



STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN PUBLIC BENEFITS OUTREACH AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in reaching underserved populations through public benefit programs and emergency response efforts. CBOs have proven effective due to their cultural and linguistic relevance, deep community trust, and flexible outreach strategies. In each case, they play a central role in engaging hard-to-reach populations through grassroots efforts such as in-language messaging, door-to-door canvassing, and direct service delivery.

Despite their effectiveness, CBOs face structural challenges that limit their impact. These include short-term and delayed funding, complex administrative requirements, and limited involvement in early program design. To address these issues, this paper examines CBO-government collaborations in California across three major efforts: the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, the 2020 Census, and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires and offers the following recommendations for public administrators:

- Support culturally responsive outreach by funding CBO-led engagement strategies.
- Provide stable, multi-year funding to strengthen organizational capacity.
- Simplify contracting and reporting to reduce administrative burdens.
- Engage CBOs early in program planning to ensure community-informed design.

Improving CBO-government collaboration is essential to delivering equitable, effective services, both in times of crisis and through ongoing public benefit programs.



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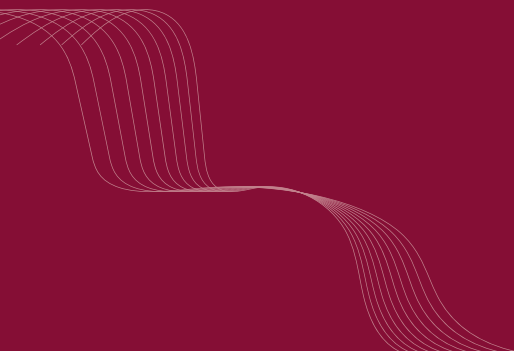




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INTRODUCTION

From the Great Society programs of the 1960s onward, public policy implementation in the United States has increasingly relied on government partnerships with grassroots, community-based organizations. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are key drivers in improving the health and well-being of specific communities and target populations. As actively engaged community workers, CBOs have unique insights into their community's challenges and a deep understanding of their community's needs. Many CBOs share similar identity backgrounds as their clients and provide services in the languages spoken by their community. For example, Roots Community Health Center in Oakland, California, is led by a predominantly Black staff and leadership team, with a strong focus on serving Black communities in East Oakland and other areas of the Bay Area. For many years, these organizations have met their community where they are by focusing outreach and education on family support services and essential needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. In the Central Valley, employees at the Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO), who are fluent in various Indigenous languages, visited agricultural workers to provide personal protective equipment, support with COVID-19 testing and vaccinations, and assist them in accessing aid programs (ChangeLab Solutions, California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, & Prevention Institute, 2021). CBOs across California are providing resources to their community by hosting food distributions, financial literacy workshops, tax assistance sites, mobile vaccine clinics, immigration services, and more.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, CBOs demonstrated their adaptability and responsiveness by meeting community needs through public health compliance promotion and resource distributions. However, many organizations dealt with limited resources and bureaucratic funding restrictions that made it challenging to reach underserved populations. Organizations experienced pandemic assistance funding delays, leaving some in a state of financial uncertainty. One example is Los Angeles County's Community Health Worker (CHW) Outreach Initiative, which aimed to deliver culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach and education, but was not implemented until late in the pandemic and only operated for three months (ChangeLab Solutions et al., 2021). Similarly, in a recent study seeking to explore barriers and enhancers of using CBOs to activate statewide COVID-19 vaccine outreach, CBOs reported that short-term funding limited the effectiveness of scaling efforts, as well as the long-term sustainability of partnerships and staff (Mansfield et al., 2023). The impact of these barriers is critical because CBOs are uniquely positioned to support Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) and other underserved communities.



They are the trusted messengers in their community who provide culturally and linguistically relevant information and services, something the state cannot achieve on its own due to the deep local connections and trust CBOs have built over time. These limitations jeopardize ongoing efforts to tackle the structural inequities that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. Acknowledging CBOs' crucial role in bridging these gaps and making intentional, long-term investments will support them in engaging and uplifting these communities. It is essential to note that addressing these barriers goes beyond responding to the pandemic, it ensures that outreach and recovery efforts are equitable and sustainable for all populations. Whether responding to health crises or natural disasters, CBOs must be adequately equipped to support their communities, ensuring an equitable and effective response and recovery system.

