

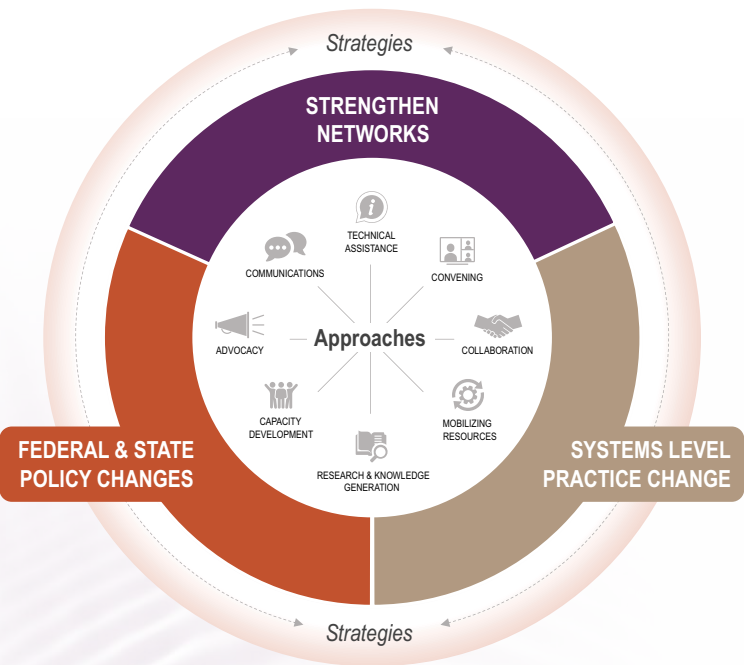
Report Summary of Ross Strategic's Evaluation of RWJF Investments

May 2023

ROSS
STRATEGIC

Background

Beginning in 2020, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) awarded \$4 million through six grants intended to advance equitable water infrastructure by supporting affordable drinking water, access to water services, and improved water quality following the completion of an initial scan of inequities in the water sector and potential solutions. These objectives were pursued by three emergent strategies: strengthen networks within the water sector, support federal and state policy change, and encourage systems level practice change. The lessons from this evaluation are intended to inform the future direction of RWJF's equitable water infrastructure strategy, feed into other RWJF program areas, and contribute to strategic thinking in the broader field.



Data Collection and Analysis

The evaluation team examined evaluation questions organized around three areas of inquiry: strategy implementation, overall program impact, and potential future impact. In addition to reviewing information collected by RWJF and grantees, Ross Strategic conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with a variety of stakeholders including RWJF grantees, peer funders, nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs), water associations, water utilities, and other water experts. In total, the evaluation team conducted 55 interviews: 10 discovery interviews (the six grantees and four water experts) and 45 key informant interviews (identified by RWJF staff, the Ross Strategic team, and through snowball sampling from interviews).

RWJF Investments

The RWJF program team and Ross Strategic collaborated on an evaluation of the Foundation's grantmaking strategy to elevate and address the connections between public health, health equity, and community resilience related to water infrastructure investment, management, and policy. RWJF funding contributed to a better understanding of current conditions in the water sector. Key informants highlighted efforts to compile data on which utilities and communities have received state revolving funds (SRF) and establish equity roadmaps, noting these efforts provide a good baseline against which to measure progress in the coming years. Establishing a baseline creates opportunities in the future to convene various actors to assess whether the U.S. has moved the needle on longer-term goals and metrics. Multiple key informants also mentioned the model of the Funding Navigator as a useful tool to help utilities in disadvantaged communities understand how to traverse the federal bureaucracy and access funds for infrastructure projects.

RWJF Grantees (2020-2022)

US Water Alliance: To work with progressive water utilities and other stakeholders to advance water safety and affordability, and to help utilities adopt new technology, stabilize financially, and become more resilient to climate impacts.

Community Water Center: General operating support for CWC's grassroots community organizing to promote safe, clean, and affordable drinking water for all communities, particularly low-income communities in California.

Natural Resources Defense Council: To advocate with grassroots organizations in impacted communities for federal and state policy changes that would make water more affordable and safe, including reductions in lead and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

Environmental Policy Innovation Center: To conduct real-time research to build a path to a more equitable and health-focused water infrastructure.

