of organizations is an obvious way to make good on the findings of Lead Local. But this massive ecosystem doesn't necessarily see themselves as part of this broader social movement, these are groups we work with that didn't see themselves in the findings of Lead Local. They think, OK, we'll give it some money and we're cool.

The question for us is, how can we work across all of these institutions and systems that think they are separate from the concept of community power to see themselves as having some role? How can we change what is expected of them? How can they change their practices to center community power?

I think our work, since Lead Local in particular, is structured around our those questions and translating Lead Local findings in those systems. What I took away is we proved our point. I think we really showed that community power is in and of itself a goal that creates the conditions for helping communities, and the question I am left with is, what are other actors’ roles in making that real outside of philanthropy?

MANUEL PASTOR:
Great answer. You're an honorary academic because you stuck ten points into the one point you wanted to make. I did want to look at two things from what you said before turning to Paul. What is the relationship between service providers and power builders and organizers? Part of it is getting the service providers to see the centrality of power building, but also getting the power builders to form new relationships to call the service providers accountable to community.

The other thing, which is fascinating, is the way in which the power builders who are part of this project actually shifted relationships within the project to more center community power building, to help determine the places that we went and did the research. So, this is another lesson for people who want to work with power builders— you cannot have a project that does not have co-creators, particularly if you want the project to be successful and have interesting findings.

Paul, much of what you do is looking at these issues of measurement around health equity, community organizing, community engagement, community power. What is the one thing you learned?

PAUL SPEER:
We reviewed an extensive amount of literature. You're right, it is a difficult question to say what is the one thing. One of the things we found that was key is that there is a substantial literature that's holding out and conceptualizing the need to develop community power for health equity.

There's a lot written about that and calling for that. One of the things we found as we reviewed all that literature is that, while there is a common and frequent call for building community power to address health equity, there's a big gap between that conceptualization for the need and actual practices and empirical achievements to get that space.

I think the broad ecology is that people acknowledge there is a need to do that, but there's a real desire and a gap to figure out methods and tools to get to that place. That's very much what Lead Local was trying to unearth and discover.

Part of what we found in reviewing that literature, is that this gap that we found is fueled in some ways because there is a predominant set of participatory processes that people are looking at,
and they are framed in the community power building process. But many of these practices are more expert convened, driven, and determined. They might be health promotion programs, or they might be intersectoral collaborations designed by others from afar. Or they might be partnerships between communities and researchers where researchers have a heavier hand and people are deferential to what they believe is a knowledge base, as opposed to the essence of developing and building community power so that communities are driving the needs that they have.

That did come through pretty clearly in the literature reviewed. Another thing we found, that I think was pervasive across all of the Lead Local work, was that there was a lot of conceptualization of community participation and engagement that I think we call mobilizing rather than true base building or development.

Mobilizing is important, it’s a part of any kind of activity, but if community power building initiatives are solely looking to mobilize people once they have determined what the issues are and what the potential solutions are, and now we just need people to come and plug-and-play into what we’ve predetermined, that’s not community power. It's not really building community power in important ways.

What we found in the literature in those cases of real success with community power that is measurably impacting important issues in our communities, is that they do invest in the development of individuals, and build collectivities, or enhance the collectives that are there within communities.

That leads to a much more vibrant community power process. I will end by saying I think what we found as we reviewed all of this literature, and this is where Lili ended up, we found there was a need to value and invest in power building for its own sake, rather than in service of a particular issue that a group might have been working on.

MANUEL PASTOR:
There’s so much in what you just said. The one thing I want to lift up and shift a bit is this difference between community engagement and community power building. Too often community engagement is experts, agencies, foundations, inviting people to the table -- rather than investing in the capacities of people to build their own table and to set the table with the issues, with the concerns that the priorities that actually emerge from communities themselves. That's very fundamental and it’s often missing in the literature and certainly in practice.

I will answer that question, the one thing I took away. One thing I took away is kind of a parallel. A big thing in this project was that philanthropy and public health had long thought about the social determinants but had not always thought about what determines the social determinants in power and in policy. The other thing that could be misinterpreted for this project is to think of community power as instrumental, as a means to an end, rather than fundamental in and of itself. To think about community power, like you said, mobilization to be able to achieve a particular policy aim, rent stabilization, rather than think about community power building as the creating of capacities on the part of communities to feel collectively efficacious of challenging the structural racism, structural inequality that impact them. So the difference between instrumental and fundamental seems really key.

Lili, can you talk a little bit about that in the health field? The opportunities you see, the shifts you see to thinking about community power building as fundamental?
LILI FARHANG:
Yes, I think it is actually our growing edge. This is how I talk about it when I am out with my public health partners and sisters. Collectively we are really comfortable talking about achieving racial equity, health equity, kind of as a process and an outcome. We say that out loud all the time. We want to end disparate outcomes in housing and education, on and on.

