Introduction

In 2017, Silicon Valley Community Foundation was one of 10 foundations across the country to increase civic participation through On the Table, a three-year national initiative funded by The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. On the Table replicates an annual civic engagement initiative of the same name developed by The Chicago Community Trust to bring together residents to share a meal and engage in dialogue about community issues. Support for On the Table advances Knight Foundation’s work to help cities attract and keep talented people, expand economic opportunity and create a culture of civic engagement.

This document explores
1) How SVCF and a team of community advisors working on housing issues in the region tailored the OTT approach to meet shared needs;
2) How two organizations from the advisory group integrated OTT conversations in to their work as seen through two case studies, and
3) Potential recommendations for future iterations.

The following organizations participated in the community advisory group:
• People Acting in Community Together (PACT)
• Faith in Action Bay Area (FIA)
• Youth Leadership Institute
• SV@Home
• Destination: Home
• Housing Trust Silicon Valley
• Urban Habitat
• Unity Care
• Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County

Many thanks to all who made OTT a reality—The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, all our hosts and participants, and our community advisory group: People Acting in Community Together, Faith In Action, Youth Leadership Institute, Silicon Valley @ Home, Destination: Home, Housing Trust Silicon Valley, Urban Habitat, Unity Care and Housing Leadership Council, San Mateo.

To learn more about the community-driven housing priorities that surfaced from 2017 and 2018 OTT conversations, please see the complementary report at siliconvalleycf.org/onthetable.
The original On the Table model was adapted by SVCF to elevate our community’s priorities and deepen relationships with nonprofits in our region. Work took place in three phases.

Year 1: Elevating community stories
SVCF intentionally designed OTT to: 1) involve the entire region by inviting community leaders and residents across the Bay Area and Silicon Valley to host and participate in OTT conversations and 2) focus conversations around one critical issue: housing. In 2017, about 7,000 participants shared stories of the impact of the Bay Area’s housing crisis on their lives and families.

Year 2: Working toward solutions
After sharing personal housing stories in 2017, participants wanted to know what they can do about it. Because of this feedback, 2018 conversations were crafted to be solutions-oriented and focused on identifying pathways to action.

Year 3: Reimagining relationships beyond the table
After two years of implementing OTT in the San Francisco Bay Area, we have demonstrated SVCF’s commitment to deepening relationships with the communities we serve. As part of that commitment, SVCF will support the continued implementation of OTT conversations to generate community-driven solutions.

ON THE TABLE ADVISORY GROUP
After the successful 2017 initiative, SVCF convened a group of community advisors to help evaluate the process, share their deep knowledge on housing and organizing and create a OTT 2018 strategy. SVCF’s goal in partnering with the community advisors was to ensure that OTT:

• Was created in collaboration with partners that work directly with diverse sectors of the community to address the challenges associated with housing and homelessness in the region;
• Incorporated feedback from 2017 participants and partners; and
• Furthered the work of partner organizations.

The advisory group convened in a series of meetings from March to August 2018 at SVCF offices to share their work, perspectives, feedback and ideas. SVCF staff also had one-on-one conversations with partners during this time. Partners were invited to provide feedback in the iteration process of the OTT 2017 executive summary, which was published in July 2018.
A NEW FOCUS
OTT 2017 participants, partner host organizations and the advisory group alike said that future conversations should be more action-oriented. Based on this feedback, the advisory group collaborated to identify pathways to action. These actions were distilled into a visual tool shared with hosts and partner host organizations during OTT 2018 conversations, visual below.

The OTT 2018 host guide suggested questions designed to drive conversations toward action. Participants were also encouraged to share contact information with each other in order to foster connections beyond the event.

The host guide also included a “Beyond The Table” section with an action list for participants, information on upcoming local ballot measures and contact information for advisory group organizations as starting points and pathways to take action.

