

The Fund for Workforce Equity

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Evaluator Positionality Statement

Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) is a research, evaluation, and technical assistance firm located in the territory of xučyun (Huichin) on unceded Ohlone land now known as the East Bay in the San Francisco Bay Area. As researchers, we recognize that our personal identities and beliefs in relation to society can influence our approach to evaluation and how we interpret what we study. As such, we offer this positionality statement to be transparent about our position and background and give context to our findings.

Our primary evaluation team is comprised of five analysts with diverse educational and life experiences. We are all women of color with advanced degrees in Political Science, Public Policy, Public Administration, and Public Health from universities across California. We bring an analytical lens that recognizes the complexity of advancing change led by culturally diverse communities embedded in systems that have historically oppressed them. At the same time, we work with and for people, using inclusive human-centered methods and processes because we understand that collaboration among diverse people and groups yields better results for everyone. We recognize and value the many ways knowledge is created and shared, and strive to integrate qualitative inquiry, documentary, and narrative methods as well as quantitative data and statistics in our work. We acknowledge that positionality is dynamic, and as evaluators, we are committed to ongoing reflection and self-awareness throughout the evaluation process.

Executive Summary

Workforce Matters is a national network of grantmakers that works to strengthen workforce development philanthropy and advance equitable access to quality education and employment for young people and adults. In 2022, Workforce Matters established the Fund for Workforce Equity (the Fund), a pooled funding initiative aimed to center workers of color in workforce policy and program design and implementation. The Fund's goals are to support workforce organizations in developing, testing, strengthening, and/or extending strategies to engage workers and learners of color and to support learning among funders and workforce organizations to expand the use of effective strategies to center and amplify the voices of workers and learners of color.

A total of fifteen workforce organizations from across the country were selected for the first round of the initiative, with fund grant awards ranging from \$60,000 to \$75,000 for the one-year grant cycle. In December 2022, Workforce Matters contracted with [Social Policy Research Associates \(SPR\)](#), a research and evaluation firm, to conduct a 12-month evaluation of the Fund for Workforce Equity's inaugural grantmaking initiative. The evaluation addresses three core areas of inquiry: (1) assessing grantees' activities in the Fund, (2) understanding outcomes of grantees' work, and (3) surfacing learnings from the Fund. This Final Evaluation Report highlights valuable learnings and outcomes that have emerged by the end of the Fund's implementation.

Engaging Workers and Learners in Workforce Program Design and Implementation

In the Fund's inaugural year, all 15 grantee organizations successfully piloted or expanded strategies to include workers and learners of color in workforce program design and implementation. Through project activities, grantees empowered workers and learners of color to actively shape decision-making processes within their programs and communities to promote systemic change in workforce systems and other areas. By the end of the funding period, project outcomes included increased worker and learner engagement, collaborations with partner organizations that better amplified worker and learner voice, and changes to internal policies and practice spurred by learnings from grant activities. Below we highlight key findings from the report regarding grantee project activities and outcomes, related challenges and opportunities, and learnings from the grants.

Grantee Project Activities

- ❖ A third of grantees conducted data collection to get a better sense of community needs. This included designing and administering surveys, facilitating focus groups and listening sessions, and training workers and learners in data collection and analysis.
- ❖ A third of grantees supported worker and learner leadership development, and relayed that building these skills was a means for both personal and professional growth for individuals.
- ❖ Several grantees built advisory boards and other vehicles for worker and learner input. These groups played diverse roles, including providing feedback, designing program services, and advocating for their communities.

Grantee Project Outcomes

Workers and learners grew personally and professionally through grant activities

- ❖ Workers and learners reported gaining a sense of empowerment from engaging in program design and implementation. Participating on advisory committees and building out new programming increased self-confidence and validated their experiences.
- ❖ Workers and learners also stated they gained valuable skills from project activities, leading to personal and professional growth. Leadership, community organizing, and self-advocacy training opportunities improved workers and learners' economic and social wellbeing.

Developing and expanding partnerships better centered and amplified worker and learner voices

- ❖ Involving individuals with firsthand experience as authentic partners was critical in centering worker and learner voice. This approach created safe spaces for workers and learners to provide feedback and helped advance grantee work in local communities.
- ❖ Strategic and inclusive partnerships offered workers and learners different perspectives and new ways to engage in workforce programming. Partners provided opportunities for critical skill-building, self-organizing, and advocacy. Partnerships centered worker and learner voice through strong leadership development through pathways for permanent job placement and participatory research work.