I think there’s a lot less attention paid to what does equity as a process piece actually mean? What I often try to do is connect those and say the process aspect of achieving equity is about building community power, is about building those community capacities. We want processes that enfranchise people, that give people control over their material conditions that affect their lives. It’s actually that process of disenfranchisement from being able to determine your life course that is, in and of itself, a risk to health. Having your voice silenced is a negative health exposure.

If we commit to helping build community power, we are actually engaging in a health promotion strategy in and of itself. When I am seeing in the health space and healthcare side and in the public healthcare space—there’s an opening to completely rethink community engagement strategies and participation and involvement strategies to actually shift power dynamics and seed more decision-making and power in those processes. They’re not fully at the place of build the capacity to allow communities to build the tables themselves, but I think in a lot of ways that’s the low hanging fruit that we can take advantage of. How can we actually use your commitment to community engagement or participation as an intervention to address these unjust power imbalances? I give a lot of credit to RWJF for normalizing this kind of thinking.

I’m going to share one super wonky example. Get ready. The National Association for County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is an association of the country’s 2800 health departments. They have this thing called Mobilizing for Action in Planning and Partnership. The thing they put out there is a community-driven strategic planning process for community health, it’s a model they established. Something like 1600 health departments have used it to approach community health improvement processes. They designed it 20 years ago, it's old and outdated. They are going through redesign.

There is now a hyper-explicit aspect of this redesign to focus on community power and power building; community power is listed as one of the nine foundational principles. The redesign and their definition of community power comes directly from Lead Local, so lessons from Lead Local are being translated into these tools and processes. We got hired to help them develop a power framework through MAP and all the stuff. I’m sharing this example to highlight how some of the examples that came through Lead Local can be scaled.

They can actually be promoted and modeled by organizations that speak to thousands and thousands of other organizations. I have a lot of other examples I can share, but that’s just one that, to me, points out a system-level shift that has come about directly from thinking about how to shift community engagement and involvement toward community power building. I think the $2 trillion American Rescue Plan Act, with several billion dollars for American health, which is being charted like another New Deal -- I think we have opportunities there to completely rethink how that funding is distributed in ways that prioritize these values.

MANUEL PASTOR:
First, that was not wonky but wonderful. Second, Lead Local is rocking. It all sounds good. How
do you measure it? We’re so used to measuring transactional stuff, like how many people show up to the meeting, and not so much transformational stuff. How do people feel more empowered? How do they bridge with other folks? How do they actually build organizations, not just the size of their budget, but the depth of the commitment?

What kind of problems and challenges, I should say delightful challenges, does this present for measuring community power?

PAUL SPEER:
The way that we have looked at the literature and understood where these approaches are affected is, when you think about the question that you pose, you’re talking about instrumental versus fundamental. When we think about measuring community power, we would translate those terms into instrumental as more strategic, and fundamental as more developmental.

When we are thinking about instrumental exercise of power, we are usually trying to measure what is happening out there in the world.

It is also critical to understand [audio lost] found in this Lead Local work is that this instrumental/fundamental or strategic/developmental frameworks are better thought as a dialectic. We need both of those things. From the measurement point of view, we have to measure both of those things. One might be thought of as a process, and the other as more of an outcome of the expressions of power.

I think one of the things that relates to what we have been discussing here, that captures this power building process, is a quote from Joseph Tomas McKellar, who is an organizer that you are familiar with in California. He made the statement, he's talking about base building. ”The central question is, Is the organization committed to creating experiences of agency for everyday people? Does the organization believe that people should be authors of their own destiny, or consumers of the future being given to them?”

When you're asking about how we measure power, we think about what are these transformational processes that are building community power that is sustainable, that can address multiple issues, that can hold together over time? How relationships can be developed with lots of nonprofits, other community groups, partners in the broader community?

A lot of what we are trying to measure is looking both at the process, the building power, and the outcomes produced. And we are looking very much at relational qualities in those kinds of power building exercises.

MANUEL PASTOR:
Let me shift gears. I also want to ask this question: What's changed in your thinking in the last months since we closed up this project? We started before COVID, we have been now through 18 months of the disease that was a fundamental illness as a society. Access to health, support, racial wealth ... which meant that so many people didn't have a cushion in these emergencies. The lack of legal status, etc., compounded on top of that. Awakening around structural racism and the centrality of antiblack racism, challenging antiblack racism in the United States.

In a way I feel like our project presages that because when people say building community power they forget about the building community part of it. That part of it is developing the skills to build a broader, more inclusive sense of community that has challenged structural racism, that has to challenge anti-Back racism in order to build community that can actually develop
power.

So while we looked at power in particular places, all of these organizations were trying to build power at the metro level, state level, across different geographies, across different generations, across different groups. Perhaps we're ahead of our time. But what's changed for you in the last year or so as we have been closing up this project? Lili?

LILI FARHANG:
I appreciate this question. It's so hard to believe that this work started pre-pandemic.

