

2020  
ANNUAL REPORT

# FIGHTING CORPORATE CONTROL & BUILDING LOCAL POWER



# Letter from the Co-Directors

Dear friends,

The year 2020, to put it mildly, has been challenging and unexpected on so many levels. We could never have predicted that our longtime home in Minneapolis would become the epicenter of a global reckoning about systemic racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. We also couldn't have imagined that we'd be on the front lines helping cities and states respond to a global pandemic and a catastrophic failure of federal leadership. The events of this year have laid bare the profound inequities in our country and the need for deep structural change.

Traffic to our website is up dramatically as people look for solutions. We're inspired by the many communities that are rethinking long-held policies that favor big corporations at the expense of small local businesses, challenging the stranglehold of the telecom and energy utility giants, and forging their own community-driven approaches instead.

Over the last year, in hundreds of media stories covering our research and analysis, we've been creating a new public narrative about the dangers that monopoly power poses to our economy and democracy. The visibility of ILSR's perspective has spurred increased political support for checking corporate concentration. Our work has been embraced by Congressional leaders who are ramping up their investigations and advancing new policies to check outsized corporate power. In the trenches, we're working closely with economic and racial justice advocates, small business groups, and labor groups in new broad-based campaigns for change.

**We're deeply grateful to our foundation partners and for the many people like you who have supported our efforts.**

ILSR's vision, research, and working models are reaching more and more people each year and we have a strong plan to increase our impact in 2021! Stay safe, stay healthy, and let's all hope for a brighter and better year ahead.



Stacy Mitchell and John Farrell  
Co-Directors

Cover Images Credits • Cafe Con Libros, a feminist independent bookstore and coffee shop in Brooklyn (courtesy, American Bookseller's Assoc.); ILSR's energy team socially distanced in Minneapolis (credit Jess Del Fiacco); ILSR Co-Director Stacy Mitchell and her work with Athena coalition was profiled in The New York Times; Amazon protest (courtesy, Athena coalition); Denzel Mitchell, Deputy Director of the Baltimore Farm Alliance, mixes farm scraps; ILSR staff zoom meeting; Independent restaurants adapt to Covid; ILSR's legal fellow Shaoul Sussman (bottom square) testifying before the New York State Assembly on antitrust legislation.

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Mary Timmel  
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WE SEND OUR SINCERE APPRECIATION TO OUR TERRIFIC COLLEAGUES WHO LEFT THIS YEAR:

Zach Freed • Lisa Gonzalez • Hibba Meraay • Sushmita Shrestha  
Virginia Streeter • Charlie Thaxton

WE THANK ALL OUR INTERNS AND VOLUNTEERS:

Lilli Ambort • Jordan Ashby • Drew Birschbach • Rahul Kulkarni  
Sayidali Moalim • Breshay Moore • Awantika Pal  
Ny Ony Razafindrabe • Ronaldo Reyes • Alison Urevig

AND A BIG THANK-YOU TO OUR SUPERB ACCOUNTING TEAM:

Mary Cleary, Founder and CEO, Studio501  
Fiona Robinson, Accountant, Studio501

# In the Media

ILSR was cited in **487 stories** in more than **300 media outlets** in 2020.

## POLITICO

*"[T]he Institute for Local Self-Reliance ...has emerged as one of the most prominent critics of the tech industry in Washington."*

## WIRED

*"Missing schematics are just one way our technology-driven economy is more fragile than our society was in the 1930s. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance has been raising alarm bells for a while, arguing that we need local banks, community-based recycling programs that keep resources close to home, and more small, local businesses that are relatively insulated from global financial volatility."*

## WBEZ CHICAGO

*"If I could give any advice to folks in Chicago ...don't give up your leverage," said ILSR's John Farrell. "Don't sign it away for a long period of time, no matter what kind of deal the utility is willing to offer you, because the only accountability mechanism you have as a city is the fact that that deal is going to come up again."*

ILSR published **24 commentaries** in media outlets in 2020.

