

PERFORMING OUR FUTURE

National Coalition Strategy 2019-2021



Delegation leaders, guests, and Appalshop/Roadside Theater staff at the end of the first Performing Our Future national coalition meeting in Uniontown, Alabama, July 2018.

1. OVERVIEW

Performing Our Future is a national, multiracial coalition of rural and urban communities, working through culture to build power and wealth. Our goal is a future where everyone belongs and everyone's contribution matters — where together, **we own what we make.**

We represent diverse regions, histories, and perspectives. At the same time, our communities share a legacy of resisting extraction, exploitation, deindustrialization, and displacement. Together we are creating a future on our own terms by building on the practices that have long fueled our resistance:

1. **Grassroots cultural work** is how a community tells its own story and makes meaning together, through its material, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual traditions and features.
2. **Broad-based community organizing** is how a community builds its own power to act together across divides, advances shared interests, and overcomes shared challenges.
3. **Community wealth creation** is how a community develops its own economy through recognizing its latent assets and turning them into shared value.

Our work is anchored in our **communities' centers of power/free spaces**, where people come together to speak and act for themselves. We work to build an inclusive community locally and nationally — including all human and non-human beings and the land itself — with the power to create our world together and own what we make.



Rural and urban Wisconsin musicians jam together at Wormfarm Institute's Fermentation Fest, October 2018.

2. DELEGATIONS

Performing Our Future's delegations set the coalition's agenda and advance it through their local work, intercultural exchange, and national collaboration. Each delegation is an expanding local and regional network with deep community roots.

The Arch Social Community Network (ASCN) is a cultural organizing network led by West Baltimore artists, musicians, storytellers, developers, organizers, and other community leaders, founded in response to the 2015 uprising in West Baltimore. It is based at the Arch Social Club, founded in 1913 to preserve African American culture through dance, live entertainment, and intellectual community conversation. The ASCN continues the legacy of the Arch Social Club through creating a cultural hub that is building the agency and voice of the area's youth, creating opportunities for cultural expression and participation, and ensuring equity in the area's economic redevelopment.

Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice (BBC) is a membership organization led by frontline communities across the rural Black Belt of Alabama. BBC began in 2005 when citizens of Uniontown, Alabama organized in response to the ongoing environmental, economic, and health crisis in Uniontown, Alabama. Its membership and partners now extend across the state. Through political campaigns, support for local businesses and artists, gathering stories and oral histories, and creating space for critical conversations, BBC works toward a world where people unite to act in love for shared liberty and justice for all.

