

From Insight to Action: Building Belonging in Sonoma County

How Community Voices Shaped the Fund for Belonging at
Community Foundation Sonoma County

November 2025

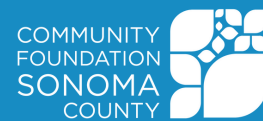


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Executive Summary

Community Foundation Sonoma County (CFSC) has long recognized that immigrant communities are central to the region's vitality and resilience. Yet persistent systemic barriers, intensified by political uncertainty, public health crises, and climate-driven disasters, continue to threaten the well-being of immigrants across the county.

To respond effectively, CFSC began by listening to the people most directly affected. In early 2025, the foundation commissioned a countywide Opportunity Assessment to better understand the experiences, priorities, and hopes of immigrant residents, nonprofit leaders, and civic partners. The research offered a detailed picture of both the challenges and strengths shaping immigrant life in Sonoma County.

Participants emphasized that belonging depends on four interconnected conditions: safety, connection, access, and opportunity. When one weakens, the others can quickly erode. These insights became the foundation for CFSC's next step: the creation of the Fund for Belonging, a coordinated initiative designed to strengthen these conditions through targeted grantmaking, collaboration, and a focus on trust, coordination, and responsiveness.

The Fund supports community-based efforts that expand access to accurate legal and policy information, strengthen trusted messenger networks, create safe and welcoming spaces that promote well-being, and build pathways toward economic stability. By reinforcing these interconnected systems of safety, access, connection, and opportunity, the Fund for Belonging helps create lasting change through coordinated, locally led investment.

Belonging in Sonoma County: Why This Work Matters

Sonoma County's story is often told through its vineyards and small towns, but its true strength lies in the people who live and work here. Immigrant residents, many of whom have called this community home for decades, are cherished members of the community, economy, culture, and civic life and are stewards of local prosperity.

Todos somos seres humanos. Sentimos discriminación." ["We are all human beings. We feel discrimination."]
- Community resident

Yet that prosperity is often not shared equally. Persistent disparities in safety, health, and opportunity fall especially hard on immigrants, who often face language, documentation, and discrimination barriers. Repeated wildfires, floods, and the pandemic

have deepened instability, while policy shifts have fueled fear and isolation. Despite these challenges, immigrant residents continue to strengthen Sonoma County through their community leadership.

CFSC launched the Fund for Belonging to strengthen the conditions that allow all residents to thrive. With more than 40 years of experience addressing complex local challenges, CFSC serves as a trusted convener, aligning public, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners to build coordinated, community-driven solutions.

To ensure this work reflected community experience, CFSC partnered with StarrWise Solutions to conduct a countywide Opportunity Assessment in early 2025. The process surfaced firsthand insights from community members, service providers, and civic partners, offering a deeper understanding of both the challenges and strengths shaping immigrant life in Sonoma County. These findings directly informed the Fund's first grantmaking strategy and continue to guide its collaborative approach to learning and systems change.

How We Listened: Countywide Assessment on Belonging

Over two months, StarrWise Solutions conducted 34 interviews and focus groups with 80 participants, including immigrant residents and community partners across nonprofit, public, and philanthropic sectors. The assessment was qualitative, emphasizing stories and shared experiences rather than statistics.

The process reflected CFSC's commitment to an approach grounded in trust, transparency, and shared learning. By creating space for open dialogue and mutual respect, the research laid the groundwork for the collaboration that continues through the Fund for Belonging.

BY THE NUMBERS: IMMIGRANT LIFE IN SONOMA COUNTY

- **15% of residents** were born outside the U.S.
- **Two-thirds** are from Latin America, and more than half from Mexico.
- **Between 27,000 and 42,000** residents are estimated to be undocumented.
- **Comparing neighborhoods** such as Roseland and East Bennett Valley, life expectancy differs by nine years, average earnings by \$48,000, and bachelor's degree attainment by 48 percentage points.

These contrasts highlight the uneven conditions that shape belonging across Sonoma County

What We Heard: Community Insights

The assessment revealed how Sonoma County's immigrant residents experience both resilience and constraint in their daily lives. Across neighborhoods, languages, and sectors, participants identified four interconnected conditions that shape belonging: safety, connection, access, and opportunity. These conditions are interconnected, so strain in one area often affects the others.

These themes reflect both lived experience and system-level dynamics. They show that individual well-being and community strength are deeply linked. When people can participate fully and confidently in community life, the entire county benefits through stronger social connections, economic stability, and civic trust.