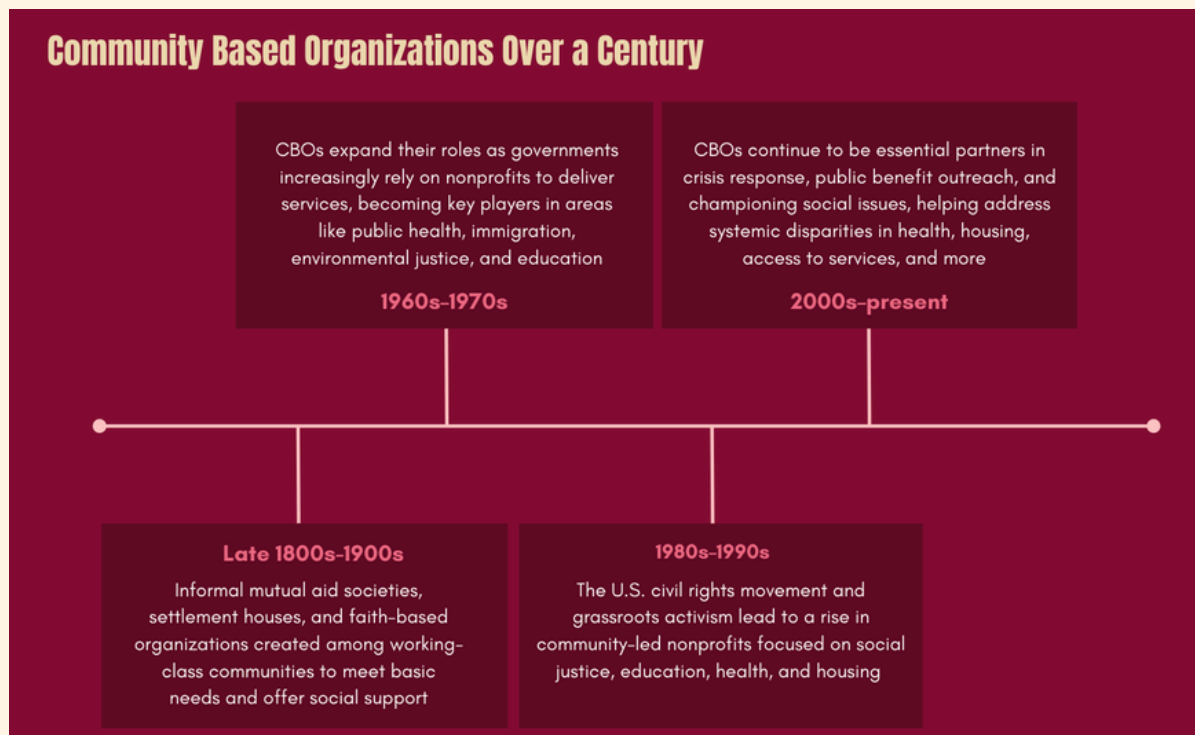
This paper analyzes strategies to establish and strengthen CBOs' role as intermediaries in government communication and responsiveness during public benefit outreach and emergencies. This paper begins by providing a background on the evolution of CBOs and examining existing literature that speaks to the challenges and best practices of CBO and government collaboration, aiming to provide actionable recommendations for strengthening partnerships. The findings will be particularly relevant to policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and government agencies looking to improve public service delivery and ensure equitable access to resources.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 will review themes in existing research focused on CBO-government collaborations. Section 3 will employ case studies, interviews, and document analysis to showcase the challenges and successes faced by community-based organizations in collaborating with government agencies. Section 4 will share in-depth findings, followed by a discussion on the implications of this research in Section 5.

BACKGROUND

Community-based organizations have existed in various forms for over a century, but widespread recognition and institutional support for CBOs began in the 1960s (Green & Haines, 2016, p.32). Figure 1 provides an overview of the evolution of CBOs throughout the last 100 years. Community development began during the Progressive Era through mutual aid societies and settlement houses that supported immigrant and working-class communities. In the 1960s, President Johnson’s Great Society programs created new federal funding streams and formalized the role of CBOs in fighting poverty and promoting social change. During the 1980s and 1990s, CBOs expanded their work as governments increasingly relied on nonprofits to deliver services in areas like public health, education, and environmental justice. From the 2000s to now, CBOs have played a critical role in crisis response, public benefit outreach, and advocating for equity in underserved communities. For example, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) works with local nonprofits to assist residents in applying for CalFresh and CalWORKs, especially in low-income and immigrant communities. Covered California also contracts with CBOs as Certified Enrollment Entities to provide health insurance enrollment assistance and education in communities that face language or digital access barriers. These partnerships help ensure that public benefit programs reach the populations they are intended to serve.

