OUR POWER.
COMMUNITY.
CHANGE.
Luz Vega-Marquis is president and CEO of Marguerite Casey Foundation, which she has led since its founding in 2001. Previously, she served with the Community Technology Foundation of California, the National Economic Development and Law Center and The James Irvine Foundation.

“Our Power. Our Community. Our Change.” was Vega-Marquis’ keynote address at Marguerite Casey Foundation’s 2018 National Convening, which brought more than 400 community and family leaders to the Washington, D.C. area, to explore how to grow a movement of low-income families, and dismantle structural causes of poverty.

The Marguerite Casey Foundation invests in organizations that put families at the forefront of efforts to fight poverty and work together across issues, race, ethnicity, regions and egos to achieve a more just and equitable society for all.
Our Power.

Our Community.

Our Change.
Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Building the power of poor families to end poverty is at the heart of everything we do at Marguerite Casey Foundation. It is our institutional mission and the core principle underlying all of our work since the Foundation was established in 2001. We envision a society where all families have the opportunity to realize their dreams, and are dedicated to nurturing a national movement of families advocating on their own behalf.

As more than 400 of us—families, grantees and partners—gather near Washington, D.C., for Marguerite Casey Foundation’s ninth National Convening, I want to share reflections on this year’s theme: “Our Power. Our Community. Our Change.”

In this historic era of injustice in the United States, what does power mean for low-income families? How can we as a community—as a national movement of families—effect change to create a more equitable and just society?

This past year was a potent reminder of the persistent inequities in our country. We witnessed the wealth gap grow to a chasm, while the ill effects of bias, discrimination and injustice continue to undermine opportunities for families.

Still, I believe as much as this is a time of peril for many low-income families and families of color, it is also a time of great potential for building power from the ground up.

How are we going to seize our full, powerful potential and forge a 21st century movement that connects us across dividing lines of policy, geography, race, gender, resource scarcity and economics? How do we see power manifest itself as opportunities and obstacles to shift? Across the country, the grantees and networks we support are winning hard-fought victories that are impressive and inspiring. What have we learned about power through these wins and, as importantly, our defeats? What are we doing right and what do we need to do differently? When have we worked well together and when have we failed to realize the power that comes from collaboration? These are large questions with important consequences that call for our consideration.

I don’t have the answers to these questions. But these answers are being generated by families, communities and organizations that we partner with at the Foundation. Every morning, I wake up with faith inspired by the courage, conviction and perseverance I have witnessed over the last 16 years. Cristina Jiménez, executive director of United We Dream, encapsulates the greatest certainty when she says:

Providing leadership means to say that, “OK, we don’t have the answer but we’re going to come together, and we’re going to figure it out, together.” I really believe in this moment that organizing is one of the only things that’s going to protect our community.

A few caveats before I delve deeper into reflections on power. These thoughts are meant to open a discussion about power. They don’t prescribe solutions, and they are not exhaustive or representative of the universe of work that is empowering low-income communities across the country to advocate for solutions on their own behalf.

Secondly, I have chosen to use the collective “we” here. I don’t presume to speak on behalf of anyone else; nonetheless, at the end of the day, I believe we are all in this together. I also believe that the conversation about power needed at this moment is not just a dialogue about the powers that be but about the power of we—we who are committed to a movement of poor families powerful enough to create solutions to poverty and injustice.

I am also conscious of the disproportionate authority of my own voice, conferred on me by my position and title. However, I also take to heart these words from Aaron Dorfman of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy: Because “emboldened white supremacists and corporate titans are threatening our democratic experiment, foundation leaders and wealthy donors [must] speak out and use their personal power to stand up for an inclusive and more just society.” I agree when Dorfman says: “Philanthropy cannot and should not lead the resistance that will make the country live up to its founding promise, but we can and must be partners with the grassroots leaders whose lives are at stake and who are risking so very much to build a better society.”

To speak truth to power, we have to talk about power among ourselves. “The more power we have, the more policies we can change,” as Desmond Meade, president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, puts it.