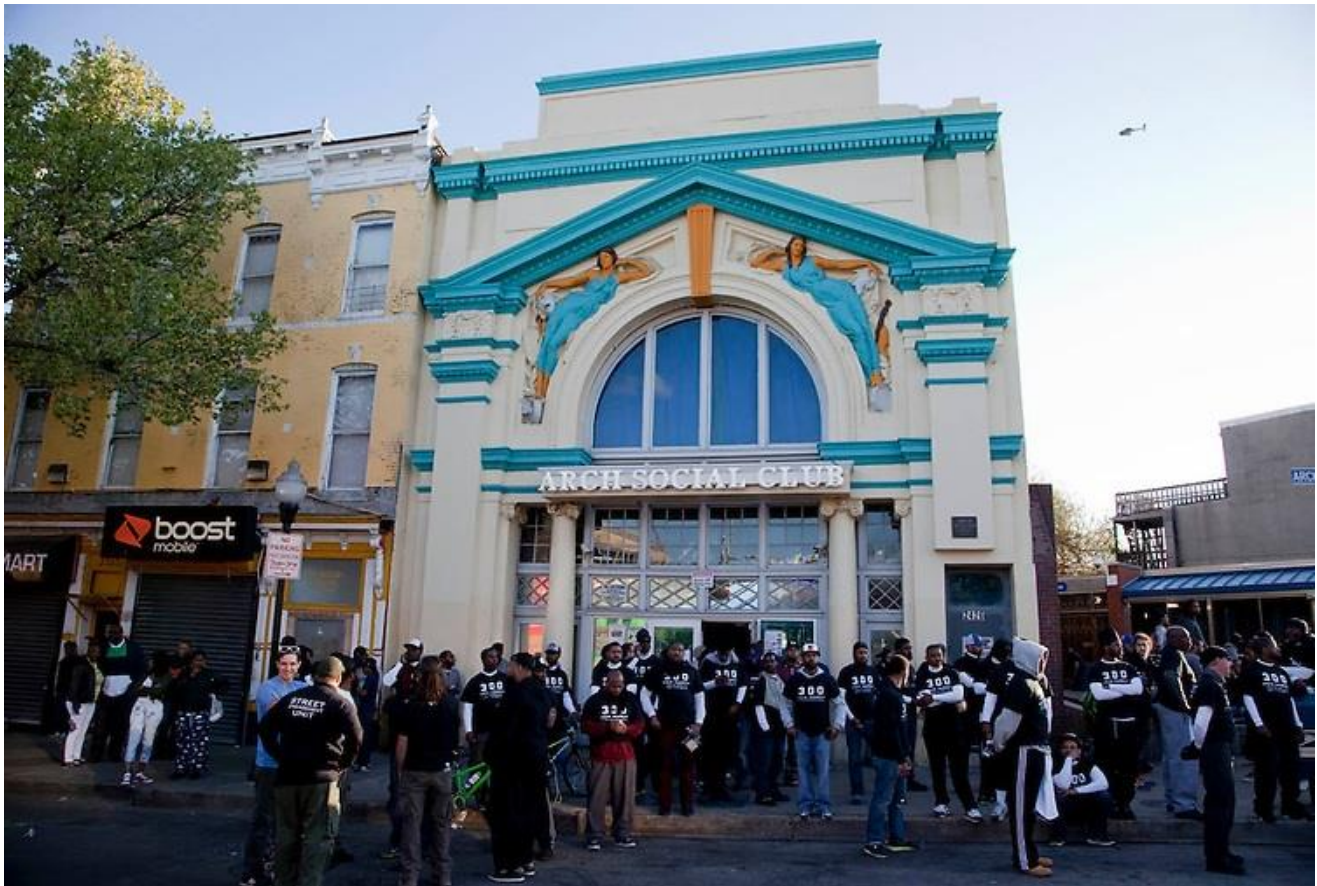
The Letcher County Culture Hub is a coalition of 18 community organizations in the east Kentucky coalfields. Initiated by the arts and humanities center Appalshop, the Culture Hub has created the conditions for artists, musicians, strip mine bosses, educators, “tree huggers,” volunteer firefighters, and hundreds of other citizens to celebrate and grow the county’s unique cultural assets and foster long-term economic stability and growth. To this end, Culture Hub partners support each other’s work; develop each other’s skills; build relationships locally, regionally, and nationally; and promote awareness of the region and all it has to offer.

Rural/Urban Flow is a growing polyculture of cultural and agricultural producers and supporting institutions in Milwaukee and Sauk Counties, Wisconsin, building community in the broad biotic sense that includes people, animals, plants, and the land itself. The Flow celebrates rural and urban communities’ varied richness and interdependence, encourages exploration beyond neighborhoods and news feeds, and cultivates common ground. Through invitation and exchange, communities provoke each other to understand their own abundance, discover latent assets within their cultural landscape, and stretch their understanding of their community’s capacities.

Performing Our Future was initiated by **Roadside Theater**, the theater division of the grassroots multimedia cultural center **Appalshop**. Performing Our Future emerged out of Roadside and Appalshop’s decades of community cultural development residencies across the country and internationally. Roadside and Appalshop played a central role in Performing Our Future’s origins, creating a play about the future of Letcher County that led to the start of the Letcher County Culture Hub, and they continue to play a leadership role in the national coalition.