Safety and Stability

Safety and stability emerged as the most immediate concern across all conversations. Participants described how fear of detention, deportation, or racial profiling is currently shaping daily life. These fears affect everything from driving to work to seeking health care or attending school events.

*A community member described how her children were bullied by classmates who said, "Your dad isn't coming home tonight."
– Community resident*

Service providers explained that fear often prevents people from accessing essential services. Families delay medical visits, avoid reporting wage theft, or withdraw from public programs. In rural areas, isolation, language barriers,

and limited transportation compound these challenges, making it even harder to find safe, consistent support.

Participants also spoke about exploitation in the workplace, especially in agriculture and service jobs where immigrants are concentrated. Limited protections and fear of retaliation make it difficult to advocate for fair treatment or safe conditions. Providers highlighted overlapping vulnerabilities among older adults, LGBTQIA+ immigrants, and Indigenous-language speakers.

Many described safety not only as freedom from harm but as the stability that allows families to plan for the future. Chronic uncertainty and stress have taken a toll on mental health, eroding trust and connection. These insights underscored the importance of reliable information, trusted relationships, and coordinated systems as the foundation for safety and belonging in Sonoma County.

Belonging and Connection

The research also revealed the emotional and social dimensions of belonging. Many participants described a growing sense of disconnection as political tensions, economic strain, and public health crises compounded long-standing inequities. For some, belonging meant safety and inclusion in everyday spaces such as schools, workplaces, and clinics. For

***“There’s so much negativity right now... about migrants not [being] wanted. We need something that allows our community to feel like we’re valued... that our community wants us and appreciates us.”
- Community resident***

others, it meant simply being recognized as part of Sonoma County’s shared story.

Participants noted that discrimination, stereotyping, and exclusion often leave residents feeling invisible despite their contributions to local life. Parents described how their children sometimes face hostility or teasing

related to immigration status or language use, and others shared that even long-time residents are still viewed as outsiders. These experiences reinforce the perception that participation and acceptance remain uneven across the county.

When the contributions of all residents are valued and reflected in community life, all people are more likely to participate, build trust, and strengthen the civic fabric that holds Sonoma County together. Belonging grows when inclusion is visible, shared, and supported by institutions as well as by neighbors.

Access to Information and Services

Clear and reliable information is essential for stability and belonging, yet participants described how rapidly changing laws, complex systems, and language barriers make daily life difficult to navigate. Even experienced service providers said they struggle to keep up with new regulations or to know where to refer families for help.

Community members often rely on friends, relatives, or faith groups to understand rights, policies, or available programs. While these networks provide trusted support, the information shared is sometimes incomplete or outdated. As a result, families may miss critical services such as legal assistance, healthcare enrollment, or disaster relief.

Service providers emphasized that language access remains a major barrier. Many residents who speak languages other than English still face translation gaps and resulting isolation. In rural areas, information about legal rights or emergency resources often reaches communities too late, leaving families vulnerable during crises such as wildfires or floods.

Participants also described how fragmented the local service landscape can feel. Nonprofits and agencies often work independently, with limited coordination or shared data. Limited

resources and fragmented systems can make collaboration difficult, leaving residents unsure where to turn for help. Many called for stronger coordination and shared leadership to ensure that accurate, timely, and culturally responsive information reaches all communities.

Across all groups, participants stressed that access depends on trust. Information must come from credible messengers who understand community context and communicate with clarity and empathy. Building that trust was seen as essential to safety, belonging, and opportunity in Sonoma County.

Income and Opportunity

For many participants, economic opportunity represented both a daily challenge and a longer-term hope. They described how many immigrant residents work in low-wage or seasonal roles, particularly in agriculture, the wine and tourism economy, and health care. These sectors are central to Sonoma County, yet workers often face irregular hours, limited benefits, and unsafe conditions. Participants also noted that shifts in the wine and tourism industries and increased employment uncertainty for undocumented workers have reduced job security for many families even as other key local sectors need additional workers.

Many households live on the edge financially. A family illness or job loss can quickly lead to crisis. Rising costs of living further intensify strain on household budgets. Participants described how transportation barriers and long distances in rural areas make it harder to access steady work and services. Language barriers also limit awareness of opportunities and eligibility for programs.