Organizational policies and practices changed due to input from grantee employees stimulated by grant activities

- ❖ Grant-related activities not only led grantees to incorporate the perspectives of their workers and learners, it also led them to examine and attempt to better embed equity within their own organizational practices.

- ❖ Grantees also shifted their policies in other ways—for example, by centering employee voice in childcare and leave practices—driven by employee input resulting from grant activities.

Challenges to and Opportunities in Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

Reflecting the complex nature of equity work, grantees faced some challenges in project implementation and engaging workers and learners in project activities. They also navigated organizational and systemic challenges in innovative ways to engage workers and learners in program design and delivery, and named several institutional supports that could better position organizations to center worker voice and agency.

Challenges to Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

Resource constraints and administrative challenges impeded grant implementation

- ❖ A recurring challenge for grantees was balancing the need to implement impactful programs within resource constraints, such as limited time and funding.
- ❖ Administrative and organizational challenges that hindered grant implementation, including staff turnover and working with partner organizations, slowed worker and learner engagement.

Capacity constraints and systemic barriers further impacted worker and learner engagement

- ❖ Workers and learners had limited capacity to participate in more involved or long-term grant-funded activities as they juggled multiple responsibilities, including school attendance, work, and family caretaking.
- ❖ Workers and learners were up against significant systemic barriers to participate in grant activities. This included state and federal labor laws that discouraged fair compensation to workers and learners involved in grant-funded activities and challenges navigating state bureaucracy to implement grant projects.

Opportunities in Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

- ❖ Strong partnerships and collaborations facilitated project implementation and expressions of worker and learner voices. Joint efforts between grantees and their partners significantly informed project development, design, implementation, and worker and learner engagement.
- ❖ Building trust with workers and learners also helped to reduce engagement barriers. In-person grant activities, co-creating a vision for grant projects, and transportation and other compensation ensured workers and learners had time and space to contribute meaningfully to projects.

Necessary Institutional Supports

- ❖ A clear articulation of “workforce equity” was important for centering worker and learner voice. Having an operational definition of equity could help organizations measure progress towards their goals to center worker and learner voice and agency.
- ❖ Hiring staff with lived experience was another opportunity to center worker and learner voice and agency. Grantees found that ensuring those most affected by inequity were involved in setting programmatic direction was vital to their grant projects’ success.
- ❖ Equity resources, tools, and networks were key for deepening staff readiness to engage in equity work, including the centering of worker and learner voice.

Learnings for Workforce Grantees, Workers and Learners, Funders, and the Field

Throughout the year, grantees had opportunities to reflect and learn from each other, partners, staff, and workers and learners about deepening equitable workforce practices for both their communities and their organizations. They discussed how to advance, progress, or shift practices to center and amplify worker and learner voice, and how workers and learners can continue to engage in workforce policy and program design and implementation.

Learnings for Workforce Organizations

- ❖ Transparent communication to manage expectations, build trust, and ensure a more realistic understanding of the organization's role in workforce development was one approach to addressing capacity and resource challenges.
- ❖ Another response to resource limitations was leveraging additional funding sources. Access to multiple resource streams meant grant projects could increase in size and scope and grantees could plan for longer-term sustainability.
- ❖ Consistent feedback loops reflected a commitment to understanding worker and learner experiences and adapting programs based on their evolving needs.
- ❖ Compensation was an important way to acknowledge and value the time and expertise that workers and learners brought to program design.
- ❖ Dissemination strategies contributed to advocacy efforts to center worker and learner voice. Grantees shared project findings widely so worker and learner voices could reach the broader workforce field.

Learnings Related to Worker and Learner Experiences

- ❖ A flexible and inclusive engagement approach made it easier for workers and learners to participate in grantee projects. Compassion, empathy, and understanding were key elements that created a positive experience for workers and learners.
- ❖ Workers and learners carefully navigated family responsibilities, educational pursuits, and career goals when making decisions about their personal and professional development.
- ❖ They also found that navigating challenges to participating in grant activities became easier when there were support systems in place, both personal (from family) and professional (from employers).
- ❖ Workers and learners defined “good jobs” as including multiple dimensions beyond pay and schedules, such as flexibility, benefits, and community-oriented values.