## theguardian

*"For all the hype about Amazon's discounts, a study conducted by the nonprofit Institute for Local Self-Reliance concluded that one California school district would have paid 10-12% more if it had bought from Amazon."*

ILSR's podcasts were **streamed more than 121,065 times** in 2020.

## FINANCIAL TIMES

*"Just as we know that concentrated power corrupts democracy, the opposite is true," says Stacy Mitchell, ILSR's co-director. "The more broadly economic decision-making is distributed, and the more say people have over their livelihoods, the more effective and engaged they are as citizens."*

## The Washington Post

*"America's now-disastrous lack of hospital capacity is no accident. It is, in part, a result of consolidation over the past 30 years that concentrated our health-care system in wealthy cities and suburbs, where the prevalence of expensive insurance plans allowed big health systems to rake in profits."*

ILSR had **35 prominent broadcast media hits** in 2020.



*"This is something that really gets to me, because we've spent billions of dollars on networks that are obsolete, and in fact, we still are through the remainder of 2020 writing checks to big companies that are delivering very slow DSL that does not qualify as broadband. Those big companies have all had their shot, and it's time to have an all-hands-on-deck approach to expanding Internet access."*  
— Christopher Mitchell on *Marketplace Tech*



David Morris, the co-founder of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance and a longstanding advocate of the USPS, explained to Salon that the post office was instrumental in making American democracy work. "Its primary goal was to knit together the country, and it did that," Morris told Salon. "The second primary goal, if you can have two primary goals, was to inform the country – that is, to build citizenship."  
— Salon



In a letter Bezos sent to shareholders after the company first went public, "he essentially says we are going to forgo profits in order to take market share; that our strategy is to lose money, which enables us then to put other companies out of business who can't afford to lose money," says Stacy Mitchell, co-director of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. — *PBS FRONTLINE*

# Fighting Corporate Control

## Holding Amazon's Feet to the Fire

ILSR continued to lead the Athena coalition, a broad and powerful network of economic and racial justice groups working to break up and reign in the power of Amazon. With a nearly full page profile in *The New York Times* and appearances in three documentary films with more than 10 million views, our work has received prominent visibility. ILSR played a key role in pushing a U.S. House antitrust investigation forward, including demands that Jeff Bezos testify with other "big tech" CEOs. The hearing



and final report extensively cited ILSR's work. The committee's final report was a watershed moment that will galvanize support in Congress to address the problem of monopolies and their negative impacts on democracy and the independent business sector.

## Fighting for Community Broadband

The pandemic put a spotlight on the essential inequities in Internet access we're trying to solve as millions of Americans found it impossible to work from home. In states like North Carolina, we've **generated a network of thousands of concerned citizens** and we're working with organizational allies to undo state laws advanced by telecom monopolies that prevent smart, community-based broadband solutions.

## Exposing the Tolls that Monopolies Put on Communities

In several high-profile articles, our research team drew on real-world stories to show how monopolization in sectors like **hospitals**, the **meat industry**, **dollar stores**, and **beer production** is harming people and communities. We also exposed Amazon's structural power and its effect on local businesses in our groundbreaking report, *Amazon's Monopoly Tollbooth*, illuminating how it extracts a growing cut of the revenue earned by independent sellers on its platform. ILSR found that Amazon keeps an average of 30 percent of each sale, up from 19 percent just five years ago.

# Building Local Power

## Giving States and Cities the Tools to Build Local Power

Our in-depth, *Fighting Monopoly Power: How States and Cities Can Beat Back Corporate Control and Build Thriving Communities* report examines crucial economic sectors (agriculture, banking, broadband, energy, retail, waste, etc.), describing exactly how corporate control has manifested in the sector and its consequences for economic justice, racial equity, climate, and communities. Each section provides numerous specific actions that states and cities can take to reduce concentration and build viable, community-responsive alternatives – highlighting real world examples, not just theoretical ideas.