Across the country, organizers and family leaders are learning lessons from one another by sharing strategies, tactics and infrastructure. I have heard from many organizations that local networks are providing a strong foundation of trust to nurture relationships and work together for change. Our collaborative actions are preparing us to face the challenges ahead: Building on local victories, spreading our strengths, and supporting one another in areas of our weakness. Together, we’re building power from the ground up to turn back the tide on poverty and injustice nationwide.
My passion for this work stems from when I was 11 years old and would go work in the fields with my mom. I remember seeing my people run every time there was a raid by la migra. I was only a child and couldn’t understand what was going on, but I knew it was not right. I became an activist to stand up for my family and community.

— Elsa Gonzalez, founder of Proyecto Vida Digna
Marguerite Casey Foundation operates from a fundamental belief that families who are closest to the problems of poverty are also closest to the solutions. More than 15 years ago, when we first announced our approach, we gathered thousands of poor and low-income families across the country to talk about solutions to their own problems. At that time, I was repeatedly asked: “Why families? How are you going to organize families instead of organizing one person at a time or one organization at a time?” The assumption underlying the crazy looks I got was that living in poverty means living in a state of powerlessness.

“There’s this theory that people in poverty are not credible,” says Gina Womack, executive director of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children (FFLIC). “When our families testify at the state Legislature, it changes the argument. When we correct elected officials, because we’ve done our homework and know the facts about the systems harming our children, they stop seeing us as ‘bad’ parents who must be ignorant if their children are incarcerated. My greatest desire is to give our family members the training and confidence they need to stop giving up their power.” Knowing how to use tools like data and statistics matters, Womack says. “But, ultimately, FFLIC’s authority comes from the 3,000 families we’ve talked to about what’s putting their kids at risk.” The power of FFLIC’s organized families has led to the closure of a detention facility notorious for brutalizing young people and to the passage of historic juvenile justice reform legislation in Louisiana.

The Fight for $15 campaign is another example of how poor families of color are redefining the terms of debate and leveraging their lived experiences to improve policies and build power.

Dorian Warren, vice president for the Center for Community Change (CCC), explains: “Before Fight for $15, we were having more abstract conversations about income inequality, like Occupy’s focus on the 1 percent. But when fast-food workers told their own stories—who they are, where they come from, what work they did—they made a real, human connection and reframed the
problem and the solution on their own terms.”

Prior to Fight for $15, he says, “The focus was on raising the minimum wage, $10 an hour was the maximum bar that was set. It had been considered audacious to say, ‘No we’re going to double the minimum wage, and we’re not going to compromise on this.’ Fast-food workers, starting in New York City, made the impossible possible.”

A movement driven by low-income families has fundamentally changed the political climate and laid the groundwork for living-wage victories in cities and states across the country. Today, I don’t get as many crazy looks when I talk about how families are the unit of change and the source of leadership our country needs. No one can tell me that families who experience poverty don’t have the wisdom and the agency to solve their own problems.

At the same time, I realize how important it is to recognize how powerless we often feel—powerless, afraid, and reeling from exhaustion and worry. We enter into the work we do—and therefore into any discussion about power—from a multitude of places, both figuratively and literally. As much as we can relate to one another as justice seekers and movement builders, we are also shaped by radically different experiences. Our experiences or reactions to power and powerlessness, are not the same, not even within our own families and communities. This is why cornerstone organizations, like Proyecto Vida Digna in San Benito, Texas, founded by Elsa Gonzalez and part of the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network, are so important: We must lift each other up as we climb.
We need ideas to shift narrative, and we need infrastructure to shift power.

We need to support ecosystems and not the usual factionalism.

—Professor Manuel Pastor
University of Southern California
Families do not experience poverty one issue at a time. Families struggling to make ends meet may face racial discrimination, unemployment, lack of education opportunities, hunger or other challenges. To address these many issues, we need strategies and networks that unify families, organizations and communities around collective actions. Networks are especially important as different organizations—all fighting for poor families—have overlapping policy priorities and are competing for resources and attention. The fate of the movement for economic and racial justice depends on our ability to connect across issues and work together.