Culture Hub Celebration at the Cowan Community Center in Letcher County, Kentucky, April 2018.



Community event at the historic Arch Social Club in West Baltimore, located at the center of the 2015 uprising.

3. ASSETS

Across delegations, Performing Our Future's work is anchored by three core assets:

Local leadership and community resources. Performing Our Future is made up of community-led organizations united by common values and principles, a shared sense of purpose, and deepening trust. At a time of grave partisan divides, we are committed to representing the full diversity of our communities and working effectively together across differences. At a time of aggressive anti-community policy, we are dedicated to protecting and strengthening communities' commonly-held land, traditions, and centers of power.

Institutional partnerships. Performing Our Future's grassroots leaders maintain working partnerships with national arts, organizing, and community economic development leaders; academic, government, and private-sector institutions and networks; and a wide range of artists, musicians, other cultural and agricultural producers, economic development professionals, economists, organizers, activists, researchers, and policy experts.

A record of success. Performing Our Future's distinctive approach enjoys a record of winning policy change, changing minds and narratives, and turning a wide range of skills into revenue-generating activity—in places where such successes are often considered impossible. Performing Our Future is regularly invited to present at national arts/culture, organizing, and community development conferences. Stories about our work have been published by the New York Times, the Boston Globe, CNN, NPR, PBS, Harper's, Salon.com, Moyers & Company, Yes! Magazine, ArtPlace America, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Each delegation also contributes its own unique assets:

The Arch Social Community Network maintains a close partnership with the Arch Social Club, a legacy organization that owns its space in the heart of West Baltimore and benefits from multiple historic designations. The Arch and ASCN are the sole organizations in the area providing both live entertainment and community cultural dialogue. Their work draws on an expansive network of partnerships in cultural work, organizing, development, local and regional philanthropy, higher education, and city government.

The Letcher County Culture Hub includes 18 community centers, cultural organizations, volunteer fire departments, other grassroots groups, and for- and nonprofit corporations. Many of these organizations had previously considered each other competitors, if not enemies. From Trump-voting conservatives to queer youth to remote rural communities, the Culture Hub's methods focus on welcoming residents who had previously been excluded. The Culture Hub is supported by Appalshop, a media and cultural center known nationally for its effectiveness at amplifying a full range of community voices.

Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice has run successful environmental and political campaigns and kept economic value in communities rich in culture yet impacted negatively by powerful political and economic forces. BBC has mapped out cultural assets and trained leaders across the Black Belt, while developing a network of community-led partner organizations building cultural and economic value. BBC sends representatives to speak across the country and welcomes far-flung visitors for homestays.

Rural/Urban Flow has received national attention for its work bridging the rural-urban divide, with a book project in progress. Its leaders embody its communities' rich diversity, coming from many different places, races, and ethnicities. The Flow receives support from rural and urban farmers and other cultural and agricultural producers, as well as regional development and arts funders, and fiscal sponsorship from the Wormfarm Institute. It includes the state's only rural county offering arts grants and a placemaking initiative, and the city that will host the 2020 Democratic National Convention.



Black Belt Citizens leaders fight pollution and environmental racism in Uniontown, Alabama.

4. CHALLENGES

Our communities are diverse in their assets, but a lot less so in their challenges. In each of our communities, organized interests have extracted our resources and exploited our labor, and left behind their waste: undrinkable water, unbreathable air, unlivable habitats, unsellable homes, unpayable debts, and unemployed neighbors. These same actors continue to push anti-community policies that privilege private interests over public needs, disinvesting in our communities' wellbeing while investing heavily in fear-based campaigns to keep us divided.

This concerted action, combined with growing deindustrialization, has led to the pushing-out of local culture, where ordinary people can take pride in their work and play an active role in their communities. In its place has come a nationalized culture in which people too often function only as gig laborers and consumers. Rather than resist this trend, dominant approaches to community economic, civic, and arts-based development have adapted themselves to it. In this standard development paradigm, professionals and large institutions play the leading roles, with communities reduced to clients to be “engaged.”

