The Greenhouse Project: Part 2

In the first installment of this newsletter (September 15, 2026), we highlighted the importance of disseminating what we've learned from our decades of work helping leaders, practitioners, and donors better unleash the inherent potential of the extended families and communities they seek to serve. And we introduced our new initiative, The Greenhouse Project.

Our approach to helping communities flourish and become self-sustainable is guided by the institute's metaphor: Wildflowers are the first plants to grow when it rains after a fire, providing the first sustainable root structures and nutrients that allow for the restoration of the ecosystem to begin. What follows is our description of the theory and practice behind what The Greenhouse Project intends to achieve.

The moment is right for The Greenhouse Project, not only as the latest manifestation of our decades of work understanding and supporting communities, but in its potential to meet the changing landscape of service and philanthropy. According to a recent survey by Foundation Source, 93 percent of donors and private foundations plan to continue or increase their direct gifts in 2026. This year alone, the donors of Fidelity Investments Charitable Gift Fund recommended dispersing $18.3 billion in grants.[1] Foundations and high-net-worth donors want to be more involved in supporting what works in communities and want to see the results of their gifts. We think The Greenhouse Project can help providers and donors of all kinds better support the communities they seek to serve.

Discovery Labs for Inside-Out Community Sustainability

Some of the most interesting ideas in advancing agency live in the space between what we already know and what we're still learning. It is in this space that we explore and discover. The Greenhouse Project will offer labs using Wildflowers' approach to uncovering the immanent resources from within the community ecosystem to identify individuals and groups who have demonstrated a deep caring for children, teens, and others in the community and to strengthen their capacity to shape collective purpose and community agency.

Greenhouse trainees will learn to apply our approach for identifying and nourishing those inherent patterns of human-hearted behavior—informal capital—that are motivated by the

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[1] Foundation Source, *2026 Report on Private Philanthropy,* "Survey Finds Charitable Giving Remains Resilient as High-Net-Worth Donors Navigate Economic Uncertainty and Political Complexity," press release, February 26, 2026.

shared principles, purposes, and premises of the community-at-large. Informal capital—the largely invisible moral wealth of the community—is one of the most untapped community resources, yet it's essential for sustainability. It's a resource characterized by (a) a protective and supportive self-organizing ecosystem, (b) an inherent formation of belonging, and (c) a sense of collective purpose, agency, and spiritual connectedness.

A recent example of informal capital can be seen in residents' response to the closure of Portsmouth Square Park in San Francisco's Chinatown neighborhood. For decades, hundreds of residents living in single-room-occupancy buildings have been meeting in Portsmouth Square for socializing and playing cards. But on July 10, 2026, the park closed for extensive renovation. Four days later, over fifty residents relocated their meeting place to an alleyway two blocks away. (See the photo on this page taken on July 14, 2026.) This was spontaneous on the part of the community, not the result of a service organization or a philanthropic gift. The informal leaders and their organizing are invisible, but the latent vitality of the community blossomed for all to see. We seek ways of building upon this kind of spontaneous initiative.



Participants in a Wildflowers lab will discover and explore the unseen and easily obscured premises of a culture that give people and the institutions in their community their unity. Our lab will bring out the collective will of broad and diverse groups by (a) surfacing the often invisible wellsprings of energy at work in the extended family and the community, especially those moral currents that foster unity; (b) undertaking an analysis of the local ecosystem and identifying what fosters security, community, purpose, and agency within it; and (c) soliciting family and community-based solutions to strengthen formal and informal ways of knowing and improve collaboration on local issues. To this end, our Greenhouse Project discovery labs will feature a method of inside-out grant making called Flow Funding as well as workshops on inside-out leadership formation.

Flow Funding is a flexible and efficacious way of grant making, providing gifts directly through a myriad of community members and activities focused on problem-solving and strengthening informal capital. The method calls first for a study to discover and map the social and cultural landscape through the mind's eye of children, teens, elders, and their extended families. Second, in cooperative planning sessions, residents dialogue with one another and agree upon three to four activities that would strengthen their purpose, social relationships, and sense of belonging. Third, they complete a poll in which each resident votes for a preferred activity, and twenty-five dollars per ballot is distributed toward activities according to each resident's vote. The primary purpose of the meetings and the polling of families and residents is to elevate the will of the community to further understand one another and work together voluntarily to address the problems they face. Through these three steps, community leadership, a code of honor, and informal capital emerge and are recognized. This way of funding deepens discernment, builds trust between the donor and the community, and deepens social relationships.

Inside-Out Leadership Formation takes place through Model-Building workshops that build cooperation between and among groups of various backgrounds by enabling them to see their different realities through a physical representation of the community that makes visible invisible resources, assets, and social orders. Wildflowers Institute was awarded a US patent for this distinctive process of developing shared symbolic vocabularies within and across communities.

In cooperation with the Aspen Institute, we have also integrated Aspen's humanities-based approach to leadership formation into our process to further strengthen mutual understanding, trust, cooperation, and leadership capacity. According to this method, participants in our workshops read short texts (including prose, poetry, history, philosophy, literature, visual arts, and music) and reflect on their values, challenges, and decisions together across differences.

The outcome of this integrated approach is the development of moral ideas, vocabularies, and icons that are both personal and communal, symbolic and constitutive. These insights lead to new clarity about community transformation and the formal and informal social structures involved in building a sustainable community.

The inside-out process of the formation of leaders—rooted in understanding what we and others value, even if we disagree with one another—helps identify and strengthen the latent moral capital of both formal leaders (those who have specific institutional roles and titles) and

informal leaders (those whose leadership derives from their family, clan, and village, rather than from institutional leadership in a community). What emerges via these group endeavors that cross organizational, sociocultural, and generational divides is greater clarity about the moral challenges of and resources for individual and collective transformation, and the motivation to support the inside-out transformation of diverse communities.

This wholistic approach to understanding and unleashing the inherent strengths that sustain a community opens new, complementary approaches to more traditional modes of service and philanthropy. We're excited about how The Greenhouse Project will bear the organic fruit of the community.