I think what’s changed is the level of urgency. I think bringing in a higher degree of urgency, a higher degree that we are facing the biggest stress of our time -- and that those of us who are not community power building organizations need to feel the fight and the fire that others feel to take on what would come to be known as the pandemic. If I could go back in time, I would have wanted to bring in much more emotion and heart, and centering the fact that our humanity is facing some of these challenges. I think that would have translated into a sense of urgency that I think so many organizations now feel, trying to figure out what is their responsibility to racial equity.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of discussions around advancing racial equity which actually don't talk a lot about community power. I think they don’t think of community power and racial equity as hand and glove, as two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot have racial equity without also building community power. You just can't.

Another sort of learning or thing that I think has shifted for me is the need to tie those two conversations together to be really explicit that racism exists to maintain a hierarchy of power and privilege along racial lines. It's not accidental. We have a role to play to not talk about implicit bias and cultural competency as the way to alleviate inequities by race, but to talk about building community power as an antidote.

What shifted is the need to bring those two conversations together. Don't say one without saying the other, if I could put it really simply. And the other piece is around the sense of urgency, the sense of heart that I think we need to stay in the fight for as long as it's likely going to take to overcome some of the challenges that we are faced with today.

MANUEL PASTOR:
I think those are important takeaways, on the way to Paul I would add, too, that paying attention to community power, social movement building will lead you not to have been surprised by Black Lives Matter and its ascendance into the conversation. I know I got very frustrated last year during the election when everyone was paying attention to what the top political figures were saying at not paying attention to the on the ground organizing in places like Georgia and Arizona. It’s the fundamental story that shifted last year in terms of the way that our politics have played out.

I think that the community power lens is so informative about what needs to happen, as you were saying, to understand the shifts within the country, to understand how to promote public health, and to understand the real drive that can actually lead us to make some advances on racial equity.

Paul, what is the big thing you have learned or realized in 18 months? By the way, one thing
both of you has learned is how to have your rooms look great. A+ for each of you on room rater. Lily has the family behind her and Paul has the books so everybody knows how erudite he is. I got the whiteboards so you can think I'm brainstorming. What did you learn over the last year, Paul?

PAUL SPEER:
I appreciate the comments you both made because my learning since Lead Local echoes what you have found. What Lead Local was pursuing from the get-go, and that's connection between health equity and community power. It was ahead of its time. It only reinforces the value of that connectivity there.

I think for all of us as individuals, but collectively as a country, the murder of George Floyd made people confront the depth of racism and racial injustice in our country. I think there is an urgency that people feel about that. The initiatives that are trying to get more people cognizant about their racism or to think about implicit biases, I'm not against any of those things, but I think to really affect what is confronting us so profoundly is that we have to have more community power. Local communities have to have power to push back on all of the manifestations of systemic racism in the ways they come through in schools, housing, criminal justice, and any number of ways.

For me, the takeaway is that these connections, which we are all aware of, they just deepened and became more clearly connected in my mind and in the learnings I have had since that time.

MANUEL PASTOR:
That's great. I will add one other thing which we won't have time to talk about, but I think one of the things that we also learned through this project is the importance of place. We wound up looking at 16 different geographies, 40 different organizations. We wound up realizing you need to do some really complex place-based analysis to understand the terrain of power, the strength of community organizations, the possibilities for change.

We wound up using a lot of data that's in the National Equity Atlas, this is a project of PolicyLink and our own Equity Research Institute, because it provides so much important disaggregated data just like the work of Human Impact Partners does as well. The importance of place is another key thing.

We are coming to a close because we are determined to end things on time and we said 11:45 AM. We do this because we know there's a lot of Zoom fatigue. We do this so that you will think kindly of us in the future. Gosh, they actually ended on time. Maybe I should go to the next webinar. And yes you should.

On Thursday, September 9, we've got it should be called profiles in courage but it's called “Profiles in Community Power.” Aditi Vaidya from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will be moderating with Doran Schrantz from ISAIAH and Elianne Farhat of TakeAction Minnesota. On Tuesday, September 21, “Multi-issue, Multi-racial Organizing” with panelists from Texas, and, again, with Aditi moderating.

On Tuesday, September 28, the “Power to Change Policies and Systems,” our very own Jennifer Ito from USC Equity Research Institute, who really led our work on this project, will moderate with Deborah Scott of Georgia Stand-Up, a remarkable leader, and Jesse Graham of the Maine People's Alliance. Two very different states, two very different locations but sharing
the idea of building coalitions that can change systems and power.

Thank you for your time today. You want to make sure you attend these three other sessions and just one personal request. As you begin to hear more about who was going to fill the shoes at Jeopardy!, think of me. I could do this. Thank you. Remember, community power is fundamental, not just instrumental. Remember that community partnerships are key. And remember the dates of the rest of these webinars. Thank you very much and special thanks to Lili and Paul. Bring them on so they can wave goodbye.

Goodbye, thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day.