Last year’s victory for a statewide living-wage law in California demonstrates just how high the stakes are for working families.

The tremendous achievement of passing a state-level living-wage law in the most populous and wealthy state in the country came on the heels of living-wage gains made earlier at the local level. The paradox of the win, however, was its implications for families who rely on child care subsidies to survive. In short, the law that nudges up the ceiling on California’s minimum wage came into direct conflict with the floor on salary eligibility guidelines imposed by the state’s child care subsidy law.

“I think for some folks there was the assumption that if you make better wages, you can have better child care,” says Mary Ignatius, an organizer with Parent Voices. “But this was only if you didn’t take into account that a parent getting a 50-cent raise meant she could lose $1,500 to $2,000 worth of child care; it doesn’t add up. The cost of child care is out of control, and without access to child care, it’s virtually impossible for parents to stay secure in their jobs and build their careers and longevity. We already knew from our members that many had turned down raises or cut their hours due to the faulty income guidelines for access to the benefit of child care.”

Then, in January 2017, when the minimum wage increase became state law, “these parents no longer had the ‘luxury’ not to accept a raise,” Ignatius says. “The problem came down to living-wage policy not working in tandem with child care policy, the very thing that enables parents to go to work. We had to look at the intersection so we can win policies that benefit families on both sides.”

This is where the power and necessity of having a multi-issue network driven by poor families came into play.
Members of the Bay Area Equal Voice Coalition worked with one another to surmount the impasse of competing policy objectives. “It wasn’t ever an either/or but a way for us to educate one another,” Ignatius says. “On the child care side, the policy conversation had been led for decades by middle- and upper-class white women who didn’t have a racial and economic justice lens, so we had to stress the importance of fighting for a living wage in a way that didn’t hurt parents or child care workers. Then we had to help the folks working for a higher minimum wage understand what the impact and implications were on the entire family budget and for families to survive. It doesn’t mean we have to oppose one another. It just means we have to be doing both at the same time.”

The ability to effect real change at the local level—and then to build on these victories to create broader policy change—is promising at this moment. Certainly, the prospects for federal-level policy changes seem dismal, as policies affecting families of color living in poverty seem to get more punitive each day. But we can be heartened to know that we are in a period of awakening from the brainwash of competing policy objectives. “It wasn’t ever an either/or but a way for us to educate one another,” Ignatius says. “On the child care side, the policy conversation had been led for decades by middle- and upper-class white women who didn’t have a racial and economic justice lens, so we had to stress the importance of fighting for a living wage in a way that didn’t hurt parents or child care workers. Then we had to help the folks working for a higher minimum wage understand what the impact and implications were on the entire family budget and for families to survive. It doesn’t mean we have to oppose one another. It just means we have to be doing both at the same time.”

The need for exponentially greater investment in child care is one of the numerous policy reforms desperately needed by poor families in this moment. But the trajectory of any national movement for social justice can be propelled by local victories. As Ignatius says, “We’re firing on all cylinders. It’s what we saw the minimum wage fight do. Start local. Get wins. Get more local wins. And build the momentum for an even larger solution.”

We must remember that the road toward collective power—which we must walk together if we are going to get anywhere—is paved with a number of principles. One is creating a safe and open forum to have discussions about how to craft change. Another is assuring each other of our agency to develop these changes. The value of networks is their unique capability to cultivate a spirit of generosity that helps us push beyond small pockets.

Networks allow us to have a conversation about our bigger potential by recognizing the power of poor families as the drivers of change. “I don’t want to get lost in the importance of our network, that this was an effort completely led by low-income women of color and mothers,” Ignatius says. “It was the collective power of these members coming together and connecting these dots. It was them showing up and saying that the decision to increase wages was good, but the work is not done yet.”