DigDeep Right to Water Project: Demonstrate the economic benefits to thousands of communities to closing the 'water gap' and learning from communities.

Altarum Institute: Analyze the economic impacts of access to safe, clean water and addressing equity implications of current substandard access in the U.S.

Through its mutually reinforcing strategies, RWJF funding enhanced the capacity of grantees to advocate for strong federal water policies and funding and to keep water inequities in the policy discourse leading up to and during major federal public infrastructure decisions. Strengthening networks and focusing on federal policy were timely and relevant levers for action. As the field shifts focus to implementation, particularly related to the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), and Justice40 investments, interviewees expressed that the time is ripe for philanthropic engagement to shift greater attention to implementation at the state and local levels.

Interviewees underscored that systems change takes time. A clear multi-year commitment of at least 5-10 years can provide stability for grantees and enable greater impact by allowing work to take root. Philanthropic actors can contribute to the development of alternative models that can be replicated and scaled. Additionally, philanthropy can leverage existing water sector work and provide a unique value-add by focusing on the water-health equity nexus. Continued investments in communications as well as strengthening networks, policy change, and systems level practice change can help to further make the case that equitable water solutions should be a national priority in the long-term.

Opportunities for Future Impact in Water Infrastructure

Prioritize local level interventions for greater impact, including focusing on communities of greatest need and supporting utility-level technical assistance and professional development

When asked at which level might interventions have the greatest impact—local, state, or federal—the greatest percentage of respondents (approximately one-third) stressed that local level work is key for impact, including support for efforts to build

community voice and power. Interviewees indicated geographic areas of need around the country, including the Great Lakes region, the Southeast and Gulf Coast, rural communities, and the Western U.S. (due to recurring drought and impending water shortages). Demographically, many interviewees highlighted opportunities to focus on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), mobile home, or other disadvantaged communities as well as renters, who often don't have knowledge of or access to resources from their landlords. Interviewees encouraged philanthropy to support movement-building for place-based organizations and the development of organizational capacity to engage in policy debates and apply for infrastructure funds. Specific recommendations include providing vital assistance to access and apply for federal funds; bridging the funding gap by providing predevelopment funds; connecting communities with consultants and other technical experts; and collecting and analyzing community-specific data on needs and impacts to inform conversations about policy change.

Technical assistance and workforce development are needed to support equitable water outcomes at the utility level. Multiple interviewees stressed the importance of technical assistance for less well-resourced utilities. Specifically, small or under-engaged utilities and their associated communities and/or nonprofits would benefit from SRF grant application assistance, education on available resources, navigation of resources, demonstration on how to effectively implement funds and deploy projects, and oversight of implementation.

Interviewees also highlighted the need to address professional development challenges within water utilities, citing the so-called "silver tsunami" of skilled operators approaching retirement age, the need to diversify and expand the workforce to include actors from historically underrepresented groups, and the harm that can be done to communities when operators hold biased or implicitly racist views. By advocating for changes in utility management (e.g., leadership structure, community and interdepartmental engagement, etc.) and supporting workforce

recruitment of “non-traditional” staff to help increase capacity within utilities, actors/philanthropy can support efforts to build a pipeline of professionals committed to equity. Consistent with recommendations to focus on local interventions, those interviewed strongly recommended supporting CBOs to effectively advocate for their needs with local utilities and elected officials.

Elevate community voice and capacity through direct support to CBOs, trust-building with community leaders, and strategic use of intermediaries who center community needs

A local focus could serve to create informed voices in communities who understand the tools, resources, and assets required to run a water system well and who can effectively advocate for their needs with their local utilities and elected officials. Interviewees broadly noted that philanthropy could do more to support communities and establish relationships with CBOs, including organizations led by BIPOC individuals. Greater engagement of CBOs would help to ensure that community needs are authentically being met and that resources are flowing where they are most needed. This will be particularly salient as federal and state agencies shift their focus to implementation of IRA and IIJA investments with an eye towards equity.