FLEXIBILITY IN TIMING
SVCF had initially imagined OTT 2018 as a week of conversations in mid-November. However, the advisory group suggested that OTT 2018 be a “season of conversations” in October 2018, leading up to Election Day in November. A longer time window allowed host partner organizations to host more events and incorporate OTT conversations into their existing pre-election calendars and programming where possible.

Additionally, by moving OTT 2018 before Election Day, organizations said they would be able to integrate the conversations into their voter outreach, education, and mobilization efforts. This was seen as critical, given the multiple state and local ballot measures that people would be voting on in the 2018 election. Listening to the advisory group’s recommendations and co-designing OTT 2018’s implementation became essential to the initiative’s success and underscores the necessary flexibility and collaboration on a regional, multi-organizational initiative.

CONVERSATION HOST OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT
On the Table conversations are possible only when host organizations and individuals create the space for community to tell stories, share resources, discuss community issues and collaborate to solve local

PATHWAYS TO ACTION: Three ways Bay Area residents can build healthy, equitable, sustainable communities for all

INDIVIDUAL ACTION:
Relationships matter. Building relationships, especially with people different from yourself, leads to greater empathy and shared understanding.

GROUP ACTION:
Organizing is powerful. Formal and informal community gatherings (like OTT conversations!) concentrate power to fight for our future.

CIVIC ACTION:
Institutions matter. Voting, understanding planning and permitting, and interacting with your local government gives residents access to decision-making power.
OTT 2018 CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

These conversation questions reflect the recommendations of community members and partner organizations. They are designed to bring us from reflection in 2017 to action in 2018.

1. What are you willing to do to build understanding among people who think differently about our region’s housing challenges?

2. What actions can we take, as a community, to ensure that we all have access to housing we can afford?

3. In addition to voting, what can we do to ensure that all voices are included in shaping our region’s housing decisions?

4. What information and/or resources do you and your community need to ensure the success of the solutions that you have talked about today?

5. How can different stakeholders, such as businesses, government, philanthropy, community partners and media best meet these needs?

challenges. When SVCF asked the organizations and individuals who hosted conversations in 2017 to host again in 2018, it was critical to frame OTT 2018 conversations as flexible and designed to be relevant and integrated into the work they already do regardless of core mission and programming. Email invitations to host again in 2018 posed the question, “Knowing housing effects everyone in our region, how might you integrate On the Table conversations into the context of the work you already do?”

SVCF held six orientation session for organizations and individuals interested in hosting OTT 2018 conversations. At these orientations, SVCF distributed the host guide, which was also available on SVCF’s website. The host guide provided guidance on both planning and facilitating conversations of 6-10 people. Hosts were asked to register their events online with SVCF.

In addition to these tools, SVCF also held in-person site visits with organizing partners, made presentations to groups and individuals upon request and had many phone conversations to answer questions, provide feedback and conduct virtual orientations to the OTT process. Often, those interactions became design sessions, providing potential host partners the opportunity to build OTT conversations aligned with what mattered most to the members of their community networks. In practice, OTT was designed and led by residents, and the conversations amplified the creativity, ideas and solutions cradled in our regional community.

The advisory group agreed that the suggested conversation questions should be action-oriented. Four questions were designed to encourage participants to think about action at the individual, group, and civic levels.
In 2018, 71 hosts held 178 public and private conversations with a total participation of approximately 2,200 individuals. Hosts were also asked to document their conversations, especially the challenges, solutions, needs and next steps identified by participants. After their conversations, hosts were asked to distribute surveys to the community members who participated in the conversation. Based on the survey results, the majority of the OTT participants were women (68%), white (57%), highly educated (40% completed post-graduate education) and over 50 (47%). For a variety of reasons, other community members who participated in a conversation did not complete the survey, but their voices are elevated in the case studies documented in the report.

Many hosts said they used OTT as an opportunity to reach out to organizations and community members with which they did not have existing relationships. For example, Housing Trust Silicon Valley had recently moved to a new office in Santa Clara in a building that also houses WeWork. Housing Trust used OTT as an opportunity to invite the WeWork community to a lunchtime conversation. “OTT gave us an opportunity to partner with an organization, WeWork, that we might not have had this contact with otherwise,” said Michael Norris, communications manager of Housing Trust.