## Bringing Equality, Justice, and Community Into Zero Waste Solutions

From Hawaii to New York, ILSR's technical expertise and training programs are helping to expand local recycling markets, close incinerators and launch community-scaled composting projects. In Baltimore, we gathered extensive input from the community and worked with several local partners to launch **Baltimore's Fair Development Plan for Zero Waste**, which centers racial and economic justice strategies while creating 1,800 new jobs. Our **Neighborhood Soil Rebuilders (NSR) program** is also supporting a dozen composting sites at community gardens and urban farms in Baltimore, creating unique, replicable models for other communities to adopt. Nationally and in other cities including Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Nashville, and Philadelphia, our

NSR program continued training, modeling best practices, and energizing the next generation of composting entrepreneurs.

## Supporting Cities With 100% Renewable Energy Commitments

ILSR focuses on the unsustainable nature of energy distribution in America and what cities and states can do about it. Our special podcast series, **Voices of 100%**, highlighted the advances and setbacks of ten communities that have adopted 100% renewable electricity goals. We're also examining ways to reduce climate impacts of heating fuels in our new project to promote city-sponsored **water main geothermal**, which we believe is a key way for us all to get off gas, "the final fossil fuel." Energy self-reliance isn't a pipe dream; 47 states can meet their energy needs with in-state renewables, a key finding in our *Energy Self-Reliant States 2020* analysis.





▲ ILSR's Sophia Hosain teaches composting basics to members of Baltimore's Northside Baptist Church, part of the Black Church Food Security Network.

## Pandemic Pivots

While all of ILSR's initiatives pivoted to respond to the pandemic, our work continued to uphold our core values of ensuring that local communities experience real democracy and control their local wealth. In this most unprecedented year, our initiatives remained focused on providing citizens with the tools they need to exercise power over their lives and their communities.

### Supporting Local Composting in Response to the Pandemic

As people looked for ways to make an impact without leaving their homes, it came as no surprise to us that interest in home composting would soar during the pandemic. We saw a greatly expanded interest in this activity that improves soil, protects the climate, and fosters community resilience. In response, we created **new resources and led fifteen home composting workshops**, which had thousands of participants from across the U.S. and 25 other countries. We also provided support to our growing **Community Composter Coalition** to illuminate best practices and new safety protocols as part of a popular new section of our website, **COVID-19 Resources for Composters & Food Scrap Collectors**.

### Saving Independent Businesses

The disastrous federal policy response to Covid has created a crisis for independent businesses. Hundreds of thousands are at risk of going under, with Black-owned businesses taking the biggest hit. This threatens to further consolidate the economy and worsen the racial wealth gap. ILSR has been the go-to source helping cities and towns respond. **We catalogued and analyzed more than 900 local and state relief programs**. This directory combined with an in-depth report, **Safeguarding Small Business During the Pandemic: 26 Strategies for Local Leaders**, stretched the limits of our web site with more than 200,000 views. These resources are helping communities save their local businesses and address longer-term problems that impede entrepreneurship, including market power, access to capital, and policies that discriminate against BIPOC entrepreneurs.

### Advancing a 30 Million Solar Homes Stimulus

**ILSR is leading an effort** to help one in four U.S. households go solar to simultaneously address the economic crisis, inequality, and climate change. This federal level "energy democracy" stimulus could create nearly 4 million jobs and provide electricity bill savings of \$20 billion per year. The proposal would focus attention on the Americans most burdened by the health impacts of fossil-fuel pollution, high energy costs, and the pandemic's economic impact.