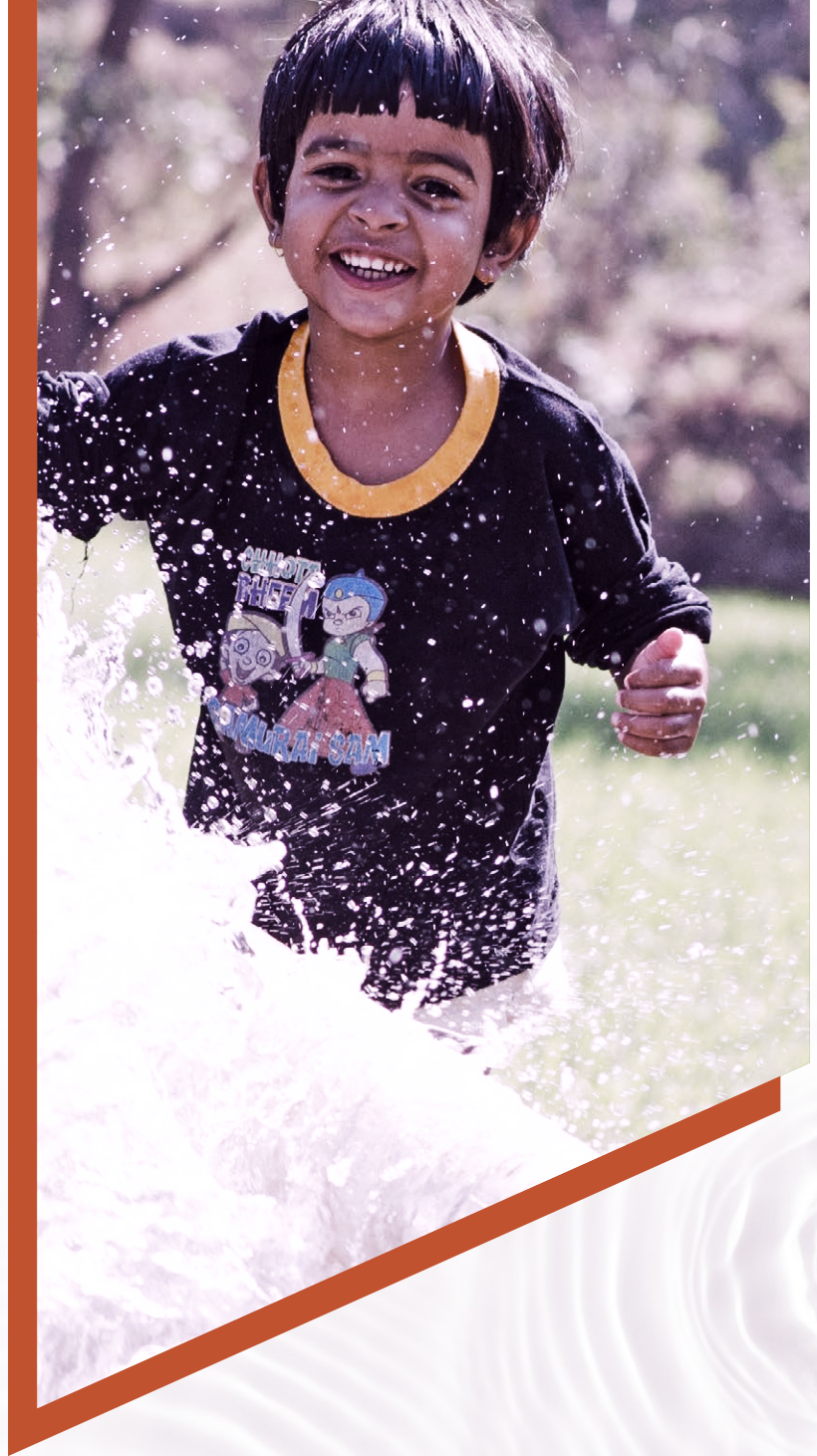
The most effective ways to elevate community voice are to build trust and center community needs. Key informants suggested identifying and engaging with “leaders”—both formal and informal—in the community, as well as other community-based participatory approaches to learn about challenges and build trust. They noted CBOs that have this level of trust are often underfunded, held to overly prescriptive funder agendas and administrative requirements, and/or are excluded from the very decision-making that has a direct impact on them and their communities. Interviewees across categories reinforced that relationship and trust-building take time. Committing to long-term funding helps ensure the viability of these organizations while helping to build