Learnings for Funders

- ❖ The Fund was a neutral learning space where funders could engage in discussions without feeling judged.
- ❖ Funder recommendations for future iterations of the initiative included more robust learning and feedback cycles, standardized evaluation criteria, and targeted funding opportunities.
- ❖ Grantees emphasized the value of flexible, unrestricted, and general operating funds, which allowed them to pivot, make real-time decisions, and explore innovative approaches that might be constrained by more rigid funding sources.
- ❖ Grantees shared that holistic metrics—rather than numbers-driven or prescriptive goals—may be better suited to capture the value they bring to their communities and suggested that funders should recognize the broader value grantees bring beyond numerical outcomes.
- ❖ Grantees observed that developing and implementing projects and programs is a process that requires time, and having multi-year funding can ease the pressure of having to constantly secure funding to continue operations.
- ❖ Grantees appreciated having the space and time to learn and iterate individually and with one another, and saw immense value in the supports provided by the Fund.
- ❖ Grantees noted that partnership dynamics with funders generally could be strengthened by establishing a co-design approach and having open and transparent communication about the challenges of project implementation.

Learnings for the Field

- ❖ Funders observed that interest and investment in workforce development within philanthropy is increasing. This is both from traditional and newer education-focused foundations, as well as those focused on economic mobility.
- ❖ Funders and grantees acknowledged the need to center the experiences of people of color in the workforce system and address historical inequities. Some also called for inclusion of underrepresented communities, such as Native and tribal communities, justice-involved individuals, and people with disabilities in workforce development efforts.
- ❖ Funders recognized the importance of partnerships between local and national organizations, as well as with governmental bodies, to address workforce challenges effectively.

The challenges, opportunities, and learnings described above are explored in more detail throughout the rest of the report. Ultimately, centering worker voice and agency takes time, particularly with communities that have been historically excluded from decision-making efforts. It also requires trust building, mutual respect, and shifting institutional power to those at the margins. In its second iteration, the Fund can continue to push for increased engagement of workers and learners of color in setting programmatic directions, the shifting of organizational policies and procedures to center worker voice, and an examination of the role of philanthropy in workforce development.

1 | Introduction

Workforce Matters is a national network of grantmakers that works to strengthen workforce development philanthropy and advance equitable access to quality education and employment for young people and adults. In 2021, Workforce Matters published [A Racial Equity Framework for Workforce Development Funders](#), a framework for funders to engage in learning, advocacy, and change with partners in the workforce field, including other funders, providers, employers, policymakers, and workers, learners, and job candidates. The framework emphasizes centering worker voice and agency. Following the release of this guide, in 2022, Workforce Matters established the Fund for Workforce Equity (the Fund), a pooled funding initiative aimed to center workers of color in workforce policy and program design and implementation.

The Fund's goals are to support workforce organizations in developing, testing, strengthening, and/or extending strategies to engage workers and learners of color and to support learning among funders and workforce organizations to expand the use of effective strategies to center and amplify the voices of workers and learners of color. To advance these goals, the Fund invested in four strategies: 1) grantmaking, 2) a learning community, 3) technical assistance and expertise, and 4) evaluation and learning activities. **Exhibit 1** describes these strategies in more detail.

Exhibit 1. Fund for Workforce Equity Investments

Grants. Flexible grants of \$60,000 to \$75,000 per year to workforce organizations so they could pilot and learn from different ways of authentically engaging and centering workers and learners of color in program and policy design and implementation.

Learning Community. A learning community to enable organizations to learn from each other and disseminate methods and lessons learned.

Technical Assistance/Expertise. Access to expertise and resources for Fund grantees on human-centered design and other best practices for elevating worker and learner voice.

Evaluation and Learning. An evaluation of the Fund focused on sharing learning with funders so they can further disseminate and invest in promising practices among their own individual grantees.

About Grantee Organizations

A total of 15 workforce organizations from across the country were selected for the first round of the initiative. Fund grant awards ranged from \$60,000 to \$75,000 for the one-year grant cycle. The 15 Fund grantees are comprised of a wide variety of community-based organizations based in 13 states. **Exhibit 2** on the following page shows where grantee organizations are located and **Exhibit 3** provides a snapshot of the composition of grantee organizations. In addition to workforce development, grantees address a variety of focus areas including education, housing, homelessness, immigration, food security, mental health/healthcare, safety/security, and transportation. Services range from emergency services, counseling and psychotherapy, primary health care, social-emotional learning and academic support,

restorative justice programming, worker education and organizing, occupational skills training, free legal services to underserved populations, and access to shelter and affordable housing.

Appendix A provides a short description of each grantee, including its mission and vision, the workforce programs and services it offers, key partnerships, and its experience centering worker and learner voice. Grantees overwhelmingly serve communities of color who have historically and systemically faced barriers to education and employment. Between 50 and 100 percent of the people grantees serve are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), with a handful of grantees' missions focused on serving specific populations (including Latine immigrants and Native American populations). Additionally, grantees who focus on specific social or economic challenges, such as poverty or violence reduction, also find themselves predominantly serving BIPOC communities. **Appendix B** provides a summary of the populations and percent BIPOC individuals that each grantee serves, their focus areas (as described above), and brief examples of how grantees center worker and learners of color in their organizations.