### Highlighting Local Broadband Solutions and Connecting Families in Need

With work, education, and healthcare shifting online due to the pandemic, universal Internet access has become more vital than ever. Despite big promises, the big telecoms continued to **struggle** to close the digital divide. We've promoted models on how community-controlled broadband networks have stepped up to fill the gaps, from a **cooperative turning school buses into Internet hotspots** in Arkansas; to Chattanooga's municipal broadband network **connecting thousands of families** to free Internet access; to leaders and community members in San Rafael, California, coming together to **build a Wi-Fi mesh network** that connects one of the city's most vulnerable populations.

# Praise

“Every time I read something from Neil Seldman of @ilsr I get fired up for change! An expert on the history of materials mgmt with a constant vision for a clean future.”

— **Mark Armen,**  
*Founder of Replenish*

“I’m an Internet infrastructure guy. If you are not already aware, @ilsr and @communitynets are excellent resources on this from a policy point of view.”

— **Jim Troutman,**  
*Director at Northern New England Neutral Internet Exchange (NNENIX)*

“@stacyfmitchell is on 🔥 in her analysis of evil Amazon. There is a ton more worker organizing needed, but this is a great piece. @ilsr is an excellent org to donate to, solid for decades.”

— **Jane McAlevey,**  
*Author and Labor Organizer*

“Thank you @ilsr, @PlattBrenda for so many #composting resources! #ZeroWaste”

— **Monica Wilson,**  
*Associate Director, GAIA*

“I’ve yet to see work from this group that hasn’t been great. I cite them at every meeting I can.”

— **Marty Walsh,**  
*Community and Business Development Specialist with CEDA, Inc.*

“This podcast series is essential listening! @johnffarrell #energytwitter”

— **Shiva Patel,**  
*UC Berkeley*

# Podcast Spotlight



## BUILDING LOCAL POWER

Our flagship podcast, *Building Local Power*, features conversations that you won’t hear anywhere else. Tune in for thought-provoking discussions of economic power and democracy as well as new ideas on how communities can take charge of their economic futures.

### 2020 SPECIAL GUESTS:

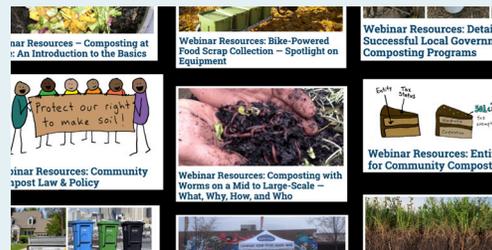
Marvin Hayes (Baltimore Compost Collective), Harry First (Law Professor), Elsa Higby and Aleks Jagiello (Queens Botanical Garden), Sandy Grodin (Owner of El Paso Office Products), Jim Hrcir (Owner of Las Colinas Pharmacy), Nestor Davidson (Law Professor), Christiana McFarland (National League of Cities), Gina Shaefer (Owner of A Few Cool Hardware Stores), Kesiah Bascom (Founder of OffBeet Compost), Seth Berry (Maine House of Representatives), Scott Hempling (Lawyer & Professor), David Dayen (Author), Zephyr Teachout (Author & Associate Law Professor), Rebecca Woodbury (City of San Rafael, Calif.), Air Gallegos (Canal Alliance)



### FIVE STAR REVIEW:

“It’s obvious that Jess and the ILSR Team put extraordinary effort into finding guests that are authentic and truly care about being a positive force in this world - the insight that they bring to bear on the problems we’re facing is still mind-blowing. Every. Single. Time.”

## LISTEN TO OUR PODCASTS: ILSR.ORG/PODCASTS



“Brenda, Thank you for your amazing presentation and all these fantastic resources, wow! We will share them with everyone... You’re such a great resource for our members on this important topic.”