trust in the communities in which they operate. They noted that through the allocation of multi-year grants with flexible general or unrestricted funds and minimal reporting requirements, recipient organizations can be more responsive to needs on the ground and less constrained by concerns about near-term capacity or organizational sustainability. Specific suggestions include providing additional resources such as compensation, childcare, virtual engagement, and other wraparound services, which can be critical for under-resourced CBOs or those that heavily rely on volunteers.

Interviewees acknowledged it may be necessary to utilize intermediaries in the short-term. An intermediary strategy that prioritizes trusted entities in communities and individuals with lived experience is critical for success. CBO representatives interviewed were largely positive about the use of intermediaries and recognized that pass-through funding can be a critical way for small organizations, which often have less capacity to absorb large grants, to get access to funding. Both funders and CBO representatives noted that intermediaries should be setting up the organizations they re-grant to with the capacity to ultimately engage with national funders themselves. Both CBOs and funders are wary of the access issues that are an inherent risk of funder dependence on intermediaries.

Design interventions that support a holistic view of community health, including the role of climate change, structural racism, and other stressors that impact the health of communities

The necessity of taking a holistic approach to redressing water infrastructure inequities appeared in numerous contexts in this evaluation. Interviewees across categories highlighted direct health issues associated with drinking water quality, and indirect implications for health and well-being connected with water affordability; climate change as a threat multiplier for any initiative aimed at improving the health and well-being of



communities; and the central role that structural racism has and continues to play in hindering equitable health outcomes, particularly for underserved communities and/or vulnerable populations. Actors seeking to support equitable water infrastructure and/or improved community health should design interventions that break down sectoral silos; explicitly center the interconnectivity of structural racism, water infrastructure, and other social determinants of health as part of equitable water infrastructure solutions; and emphasize an integrated, systems-based approach to water resource management.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change was the most cited threat to the advancement of equitable health outcomes related to water infrastructure. Interviewees expressed that communities facing the most challenges in the water space are also the first to be affected by climate change and the most likely to experience more severe, longer lasting effects of climate change.¹ From wildfires and droughts to storms and flooding, numerous climate impacts are expected to further overwhelm aging and deficient infrastructure with disastrous consequences for communities across the country. According to interviewees, many communities, utilities, and emergency management services are inadequately prepared to handle major disruptions.

Organizations committed to advancing equitable water infrastructure must prioritize climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience. To the extent that water infrastructure investment decisions do not adequately take into consideration

¹ This perspective is supported by Key Message 2 of the recent Fourth National Climate Assessment from the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP), among other studies. USGCRP, 2018: *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II* [Reidmiller, D.R., C.W. Avery, D.R. Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, K.L.M. Lewis, T.K. Maycock, and B.C. Stewart (eds.)]. U.S. Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, USA, 1515 pp. doi: 10.7930/NCA4.2018.

“Interviewees expressed that communities facing the most challenges in the water space are also the first to be affected by climate change and the most likely to experience more severe, longer lasting effects of climate change.”

climate change, many community health benefits may be eroded in the decades to come. Interviewees suggested a range of adaption and mitigation-oriented interventions from building green infrastructure to efficient wastewater technologies to helping community members understand the benefits of resilient water systems and how to advocate for their implementation. Within the water utility sector there is a substantial opportunity to mainstream climate vulnerability assessments and resilience planning and investments. Philanthropy could draw on the efforts and successes of water utility leaders in this space to advance practice across the sector.

