

REGIONAL FOUNDATION

From Neighborhood Organizers to Civic Leaders: How Resident-Led Community Development Builds a Pathway to Public Office

Samantha Mogil, Program Officer, Regional Foundation

Executive Summary

Four community development practitioners across the Regional Foundation's grantee partner network ran for local office in 2025, demonstrating that, 1) residents who serve as community development practitioners are well positioned as political leaders, and 2) investing in long-term, place-based work means investing in the people who make that work possible. In early 2026, the Foundation conducted interviews with each leader to understand what motivated their candidacies and how their experiences shaped their perspectives.

Across interviews, practitioners emphasized authenticity, relational trust, and community mobilization as their core political capital. They also described structural barriers—from gatekeeping to limited access to political resources—that make it difficult for nontraditional candidates to enter public office. Their experiences point to a clear opportunity to formalize civic leadership pathways, strengthen support systems for first-time candidates, invest in regenerative leadership development, and protect long-term neighborhood-based work. Together, these insights show that community development practitioners are already doing the work of governance, and when they step into public office, local democracy becomes more accessible, representative, and grounded in lived experience. We conclude with a call for urgent investment in civic leadership pathways because communities benefit when elected officials reflect the neighborhoods they serve.

Introduction

The Regional Foundation mobilizes resources to advance racial, social, and economic justice through resident-led community development that builds equitable, thriving neighborhoods across our region. Resident leadership is not an optional feature of this work; it is foundational. Community development organizations across our region embody this principle through advisory boards, steering committees, resident-led planning



¹ González, R. (2026). Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership. Facilitating Power. https://www.facilitatingpower.com/spectrum_of_community_engagement_to_ownership

processes, board service, and staff roles that place neighborhood residents directly at the seat of power. Our vision is a region where communities most impacted by inequities have the power, resources, and leadership to shape their futures within just and equitable systems. Resident leadership is essential to making that vision a reality.

To help organizations reflect on their resident leadership practices, we often ask them to identify where they fall along the [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) (SCEO)¹ — from ignore and inform, to consult, involve, collaborate, and ultimately defer to community ownership. Originally developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power in 2014 and updated in 2026, the SCEO situates community engagement within the broader context of U.S. democracy. The updated framework reminds us that the nation's history is shaped by social movements fighting to extend democratic rights to those excluded from political and economic power and underscores the direct connection between economic exclusion (slavery, land theft, exploitation) and political exclusion (denied citizenship, voting rights, and top-down decision-making). The SCEO highlights the role of community organizing, relationships, and power-building in addressing these inequities and makes clear that local systems alone cannot deliver the structural change communities need. At its apex, the defer to or community ownership phase represents a shift in which strengthening local democracy becomes a process of ending dependency and restoring dignity.



In 2025, four community development practitioners across the Regional Foundation's grantee partner network identified an opportunity to strengthen democratic governance and launched a campaign for local elected office. Their campaigns became a powerful expression of community ownership and a reminder of who is best positioned to lead. In a political climate defined by threats to democracy and to working-class families, immigrants, and communities of color, their candidacies underscored a simple truth: residents who serve as community development practitioners are well positioned to step into political leadership. Practitioners bring deep relational trust, firsthand knowledge of neighborhood conditions, experience mobilizing residents, and the ability to collaborate across sectors. Their campaigns reflected the strengths they had already demonstrated in their day-to-day work.

This moment also highlighted a broader lesson: investing in long-term, place-based work means investing in the people who make that work possible. Philanthropy, nonprofit community development organizations, and local governments all play critical roles in creating and supporting pathways for practitioners to step into public office.

These reflections inspired us to dig deeper. Between February and March 2026, we interviewed each practitioner to hear their stories: what sparked their campaigns and what they learned along the way. We recorded and transcribed each conversation, and interviewees stayed actively engaged throughout the process; their feedback shaped the interview questions, thematic analysis, and final narrative.

