

## Fueling the Future: The Promise of Social Innovation



**By Shelley Hoss**  
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Community Foundation

Innovation is an essential driver of success in the business world. Significant investment in cutting-edge research and development is expected and rewarded, and venture capital spending continues to reach new heights. In 2020, a staggering \$156.2 billion of venture capital was raised, according to Pitchbook. In California alone, venture capital investments amounted to \$84 billion.

Missing from this equation is the nonprofit sector, where innovation is crucial but rarely considered a target for investment.

Philanthropic funding is traditionally reserved for programs with established track records and proven metrics, leaving many nonprofits without opportunities to test new ways of tackling complex challenges.

Innovation is a clear and urgent imperative across the nonprofit sector. According to a survey of nonprofit leaders from the **Rockefeller Foundation** and **The Bridgespan Group**, 80% see the importance of new approaches and want to innovate. However, just 40% believe their organizations have the capacity to do so.

### Sustainable Recovery

As we grapple with the long-term repercussions of the global pandemic, we need mechanisms to tackle not only today's challenges but those of the future. Sustainable recovery will require new approaches by social sector entrepreneurs and innovators, and investments must be made to fuel their progress.

The necessity for innovation in the social sector arrived practically overnight with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonprofits were forced to move at a moment's notice to online platforms, adapt their programming, and think creatively about reaching those they serve and engaging new and existing donors. Now, the challenge is to sustain these sparks of innovation to support our community's long-term recovery.

At the **Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF)**, we are committed to strengthening the nonprofit sector by providing a runway for innovation. This work has been advanced through a collaborative investment pool for social sector innovation, with promising early outcomes.

### The Social Innovation Fund

Launched in 2019, OCCF's **Social Innovation Fund** has supported 11 projects addressing our community's most complex challenges. The fund provided \$411,000 for five organizations in 2019 and an additional \$237,395 to six organizations in 2020.

The purpose of these investments are to support innovations that advance social and economic wellbeing in Orange County. Funding is directed to organizations that: a) Are ready to start a new program implementing an innovative idea to solve an existing problem or b) Will bring an innovative program operating in another part of the state/country to Orange County.

From homelessness to mental health and human trafficking, the lessons learned from these bold innovators over the past two years are already driving results.

Take for example, our burgeoning older adult population. There

are currently more than 450,000 adults aged 65 and older in Orange County, representing 15.3% of our population.

By 2040, nearly one in four OC residents will be over the age of 65. According to the Orange County Strategic Plan for Aging, older adults will face a growing set of economic, social, health, and lifestyle challenges associated with aging, and Orange County is lacking essential infrastructure and resources to support their needs. Of greatest concern is the lack of knowledge and access to resources to develop comprehensive, individualized care plans to support well-being and longevity.

The **Council on Aging – Southern California's Concierge Care Navigators (CCN)** program was designed to bridge this gap. Their fee-for-service program addresses the needs of OC's older adults and their caregivers, who are overwhelmed with the challenges of aging.

CCN's innovative solution provides a personalized care plan developed by a nursing and gerontologist team. This plan links the patient with a health team including physicians and providers and offers strategies, recommendations and trusted resources to help families navigate the complexities of care.

What's more, the program is self-sustaining. The fee-for-service model creates revenue to sustain the program and underwrites care for vulnerable populations with financial need.

### Home Insecurity

Or consider the dual challenge of isolated life for seniors and housing insecurity for young people in the challenging local housing market. HomeShare OC, a program of HIS House, created the first home sharing program of its kind in Orange County. This unique approach builds intergenerational home-share opportunities for senior homeowners and college students that enhance financial and social well-being, promote companionship and relieve feelings of isolation for both populations.

Another promising effort funded by our Social Innovation Fund is **Teens4TeensHelp**, a new approach to helping teens and young adults suffering with mental health issues. The program was inspired by the founding family's experience with their daughter's anorexia and depression. Her story of recovery saved another teen's life, and the idea for broader outreach was born. Today, Teens4TeensHelp is an online platform that provides videos, information, and resources across a full spectrum of mental health challenges, including inspiring stories of recovery from peers.

Though still developing, these programs are already delivering promising results for Orange County's most vulnerable populations. As we continue our recovery from the global pandemic and work to meet the challenges ahead, wise investments in nonprofit innovators will help chart the path to a healthier, stronger, more vibrant Orange County for all.

*Editor's Note: Shelley Hoss is CEO of Orange County Community Foundation, the second largest in Orange County with \$120.9 million in revenue for the year ended June 30, 2020.*



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