The Native Voice Network provides another illustration of networks igniting and sustaining action. As the Indigenous, youth-driven “Water is Life” movement at Standing Rock, South Dakota, was gaining momentum, “We were already poised, ready, and practiced, and had trusted relationships among members of the [Native Voice] Network,” says Laura Harris, executive director of Americans for Indian Opportunity. Harris describes how, during that “very long, very cold movement,” members of the Native Voice Network from across the country organized vital resources and supply runs. “It was of the utmost importance that we already had the opportunity to get to know each other in person, to trust each other so we could engage in group learning and create collective language and terms. That allowed us to collect one another’s skills and determine the ways our organizations could best serve each other and work together. We were able to set aside our own work and realize it was part of our mission to support one another as the Native Voice Network. Because we had already created those relationships as a network, we could turn to one another so we could then best support the “Water is Life” movement.”

What Marguerite Casey Foundation is learning from our grantees and networks across the country is how they are reaching toward ever-larger solutions to problems facing low-income families—precisely by working in solidarity with one another. In the current climate, it might be tempting to hunker down in silos, seeking to protect hard-won individual gains. But networks offer critical social and political infrastructure that multiply the gains of collective action.
Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me

I need to be one in the number, as we stand against tyranny ... /

I’ve come to realize /

That teaching others to stand up and fight is /

the only way my struggle survives.

— “Ella’s Song,” lyrics by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, professor
The Power of Community Love and Justice
How do we reach the full potential of our power to advance justice for working families?

“The answer to why we aren’t winning more begs of us another question: Why aren’t we replicating one another’s strategies?” says organizer and Akonadi Foundation president Lateefah Simon. “Power is going to be gained by people not just understanding systems and structures, but how to work together. We need to do less talking about who has power over us and more acting from the standpoint that our real power ultimately comes from the power we hold onto with each other. And we have to operate from this understanding when we’re happy and when we’re pissed off. When we do and when we don’t like each other. We cannot replicate one another’s strategies and share infrastructures of power if we do not try harder and do better at loving and trusting one another.”

I would add that we need to develop our capacity for patience. We must hold two contradictory ideas at the same time: The “fierce urgency of now” and the long “arc of the moral universe,” to use phrases from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The full use of our power as a movement of low-income families will be determined by our ability to balance ourselves across the tightrope between urgency and patience.

I recognize the irony of my call for patience in a field commanded by deadline-driven philanthropy. This recognition underlies Marguerite Casey Foundation’s practice of making multi-year, general operating grants and our commitment to building long-term relationships with our grantees as best we can. This approach certainly does not level the playing field completely. But I do believe that, as Aaron Dorfman of National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy says, “Providing long-term support is always important, and in this current moment, it’s more crucial than ever.”

The Foundation’s grantmaking model is rooted in another important principle as well: We do not seek to support “capacity-building” efforts, a trend that’s all too prevalent in the foundation world. We aim instead to help build infrastructure. This is an important distinction because what funders often have in mind when they say “capacity” is pre-determined and reflected in a pre-packaged list of boxes to check. This approach comes down to pre-supposing what a community needs, instead of asking, then listening, and only then deciding how
to act responsibly and respectfully. Our promise at our Foundation is to first ask, then to listen, and then to act.

Having trusting relationships across our differences allows us to build a movement based not on a limited politics of identity—which underlies so many foundations’ preoccupation with “diversity” and is another way to simply check boxes—but a politics of experience. By this, I mean the lived experience of poverty on the one hand, but also of privilege on the other. One’s power is relative to one’s privilege—predominantly white privilege, which is something else we need to be able to have honest conversations about.

Bringing the issue of privilege into our conversation about power means recognizing that agency and resilience are not ultimately matters of tenacity or courage. If we were going to conduct a power analysis within our own movement, we would have to dig beneath the maxim that “closer to the problem” means “closer to the solution.” We would have to recognize that the closer a family’s proximity is to problems connected to poverty, the nearer is that family’s exposure to trauma and fear.