This paradigm presents a major challenge for work controlled by community members and their local organizations. It is an ongoing struggle to secure general operating support, as well as the funds to compensate organizers, artists, and other involved residents.



A citizen-artist faces down a giant monster at Wormfarm Institute's Fermentation Fest, October 2018.

5. PLANS AND PRIORITIES

Between now and the end of 2021, the Performing Our Future coalition will cultivate our assets and face our challenges through collaborative work in three primary areas: (1) supporting leaders, (2) advancing ideas, and (3) growing the coalition.

SUPPORTING LEADERS. We believe a “leader” doesn’t need to have an official title, status, or degree. A leader is simply a community member with followers—who the leader represents and can deliver when needed, and who hold the leader accountable. Performing Our Future’s continued growth depends on supporting and strengthening current grassroots leaders in our communities, as well as continuing to identify and develop new leaders. In communities with legacies of extraction and exploitation, community leadership is an undervalued asset, and we must re-value it. Performing Our Future will support and develop leadership from the inside out and the bottom up.

TRAIN: the coalition will support training opportunities for community members to increase their leadership abilities.

EXAMPLE: in July-August 2019 leaders from all four delegations took part in People’s Action’s national transformative leadership training.

EXCHANGE: the coalition will support delegations visiting each other to learn from and to imagine new ways to do their local work.

EXAMPLE: in June 2019 Black Belt Citizens visited the Letcher County Culture Hub for meetings, homestays, and a public screening of a new film about BBC’s work.

SHARE SKILLS: the coalition will support one-to-one and group learning between delegations in order to transfer and strengthen skills.

EXAMPLE: Rural/Urban Flow has invited an award-winning Letcher County queer youth filmmaker to conduct a training in first-person media making for Milwaukee and Sauk County citizen-artists.

DOCUMENT AND EVALUATE: the coalition will support documentation and evaluation of its efforts to develop leaders.

EXAMPLE: the summer People’s Action training was followed by a series of one-to-one and group debrief meetings, to maximize the training’s effectiveness for delegation leaders and other national allies.



Black Belt Citizens Awolowo and coordinator Adam Johnston present an overview of their work and plans for the future at the second Performing Our Future national coalition meeting in Milwaukee, December 2018.

ADVANCING IDEAS. There is growing recognition that current approaches to achieving greater cultural, political, and economic equity are not working. One of Performing Our Future’s signature assets is its distinctive approach to making meaning, building power, and creating wealth, rooted in communities’ collective ownership of the work’s processes and products. Performing Our Future leaders will continue to develop this asset by creating and distributing new language and stories about our shared method and its effects in our communities.

ESTABLISH A LOCAL AND NATIONAL PRESENCE THROUGH PRESENTING AND MAKING MEDIA: *the coalition will support opportunities to grow its ideas’, methods’, and stories’ resonance with a wider audience.*

EXAMPLE: leaders from the Arch Social Community Network are collaborating on an article that defines “cultural organizing” and outlines a strategy for building power through community meaning-making.

CONNECT WITH FIELD LEADERS: *the coalition will support building relationships with individuals and organizations with powerful positions in the arts/culture, organizing, environmental, agricultural, and economic development fields.*

EXAMPLE: Letcher County Culture Hub leaders have partnered for several years with economists at Lafayette College, and are now building a collaboration with the national organizing network People’s Action.

GATHER PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE AND JOIN OUR WORK: *the coalition will support efforts to assemble people and communities, physically and virtually, to experience and join in our work.*

EXAMPLE: leaders from all delegations are collaborating with Virginia Tech and the digital design collaborative CoLab to launch a web platform that will allow for a wider and deeper critical discourse about our ideas and offer an invitation to potential allies to join the work from their own local communities.

DOCUMENT AND EVALUATE: *the coalition will support documentation and critical evaluation of efforts to advance Performing Our Future’s ideas.*

EXAMPLE: organizers and leaders from all delegations will be able to use the digital platform to gather feedback on the effectiveness of communication efforts by tracking numbers of users by types, depth, and location.