Candidate Profile Summaries

Candidate	Location	Role and Organization ²	Community Development Tenure	Race	Outcome
Amos Stoltzfus	Lancaster, Pennsylvania	(Former) SoWe Neighborhood Director; Tenfold	Returned to Lancaster after working in tech and international development and joined Tenfold in 2022	Lancaster City Council	Won; now serving and strengthening collaboration between nonprofits and municipal government
Heather Garrison	Millville, New Jersey	Community Builder, Holly City Development Corporation	10+ years (joined HCDC in 2016; full-time Community Builder since 2022); previously worked at a local elementary school	Millville City Commissioner	Did not win; remains deeply committed to partnership-based community development and continues her leadership outside elected office
Kyana Evans	Paulsboro, New Jersey	Program Operations Manager, Gateway Community Action Partnership	Joined Gateway CAP in 2016; previously managed social services programs; led neighborhood based work in Bridgeton and Paulsboro	Paulsboro City Council	Won; continues advancing community-driven priorities, youth leadership, and small business support
Todd Pousley	Scranton, Pennsylvania	(Former) Director of Community Development, NeighborWorks Northeastern Pennsylvania	Began nonprofit work through volunteer service at Habitat for Humanity; joined NeighborWorks in 2017; promoted to Director in 2024	Scranton City Council	Did not win; built a strong base and is open to running again

² Role and organization at the time of campaign and interview.

Key Lessons

Lesson 1: Community Development Practitioners Become Political Leaders Because They Already Are Doing the Work

For each practitioner, the decision to run for office did not emerge from political ambition. It grew out of years of community organizing, relationship-building, and visible service within their neighborhoods. Long before appearing on a ballot, they were coordinating programs, mobilizing neighbors, and building trust — work that government systems often struggle to deliver at scale. Their campaigns grew organically from the experiences, relationships, and values that informed their work.

Garrison, a longtime parent leader in Millville, New Jersey, spent nearly a decade building relationships through schools, PTOs, and family advocacy. Her approach to leadership was grounded in care and partnership. She shared, “people don’t care how much you know until they

know how much you care.” Over time, she became a unifying presence — someone who could bring people together, elevate unheard voices, and model belonging. Her frustration with political negativity, combined with the community’s recognition of her value, ultimately pushed her to run as a community-first candidate.



In Northeastern PA, Pousley described a similar journey. Through years of resident-driven work in West Scranton, Pousley saw firsthand that nonprofits could only go so far. The priorities he championed around affordable housing, safe and clean neighborhoods, and belonging came directly from residents. His deep knowledge of community concerns, combined with his experience in engagement and familiarity with public neighborhood development programs shaped his campaign strategy. He also recognized how macro-level conditions, such as ICE presence in Scranton, were heightening fear and insecurity. Running for office became a direct response to political, social, and

economic conditions. As Pousley explained, “There are certain things that NeighborWorks can do as an organization, but there are also policies and systems in place that we can’t change alone — that really takes local government and local elected leaders to change.”

Stoltzfus’ dual role in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, both grassroots and institutional, gave him a unique vantage point on community needs and policy levers. His hands-on experience with housing inequities and homelessness distinguished him from other candidates. As he reflected, “Every other candidate said housing and homelessness were top priorities, but I was the only one who could talk about the work I do every day.” At Tenfold, Stoltzfus built neighborhood leadership pathways through committees and working groups, led cross-sector collective efforts to create inclusivity within a neighborhood park, and co-launched a pilot program to ensure unhoused neighbors had a safe space to keep their belongings. His credibility came from lived practice, not political rhetoric. The affordable housing crisis inspired his race; he saw an opportunity to influence local conditions despite federal level challenges.

Evans entered public office through a neighborhood planning process in Paulsboro, New Jersey. When a vacancy opened on city council, members appointed her because they already saw her as a trusted partner with a track record of supporting residents and small businesses. When she hesitated to run for a full term, her community pushed her forward. One business owner told her, “If it wasn’t for you and the Paulsboro Pride (neighborhood planning) effort, my business wouldn’t be here... your influence is valuable and we need someone genuine who doesn’t just talk the talk, but actually walks the walk.” Residents already viewed her as their advocate, and they wanted her leadership reflected in local government.

