



RACE FORWARD'S POLICY INNOVATION LAB: 2025-2026 COHORT

OVERVIEW

Race Forward’s Policy Innovation Lab, which focuses on the intersections of race and climate justice, is seeking local coalition partners for our 2025-26 cohort. Piloted in 2022-2024, the Lab cultivates methodologies of community-driven policy development within the context of community organizing. The new cohort will consist of coalitions interested in exploring the role policy plays in building long-term community governing power.

The Lab aims to disrupt traditional policy development by positioning local communities as owners and decision-makers over policies that directly affect their daily lives. Through this program, Race Forward supports coalitions by providing tools, capacity-building training, pass-through funding, and strategic support to advance racial and climate justice initiatives.

PRIORITY FOCUS

For this cohort, we’re prioritizing coalitions that are:

- ▶ Comprised of majority Black, Indigenous, Latin(o/a/x/e), Asian, Pacific Islander and community of color-led membership-based organizing groups
- ▶ Currently engaged in active policy campaigns or implementing recent policy wins alongside government entities
- ▶ Navigating the complexities of administrative implementation or enforcement
- ▶ Interested in shared learning and peer exchange in an experimental and lab-style environment

Special consideration will be given to groups employing strategies to protect vulnerable communities in response to current political challenges.

Policy Innovation Lab APPLICATION



Scan the QR Code
to view the application

POLICY INNOVATION LAB GOALS

- ▶ Create a forum where established and emerging coalitions can ideate and explore policy solutions that advance community priorities and expand community power to govern
- ▶ Support peer-to-peer learning by providing tools, capacity-building training, and policy development frameworks
- ▶ Develop, document, and share tools, solutions, and successes across the racial justice movement

KEY QUESTIONS WE'LL EXPLORE

Drawing on lessons from Policy Innovation Lab's first cohort, as well as Race Forward's report "[Co-governing Toward Multiracial Democracy](#)," we will examine:

- ▶ How does policy work advance our long-term vision, and what challenges does it present in practice?
- ▶ What cultural norms are we challenging, and how are we shifting them?
- ▶ How do we collaborate with government contacts while applying external pressure?

Participants will also have the opportunity to test Race Forward's newest tool for Collaborative Governance.

CAPACITY-BUILDING SUPPORTS

Based on cohort needs, the Lab can:

Strategy Support

- ▶ Support organizations in identifying campaign strategies and tactics for their local context
- ▶ Connect local organizations to experienced organizers for mentorship and resources

Research & Policy Support

- ▶ Identification of policy opportunities at local, state, and national levels
- ▶ Field scans based on areas of interest to local partners
- ▶ Analysis of data and trends related to racial justice issues
- ▶ Support with interpreting and implementing data-driven strategies
- ▶ Creation of fact sheets and other materials to support policy advocacy efforts
- ▶ Documentation and elevation of innovative community-driven solutions
- ▶ Development of reports, one-pagers, and tools
- ▶ Documentation of stories highlighting solutions emerging from those most impacted by environmental injustices and climate catastrophe





In-Person Convenings

- ▶ Relationship building with organizers from across the country
- ▶ Amplification of community-driven efforts and local racial justice history
- ▶ Building connections across communities to build scale on a national level

Timeline of activities

April 17 - May 16	Application period
June 2 - June 6	Interviews of applicants
June 25, 2025	Cohort final decisions to participate
July 29-31, 2025 (tentative date range)	Virtual launch convening
August - December 2025	Monthly peer learning and skills-building virtual sessions Bimonthly site check-ins
November 13-15, 2025	Policy Innovation Lab pre-convening and attend Race Forward's Convening Just Narratives for Multiracial Solidarity, St. Louis, MO focused on narrative change
January - May 2026	Project feedback and Individual site TA Bimonthly site check-ins
May - July 2026	In-person closing convening and sharing of projects

Financial Support

Each participating coalition will receive a pass-through grant of \$30k (split between two payments) to cover staff time and, where the coalition deems appropriate, stipends for the participation of community members. All travel expenses will be covered by Race Forward.