— **Natalie Narotzky,** *Urban Sustainability Directors Network’s Food Waste Working Group*

◀ *Our popular webinar series helped to advance local composting.*



“As the lead advocate for improving Internet connectivity in Island County, WA, I rely on ILSR’s e-newsletter to remind myself that we are not alone. Learned a ton about... serving unserved areas sooner than later.” — **John Mishasek,** *Island County Economic Development Council*

◀ *Connect This! is a new vlogcast from ILSR’s Community Broadband Initiative.*



“Just wanted to let you know I was glad to find your articles last year & to know that other communities are fighting the good fight as well... Please know your research is making a difference in a real way in this real place & with real people.” — **Marty Hubbard,** *Small Business Owner in Onsted, Mich.*

◀ *Co-Director Stacy Mitchell, conducting an interview for a documentary film.*

# Income & Expenses

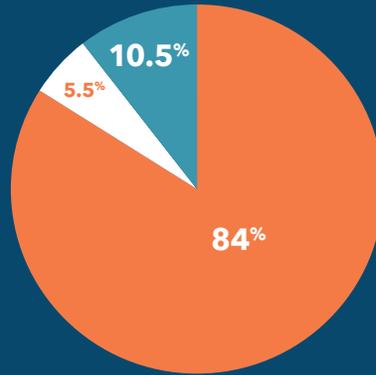
Fiscal Year 2020

July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

We send our sincere gratitude to the individuals and foundations that have supported our work over the last 46 years.

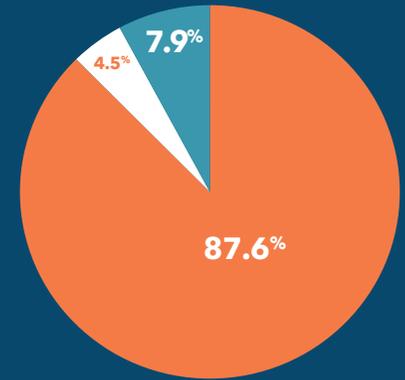
## INCOME

- Grants  
\$2,180,128
- Contracts, Honoraria,  
& Misc  
\$143,425
- Contributions  
\$271,937



## EXPENSES

- Program  
\$2,273,661
- Fundraising  
\$116,378
- Management  
& General  
\$205,450



**SUPPORT ILSR! ILSR.ORG/DONATE**



### IMPACT STORY: LOCAL SELF-RELIANCE IN ACTION

ILSR's Co-Founder, David Morris, has been applying local self-reliance principles in his adopted home of Point Reyes, Calif. David jumped into a number of fights this year in the small town, building on 50 years of grassroots efforts to protect the area's natural beauty, defeat out-of-scale hotels and highways, and nurture the local economy. David helped to defend the principle of local commercial ownership as a leader in the formation of a local investors group to keep a major main street building from being purchased by outside developers. The historic "Emporium

Building," built in 1898, has been a cornerstone of the community and home to a variety of independent businesses for generations, and by staying in local hands, will remain so for decades to come. David has also been working collectively to save the last remaining independent pharmacy in the area, and assisted in persuading Marin County to transfer ownership of an unused tract of U.S. Coast Guard property to a local organization which will oversee the largest truly affordable multi-family housing development in Marin County.

[WWW.ILSR.ORG](http://WWW.ILSR.ORG)



“Incredible work by the team [at ILSR], who is always on the leading edge with ideas to protect local self-determination and democracy.”

— *Amanda Fischer, Policy Director at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth*



## About ILSR

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a national nonprofit research and educational organization founded in 1974. ILSR has a vision of thriving, diverse, equitable communities. To reach this vision, we build local power to fight corporate control. We believe that democracy can only thrive when economic and political power is widely dispersed. Whether it's fighting back against the outside power of monopolies like Amazon or advocating to keep local renewable energy in the community that produced it, ILSR advocates for solutions that harness the power of citizens and communities.

◀ (Left to right) Clayton Williams, Carlos Mobley, Denzel Mitchell, and ILSR's Brenda Platt at Strength 2 Love II Urban Farm in Baltimore. ILSR facilitated the installation of a composting system and is providing training with more sites launching in collaboration with the City's Office of Sustainability, and support from NRDC. Photo credit: Miriam Doan, Murmur Ring – @lowandlush

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