Lesson 2: Authenticity and Relational Trust Serve As Primary Political Capital

While traditional political campaigns rely on party structures, endorsements, and fundraising networks, the power of these leaders came from long-standing relationships, authenticity, consistency, and deep relational trust. All practitioners reflected that their legitimacy was rooted in their lived presence – years of showing up, listening, and working towards solutions alongside their neighbors – not political performance. Campaigns rooted in belonging, partnerships, storytelling, and mobilization of nontraditional voters were common themes throughout the interviews.

Before launching her campaign, Garrison received a Millville Citizen Award to acknowledge her leadership in the community. This informed her decision to run for city commissioner. She said, “people recognize me as valuable. So why can’t I help be a voice, bring some of these people to the table that might not feel they belong here? Why can’t we use that for our benefit and bring people along who think their voices don’t matter? So that was my main goal – to knock down those silos that people are operating in to join as a community.”



As Evans’ reminisced on her journey, she said, “I remember the mayor at that time saying, how did you get all these people to come out [for the first community meeting]?,” I just said, ‘I asked them. I did personal asks.’” Years of building deep relationships in the neighborhood fostered reciprocity and support.

Their legitimacy was relational, not performative. Their longstanding commitment to community building catalyzed a strong base of support. “People who had never been involved in politics were knocking on doors for me,” Stoltzfus shared.

Lesson 3: Campaigning Deepens Understanding of Personal and Collective Power

As each practitioner moved through their campaign, they encountered a moment that surprised them: so many people were willing to rally behind them. What began as an individual decision to run quickly transformed into a civic awakening, revealing both their own power and the collective power of their neighbors.

Throughout their campaigns, all four leaders were overwhelmed by the depth of community support. Residents who had never been involved in politics before began canvassing, attending public meetings, and sharing information with friends and family. The campaigns became a catalyst for participation, drawing in people who had long felt disconnected from local government.

Stoltzfus’, running without party endorsement, collected more petition signatures than most other candidates, serving as a clear sign of grassroots momentum. Pousley watched strangers knock on

doors for him and reflected, “I was amazed how people — strangers — people I was meeting for the first time — rallied around me.” Evans saw residents who had never voted before showing up because they believed in her authenticity and advocacy. She shared, “I didn’t realize just me showing up as who I am would have that much impact.”

This awakening was not limited to individual acts of support. It manifested in first-time voters, intergenerational campaign teams, multilingual outreach, and new expectations for transparency and accountability. Residents who had long felt overlooked suddenly saw themselves reflected in candidates who shared their experiences, values, and struggles. In supporting these practitioners, they were also claiming their own agency.

Through these experiences, we see how community-rooted candidates can inspire and strengthen democratic participation. Grassroots power is not only about winning elections; it is about transforming how communities understand their role in shaping civic life. It shifts political identity toward inclusivity, shared responsibility, and co-ownership of local democracy.

Lesson 4: Power Is a Regenerative Action

Each practitioner conveyed their excitement for building the next generation of leaders. They rejected the idea of leadership as a personal achievement, and instead, they saw themselves as stewards — temporary holders of responsibility whose role is to open doors for others and to bring more diverse voices into government.

Garrison hopes her candidacy shows neighbors that they belong at decision-making tables, emphasizing that leadership is rooted in care rather than credentials. Pousley has begun advising other local leaders who are considering running, demystifying the process, and encouraging “untraditional candidates” to step forward.



Evans centers youth leadership, determined to ensure that younger residents and marginalized voices see themselves reflected in local government. “My main goal,” she shared “is to empower younger people so they step up.”

And Stoltzfus intentionally built a campaign team that spanned generations, languages, and racial identities, modeling what inclusive political leadership can look like. As he explained, “Part of what I tried to do during my campaign was engage with folks who don’t typically engage in the political

process... I was very intentional about tapping younger folks and people who had a different experience than me.” His team included a 20-year-old aspiring mayor, a 72-year-old woman still working because she could not afford to retire, and a recent immigrant from Ecuador who helped reach Spanish-speaking constituents.