Victor Rubin, vice president for research at the national policy organization PolicyLink, shares his research on building and evaluating cultural equity at the second Performing Our Future national coalition meeting in Milwaukee, December 2018, following a two-year partnership with the Letcher County Culture Hub.

GROWING THE COALITION. Prior to taking on new delegations, scheduled to start in 2020-2021, Performing Our Future will deepen, clarify, and strengthen the work of its current delegations and the ways they collaborate. This will happen partly through supporting leaders and advancing ideas, as described above, and partly through pursuing several internal priorities.

BUILD AND STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS: *the coalition will support strong connections among delegations and allies, deepening and clarifying their relationship to one another and to the coalition.*

EXAMPLE: representatives from each delegation meet regularly, both in-person and virtually. These meetings include cultural exchange and story sharing as well as strategy and planning.

SUPPORT LOCAL ORGANIZERS AND GRASSROOTS LEADERS: the coalition will support the recruitment and development of staff organizers and volunteer leaders at each delegation site.

EXAMPLE: in 2018 the Letcher County Culture Hub hired its first full-time staff organizer, who has developed broader community leadership and keeping accountability to the long-term agenda.

SUPPORT LOCAL PROJECTS: the coalition will support the creation of a partnership fund for each delegation, to support local community-led projects.

EXAMPLE: the Culture Hub partnership fund, distributed by consensus, has invested more than \$100,000 in community-led projects including new businesses and strengthened community spaces.

DOCUMENT AND EVALUATE: the coalition will support documentation and evaluation of efforts to grow the Performing Our Future coalition.

EXAMPLE: media from the coalition's national gatherings are being used to track the coalition's progress, internally and on the digital platform, where they promote the work of each delegation and demonstrate the collective breadth and depth of the coalition's work.



Community leaders, artists, and researchers from twelve U.S. states and one Canadian province join in a square dance at Letcher County's Carcassonne Community Center during the 2016 Performing Our Future national institute.

Each delegation is also developing its own plans between now and the end of 2021:

The Arch Social Community Network (ASCN) will acquire 50 lots for development, plan an artist residency program, and develop businesses that work with artists to create products that represent the local community. ASCN will start a youth development program promoting land preservation (greening), the exploration of cultural identity, and health. ASCN will develop the Arch Social Club as a center of cultural organizing and a sit-down food destination for community members and visitors. ASCN will raise operating funds, including through opening a small business with donated property.

The Letcher County Culture Hub will develop new partnerships, with a focus on local businesses, while continuing to support and generate economic opportunities for all partners. The Culture Hub will promote collaboration among partners, grow leaders' and communities' skills, promote exchanges across cultures, and become a leader in conversations about shifting the region's economy. The Culture Hub will grow into a financially-sustainable organization, with a strategic plan functioning as a living document and roadmap of the organization's future.

Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice (BBC) will expand its programs, staff, and budget to meet communities' needs and confront the region's crisis. BBC will continue building a network that spans the state, linking communities in common struggle across racial and partisan lines. BBC will grow its membership, develop local grassroots leaders, and deepen its commitment to community governance. Moving beyond resistance, BBC will invest in storytelling, media making, local oral history work, and supporting efforts to keep the community's wealth in the Black Belt.

Rural/Urban Flow will produce a series of public cultural events and projects, starting with existing ("Flow-ready") projects while co-creating new ones. The Flow will provide a sustained and durable platform to cultivate intentions into collaborations, with the goal of a continuous, ongoing rural/urban flow of art, food and ideas. The Flow will expand its partners, venues, and possibilities, within and between its two founding counties and eventually across the state, alongside partners nationwide. The Flow will develop budgets and plans for fundraising, communications, and evaluation.



National delegation leaders and guests share skills with local young folks at the Uniontown library during the first Performing Our Future national meeting, July 2018.