Exhibit 2. Where Grantees are Based

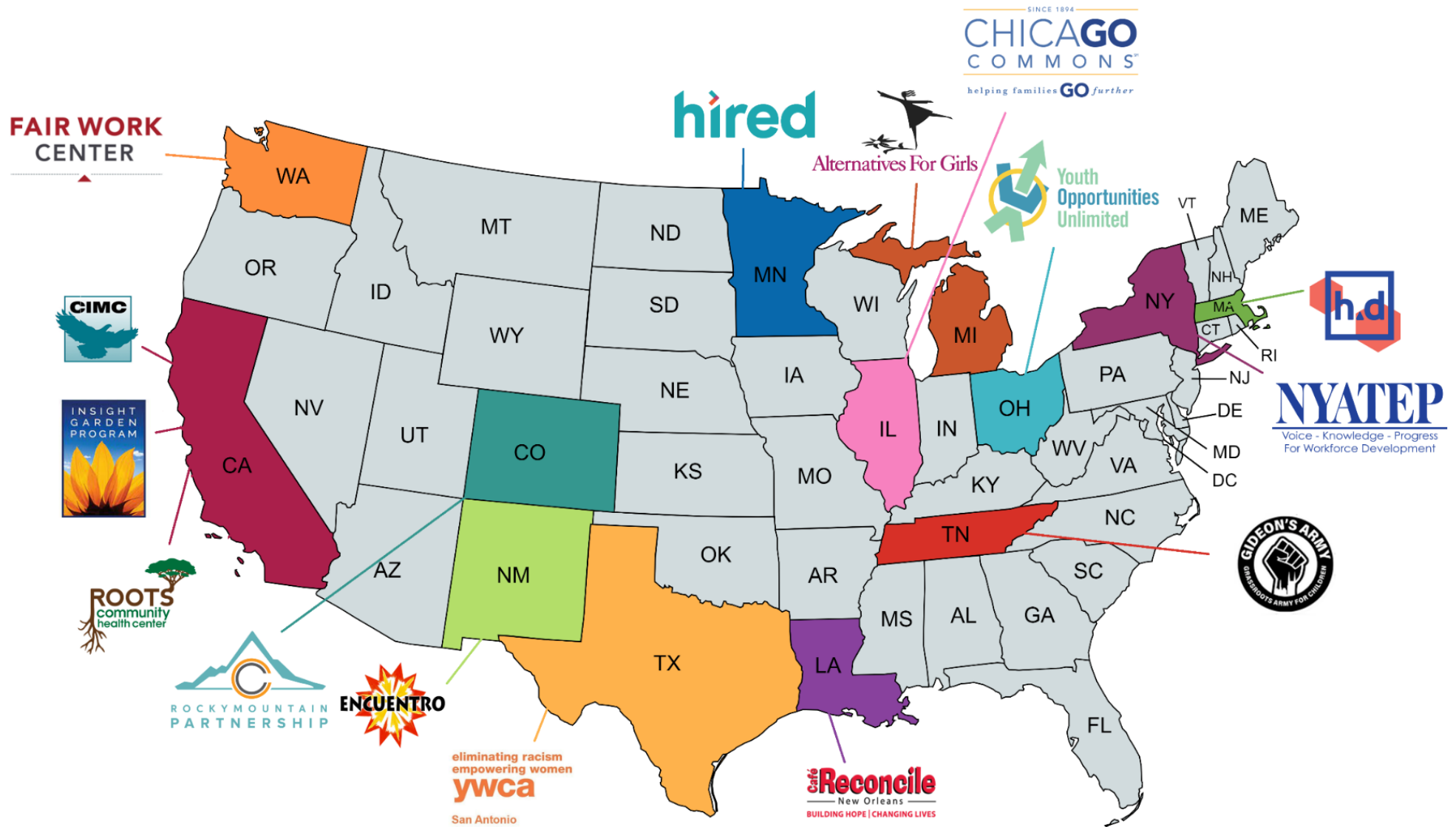


Exhibit 3. Grantee Profile

Grantee focus areas included:

- Workforce development
- Educational programming
- Youth development
- Supportive Services
- Policy advocacy & organizing

Populations grantees served included:



BIPOC & immigrant workers



Low-income communities

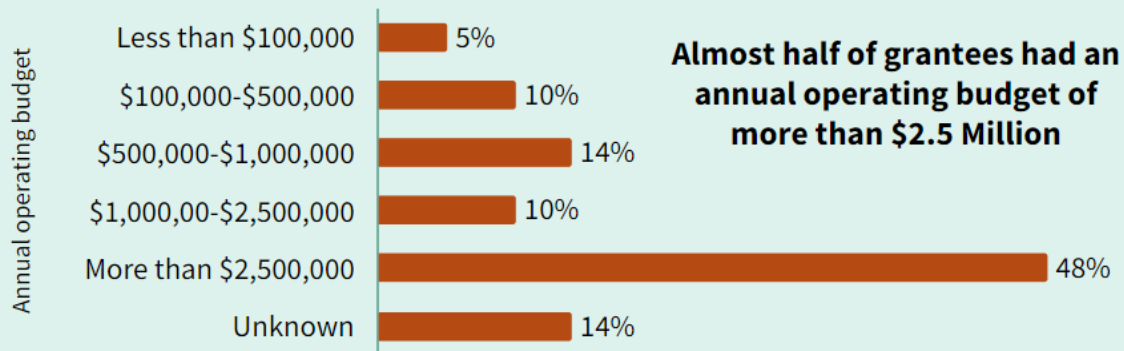


Youth & young adults

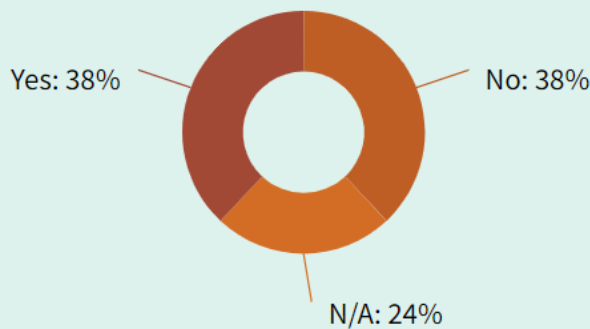


People with barriers to employment

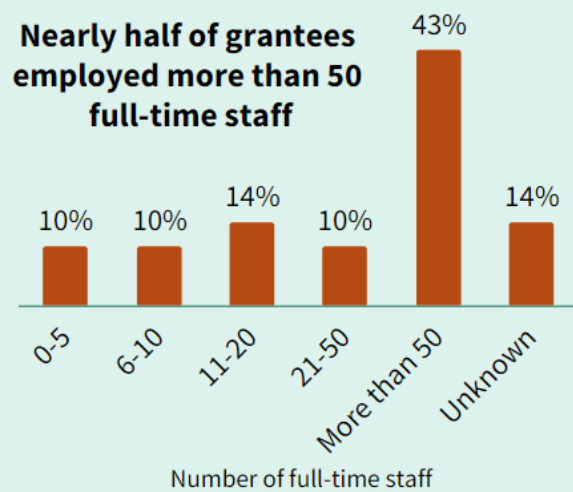
Years in Operation	% of Grantees
0-5 years	0%
6-10 years	10%
11-20 years	14%
More than 20 years	62%
Unknown	14%



More than one third of grantees had a CEO that identified as a Person of Color



Nearly half of grantees employed more than 50 full-time staff



Sources: Grantee applications and the Field Partner Survey

About the Evaluation

In December 2022, Workforce Matters contracted with [Social Policy Research Associates \(SPR\)](#), a research and evaluation firm, to conduct an evaluation of the Fund for Workforce Equity's inaugural grantmaking initiative. The evaluation addresses three core areas of inquiry: (1) assessing grantees' activities in the Fund, (2) understanding outcomes of grantees' work, and (3) surfacing learnings from the Fund. SPR is employing a developmental approach, which allows the evaluation team to be able to support the testing and refinement of the project by sharing data via rapid cycle learning. Many of the strategies described in this report are still being tested and refined. The evaluation learning questions were focused on highlighting key challenges with, and identifying specific examples of, activities and outcomes of Fund grantees while providing information around the effects of the funding model and its associated activities. More information about the evaluation questions can be found in **Appendix C**.

About this Report

This Final Evaluation Report highlights key learnings and outcomes that have emerged by the end of the Fund's first round of grantmaking. It is based on data collected from June through December 2023, which included an analysis of grantee application, progress report, and final report documents; interviews with 18 individuals across 14 of those grantees via video conference; interviews with 9 members of the Fund Advisory Committee; an analysis of results from the Field Partner Survey sent to grantees and other partners in Fall 2023 by Workforce Matters, and focus groups with 15 workers and learners across 5 grantees.¹ Data from these sources were synthesized and are presented within the remaining chapters of this report.