Their approach reflects a regenerative model of leadership designed to multiply power rather than consolidate it. This stewardship mindset aligns with restorative practices and the belief that strong democracies require interdependency, widening participation, and ensuring that leadership is never confined to a select few. In their view, leaders should not be gatekeepers; they should be catalysts.

Lesson 5: Mentorship Is Structural Support

Across every interview, one theme surfaced with striking consistency: none of these practitioners stepped into political leadership alone. Each of them described a mentor, often a direct supervisor or organizational leader, whose encouragement, guidance, and confidence played a decisive role in moving their candidacy forward.

Garrison spoke about the unwavering support of her executive director, who championed her candidacy and affirmed her readiness to lead. Stoltzfus leaned on colleagues who understood Lancaster's political dynamics and helped him navigate the complexities of campaigning without party endorsement. Evans' supervisor at Gateway CAP became her strongest advocate, urging her to pursue a full term when she doubted whether she should run.



These mentors did more than offer moral support; they acted as bridges between community organizing and public governance. Their guidance helped each practitioner cross a threshold: from collaborating with residents to stepping into roles where communities could defer to their leadership. This pattern reveals something important: community development organizations are poised to shape the next generation of civic leaders. Their encouragement, institutional backing, and willingness to stand behind practitioners create the conditions for community-rooted candidates to emerge.

At the same time, these experiences raise critical considerations for nonprofit executives. If organizations are going to support staff who step into public roles, they need clear policies and practices that protect both the candidate and the institution. The work of a local elected official and community development practitioner is so intertwined; nonprofit executives must be prepared for transparent conversations to help candidates navigate the duality of these roles. Creating some separation between the non-partisan nonprofit work and partisan political campaigning is critical.

Lesson 6: Running for Office Exposes Structural Barriers and Challenges

Despite deep community support, all four leaders encountered obstacles that exposed how difficult it is for “nontraditional” candidates to enter politics. Obstacles included gatekeeping, party politics, ageism, candidate opposition that impacted their respective institutions, and the emotional labor of campaigning. Stoltzfus shared, “because I was not an endorsed candidate, I just didn’t have access to the same technology and [fundraising] support.”



Each leader reflected on their experience and shared actions that, in retrospect, would have better supported their campaign process. When Garrison first decided to run, she started attending commission meetings more regularly; however, she would have benefited from engaging elected officials more formally and asking questions to those already in positions of power. Pousley shared that he did not know where to start with respect to fundraising and advertising, and he benefited from support of Scranton's mayor who formally endorsed him. He wishes he had participated in someone else's campaign before running; he recommends getting involved in another campaign before leading your own. Participating in classes or trainings related to political governance (i.e.

political structures, budgeting) was also raised by Evans as a resource that could have benefited the process. Their experiences reveal that even the most trusted community leaders face resistance from political cultures designed to protect traditional party politics.

Next Steps for Building a Pathway for Community-Rooted Civic Leadership

The experiences of these four leaders point to a clear opportunity to strengthen and formalize a pipeline of community-rooted civic leadership in recognition that practitioners often become civic leaders precisely because they have spent years building trust, solving problems, and sustaining neighborhood-level work. Their reflections underscore the importance of deep community engagement, long-term roles in neighborhood planning and implementation, and the resources required to sustain both. Moving forward, funders, nonprofits, and local governments each have a role in building the conditions that allow community development practitioners to step into civic leadership with confidence, support, and staying power.

I. Formalize a Civic Leadership Pathway

A key priority is to formalize a civic leadership pathway that helps resident leaders build the skills, networks, and confidence needed to navigate public systems. Programs like [Philadelphia's Citizens Planning Institute](#), the [University of Delaware's Community Development Institute](#), and [NeighborWorks America's](#) Community Leadership Institute demonstrate how structured, scaffolded training can demystify planning, zoning, development, and civic processes while equipping leaders to bring new tools back to their neighborhoods. Funders can expand access to these opportunities by providing nonprofits with flexible dollars for professional development, stipends for resident leaders to participate, and scholarships that remove cost barriers. Nonprofits can integrate civic skill-building into their existing organizing, planning, and neighborhood revitalization work, ensuring that leadership development is not episodic but embedded. Local governments can partner with these institutions to participatory planning, budgeting, and decision-making processes, making them more accessible to emerging leaders and reinforcing a culture of shared governance.