The Housing Leadership Council of San Mateo County used OTT as an opportunity to reach out to the local business community. Leora Tanjuatco, organizing director of HLCSMC, said that because participants came from diverse experiences, they had different levels of understanding about both the crisis and the potential solutions. Because these were individuals with whom HLCSMC did not have preexisting relationships, it required significant resources for HLCSMC staff to canvass, explain the OTT process, and convince individuals to participate.

SV@Home organized an OTT event to connect with high school students. David Meyer, director of strategic initiatives, said SV@Home hosted an OTT conversation at the Santa Clara County Government Center with 25 youth council members from San Jose and Santa Clara County. They invited Supervisor Cindy Chavez to open the conversation with remarks about the importance of housing. “These young leaders [shared how they] perceived housing issues and shared their ideas about solutions,” Meyer said.

Participants in OTT conversations said they are concerned about housing in the region, but they see glimmers of hope in their communities to address challenges.

We learned from post-OTT 2018 conversation survey results that civic and community engagement is important.

Participants said that they are most interested in getting involved by:
• joining small groups that meet regularly (49%)
• volunteering (45%)
• attending a rally or march (37%)

In other words, people who came to OTT conversations are interested in organizing, but they don’t have a lot of time and aren’t sure what to do.

Community leaders, including the advisory group, underlined how critical it is for philanthropic institutions to invest in community organizing efforts together with policy- and advocacy-based solutions. Organizing and civic engagement are essential to inspire our political class to act.
PACT’s core issues are economic justice, education equity, immigrants' rights and justice system reform. While it does not work explicitly in housing, PACT recognizes that its areas of concentration are all closely related to challenges associated with housing.

PACT was a core OTT organizing partner in 2017 and part of the advisory group that guided OTT 2018. PACT officials said part of the group’s motivation to stay involved was seeing the long-term impact of 2017 conversations: Out of OTT conversations held in Sunnyvale in 2017, some participants invited PACT to come and do trainings, and now there is an organizing team. OTT was a key step in building relationships that led to long-term impact.

Given the one-time nature of OTT conversations, PACT saw it as an opportunity to reach out to new sectors of the community with which they did not have close relationships. “Our approach was to continue to engage with people involved with PACT but also, significantly, with folks who have some kind of connection or interest but who aren’t actively involved,” explained Executive Director Akemi Flynn. “We wanted to give them another touch point or way to get invited in.”

PACT built upon the networks and relationships it had established over time and leveraged those opportunities to bring people together. In particular, PACT reached out to local high school teachers and hosted OTT conversations in schools with students, parents and teachers. “We did outreach to teachers, who then invited students to participate,” said Danny Doan, a PACT community organizer. “Students could invite parents or siblings to participate in the conversations as well.”

Flynn said, “There are many different people interested in our work, but we don’t always have a way to plug them in. Pairing Danny’s interest in youth outreach for OTT was a way to utilize his interest and relationships in order to build PACT’s relationships with students. It was a way for us to engage so that relationships don’t go stale.”

The PACT team noted that youth are significantly impacted by the housing crisis but are not often part of community conversations or organizing teams. Flynn also noted that students can’t always make a commitment to be involved in a longer-term organizing campaign: “Having students even have periodic opportunities like this is valuable for their longer-term trajectory.”

Students were invited to bring their parents. “MANY OF THESE PARENTS MIGHT BE VERY BUSY, ESPECIALLY THOSE AFFECTED BY THE HOUSING CRISIS,” Flynn said. “And while they might want to get involved, they don’t have time. But they make time for their children. It’s another way to have an opportunity with those adults who might not participate if it was just about them.”