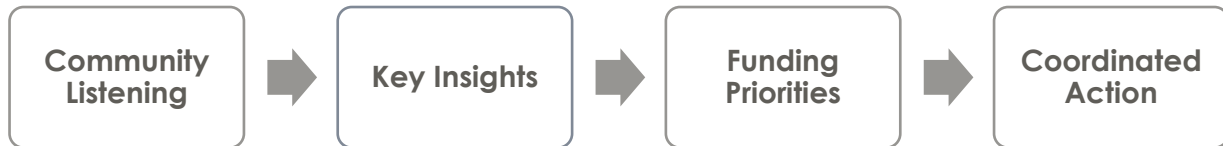
***“We don’t want money. We want jobs.”
- Farmworker in Sonoma County***

Several community members expressed interest in generating income through small businesses, shared-ownership models, and other forms of entrepreneurship.

They emphasized the need for practical guidance, mentorship, and entry-level capital to turn ideas into viable ventures. Service providers observed that these ambitions often go unmet without coordinated support.

Across discussions, participants linked enhanced economic opportunity to belonging. Expanding access to more secure employment, job transitions into growing sectors, and entrepreneurship was viewed as central to both household resilience and the county’s shared prosperity.

Turning Insight into Action: Priorities for the Fund for Belonging



The Opportunity Assessment revealed clear patterns showing where community strengths align with unmet needs. These findings directly shaped the design of the Fund for Belonging’s first grant program, which focuses on strengthening the shared conditions that sustain safety, connection, access, and opportunity. Rather than addressing individual issues in isolation, CFSC developed an integrated approach that reinforces these conditions together.

The Fund’s 2025 grant priorities translate the research themes into four coordinated areas for local investment: expanding access to accurate legal and policy information, strengthening trusted messenger networks, supporting safe and welcoming spaces that promote well-being, and advancing income generation and economic stability.

Legal and Policy Information

Participants described widespread confusion and fear surrounding changing immigration laws. In response, this funding area supports the creation and maintenance of a centralized, countywide source of accurate, accessible, and culturally responsive legal and policy updates.

Materials developed through this effort will be reviewed by legal experts, translated into multiple languages, and shared in various forms through trusted local partners. Strengthening access to reliable legal and policy information helps immigrant residents navigate changing conditions with confidence and security, building a stronger foundation for safety, belonging, and participation in community life.

Trusted Messenger Network

Access to accurate information depends not only on translation and content but also on having a reliable, known messenger. Across interviews and focus groups, participants described how immigrant residents rely on community-based organizations, local leaders, educators, and peers to interpret complex and changing information.

The Fund will launch a Trusted Messenger Network to connect many community partners with fully vetted legal and policy information that can then be shared with a broad swath of

community members. To do this, the Fund will support local organizations and collaboratives to establish this network in a holistic way, bridging any gaps between them in the process. The Trusted Messenger Network will reach beyond nonprofits to also include healthcare providers, schools, businesses, housing complexes, government entities, faith communities, and more. These partners share multilingual information about immigration policies, public programs, and available resources, ensuring that residents receive reliable information from people and institutions they already know and trust.

This network also enables a two-way flow of information between communities and systems, elevating community voices and strengthening coordination among service providers, funders, and public agencies. Building this capacity reinforces the trust and civic confidence that allow belonging to take root across Sonoma County.

Safe Spaces and Well-being

Participants described how discrimination, stress, and repeated crises have reduced the number of gathering places where immigrant residents build connections. Many neighborhood centers, community events, and faith-based programs have been disrupted by overlapping challenges such as the pandemic, disaster recovery, and limited community resources, deepening isolation and weakening social networks.

This funding area supports environments and programs that help rebuild connection and trust. These include gathering spaces, peer support groups, events, and community hubs that help residents heal and strengthen community ties.

When people have places where they feel welcome and understood, they are more likely to participate in the life of the community, seek support, and contribute to local resilience. Investing in these spaces strengthens both individual well-being and the social infrastructure that sustains belonging across Sonoma County.

Income Generation and Economic Stability

Economic security supports every other aspect of belonging. This priority area invests in programs that expand pathways to stable employment, entrepreneurship, and financial resilience for immigrant residents. Examples include adult training and certification programs that are aligned with local labor needs, initiatives that improve job stability and access to higher-quality employment, and partnerships that provide small-business coaching.

Economic opportunity is essential not only for household stability but also for the county's shared prosperity. Investing in opportunity alongside safety, connection, and access helps build the conditions for lasting inclusion and regional resilience.