“The climate of terror that is keeping the community from being involved” is Proyecto Vida Digna’s biggest challenge since the election of Donald Trump, according to founder Elsa Gonzalez. “We used to meet three times a week, but now it’s hard convincing our members to come to meetings and events because of the fear we are living with all of the [ICE] raids and the militarized environment. We have lost a lot of communications with people in our community because of the terror.”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, Proyecto Vida Digna mobilized to provide food, housing, clothing, medicine and cleaning supplies to hundreds of families when the organization realized that no one in their community was seeking help from entities like the Red Cross out of fear they would be asked to show their documentation and be arrested by immigration authorities. Proyecto Vida Digna is now focusing on “know your rights” work in its community. “We are offering our members the first interview or consultation they’ve ever had with a lawyer,” Gonzalez says. “Once they know their rights, including their right to remain silent, they feel less fear, a little more hope. And then, only from there, maybe they can fight.”

There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between fear-mongering and racial divisiveness, but “leading with families” can surmount both. A decade ago, the immigrant rights movement was framing its message in part as, “Immigrants are workers, not criminals.”

“It was our way of pushing back against the demonization that the conservatives were pushing,” says Joshua Hoyt, executive director of the National Partnership for New Americans, “and a rhetorical attempt to prevent the issue of immigration from becoming toxically racialized and the destruction of a political center that could support reasonable compromises. Little thought was put into the fact that we were accepting the frame of criminalization, or what that meant to other groups who were victims of the massive prison-industrial complex, especially African-Americans.”

In 2007, Hoyt attended one of Marguerite Casey Foundation’s first family convenings, where he sat at a table with a group of multi-racial, intergenerational organization leaders from across the country. “I was kind of dumbstruck at the power of the ‘family’ approach to the conversation … It demolished the differences between the participants. It showed how the mass incarceration and criminalization approach to both criminal justice and to immigration had touched everyone in the group. It united us across race. I left there, and [my organization] changed our organizing framework from ‘Workers, not criminals’ to ‘Protect families.’”

The power of working with people who don’t at first seem to share priorities, or who come from different cultural backgrounds, lies in the strength of family and community cultural traditions. “It’s really our theory of change model that transformative leaders have to be grounded in their core cultural identity to be effective,” says Laura Harris, executive director of Americans for Indian Opportunity.

The high school students who led the Standing Rock “Water is Life” movement were “the first generation in whom the tribes had invested to center cultural identity for young people, reweaving cultural values into their education. … Cultural power has really fueled our movement.”

The foundation and legacy of the culture of one’s community and traditions can also lay the groundwork for winning new allies and sustaining powerful alliances. The youth leaders at Standing Rock “stuck to the ideas of prayer, spirituality, of having collective responsibility.” Harris says. “That the Earth is our mother and we have a collective responsibility to care for our relative. This really helped them attract non-Native allies, celebrities and environmental groups, which had never ‘played well’ with Native Americans. But this movement of young people created new alliances and long-term relationships with environmental organizations, including Native American environmental organizations, that are a part of the Native Voice Network.”
The Power of Truth
Shifting the Narrative
What claim to influence over public policy does a social movement have? …

What aspects of social movements pose a threat to those in power, and when can they decide to ignore them?

—Zeynep Tufekci, activist and author
Long before the “fake news” infiltrated social media, misrepresentations of low-income families, especially those of color, were prevalent in the public discourse. For decades, they’ve been used to justify unjust policies. The new Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, led by Rev. William Barber, makes this clear. “Blaming the poor and claiming that the United States does not have an abundance of resources to overcome poverty are false narratives used to perpetuate economic exploitation, exclusion and deep inequality.”

Marguerite Casey Foundation’s grantees and networks across the country are making significant strides toward producing accurate portrayals of low-income families by, among other tactics, analyzing data and organizing action research initiatives led by their members.