Figure 1 - CBOs Over a Century



Note. Adapted from Green & Haines (2016), Asset Building & Community Development .

FROM CRISIS TO COLLABORATION: LESSONS FROM CBO ENGAGEMENT

Existing literature highlights several key themes that shape the effectiveness of CBOs in these roles and their capacity to manage resources, build trust, disseminate critical information, and provide direct support to underserved communities. Lessons from CBO and state government partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 decennial census, and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires underscore CBO's role as trusted messengers in their community. These examples are worth noting as they represent large-scale public challenges that have tested the government's ability to reach and support vulnerable communities. The following sections will explore these examples in more detail, illustrating how CBOs have supported public benefit outreach and emergency response in various capacities and examining the challenges in these collaborations.

COVID-19 Vaccine Outreach

When it comes to COVID-19 vaccine outreach, Levinger (2024, p. 3) notes in an analysis on behalf of the California Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications (OCPSC), "CBOs built trust with Californians by partnering with local entities— schools, businesses, faith groups, and other CBOs to "spread the word." They organized well-attended events, created in-language social media, and used such highly personalized communication tactics as door-to-door visits, phone banking, and in-person conversations at high-traffic sites." In 2023, OCPSC granted 121 CBOs serving vulnerable communities to form a Trusted Messenger Network (TMN) and engage in California's highest priority public awareness campaigns and community outreach efforts focused on residents facing the most significant social and health inequities. The campaigns have encompassed a variety of initiatives, including COVID-19 vaccine outreach and education under the Vaccinate ALL58 campaign, water conservation tips through the Save Our Water campaign, and extreme heat event awareness as part of the Heat Ready California campaign. TMN grantees conduct interactive engagements with their communities on the identified campaigns, including but not limited to hosting workshops, posting on social media, engaging with ethnic media, and distributing campaign materials.

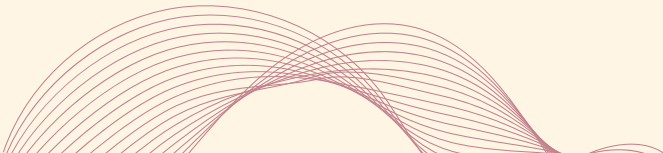
Figure 2 highlights the outreach tactics 29 partner CBOs identified as having the greatest impact during their public awareness campaigns. The most frequently cited approaches being canvassing, outreach at events or high-traffic areas, and media development, reflecting a shared emphasis on “high touch, low tech” strategies. These methods prioritized direct, personal interaction over digital tools, underscoring the value of face-to-face engagement and culturally resonant communication in building trust and reaching vulnerable populations. These grants fund a variety of operational and programming functions for CBOs, such as staff salaries, outreach materials, space rentals, and travel. The efforts of CBOs through the Trusted Messenger Network exemplify a model of community engagement that prioritizes trust, accessibility, and targeted outreach. The funding and resources provided through OCPSC empower these grassroots efforts and ensure that the voices of vulnerable populations are heard and supported in statewide initiatives.

Figure 2 - Outreach Tactics

Tactic	Count	Percentage
1. Canvassing	40	46
2. Outreach at events or high-traffic areas	16	18
3. Media development (including outreach to influencers)	15	17
4. Training	10	11
5. Fostering collaborative relationships	7	8
6. Phone banking	5	6
7. Other	4	5
Totals	87	100

Note. From Levinger (2024) Fruitful Partnerships: How State Government and Community-Based Organizations Reach California’s Most Vulnerable Communities.

Another key example of CBO-led public health outreach is the Get Out the Vaccine (GOTVax) program, a statewide, government-funded initiative aimed at increasing COVID-19 vaccinations among high-risk communities through a collaborative effort including 34 local CBOs. CBO canvassing staff leveraged personal vaccine stories to foster trust and create a safe space for residents to express concerns (Mansfield et al., 2023). This empathetic, community-centered approach helped ease vaccine hesitancy and contributed to the program's success, demonstrating the CBO's ability to address public skepticism and enhance government messaging.