Following this introduction, Chapter Two explores grantee projects in more detail and provides descriptions of project activities and their outcomes. Chapter Three highlights the challenges and opportunities in centering worker voice and agency, and Chapter Four surfaces learnings from the Fund Initiative from the perspectives of grantees, workers and learners, and funders. Finally, Chapter Five concludes the report.

¹ We were unable to reach one grantee to collect data for this report.

2 | “Where Workers Can Come Together”

Engaging Workers and Learners in Workforce Program Design and Implementation

The Fund aims to center workers and learners of color in the design and delivery of workforce programs, services, and policies, and support learning among both funders and workforce organizations about effective and innovative worker engagement strategies. In the initiative’s inaugural year, all 15 grantees piloted or expanded strategies to include workers and learners of color in workforce program design and implementation. This chapter explores grantee projects in more detail and provides descriptions of project activities and their outcomes.²

Grantee Project Activities

Grantees underscored the significance of community-led change, with project activities aimed at reshaping decision-making structures within their respective communities. The intention here was not only to collect feedback but also to empower workers and learners of color to actively participate in decision-making processes and influence systemic change in areas like workforce systems. Below we describe several common project activities.

- **A third of grantees conducted data collection to get a better sense of community needs.** Some grantees designed and administered surveys, which involved thinking through survey engagement, outreach, and the process for collecting and reviewing data. Others gathered data qualitatively through focus groups and listening sessions to develop a more nuanced understanding of issues and opportunities in their communities. For example, one grantee held a focus group with workers to better understand concerns around workplace safety and wellbeing in low-wage industries. Similarly, a second grantee expanded census data collection work, which had been in development for years, to better understand the needs of its community. Further, data collection was occasionally led by community members and meant to inform the grantees’ ongoing work with those communities. For instance, two grantees had workers lead survey creation, administration, and analysis, and provided support throughout the process through frequent discussion sessions.
- **A third of grantees developed and cultivated worker and learner leadership skills.** Grantees relayed that building worker and learner leadership skills was a means for personal growth and organizational capacity building. Staff at one grantee shared that they “want to build voice and build power” in local communities so workers and learners can be better advocates for themselves in the workplace (e.g., know how to negotiate salaries, know what training they need to upskill). Another grantee noted that they are focused on collective capacity building so that worker leaders can be involved in recruiting other participants and shaping the training, outreach, and enforcement priorities for the cohort. They’ve engaged workers in trainings on topics such as strengthening equity-focused leadership competencies, building worker power, organizing and advocacy skills, introducing research and evaluation techniques, amongst others.
- **Several grantees built advisory boards and other vehicles for worker and learner input and feedback.** These groups played diverse roles, including providing feedback, designing services, and advocating for their communities. For example, one grantee convened a participant

² A summary of grantee project activities and outcomes can be found in **Appendix D**.

committee that informs the content, design, and coordination of its small business development programming, which helps the grantee expand partnerships with local community members and employers. Another grantee established a coalition of workers to oversee its four program focus areas. These workers held leadership roles in the organization and supported key decision-making activities and mobilizing the larger community around the grantees' bigger initiatives.

Grantee Project Outcomes

Despite the short project timeframe, grantees centered worker and learner voice in different ways. Project outcomes included increased worker and learner engagement, collaborations with partner organizations that better amplified worker and learner voice, and changes to internal policies and practices spurred by learnings from grant activities. These outcomes are described in more detail below.

Workers and learners grew personally and professionally through grant activities

As described above, data collection and feedback mechanisms significantly guided grantee programming. Through these activities and others, organizations achieved several outcomes related to engaging worker and learners in program and policy design and implementation.

- **Workers and learners reported gaining a sense of empowerment from engaging in program design and implementation.** At one grantee, individuals engaged in an advisory committee researching the impact and value of early childhood educators highlighted the transformative impact on their confidence as teachers. Raising awareness of pay inequities in the profession—by presenting on employer panels, writing op-eds, and visiting with elected officials—led to changing perspectives about teachers in their community, promoting a view of them as professionals deserving respect. Further, the advisory committee was a safe environment where teachers could freely express their frustrations, concerns, and challenges that could not be expressed “in class, to the parents, or to coworkers,” which led to “finding common ground” with each other. Most importantly, the advisory committee also provided an opportunity for collective problem-solving and action-oriented discussions. Participants emphasized the importance of moving beyond complaints to actively seeking solutions, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency. One teacher remarked, “Once your mind is kind of clear, once you're not holding it all in your head, then you can work on next steps.”