As part of its Campaign to Connect One Million, the members of Opportunity Youth United (OYU) analyzed the federal budget, finding that a $4 billion appropriation is needed to connect the 5 million young people in the U.S. between the ages of 16 and 24 (that’s 1 in 9) who are neither working nor in school with opportunities.

But given policy paralysis at the federal level, “we know that change is going to come from the bottom up,” says Lashon Amado, OYU’s National Coordinator of Community Action Teams. In 13 cities across the country, OYU’s community action teams are analyzing city and county budgets. By running the numbers, both fiscal and demographic, young people are positioning themselves as policy experts.

“First off, how many youth in our country are disconnected and how much is being spent to make slots for them?” says Amado. “This gives young people a platform to educate their community and to hold elected officials accountable,” especially those who give lip service to caring about them. “When they have this data, it creates a different dynamic with decision-makers and a transformation within the young people themselves when they realize they have this power. Elected officials have looked at young people as angry and incompetent. But they can’t discredit us when we do this research and come in with solutions and strategies backed up by data.”

OYU youth got public officials in Sacramento to create a city department dedicated to youth. In Boston, youth organizers exposed that the owners of TD Garden, home to the Celtics and Bruins, had failed to honor its obligation to give back to the community. Their campaign led to TD Bank paying $1.65 million for a local recreation center. “If you don’t create your own solutions, people are going to create them for you,” Amado says.

In a democracy, the collective voice and interests of ordinary, working people and families should speak louder than corporations, even if the U.S. Supreme Court has said that they have “personhood.”

Across the country and the globe, movements of marginalized people are experimenting with dynamic media platforms and technologies that are reshaping the way we talk about justice. “Technology is not a theory of change and media is not an analysis of power,” says Rashad Robinson, president of Color Of Change. “As we think about how to build the 21st century campaigns that will translate the presence of Black people and oppressed people into power to actually change the rules—the written rules of policy and the unwritten rules of culture—our ability to change those rules depends on our ability to understand strategy and power. And then overlay technology.”

With over 1 million online members, Color Of Change is the largest racial justice organization of its kind in the nation. The organization is forging innovations at the intersection of online and offline strategies to build power for communities of color. What they’re finding is that “high-tech” organizing has to integrate “high-touch” elements.

“At the bottom, building a movement depends on strong, trusted relationships, ones that are built outside of our communications platforms,” says Dorian Wanen, president of the Center for Community Change Action (CCCA) and vice president of the Center for Community Change (CCC). “People want to make sense of and meaning out of their world, and they want to do it in person. People want to feel connected and to be in community. We have to create a ladder of engagement that combines digital and social media, with voter outreach, and with cultural conversations.

“There have to be different ways of getting people in the door,” he says. “We have to think more about how to recruit people who aren’t engaged, about how to expand the base, not just talk to the choir. We have to experiment with messaging. But by that I don’t mean some D.C. consultant doing polls of message testing. I mean real experiments about how to be in relationships with people and how to get people to be in relationship with us.”
When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

― Audre Lorde
writer, feminist and civil rights activist
Another reason Marguerite Casey Foundation focuses on building networks and infrastructure through long-term general operating support: Movements need to develop offensive and defensive power simultaneously. This is especially the case now, given “what will be the increasing amount of attacks on progressive organizations that work with vulnerable people,” explains Dorian Warren at the Center for Community Change, “The problem with program support and not multi-year general operating support, to me, is about risk—organizations and therefore communities being able to take risks to improve their lives” when they have access to multi-year, general support.

Risk involves both risk taking and risk mitigation. “Risk taking means the ability to experiment with new approaches,” Warren says. “This requires having a trusted relationship with a funder that serves as a form of insurance that allows you to be able to keep doing your programs but also to try a bold idea, new strategy or innovation. What we need as a field is to do better at rigorous experimentation. We have to be willing to learn when something doesn’t work, why, and then to be able to move on to something else. We all have to be able to be honest with funders and not always have to prove that something we did is ‘good work.’”