The GOTVax program also indicated how flexible, milestone-based contracts allowed for rapid program implementation by streamlining funding processes. Unlike traditional cost-reimbursement models, the program implemented a new funding approach that offered upfront payments and additional funds tied to performance milestones. CBO staff emphasized that upfront funding provided the confidence to mobilize resources and staff immediately (Mansfield et al., 2023). This approach gave CBOs the financial security and flexibility needed for a quick ramp-up, reducing bureaucratic delays and allowing organizations to focus on outreach efforts.

Census 2020 Outreach

Just as vaccine outreach required overcoming skepticism and systemic barriers, ensuring an accurate census count demanded a similarly nuanced approach tailored to the needs of California's diverse and hard-to-reach populations. Accurate census data is crucial for equitable resource allocation and political representation. Recognizing the challenges in counting hard-to-reach populations, California's Complete Count Census Campaign partnered with 150 CBOs to enhance outreach across all regions of the state. These organizations employed culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies, such as engaging promotoras (community health workers) for phone banking and distributing census information alongside food and personal protective equipment at COVID-19 testing sites (LPC Consulting Associates, 2021). The census campaign demonstrated how CBOs' trusted presence enabled the state to reach populations that might otherwise have been missed by helping address language barriers, digital divide issues, and fear connected to immigration enforcement.

Many communities faced challenges in participating in the census. Nearly 18% of Californians reported speaking English "less than very well," while the online census form was only available in 12 non-English languages, leaving out several of the most spoken languages in the state (LPC Consulting Associates, 2021). As the report notes, "California's population is more racially and ethnically diverse than ever before," and ensuring meaningful language access was critical to reaching communities that have been historically excluded from being counted. Other individuals lacked internet access or the digital literacy needed to complete the online form. The pandemic exacerbated the issue when public libraries and community centers closed. In addition, widespread mistrust of government, especially among mixed-status and undocumented immigrant households, increased after controversy over a proposed citizenship question. Many feared that taking part could put their safety at risk. As one CBO partner noted, "People were afraid we were trying to trick them... They thought it was ICE coming to get them." These barriers highlight the critical role CBOs played in bridging information gaps and building the trust necessary to ensure inclusive participation.

2025 Los Angeles Wildfires Aid Outreach

In January 2025, Los Angeles, California, faced devastating wildfires that burned over 40,000 acres, destroying thousands of homes, businesses, and community institutions, causing at least twenty-seven deaths and leaving many residents displaced (Horton et al., 2025). In response to the catastrophic wildfires, community-based organizations like the YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles, L.A. Works, and Habitat for Humanity of Greater Los Angeles collaborated with state and local government entities to provide shelter, meals, financial assistance, and mental health resources to ensure community members receive the needed support.

At the YMCA of LA, residents who lost their homes in the wildfires are assigned a "Well-Being Coordinator" to help coordinate care and plan long-term recovery. The YMCA provides free childcare, mental health services, and complete wraparound services to displaced wildfire residents (YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles, 2025). L.A. Works, a local nonprofit organization mobilizing volunteers to address issues impacting the city of Los Angeles, supported the community during and after the wildfires by deploying volunteers to assemble food packages and assist at distribution centers and donation drives for families and individuals facing homelessness (L.A. Works, 2025). Another CBO, Habitat for Humanity LA, with a mission to build sustainable and affordable homes for all, supported their community by initiating the ReBuild LA campaign. This long-term emergency response campaign assists displaced wildfire residents by rebuilding their homes, relocating to alternative shelters, and providing essential supplies (Habitat for Humanity LA, 2025). These collective efforts highlight the indispensable role of CBOs in delivering timely, responsive support to communities navigating the physical and emotional aftermath of the destructive wildfires.



Note. From L.A. Works, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.laworks.com/2025fires>

Community-based organizations themselves are not immune to the impacts of the LA wildfires. In fact, the Center for Nonprofit Management highlights that nonprofits in affected areas hold \$9.5 billion in assets and resources that may have been disrupted, lost, or held back (Bui, 2025). Figure 3 provides a breakdown of nonprofit impacts and assets at risk in January 2025. While the demand for CBO support and services increases, shifting requirements in government funding have led organizations to financial shortfalls (Bui, 2025). Additionally, many CBOs struggle with the administrative demands of accessing complex funding streams during a prolonged recovery phase.