At another grantee, formerly incarcerated individuals were engaged with building out the organization's reentry supports. For them, financial compensation, facilitated through stipends provided by the grantee, offered a crucial form of support that validated their work on the project. As one individual noted, “[The grantee] gave me a stipend to participate in this advisory role, which has, impacted my life immensely. I can pay for repairs on my vehicle and things like that...having that money was a savior.”

- **Workers and learners reported gaining valuable skills, leading to personal and professional growth.** Several grantee projects provided training and skill-building opportunities that improved worker and learners' economic and social wellbeing. For example, one grantee established a parent-led subcommittee focused on small business development. Individuals on this subcommittee participated in a Community Organizing Family Issues (COFI) leadership training and learned about community outreach and action (e.g., how to build relationships with community members), and policy and systems change (e.g., how to build a parent power organization).

Another grantee worked with groups of workers to take collective action on workplace issues, such as changes in sick leave policies and how to address discrimination. These workshops, a blend of Know Your Rights and legal clinics, resulted in a letter to their employer, signed by 45 coworkers, demanding a change in sick leave policy. The grantee remarked, “That was something they had built. They talked to us and we were able to help them figure out a media strategy, but clearly, the outreach we’ve been doing had gotten people together in this mindset that they could push back.”

A third grantee tasked workers with developing a needs assessment study to understand the reentry experiences of individuals looking to develop work experience. Formerly incarcerated individuals led the study from the ground up and described the skills they learned in the process. Stated one of these individuals: “This is workforce development: this whole process of program design. We designed this whole study from the ground up and that’s something that goes on your resume. We have all learned a lot during this process, so this [needs assessment] is actually workforce development.”

Developing and expanding partnerships better centered and amplified worker and learner voices

In the pursuit of centering worker and learner voices, grantees recognized the critical role of diverse and strategic partnerships. While outcomes varied, four distinct themes surfaced across grantee organizations: the importance of alumni engagement, community-centric initiatives that prioritize inclusivity, the value attached to leadership program expansion, and intentional engagement with employers for sustained impact. These outcomes extend beyond transactional relationships, emphasizing shared values and long-term visions for creating equitable and supportive employment opportunities.

- **Involving individuals with firsthand experience as authentic partners was critical in centering worker and learner voice.** For instance, one grantee’s Alumni Advisory Council served as both a feedback loop that centered youth learner voice in program design and planning. It also provided those youth with an opportunity to develop their leadership skills by having the Council Chair (a program alumni) sit on the organization’s Board of Directors. This council created a safe space for youth learners to have ongoing access to resources, growth, and authentic relationships. For another grantee, hiring formerly incarcerated individuals similar to the populations they serve to support the project’s data collection and analysis tasks was a way to center input from individuals similar to their learners and helped them “understand, identify, and articulate those things that don’t show up in the numbers.”
- **Strategic and inclusive partnerships offered workers and learners different perspectives and new ways to engage in workforce programming.** For example, one grantee collaborated with a variety of agencies, including law enforcement, global organizations, and local community groups to provide well-rounded programming for youth. Through the training and skill building provided by these partners, youth deepened their understanding of civic engagement and leadership, power building, power mapping, community change, communication, and how to become leaders in their communities. A second grantee worked with a trusted community partner to establish a local community center it hopes will become a culturally accessible hub “where workers can come together and have a myriad of things that they can participate in or have access to.” By working with a local organization the community trusted, the grantee became a space where workers and learners could convene and organize around worker rights issues.

“Going into an area that has been extremely marginalized, that relationship-building takes a lot longer than most grant cycles...Now that we have that space established and that workers have been able to come to us for support...that has shifted conditions for them through word of mouth, which we know is what naturally happens in communities of color. Folks are going to come in and be more connected to us because they hear from their cousin or their auntie that we can be trusted. And that creates that loop in community.” – Grantee

- **Partnerships centered worker and learner voice through strong leadership development.** One grantee collaborated with an employer partner to explore the idea of building a pipeline for program alumni to participate in an internship that could turn into a permanent job placement. Another grantee noted that an outcome of their participatory research work was youth participants’ growing interest in research and evaluation as a future career field.

“We have teens and at-risk youth who are learning this valuable [research] skill and having some of them even saying that this is of interest to them in their future career, that’s a huge success. That’s a win.” – Grantee

Organizational policies and practices changed due to input from grantee employees stimulated by grant activities

Incorporating the perspectives of workers and learners in their programming as a result of grant activities prompted grantees to examine their own internal policies and how they included and valued the voices of their own employees who are also workers and learners. These organizational outcomes underscore a recognition of the dynamic nature of workforce equity work, prompting the need for continuous policy adjustments to meet evolving challenges and priorities.