At Marguerite Casey Foundation, we see the rapidly shifting terrain in which we are working to build a movement of low-income families. And if the times are changing, so must strategies and tactics. Strong infrastructure is critical—both within organizations and across multi-faceted networks—to cross-fertilize ideas and lessons about best practices as well as those that aren’t working.

The second dimension of risk-taking Warren describes is mitigation: “We have to be able to engage in risk mitigation to prepare for attacks that could destroy our organizations, whether from the government or private and civil society actors who have always attacked movements for social justice. Program support doesn’t allow you to prepare for cyberattacks, other assaults through social media, physical attacks on our leaders, or how the current
administration could use the IRS to destabilize us. We have to be able to do the preparation, do scenario planning and put defense systems in place."

We also have to be able to acknowledge cases in which "our nonprofit infrastructure is hanging on by threads," according to organizer and Akonadi Foundation president Lateefah Simon. "Staff members are exhausted, living paycheck to paycheck, trying to support their families. They are fighting for their organizations’ priorities while also fighting rent control and their school administrators, and making court dates in their personal lives."

“We can’t be proud of ourselves for funding movements and organizing if we don’t think beyond the usual reporting structures. Philanthropy makes you write out pre-determined objectives when strategies shift and change all the time. Being timeline-based doesn’t allow people to be long-term."

Instead, let’s shift the relationship between funders and grantees to build more power. “Let’s say to grantees, ‘I want you to surprise us and train us on how you are doing the work.’” Simon says. “Most of the time grantees have to write reports saying what they think the foundation wants to hear so they get funded again. The implications for this for us, as a sector, is that we don’t have an opportunity to gain real knowledge about what’s really hard. So we should ask groups, ‘What came up that you didn’t expect?’ And then we should allow folks to answer this honestly—and encourage them to have this conversation not only with us but within their networks and collaborations on an ongoing basis. We have to develop this as a practice, as a vocation to constantly learn and do better at building power.”
In order for us as a poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed … [This] means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. But one of the guiding principles has to be that we cannot lead a struggle that involves masses of people without identifying with the people and without getting the people to understand what their potentials are, what their strengths are.

—Ella Baker
civil rights and human rights activist
We are not leaderless, we are leader-full.”

That’s how Patrisse Khan-Cullors—one of the three women founders of Black Lives Matter—answers criticism that BLM is too decentralized.

I believe, and Marguerite Casey Foundation believes, that everyone has the capacity to lead. But we have to create, to borrow Cullors’ term, “leader-full” conditions. Experienced leaders helping one another build up new leadership is how we’re going to get there. We must create ever more opportunities for people to engage.

Jazmin Ramirez, a 23-year-old DREAMer, leads the Tuition Equality Campaign with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, where she is also vice president of the board. Tennessee law requires undocumented students to pay three times more than the standard state tuition. “I’m beyond tired of telling students they can’t go to school,” Ramirez says. “What motivates me is when I see youth and women’s smiles on their faces doing the work that they love. I love seeing their leadership develop, seeing them there every day doing the work. There’s no reward like it. Some of the challenges I can see right now growing up is that there’s not enough investment in developing youth leadership. That is where we can begin—investing in programs so youth can be involved in creating change.”

Marguerite Casey Foundation is working to create “leader-full” conditions within our Board of Directors. Ramirez, a recipient of the Sargent Shriver Youth Warriors Against Poverty Leadership Award, just began her one-year term as the Foundation’s inaugural Board Fellow.

The Foundation values the intergenerational focus of grantee organizations and networks in building a movement of poor families. We know it is critical to build youth leadership in meaningful ways, to make space for, and defer to, the voices of young people at the outset, and not to ask them for input after the fact. Families and youth are the conduit for power in a movement for democracy rooted in racial and economic equality. “Young people can be leaders and change agents in their families,” says Lashon Amado, an organizer with Opportunity Youth United. “OYU encourages our local members to get their family members to go vote with them. This is how we’re going to create a renewed culture of citizen engagement in our communities.”