Figure 3 - Impact by Fire

Breakdown of Nonprofit Impact by Fire:		
Wildfire	# of Nonprofits	Nonprofit Assets at Risk
Palisades Fire	2,200	\$5.9 billion
Eaton Fire	1,507	\$3.0 billion
Hurst Fire	488	\$0.6 billion
Totals	4,195	\$9.5 billion

Note. From Bui (2025), Center for Nonprofit Management.

METHODS

This paper uses a qualitative document analysis approach to examine the role of community-based organizations in enhancing public benefits outreach and emergency response in California. The analysis focuses on four key reports and articles published by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and academic researchers. These documents are selected based on their connection to the research question and focus on California's recent public health and emergency communication efforts. Another valuable component of these sources is that they utilize primary data from interviews with CBO leaders and staff across California. For example, the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network report on how CBOs supported COVID-19 prevention efforts draws on interviews with 21 racially and ethnically diverse CBOs. Furthermore the BMC Health study is based on semi-structured interviews with 31 CBOs participating in the GOTVax campaign. Similarly, the Census 2020 evaluation includes partner interviews that reflect lessons learned from grassroots census outreach. These firsthand perspectives offer key insights into the lived experiences of CBOs during public health and emergency response efforts. Recent wildfire response efforts are supplemented with articles from media coverage and publicly available articles that describe how CBOs responded to the LA wildfire crisis.

Each source is analyzed for insights into CBO roles, best practices, and barriers to collaborating with the government. While each case presents unique policy contexts, together, they reveal common patterns in the value and vulnerability of CBO-government collaborations. Rather than directly comparing the cases, this paper highlights recurring themes that consistently shaped CBO effectiveness across all three efforts. By examining both successes and systemic limitations, the goal is to identify actionable recommendations to strengthen CBO-government partnerships. The following section puts these insights into practice through practical policy recommendations for public administrators.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Community-based organizations have stepped in as trusted messengers and essential partners, filling in gaps where government efforts have often fallen short. Comprehensive document analyses reveal that CBOs are vital in reaching California's most vulnerable populations due to their deep local roots, cultural competency, and ability to mobilize in response to urgent needs. One of the most consistent findings is that CBOs are effective because they operate with cultural and linguistic relevance, meaning they communicate in the preferred languages and tailor their outreach with sensitivity to the values and lived experiences of the communities they serve. Furthermore, having staff who reflect those communities allows them to build trust and deliver messages in ways that resonate. This has made them essential in public benefit outreach efforts, where grassroots strategies such as door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, and outreach at local community events have proven more effective than traditional government top-down approaches.

These outcomes are not achieved due to the current systems in place, but in spite of them. CBOs continue to face major challenges that limit their capacity and sustainability to meet the needs of their community. These unmet needs are exacerbated by government mistrust among vulnerable communities, often due to historical injustices or a lack of culturally competent services. At the same time, CBOs themselves are often limited by short-term and unreliable funding streams, which make it difficult to plan or employ staff long-term. CBOs also encounter bureaucratic barriers such as delayed reimbursements, complex contracting processes, and reporting requirements that are challenging for smaller organizations to navigate. These systemic limitations weaken the structures that have been central to reaching underserved communities.

Considering these findings, it is clear that intentional policy change is needed to strengthen the infrastructure supporting CBOs and ensure their role in equitable service delivery. The following policy recommendations are informed by the documented successes and challenges CBOs face and aim to improve state-level support for more effective and long-term partnerships between CBOs and government agencies.

Prioritize Community-Centered, Culturally Responsive Outreach

Public benefit and emergency response initiatives should be developed in partnership with CBOs that reflect the cultural and linguistic identities of the populations they serve. Public administrators should not only fund outreach efforts but also actively listen to and recognize the community expertise that CBOs bring, particularly in identifying barriers and tailoring strategies. For example, during the 2020 Census, CBOs used promotoras and distributed multilingual materials alongside personal protective equipment and food to ensure hard-to-reach households were informed and felt safe participating. If these insights had been more fully integrated into early statewide and nationwide planning, governments could have mobilized trusted messengers sooner and improved reach. Administrators should also document and share the impact of CBO-informed strategies across agencies to normalize and institutionalize inclusive outreach practices.