2. Build a Support Infrastructure for Community-Rooted Candidates and their Institutions

At the same time, the case study makes clear that community-rooted candidates need a stronger support infrastructure—one that reduces the structural barriers and emotional labor all four leaders

described. Funders can invest in nonpartisan training hubs that teach campaign fundamentals such as fundraising, messaging, compliance, and voter outreach, ensuring that first-time candidates are not navigating these complexities alone. Nonprofits can develop resource libraries or “playbooks” tailored to practitioners who come from outside traditional party machines, offering guidance grounded in lived experience rather than political gatekeeping. Additionally, developing organizational policies that provide clear guidelines to employees who may have an interest in public office is critical to supporting this pathway while protecting the institution from backlash or emerging challenges. Local governments, while remaining nonpartisan, can strengthen public information systems, simplify candidate onboarding processes, and ensure that residents understand how to run for office.

Funders and other intermediaries can also facilitate mentorship connections with past candidates, creating a peer-supported ecosystem that normalizes community-rooted leadership and reduces isolation. This infrastructure strengthens democratic participation without endorsing specific candidates, instead expanding who feels equipped to step forward.

3. Invest in Regenerative Leadership Development

A third opportunity lies in investing in regenerative leadership development, recognizing that community-rooted leaders emerge from long arcs of relationship-building, service, and collective problem-solving. Funders can support youth leadership pipelines, resident-led training cohorts, and micro-grant programs that allow emerging leaders to test ideas, build confidence, and deepen their commitment to place. Nonprofits can cultivate intergenerational leadership spaces, ensuring that experienced practitioners pass on knowledge while younger leaders gain structured opportunities to lead. Local governments can partner with these efforts by aligning youth councils, advisory boards, and neighborhood planning processes with community-based leadership development, creating continuity between informal leadership and formal civic roles.

4. Fund and Protect Long-Term, Neighborhood-Based Work

Finally, it is critical to fund and protect long-term neighborhood-based work, the very foundation from which these leaders emerged. Funders must prioritize multi-year, flexible investments that allow organizations to sustain organizing, planning, and implementation efforts over time. Funding that can directly support employee salaries and benefits generates more stable tenure for leadership development and building community trust, which is a long-term process. Nonprofits can continue building the deep relational infrastructure that makes civic leadership possible, ensuring that leaders remain grounded in community priorities rather than political cycles.

Local governments can reinforce this work by supporting neighborhood-level planning, investing in community-based institutions, and ensuring that public processes value long-term resident engagement. Together, these actions create a durable civic ecosystem—one where community development practitioners are not only supported in their current roles but positioned to become the next generation of civic leaders.



Conclusion: A New Civic Pathway

Taken together, these four stories illuminate a powerful insight: residents who serve as community development practitioners are well positioned for civic leadership. They are embedded in neighborhoods, trusted by residents, fluent in local assets and challenges, and skilled at building coalitions. Long before they ever consider running for office, they are doing the work of governance: facilitating meetings, shaping priorities, identifying public and private resources, and stewarding neighborhood-level change. When practitioners consider public leadership, government becomes more accessible, residents feel seen, and the boundary between organizing and governance begins to dissolve. This case study suggests that the future of local democracy may already be emerging in neighborhood planning processes, community-based organizations, and resident-led initiatives across the region and country.



A central lesson from their journeys is the shift in perspective that occurs when community practitioners enter the political arena: public office becomes an extension of community organizing, not a departure from it. Each leader began with a sense that politics and community work were separate spheres, yet campaigning revealed how deeply intertwined they truly are. By the end, all four embraced a new civic pathway—one where authenticity, organizing skill, and deep community connection are not only assets but essential ingredients for effective public leadership.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement comes fully alive when residents, already reflected in neighborhood-based organizations, position themselves towards elected office. We must resource a civic leadership pathway urgently. We all benefit when our elected officials reflect our neighborhoods and communities.