Eligibility Criteria

- ▶ Established or emerging coalitions and alliances operating locally or statewide (regional formations may also be considered)
- ▶ Rooted in communities directly impacted by systemic racism (Black, Indigenous, Latin(o/a/x/e), Asian, Pacific Islander and community of color-led membership-based organizing groups working with directly impacted/frontline communities)
- ▶ Majority leadership, staff, and members are people of color
- ▶ Engage in organizing as their primary strategy
- ▶ Focus on an aspect of environmental and/or climate justice
- ▶ Root cause analysis of the connections between environmental/ climate injustice and systemic racism
- ▶ Deep relationships with directly impacted communities
- ▶ 501(c)(3) or are fiscally sponsored in order to receive the pass-through funding

Additional beneficial factors

- ▶ Existing relationships with elected officials or administrative appointees
- ▶ Identified champions in legislative, executive, or administrative realms
- ▶ Active campaign for policy that is already moving legislatively OR the goal is policy implementation

APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Coalitions will complete this short [Application Form](#) by May 16, 2025. You have the option to provide an audio or video recording of up to 10 minutes long and send via email to contactMCB@raceforward.org. Race Forward will review applications and invite finalists to a one-hour call. These calls will take place between June 2-June 6, 2025. Race Forward will announce final Policy Innovation Lab participants by June 11, 2025.

PROGRAM TIMELINE

The Policy Innovation Lab will run from July 2025 through June 2026.

PARTICIPATION COMMITMENTS

Participating coalitions will:

- ▶ Attend virtual opening (Summer 2025) and in-person closing (Spring 2026) convenings
- ▶ Attend Race Forward's [Just Narratives for Multiracial Solidarity convening](#) in St. Louis, MO (November 13-15, 2025)
- ▶ Attend six monthly peer learning and skills-building virtual sessions
- ▶ Identify a technical assistance topic and receive six months of technical assistance from Race Forward staff or peer coaches
- ▶ Connect with Race Forward for strategy sessions every other month
- ▶ Participate in reflection, learning, and evaluation activities throughout the project

All venue, food, accommodation, and travel costs for required events will be covered by Race Forward.



COALITION TEAM STRUCTURE

We recommend forming a team of 3-4 individuals who will be accountable for this work, potentially including paid staff, organizational leaders, community members, and youth representatives. Race Forward will support travel for 3-4 individuals from each team for in-person convenings.

ACCESSIBILITY

Race Forward is committed to a disability justice, healing justice, and trauma-informed approach. Throughout the application process and program, we will ask participants about their needs for full participation, including interpretation, live captioning, childcare, mobility, food, healing or other forms of support.

ABOUT RACE FORWARD

Race Forward's mission is to support communities and public institutions to achieve a just multiracial democratic society through governance that advances racial justice. We envision a society in which people of color thrive with purpose and power.

The Movement Capacity Building team envisions racial justice movements led by communities of color with the self-determination, power, and resources to transform material conditions. We honor local organizing, histories, culture, and context in place, embodying multi-racial, cross-movement solidarity by developing tangible organizing and policy tools, amplifying community strategies, and building networks for shared learning and alignment.

For more information or questions about the Policy Innovation Lab, please contact:

Race Forward

PO Box 96353
Washington, DC 20090-6353
contactMCB@raceforward.org



What is the Policy Innovation Lab?

The Policy Innovation Lab is a project of Race Forward’s Movement Capacity Building team and aims to disrupt the patterns of traditional policy development and to position local communities as owners and decision-makers over the policies that directly affect their daily lives. Through the Lab, Race Forward will support three (3) people of color-led and grassroots-led coalitions who aim to move community-driven policy development to advance racial and climate justice. Race Forward will share tools, provide capacity-building training, provide pass through funding, and support local strategizing to advance community-based initiatives with racial justice at the center. The Lab is one way to re-imagine and create racially-equitable policy solutions that address complex and intersecting issues.

What do we mean by governing power?

As a working definition, governing power – whether through various types of participatory and democratic decision-making structures, collaborative governance with institutions and other communities, or electoral power – held by communities most impacted by racism, is a necessary component of racial justice governance.

We believe that racial justice governance requires dominant institutions in society, such as governments, to become racially equitable and willing to contribute to building the power of communities of color. It includes but is not solely within the realm of government.