PACT said that the biggest impact from OTT 2018 was that some participants got more deeply involved after they learned about the organization’s voter engagement — canvassing and phone banking — about Prop 10. Following OTT, one high school’s social justice coordinator encouraged students to go to a PACT training.
In order to ensure that these community members would participate, Melgarejo and Adriana Guzman, lead community organizer, focused their efforts on working with leaders from these communities to learn what they would need to host successful OTT conversations. Leaders said that, in addition to food, they needed childcare, physical spaces and transportation. FIA decided that rather than spend significant resources on a coordinator position (as in 2017), they would dedicate more resources to meeting the needs these leaders identified.

While FIA had worked in collaboration with the OTT advisory group to develop more action-oriented host guide materials for OTT 2018, they decided that the suggested questions weren’t best suited for their community for two reasons. First, many of the suggested action items involved voting, and a significant proportion of community members FIA was working to involve in OTT were not eligible to vote. Second, FIA wanted to build on an independent initiative to reframe conversations around belonging. “Our community members are worried that their rent is going to go up,” Guzman said. “They’re wondering when they will be displaced. So even though there is a community, there’s insecurity.”

FIA, together with the Working Families Alliance in San Mateo, worked with a communications consultant to reframe questions about housing to instead be about community and belonging. Guzman posits that these questions helped to create space for conversations among diverse groups. She said that at some OTT conversations, there were youth together with adults sharing their experiences. In other conversations, there were low-income community members living with insecurity, daily, in conversation with affluent community members who were willing to listen. “These questions were framed to encourage participants to be real and open up about their realities,” Guzman said, explaining that solutions can’t be created without knowledge of lived experiences. “When people are living with constant fear and stress, it’s hard to think about solutions, but communities know what they need.”

In particular, one conversation organized by FIA leaders in a Redwood City apartment building has led to longer-term impact. Guzman
says, “The leaders in Redwood City had never organized these kinds of [political] conversations with their neighbors, [and they] started thinking about how to organize. They asked: ‘What do we need to be able to belong? How can we be more prepared? What can we do? What do we need to learn?’” After their experience with OTT, these neighbors have continued to organize and explore ways to exercise their collective power.

Out of FIA’s OTT conversations, participants said they had new hope for the future of their communities. One participant said, “WE NEED TO RECLAIM OUR HOPE AND OUR RIGHT TO BELONG WITHOUT REGARD OF WHO SAYS THAT YOU DO NOT BELONG. HOPE IS KEY TO RECLAIMING BELONGING.”

In early 2019, the PICO California network (an organizing coalition made up of interfaith congregations, schools, and neighborhood institutions, including FIA and PACT) announced they would be launching the Belonging Campaign, “a movement of becoming and belonging where we strengthen our capacity to bridge across differences and stand for the most vulnerable among us.”

FIA Bay Area, a member of PICO, immediately recognized that PICO’s core strategy for the Belonging Campaign — getting organizations and community leaders to host a series of four conversations with a group of community members to learn, share, and take action — was similar to the work FIA had been doing with OTT.

“For us, the Belonging Campaign is like OTT: There’s a host or core leader and they invite community members,” Melgarejo said. “But this invitation is for more than one meeting, and they’ll track who is participating over time.” For PICO, and for FIA and other Becoming Campaign partners, this strategy is the groundwork necessary for 2020, when Melgarejo says PICO aims to engage 2 million people to get out and vote “schools and communities first”. Melgarejo says that for FIA’s community leaders, OTT was a training ground in hosting small group conversations and bringing diverse community members to the table. “OTT prepared our leadership to be fluent in this kind of interaction.”
Learnings and Recommendations

CONVERSATIONS A PATHWAY FOR COMMUNITY CONNECTION

What for some OTT hosts might be a touch point in the continuum of their community organizing efforts, for others, OTT conversations provide an opportunity to gather diverse sectors of the community to get to know each other, hear new perspectives and lay the groundwork for future collaboration and organizing.

OTT provides a pathway for community members who are interested in and motivated about the issue under consideration to participate, even if they do not have prior experience with civic engagement or the time or resources to engage on a regular basis.