STRUCTURAL RACISM

In the last three years, fueled by the syndemic of the COVID-19 pandemic and civic unrest, the nation’s broader racial inequities were laid bare. Like climate change, a legacy of structural racism will continue to erode the resilience of environmental justice communities unless—as part of a broader call to action—more players, including philanthropy, invest in strategies that intentionally target the root causes of inequities. Structural racism manifests in a number of tangible ways, including where vulnerable populations live; decision-making about which communities do and do not receive funding for infrastructure projects; laws and policies that determine which communities have water access or rights to water; responsiveness to community complaints about water services; and policies and procedures that determine which communities receive traditional loans—versus grants or forgivable loans—for infrastructure projects. Interviewees noted several ways influential actors can address structural racism in the water infrastructure space:

“We can talk about the facts around the water issue in places like Flint, but those are all symptoms of issues related to power and race. If you ignore that, you’re tinkering around the edges.”
— Technical Assistance Provider

- Shifting the narrative from one that ignores intentional disinvestment in certain communities to one that talks about how structural racism has shaped—and continues to shape—water systems and decision-making.
- Encouraging utilities to be more transparent about their data—including water rates and disaggregated shutoff numbers, locations, and duration—and encouraging water actors to think of long-term solutions to preserve water resources rather than short-sighted band-aid solutions. Several interviewees noted that water shutoffs disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color, with significant impacts for health and well-being. One interviewee explained conditions in Flint, Michigan where some households had to choose between paying expensive water bills or buying medicine for their families. They also noted that a lack of running water can prompt child welfare agencies like Child Protective Services, to remove children from their homes.
- Supporting the intentional design of SRF programs to take race into account and make more funding more accessible for tribal communities around the country. When states do not take structural racism or conditions on the ground into account when defining “disadvantaged communities”, interviewees observed that allocations can miss key communities of need. One interviewee stressed that tribal communities, in particular, are often deemed ineligible for federal grants, due to programmatic requirements which do not take into account factors such as under-employment, as distinct from unemployment rates. Loans can result in increased debt and higher rates for these communities.
- Promoting community voice in key discussions about water issues and decision-making, regardless of technical or water-specific expertise. Multiple interviewees acknowledged

that BIPOC households are often the most exposed to environmental injustices yet have often been excluded from decision-making processes. Some CBOs may not focus solely on water infrastructure issues but have institutional and cultural knowledge about needs specific to the communities in which they operate. “There are CBOs that might not have ‘water’ in their name but are connected to people on the ground, have water expertise, and know what work needs to happen around water service management in a particular community.”

ecosystem-based lenses and could also help shine a light on the important health- related gaps in the interface between the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act.²

Philanthropy can advance equitable water infrastructure by convening key stakeholders and supporting research and strategic communications

CONVENINGS

Philanthropy can play a critical convening role to break down silos and bridge the gap between health, water, and other actors, thus encouraging a more holistic view of community health.

Multiple interviewees noted silos both within the management of water systems (e.g., drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater) and regarding the types of actors who regularly engage each other in conversation. Within the water sector, interviewees stressed the necessity of bringing all actors—utilities, advocates, affected communities, researchers working on water issues, and engineers or other technical experts—together at the same table.

Convening actors across silos to listen to and learn from each other can lead to interventions and policies that more effectively address complex water infrastructure challenges in an equitable way and lead to better coordination on water infrastructure investments. Philanthropy can create space for dialogue and elevate key issues such as ensuring community voices are at the table and that community needs are centered in discussions and decision-making about water infrastructure issues that impact them.

² For example, bromide discharges from power plants move through the treatment process at drinking water systems and when the bromide comes in contact with chlorine (used for disinfection), it creates brominated disinfection byproducts associated with bladder cancer and other serious chronic health impacts.

Health funders in particular could provide a critical bridge between traditional water sector actors, public health practitioners, other funders, and policymakers. There was consensus among interviewees that water—and its associated connectivity to other factors for community well-being—is an important space for health funders to engage. CBO representatives, technical assistance providers, and water funders alike suggested that health-focused funders can convene and encourage shared

ONE WATER

Using a One Water approach could more efficiently address the root causes of complex water issues. Water is connected to many different aspects of community well-being and is just one of many issues that communities and CBOs seek to address at the local level. Interviewees cited specific ways in which structural racism and water infrastructure are interconnected with other issues, such as housing; climate impacts; political infighting between state and local elected officials; uranium mining near tribal communities; displacement and other unintended consequences of building green infrastructure; and more.