Racial justice governance is governance that:

- ▶ Deepens and expands our communities’ ability to produce racially equitable outcomes for all
- ▶ Prioritizes the collective over the individual, human dignity over profit
- ▶ Repairs and heals past harms brought about by systemic oppression
- ▶ Transforms inequitable institutions and systems toward racial equity
- ▶ Liberates everyone from systemic racism and injustice, and all forms of oppression and enslavement

You can view Race Forward’s Theory of Change and strategic plan [here](#).



Why coalitions?

Coalitions are critical sites of movement work and movement infrastructure. Through coalitions, groups come together, often across sectors (eg labor, faith, students, tenants etc), to move policies at the local and state level. They are structures where scaling up and scaling out happen. Through their formation and work together, coalitions have already done some of the critical work of sharing lessons, learning from others, and are building collective strategies to reshape policies across levels of government. There has been some weaving of local fights together into a collective struggle. At the same time, we've seen that coalitions are operating at extremely low capacity, rely on a very small number (often 0-2) of staff organizers, and are powered by local organizations that are themselves low capacity and running their own local work in addition to the work of the coalition.

What are the lessons from **Co-governing Toward Multiracial Democracy** that PIL is referencing? What possible questions will we be exploring?

▶ Cultivate Community Capacity

- ▷ How do we engage our membership base in policy implementation without overburdening them with meetings or activities?
- ▷ How do we maintain coalition unity when specific organizations become the spokespeople?

▶ Build Relationships

- ▷ How do we build upon our one or very few champions within government?
- ▷ How do we transform conflict into opportunities to be a stronger coalition?

▶ Pursue Inside/Outside Strategies

- ▷ How do we maintain political independence while navigating co-governing relationships?
- ▷ How do we collaborate with government contacts while applying external pressure?

▶ Make Co-Governance Enforceable

- ▷ How do we continue to build power during implementation?

▶ Transform the Culture of Governance

- ▷ What cultural norms are we challenging, and how are we shifting them?

▶ Scale Up and Scale Out

- ▷ What stages and developmental milestones build governing power to advance racial equity?
- ▷ How does policy work advance our long-term vision, and what challenges does it present in practice?



How many coalitions will be selected to participate in the Policy Innovation Lab and when will we know if we've been selected to participate?

We will be selecting three (3) coalitions to participate in the Policy Innovation Lab. We will let applicants know whether or not they have been selected to participate in the Policy Innovation Lab by June 11, 2025. We ask that organizations confirm their participation by June 25, 2025.

How will participating coalitions be supported by Race Forward throughout the Policy Innovation Lab?

Race Forward will provide racial justice research capacity building support, along with tangible research that will help build your Policy Innovation Lab work. We will convene participating organizations with the intentions of building relationships, providing strategic support and concrete tools, and bringing in movement leaders who can also share their lessons and frameworks. We will offer ways to elevate the participating organization's work through Race Forward's communications. And we will aim to ground the Policy Innovation Lab work in narrative and culture building. We also aim to be adaptive to the requests of participating organizations.

Organizations will receive a \$15,000 stipend for each fiscal year of participation for a total of \$30,000 for the entirety of this project. We hope these resources will support coalitions in the short term. Funds can be used to cover staff time, to support community research or other organizing strategies. The funds will be distributed in summer 2025 and early 2026.

The Technical Assistance period from January through May 2026 will include tailored consultancy support for each coalition. The TA topic will be identified by the coalition.

How should our coalition form a Policy Innovation Lab team?

We encourage participating coalitions to create a team who will be accountable to this work and who will move this project toward your desired goals. We recommend a team consisting of paid staff, organizational leaders including community members, youth members etc, or others you would like to be part of the lab space. People participating in the Lab will benefit from growing movement relationships across the country and building our collective capacity by learning and teaching one another. For each in-person convening, Race Forward will be able to support the travel of 3-4 individuals from each lab team. It is our strong recommendation that the same 3-4 participants attend PIL events for continuity of relationships and content.

How will Race Forward make this space accessible?

We aim to use a disability justice, healing justice, and trauma-informed approach to our facilitation and planning. Starting with the application process, and throughout the course of the Lab, we will ask participants about what they need to fully participate, whether it's interpretation and live captioning, childcare, mobility, food, healing, or other support for collective care.