Going forward, SVCF should consider whether there is value in structuring OTT as a series of ongoing conversations in order to further develop relationships and provide more opportunity for flashpoint groups to gel into deeper networks. There will be an opportunity for SVCF to learn from FIA Bay Area’s Belonging Campaign.

RESOURCES ARE NEEDED TO MAXIMIZE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ORGANIZING

Community members who participated in OTT 2018, as well as in 2017, said they want opportunities to continue meeting with their neighbors and community members in small groups to discuss solutions to challenging problems. In other words, community members have a deep desire to continue organizing.

It was found that most partner organizations that hosted successful OTT conversations had prior experience organizing community members. In contrast, some partners said that they were unsuccessful in hosting as many conversations as they had hoped because they lacked the resources and experience bringing together diverse groups of community members.

To further catalyze civic engagement, more resources are needed for organizing.

OTT AND SVCF IN TRANSFORMATION

Over multiple years and across 10 states, thousands of community champions have tested the On the Table methodology. The process includes creating an advisory committee, developing a plan for a series of community conversations, creating event materials, defining questions to facilitate the conversations, identifying hosts, organizing orientations for hosts, offering facilitation tips and swag, arranging meal-time conversations, inviting guests to the conversations and documenting the conversations. In isolation, these elements represent a list of mechanical steps needed to organize an event, convening, or community forum to achieve greater civic participation. However, if we go a step beyond one-time events to build deeper, more equitable, ongoing relationships with our community, learn the untold stories and be a megaphone for resident voices and community-driven solutions, we must move from thinking of On the Table as a tool and embrace the transformative power of the approach.
SVCF used OTT as an opportunity to reimagine the foundation’s role and presence in its community. By creating new relationships and strengthening existing partnerships, SVCF has opened itself to a community-driven agenda and is working to be responsive to the desires and challenges of the region’s residents.

SVCF’s approach to OTT has evolved in response to the advisory group and host partners’ guidance. In 2017 and 2018, SVCF and partners gathered community-driven ideas and aspirations that address the Bay Area’s housing crisis. These ideas represent the voices of more than 7,000 Bay Area residents and nonprofit partners and are ready to be shared with decision makers and narrative changers to move the conversation beyond the table. What is more, SVCF and partners are eager to develop and disseminate a more comprehensive OTT approach, one that is able to address any community-centered challenge and that can be integrated into any organization’s strategies, initiatives, or programming.

After two years of implementing OTT across the region, SVCF and partners have a unique opportunity to:

1. Create and leverage existing exciting opportunities to promote community-driven housing solutions and priorities elevated in OTT conversations and by partner organizations to targeted elected officials, philanthropists, journalists, and nonprofit organizations who may not work on housing-related issues but whose constituencies are affected by our region’s housing crisis.

2. Share how OTT can be utilized to advance the work of any organization or any community-centered issue and encourage former OTT hosts to experiment with hosting their own community conversations on an issue that is important to them or their constituencies.

SVCF is committed to deepening the foundation’s relationships with the community. OTT will be a critical approach in exploring how community engagement can help inform and define SVCF’s role in the local community it serves. OTT lends a tested, institutional approach to community engagement and provides a framework to inform SVCF’s community impact initiatives.

In this new chapter of the community foundation, SVCF will reimagine how its housing, grantmaking, and policy efforts, collectively, can elevate the community stories and data gathered over the last two years and guide us toward a unified housing strategy.

SVCF will continue to experiment and learn from the integration of OTT as a community engagement approach that has already helped us elevate the value of community conversations being community voices to the heart of the community foundation.
About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation advances innovative philanthropic solutions to challenging problems. We engage donors and corporations from Silicon Valley, across the country and around the globe to make our region and world better for all. Our passion for helping people and organizations achieve their philanthropic dreams has created a global philanthropic enterprise committed to the belief that possibilities start here. Learn more at siliconvalleycf.org.

More Information

If you have questions, please contact our On The Table team at info@siliconvalleycf.org or call 650.450.5400