Together, these four priorities translate community insight into coordinated local action, forming the foundation of the Fund for Belonging. In future years, the Fund will continue to

be responsive and build upon these systemic investments, seeking ongoing input from community partners as we establish future grant programs.

CFSC's Leadership: Convening for Collective Impact

Community Foundation Sonoma County (CFSC) has a long history of bringing people and institutions together to address complex local challenges. Through the Opportunity Assessment, CFSC deepened its understanding of immigrant residents' experiences and helped lay the foundation for broader collective action. The Fund for Belonging carries that work forward by using grantmaking, convening, and shared learning to align efforts across nonprofit, government, and philanthropic partners.

CFSC's approach emphasizes collaborative, relationship-driven philanthropy and systems learning. The foundation invests as intentionally in relationships as it does in programs, supporting transparency, shared decision-making, and the exchange of knowledge among grantees and civic partners. By facilitating dialogue across organizations and communities, CFSC helps build the infrastructure that allows local solutions to take root and scale.

This coordinated model enables the foundation to respond flexibly to emerging needs while maintaining focus on long-term systems change. CFSC convenes partners to identify gaps, coordinate funding, and surface lessons that strengthen the county's overall ecosystem of support. Its role as connector ensures that philanthropic resources reach the organizations best positioned to deliver impact, while also informing public agencies and policymakers of on-the-ground realities.

CFSC's enduring commitment to listen deeply, act collaboratively, and invest for the long term positions it as a trusted catalyst for belonging in Sonoma County.

WHY PHILANTHROPY MATTERS HERE

- **Philanthropy can fill critical gaps** that government and service programs cannot and supports coordination, innovation, and capacity-building across organizations.
- **Flexible, locally rooted funding** helps communities respond quickly to changing conditions.
- **CFSC's trust-based approach** ensures resources strengthen relationships and long-term systems, not just short-term projects.
- **By investing in shared learning,** philanthropy helps align local efforts toward a common vision of belonging.

Looking Ahead

The Fund for Belonging was designed not as a one-time initiative but as an evolving framework for collaboration and learning, built to strengthen the infrastructure that supports immigrant communities in Sonoma County. Each grant cycle builds on knowledge gained from community partners, allowing CFSC and grantees to adapt strategies as conditions change and new opportunities emerge. This continuous learning approach ensures that the Fund remains responsive to the realities of immigrant life in Sonoma County.

In the coming years, CFSC will deepen the Fund's impact by expanding partnerships, creating shared learning opportunities, and engaging additional philanthropic and civic collaborators. Insights from grantees, data from funded projects, and community feedback will guide refinements to grant priorities and identify where investments can have the greatest systemic effect.

As the Fund expands, CFSC will continue to elevate community leadership, ensuring that those most affected by policy and economic shifts help shape the solutions. The foundation's role is to sustain the connective tissue of this ecosystem, linking organizations, convening dialogue, and aligning resources to advance safety, connection, access, and opportunity for all residents.

The work ahead is long-term and collective. By fostering belonging as both a value and a practice, CFSC and its partners are helping to build a Sonoma County where every resident can participate fully, contribute meaningfully, and share in the region's prosperity.

Conclusion

The Fund for Belonging represents both a response and a commitment: a response to what community members shared through the Opportunity Assessment, and a commitment to act on those insights with care and collaboration. The findings affirmed that belonging grows when safety, connection, access, and opportunity are reinforced together. Guided by this understanding, CFSC and its partners are building a durable framework that links immediate support to long-term systems change.

As this work continues, the Fund will evolve alongside the community it serves, learning from experience and adapting to new challenges and opportunities. By grounding philanthropy in listening, partnership, and trust, we can together move toward a Sonoma County where everyone can participate fully and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements

This white paper draws on the findings of Fund for Belonging: Opportunity Assessment, conducted by StarrWise Solutions for Community Foundation Sonoma County in July 2025. CFSC extends its gratitude to Elena Chávez Quezada and the StarrWise team for their thoughtful partnership and analysis.

We are deeply thankful to the community members, nonprofit leaders, service providers, and public partners who shared their time, experience, and perspectives throughout the research process. Their insights continue to shape the Fund for Belonging's direction and impact.

CFSC also recognizes the local organizations and donors whose collaboration makes this work possible. Their shared commitment to inclusion, trust, and learning continues to strengthen the systems that support belonging across Sonoma County.



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