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'Zuckbucks' Group Acting As Shadow Legislature In Rural America

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The Center for Tech and Civic Life, which funneled millions in "Zuckbucks" to local election agencies in 2020 through grants favoring Democrat areas, recently announced another round of grants to "rural and nonmetro" election offices ahead of November. The leftist group has awarded grants to at least 11 jurisdictions so far, cultivating relationships with election officials while effectively taking on the legislature's job of appropriating funds for elections.

Applications for the new round of CTCL grants opened Aug. 2, and the organization has so far approved election funding in at least the following jurisdictions: Colorado (San Juan County), Massachusetts (Greenfield), Maine (Belgrade, Caribou, Farmington, and West Paris); Minnesota (Nobles County); Nevada (White Pine County); New Hampshire (Meredith and Plymouth); and Vermont (Washington).

A Shadow Legislature

Many of these election officials expressed the need for funding and infrastructure, and CTCL has effectively taken on the role of a shadow legislature, granting money to fill the perceived needs of election officials. Doing so allows the group, which was responsible for election meddling to benefit Democrats in 2020, to curry favor with those officials.

"CTCL is run by sophisticated Democratic operatives. If sophisticated Republican operatives were digging out internal information from government election offices and befriending them with cash, the *New York Times* and others on the left would rightly be outraged," said Scott Walter, president of Capital Research Center, in a statement to The Federalist. "CTCL deserves the same response."

The group's money is supposedly going toward meeting local election needs, taking on the legislative role of providing funding for things like tabulators, ballot storage, polling station work, security upgrades, and more. But in the last presidential election, CTCL grants came with strings attached.

Charles Alex Lanis, chief deputy clerk for San Juan County, Colorado, told The Federalist his office accepted a $5,000 grant from CTCL in hopes of keeping up with the state's larger counties.

Lanis said his office applied for the grant in early August due to "limited resources" and expensive elections in rural jurisdictions.

"While CTCL does offer resources such as webinars and best practices, our engagement has been centered around the funding to address our specific election needs," Lanis said.

He said no other nonprofits had yet contacted the office since it received the grant, but his office accepted an Institute for Responsive Government grant on Aug. 29 for $6,000. As The Federalist previously reported, CTCL promoted the grant from IRG, which has close ties to both CTCL and leftist groups.

"These funds aren't as specific and have few, if any, strings attached," Lanis said.

Nancy Blackmer, town clerk for Orange, Massachusetts, told The Federalist she pursued the grant due to budget cuts. She said CTCL awarded the grant on Aug. 6 – to the tune of $20,000, according to the Greenfield Recorder.

She said CTCL has not yet offered any "resources or guidance" like training, access to conferences or webinars, aid in ballot curing, or guidance on absentee or drop-box policies, and no other nonprofit had yet contacted her office since it received the grant.

Mary Vogel, town clerk of Belgrade, Maine, told The Federalist she applied for the grant because she wanted to "acquire some equipment" and "additional manpower" to keep the budget down. She said she is "thankful" the grant money allows her to purchase equipment she would otherwise "have to budget for over several years time." CTCL awarded the $5,000 grant on Aug. 14, and Vogel's office received a check Aug. 26, Vogel said.

She said while CTCL training, access to conferences or webinars, aid in ballot curing, or guidance on absentee or drop box policies "may have been available," she has not been able to participate due to other responsibilities. She said no other nonprofits had yet contacted her office since receiving the grant.

Danielle Brissette, city clerk of Caribou, Maine, told The Federalist her office applied for the grant on Aug. 3 and CTCL awarded the grant on Aug. 9. Local news outlet, The County reported that CTCL awarded her office $20,000. Brissette said she had "no additional contacts yet" from nonprofits.

Diane Dunham, town clerk of Farmington, Maine, said her office applied for the grant on Aug. 5 to "get some items that may not be considered essential under the normal budgeting process." CTCL awarded the grant the next day. CTCL has not provided any other "information or guidance," according to Dunham, and no other nonprofits had contacted her office at that point.

The West Paris, Maine selectboard voted to accept a $5,000 CTCL grant Aug. 8, according to documents obtained by the Citizens Election Research Center (CERC) and shared with The Federalist. The grant will fund "election purchases" and must be used by Dec. 31, the minutes specify.

CTCL awarded the White Pine County, Nevada clerk's office $20,000 on Aug. 8, according to documents also shared with The Federalist by CERC. The application is dated the same day.

"We are primarily a Republican county with a lot of people crying 'election fraud,'" reads part of the application, which says it was filed by White Pine County Clerk/Registrar of Voters Nicole Stephey. "Id [sic] like the money to purchase a solution for a completely secure internet connection that will allow me to securely transmit election results to the state without having to drive back to my office."

The Meredith, New Hampshire town clerk asked the selectboard to accept a $20,000 CTCL grant "for a new tabulator ballot-counting machine and six new poll pads (tablets)," according to The Laconia Daily Sun.

Earlier this week, Washington, Vermont Town Clerk Lois Deberville also accepted a $5,000 CTCL grant, according to selectboard minutes. The grant will fund election items "not in the budget," and a "wish list is being compiled," the minutes say.

The Federalist reached out to Plymouth, New Hampshire, but officials declined to comment. Nobles County, Minnesota, also did not respond to requests for comment last week.

It is unclear which other jurisdictions CTCL plans to fund, or how it will work with these grantees.

Leftist Ties and Election Meddling

CTCL attempts to paint these new grants as "nonpartisan," but the group has a history of sending money to election offices in a way that helps Democrats.

In 2020, CTCL funneled $328 million from Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg through grants to public election agencies, using these "Zuckbucks" to target areas with likely left-leaning voting blocs and boost Democrat turnout. Although Zuckerberg has since claimed he did not know his 2020 election funding would help elect now-President Joe Biden, and has reportedly committed to not make a "similar contribution" in 2024, the so-called "nonpartisan" organization has deep ties to leftist groups.

Its founders — Tiana Epps-Johnson, Whitney May, and Donny Bridges — came from previous roles at the since-dissolved left-leaning New Organizing Institute, which "trained digital organizers and campaigners for the Democratic Party and liberal political causes," according to Influence Watch. The group's board members, including Tammy Patrick and Cristina Sinclaire, also have "strong ties to Democratic political operations," according to InfluenceWatch.

Members of groups in CTCL's network have previously meddled in the election operations of CTCL's grantees, such as in Green Bay during 2020, as The Federalist previously reported. CTCL also offers webinars on lecturing election officials on how to silence speech dubbed "misinformation" and sway election laws.

After the 2020 election, 28 states have banned private funding of elections, according to the Capital Research Center (CRC).

"No wonder the majority of states have barred such interference by special interests," said CRC President Scott Walter. "Too bad CTCL doesn't respect democracy's verdict on their schemes."

CTCL's website says the new grants are partially different from those in 2020 because they are limited to "rural and nonmetro" jurisdictions without bans on private election funding, and "the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative is not funding 2024 grants to local election offices."

"What won't change is that the grants will continue to be nonpartisan, voluntary, and compliant with federal, state, and local laws," CTCL's website reads.

But in the last four years, it has become clear that CTCL's 2020 election grants were in fact partisan, boosting Democrat turnout. So the promise that grants "won't change" in this regard raises questions.

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