Numerous interviewees stressed the need for a nexus approach that adequately considers all the stressors that impact the health of communities (e.g., housing, food, energy, etc.). As one person put it, if one does not consider the connectivity of water when designing community-wide solutions, unintended consequences are likely to arise. Some interviewees specifically referenced the One Water approach to water management which recognizes that all water, regardless of its source, has value and is interconnected. This systems level approach encourages water actors to work at critical intersections and approach solutions with community- and

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One Water

One Water is an inclusive and holistic approach to managing water resources. The approach moves beyond the traditional drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater silos and advocates for inclusive and integrated planning. The seven hallmarks of One Water are:

- 1. Mindset that all water has value
- 2. Focus on achieving multiple benefits
- 3. Systems approach
- 4. Watershed-scale thinking and action
- 5. Right-sized solutions
- 6. Partnerships for progress.
- 7. Inclusion and engagement for all

– US Water Alliance

learning between traditional water sector actors and public health practitioners and funders.

Philanthropy can also support convenings that enable collaboration and peer learning among organizations working on climate change and those working on public health and/or health equity, thereby strengthening preexisting networks and seeding new ones. Interviewees noted there is a need to encourage communication across environmental, health, and other sectors because housing, redlining, racial injustice, and other issues are all connected. The need for greater cross-disciplinary coordination on water issues has been named by other entities beyond key informants for this evaluation, including the American Public Health Association.³

RESEARCH

Philanthropy is well-placed to fund research to fill existing data gaps and strategic communications to inform water policy and equitable solutions. RWJF grantees and other interviewees overwhelmingly noted that a major challenge in the water sector is the lack of comprehensive data that effectively characterize the full scope of water-related concerns, articulate inequities in the provision of water services, and underpin evidence-based interventions for the long-run. Interviewees consistently pointed to data gaps around issues like identifying communities (rural, urban, or otherwise) of greatest need; rate structures; racial analysis overlayed onto water issues; water shutoff data and impacts; and equitable distribution of SRF funds: where funds have historically gone, which communities have applied for SRF funding, which

³ Policy statement by the American Public Health Association. 2022. Drinking Water and Public Health in the United States. Accessed on Dec. 16, 2022 at <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2020/01/13/drinking-water-and-public-health-in-the-united-states>.

One interviewee observed there could be value in partnering with policy-focused organizations and academic institutions to develop initiatives that could be adopted by policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels.

communities were denied funding, and the reasons for funding denials. Several interviewees observed that communities often lack the resources to conduct their own research and gather and disseminate their data for policy advocacy and systems change. Nearly one-third of evaluation interviewees stressed the importance of data transparency in accountability for Justice40 goals.

Within the current water landscape, interviewees noted that mapping across a spectrum of issues would be valuable including but not limited to the number and location of water systems in the US; rates and affordability; violations; existing lead pipes, replacement efforts, and costs; or demographics of water systems. A number of interviewees also noted that research into the efficacy of interventions is needed to understand

critical issues like what regulatory enforcements and structures provide the best public health outcomes or what technologies are most promising for demonstration projects. Interviewees also highlighted that rural, Indigenous, Black, and Latino populations experience the worst water provision-related health outcomes and suggested that philanthropy could focus efforts on those populations specifically. One tangible opportunity interviewees raised was to consider convening researchers to develop a research agenda aimed at influencing the national policy agenda and filling important data gaps in the sector. Once that research agenda has been developed, philanthropy can then make a long-term commitment (e.g., 5 years) to support that agenda.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Strategic communications on the health co-benefits of equitable water systems, policies, and practices can help articulate the true return on water infrastructure investments. Multiple

interviewees, including grantees, expressed the need for more data for policymakers that quantifies all costs—including health impacts—related to community and economic impacts of not fixing systems in disrepair, compared to the cost of fixing those same systems. This, they hold, will show the return on investment in terms of health co-benefits including lower health care costs and fewer economic impacts such as loss of productivity due to illness. Philanthropy can support the explicit quantification of these health impacts and benefits and ensure they are embedded into policy discussions about infrastructure funding.

The recommendations and findings from the evaluation informed RWJF decision-making in the current round of water equity funding. The RWJF program team appreciates the time and commitment of the dozens of stakeholders that were interviewed for this evaluation.