Invest in Long-Term, Stable Funding for CBOs

To ensure consistency and long-term impact, public administrators should shift away from temporary or emergency only grants and invest in multi-year funding strategies. Long-term financial stability enables CBOs to maintain their staff, build capacity, and foster trust within their communities. During the GOTVax campaign, CBOs with milestone-based contracts mobilized outreach staff more quickly and effectively than those operating under traditional reimbursement models. Sustainable funding would not only help CBOs plan proactively but also allow governments to honor the long-term value of trusted messengers who are embedded in communities. In times of crisis, administrators should be prepared to adapt contracts, reorganize staffing, or escalate needs to leadership and legislators to ensure partnerships remain effective and responsive.

Streamline Contracting and Administrative Processes

Public administrators should make it easier for CBOs to partner with state governments by simplifying contracting, reporting, and reimbursement processes. Current administrative requirements often create unnecessary hurdles for smaller CBOs with limited capacity. Streamlining these processes and providing technical assistance would allow CBOs to focus their time and resources on serving communities rather than navigating complex bureaucracy.

After the 2025 LA wildfires, several CBOs reported delays in accessing emergency funding due to burdensome application processes, delays that undermined their ability to deliver food, housing, and recovery services during the critical early weeks of the crisis. Had a streamlined emergency funding protocol been in place, these organizations could have mobilized resources more rapidly and prevented service disruptions for displaced residents.

Institutionalize Collaborative Decision-Making with CBOs

To improve the relevance and effectiveness of public programs, public administrators should actively involve CBOs in the early stages of program planning and policy development. CBOs offer critical insight into the needs and experiences of underserved communities and should be treated as strategic partners, not just implementation contractors. This means going beyond simply asking for input, it involves listening to how CBOs identify challenges, recognizing the impact of their work, and clearly showing that their contributions are valued. Formalizing their role in decision-making processes will help ensure that government initiatives are more equitable and grounded in community realities.

Benefits and Limitations

The findings across all three cases, COVID-19 vaccine outreach, the 2020 Census, and the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, demonstrate that CBOs bring critical strengths to public outreach and emergency response efforts. Their deep connections to local communities and ability to offer culturally and linguistically tailored services make them uniquely effective in reaching populations that are often overlooked by traditional government streams. CBOs consistently demonstrate adaptability and responsiveness in high-pressure situations. During the pandemic, organizations involved in the Trusted Messenger Network and GOTVax campaign rapidly deployed outreach staff, created in-language materials, and leveraged grassroots strategies such as door-to-door canvassing and social media engagement to increase vaccine uptake. Similarly, during the 2025 wildfires, CBOs mobilized volunteers, distributed aid, and coordinated recovery services, helping fill critical service gaps when public systems were overwhelmed.

However, despite their demonstrated effectiveness, these organizations often operate under conditions that limit their capacity to scale and sustain their efforts. CBOs face ongoing structural barriers, including short-term and unreliable funding, delayed reimbursements, and complex administrative requirements. For example, CBOs engaged in wildfire response reported delays in accessing emergency funding due to bureaucratic hurdles, even as community demand surged. Additionally, many CBOs are excluded from the early planning stages of public initiatives, limiting their ability to shape program design in ways that reflect the realities of the communities they serve.

Together, these benefits and limitations point to a structural disconnect. While CBOs play an essential role in equitable service delivery, current public systems are not fully structured to support or sustain their contributions. Addressing these challenges requires a policy shift that recognizes the value of CBOs and removes systemic obstacles that prevent them from operating at their full potential. These recommendations apply to CBO partnerships across local, state, and federal systems, where the same structural challenges often exist.

CONCLUSION

This paper reinforces the critical role of community-based organizations in advancing equitable access to public benefits and emergency services in California. By analyzing key examples from recent public health and disaster response efforts, it becomes clear that CBOs are indispensable partners in bridging systemic gaps, particularly for communities historically excluded from government systems. The policy recommendations offered are rooted in practical challenges and successes drawn from real-world cases, demonstrating how public administrators can enhance the capacity and sustainability of these partnerships. While this study draws on rich document analysis and first-person interviews reported in secondary sources, it is important to note its limitations. This analysis does not include direct interviews with practitioners or original empirical data. However, the findings offer valuable insights into structural dynamics and provide actionable recommendations for strengthening CBO-government collaboration. Investing in CBOs is not just a matter of equity, but it is a matter of effective governance. Building stronger, more resilient partnerships with CBOs will be essential as California continues to confront climate crises, public health challenges, and disparities in access to government resources.



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