Campaign Overview and Background

In April 2021, Washington joined 29 other states and the District of Columbia in implementing its state-level version of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Working Families Tax Credit. Beginning in 2023, the credit stands to benefit 420,000 households with annual payments up to $300 - $1,200 depending on household size and income. Importantly, the credit was expanded to include filers using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs), those who file without a Social Security number. Those closest to the campaign credit its success to a long-term collaboration between grassroots organizations, policy experts, and funders. Washington state’s Working Families Tax Credit was originally enacted in 2008, but it was not inclusive of ITIN filers and its implementation was never fully funded. The coalition that led the charge on funding and expanding the credit formed in earnest in 2018, building on the advocacy that preceded them for over a decade. After the policy made it through two committees in 2019 but ultimately failed, the coalition sought to be more strategic and grow their capacity. Support from national funders like the EITC Pooled Fund and The Rockefeller Foundation and local funders like Progress Alliance of Washington, among others, helped them get there by allowing them to build the bandwidth they needed to collaborate, lead with their strengths, and organize. With nearly half a million dollars of funding over 2019 and 2020, compared to less than $100,000 in previous years, the campaign was able to increase its reach tenfold through expanded capacity.

Then COVID hit. While the state shut down immediately after its legislative session ended and organizations scrambled to continue collaborating during the pandemic, a silver lining was a shift in how people thought about flexible dollars for communities. “[The coalition] decided to take the approach of, ‘Let’s create a narrative shift here in Washington,’” said Emily Vyhnane, campaign manager, of the coalition’s strategic response to the pandemic.

The coalition rebranded the state’s EITC as the “Recovery Rebate” and its messaging focused on the importance of getting cash to people in need right away. Through virtual town halls, personal storytelling, and digital outreach—the bill passed.
“[The coalition] was a golden child,” said Tiffany Mendoza, political director of Progress Alliance of Washington. “It was extraordinarily well-run.” She cited their clarity of vision and priorities as key factors in their success.

The campaign manager, Vyhnane, made sure to create a deep power-sharing structure for the coalition.

She designated two co-leads for each subcommittee from six different organizations within the coalition. Policy development was a collective effort of all coalition members and organizing was a joint effort between the field and communications teams.

Strength in Structure

The coalition was comprised of four subcommittee teams:

- Communications
- Field Organizing
- Advocacy
- Research

Expanded Capacity and Collaboration through Regranting

Funding from The Rockefeller Foundation helped the coalition expand capacity in a few ways. They were able to hire a campaign manager, Vyhnane, who focused on harnessing the coalition members’ energy and focusing it on their campaign goals. This included managing a regranting process that distributed some of the Rockefeller funding to ten members of the coalition, allowing them to deepen their engagement and do what they do best.

For example, the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence was able to uplift the stories of survivors explaining what the tax credit money would mean to them; All in for Washington helped youth organizers lead workshops with their own communities about economic justice. The redistribution of funding through regranting helped each organization fully participate in the coalition by providing them the resources to do so.

The Rockefeller Foundation, which funds both grassroots organizations and policy and research organizations, sees the need for both groups to work together on campaigns like this one.

“We believe that there needs to be an ‘under the dome’ and outside strategy to really make any kind of policy effective,” said Rachel Isacoff, manager, Economic Policy for The Rockefeller Foundation. “So, trusting and listening to grassroots organizations who really have their ears to the ground and can build out policy recommendations with that vantage can be coupled with organizations who know how things work on the hill and can really be effective.”

Rockefeller trusted the coalition’s deep ties within the community and their knowledge of what those impacted by the legislation need most. Therefore, they provided flexible funding, putting that trust into action.

1 The Rockefeller Foundation does not support lobbying.
Similarly, Progress Alliance of Washington was inspired by the coalition’s collaboration. Mendoza was particularly impressed by the strong line in the sand the coalition drew on including ITIN filers in the legislation. They found that providing general operating support was the best way to break down power dynamics and build trust. Vyhnanek expressed the importance of this support for administrative and overhead costs—the underpinning of their whole campaign.

“[Administrative] work often goes unrecognized,” she said, “but it’s the reason why any of the work happens…it has to be valued.”

Grant funding also supported the coalition’s communications efforts, allowing them to bring on staff who worked closely with field organizers to bring their great ideas to life. For example, they held a virtual workshop to help community members write letters to the editor. A portion of the money also went toward translating materials to Spanish, Chinese, and Russian, the three primary languages identified by the coalition, to help reach a bigger audience.

Advice for Funders

Vyhnanek is quick to point out that the win was the result of years and years of effort. She encourages funders to be part of the work at the beginning when things aren’t “shiny and pretty.”

“We had to go through losses in order to get to where we are,” she said. “We had to learn from that to figure out what to do and where to go.”

And both Vyhnanek and Isacoff from The Rockefeller Foundation urge funders to remember that the work doesn’t end when the legislation is passed. Though they are celebrating the hard-earned victory, they know that it is only meaningful if it gets cash in the hands of the families who need it.

“Think about the whole picture,” Isacoff urged fellow funders considering supporting tax credits campaigns. She suggested regranting to community outreach organizations and direct service providers after the policy is passed to help them effectively spread the word about the credit and help families learn how to claim it.

Isacoff, Mendoza and Vyhnanek emphasized the role flexible funding played in the success of the coalition. It allowed each organization to honor its strengths and did not put a heavy burden on the coalition to manage a grant when they should be focusing on their campaign.

Ultimately it all came back to trusting that everyone was working toward the same goal.

“The work moves at the speed of trust,” Mendoza said. “We’re in this because we know our value and what we can do, we know [the coalition’s] value...we’re in alignment toward a greater vision.”

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Rachel Isacoff, Manager
Economic Policy and Energy Justice
for The Rockefeller Foundation

Learn more at eofnetwork.org and eitcfunders.org