Power is evolving through new conceptions of citizenship that poor families are creating and through which they are channeling their agency. Our grantees and networks are demonstrating that electoral power is not just about getting out the vote; it is a transformative vision of what it means to have a political voice. Those who are building electoral power through integrated voter engagement, for example, are not just aiming to register as many eligible voters as they can. They are also tapping into the power of family members who are not legally eligible to vote because they are excluded from the U.S. citizenry by virtue of their immigration status or because they have been convicted of a felony—an exclusion that applies in many states regardless of whether or not an individual has spent time in prison.

“When you’re doing get out the vote, they typically tell you it’s all about hitting the numbers: ‘Don’t argue with people if they say they’re not interested in voting, just keep it moving,’” says Desmond Meade, president of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition. “But there is so much untapped power within communities of color and poor communities. When people tell you they don’t care about voting, they don’t have time for it, or it wouldn’t make a difference anyway and they walk on by or shut the door, what they are really doing is masking their pain and their shame with indifference.”

This is certainly the case among people who are disenfranchised because of a criminal record, Meade says. In Florida, the largest swing state, 1.54 million people are presently disqualified from voting for the rest of their lives because they are incarcerated, were once in prison or on probation or parole. The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition spearheaded a multi-year, statewide grassroots mobilization that placed the restoration of voting rights for this disenfranchised population on Florida’s ballot.

“Whether you can’t vote because you’re a returning citizen,” as FRRC refers to formerly incarcerated people, “or you’re a person of color whose family has been systematically attacked by policies, it is painful to feel like you’re in a position of servitude, not power,” Meade says. “We have this huge block of dormant voters because they don’t see any possibility of their vote making any difference for their kid who got arrested and sentenced for riding a bicycle while Black.”

Organizers must offer people tangible, concrete hope. “Only then can people be convinced that
they should bother to vote or that they should go get their families and communities to vote," Meade says. His wife developed this message for women who have experienced trauma at the hands of the criminal justice system: “Taking your Pain. Turning it into purpose. To change policy.”

Color Of Change operates on a similar premise: “People don’t mobilize and turn out to vote to send someone to Congress; they vote because they need jobs,” it’s president, Rashad Robinson says. “We participate in elections because we want to make our lives, our communities and our families’ lives better.”

Color Of Change was founded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina when so many Black residents of New Orleans were left to die. Hurricane Katrina illustrated so many things about policies, from geographic segregation to generational poverty, to systems like transportation and criminal justice. But at the heart of it all was that no one—not the government, corporations or the media—was nervous about disappointing African-Americans and poor people of color across the board," Robinson says.

“We have to build movements in this country that actually deal with those who are manufacturing poverty, inequality and injustice. We need a different narrative about injustice, and we need a different kind of people power.”
It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

—Assata Shakur
social justice activist
A question I often ask myself is this: Ten or 20 years from now, if we had successfully built a national movement, a strong political force led by families to conquer poverty through policy solutions of their own devising—a movement with the membership scale and political authority of the National Rifle Association—what would we have done differently?

I hope that, at this Convening and beyond, we can begin to imagine this future and, more importantly, begin the process of asking one another some of the hard questions related to power that are required to make this vision a reality.

Marguerite Casey Foundation seeks to support the conditions and the framework for changing the balance of power in this land of stratified wealth and concentrated poverty, meeting the needs of low-income families across the United States through organized and collective self-determined action.

“Change is possible” is a favorite phrase at Marguerite Casey Foundation. Our new tagline makes it more specific: “Change for families. By families.” That is also my personal conviction.

In listening to our grantees and networks over the past 16 years—and watching the collective work grow, develop and adapt to new challenges—I have come to believe that this faith in change and this love for the collective work we do are two fundamental things that we share in common across the dividing lines that might otherwise separate us and dilute the power of our unity.

Indeed, I think we are at a tipping point to share an even bolder belief: The change we envision is not only possible. It is probable. It is inevitable if—and only if—we build and share power.