- **Grant-related activities not only led grantees to incorporate the perspectives of their workers and learners, it also led them to examine and attempt to better embed equity within their own organizational practices.** One grantee’s engagement with a racial equity consultant to review its policies and procedures and another’s interrogation of power dynamics within its organization were examples of efforts by grantees to embed equity principles in organizational practices, potentially leading to policy changes for inclusivity. Another grantee analyzed data from its feedback sessions with employees and learned that employees valued recognition and supports around health and wellness. Based on this information, the grantee decided to include this information in its management trainings to help managers better understand how to address the needs of employees.

Funders also noticed how grantees were grappling with the need to shift their organizational culture to better engage workers and learners. This involved the grantees gaining an understanding of power dynamics within their organizations, adjusting agendas to center worker voices, and recognizing the importance of organizational ethos in driving effective engagement strategies.

“Some people felt the rub between the programmatic work and the shifts they needed to make in their organization. I'm thinking in particular about just understanding power and how people and organizations wield or share power...A big part of the learning is when you're really trying to center the voices of people who are not working within the organization, there is an adjustment that needs to be made.” – Funder

- **Grantees also shifted their policies in other ways driven by employee input resulting from grant activities.** One grantee focused on incorporating wellness initiatives based on staff input, asking staff what types of health supports would be good investments for the organization to make. Another grantee noted challenges in state policies related to family-friendly employment policies, such as limited paid family and medical leave and accessible childcare, and advocated for changes within its organization to address these challenges. They asked themselves, “Are we enacting the family supportive policies that we want our parents to have? Are we creating hybrid possibilities for our own staff or our parents? Are we creating opportunities for parents who don’t have afterschool care to leave early to pick up their kids and finish their work at home? Are we creating more flexible opportunities for people to do the work differently than they did?” This type of dialogue highlighted a push for policy adjustments at the organizational level and beyond.

Further, a few grantees anticipated future policy changes stimulated by grant activities to benefit their employees. For instance, after grappling with staff turnover during the grant, one grantee acknowledged a need for systemic changes and planned to overhaul some of its HR policies. A second grantee expected updates to some of its practices to occur in 2024, as part of a larger strategic organizational initiative to align internal policies with evolving staff needs.

Over the past year, grantees demonstrated a commitment to centering worker and learner voice by engaging workers and learners in program design and delivery. These activities led to tangible outcomes for workers and learners, partnerships with other agencies and businesses, and for grantee organizations themselves. However, this work was not easy. In the next chapter, we describe some common project implementation and worker engagement challenges, and where grantees found opportunities to lean in and deepen their investments in workforce equity.

3 | “The Need to be Trusted”

Challenges to and Opportunities in Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

While grantees made significant strides in their ability to center worker and learner voice both internally and externally, the process was often a difficult one. Competing priorities, workers and learners having limited capacity to engage in the work, and staffing and other organizational challenges were substantial barriers. At the same time, grantees adapted to challenges by finding new and innovative ways forward. In this chapter, we highlight both the challenges to and opportunities in centering worker and learner voice and the types of supports needed to help facilitate this work.

Challenges to Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

Reflecting the complex nature of equity work, grantees faced some challenges in project implementation and engaging workers and learners in project activities. We detail these challenges below.

Resource constraints and administrative challenges impeded grant implementation

- A recurring challenge for grantees was balancing the need to implement impactful activities within resource constraints, such as limited time and funding.** Two organizations expressed the importance of having more time to build relationships with workers and learners both before and during grant implementation. As one grantee stated, *“One of the things that's underestimated a lot in doing this type of work is the need to be trusted first before you can do any sort of program implementation.”*

Budget constraints were another issue that hindered grantees’ ability to carry out certain aspects of their projects effectively. For example, almost a third (29%) of grantee respondents to the Field Partner Survey indicated that securing funding to sustain workforce development programming was one of the most pressing issues facing their organization. Then in interviews, two grantees observed that they could have used additional funding to focus on data collection and analysis tasks to capture as much learner input as they would have liked. One grantee reflected, *“We didn't really get to assess [the data] the way me and the team wanted to see if [the program] was very effective. This all goes back to budget.”* A second grantee stated that it would have liked to have sufficient resources to hold a small retreat with its learner advisory committee *“to really spend time together going through the data.”*

- Administrative and organizational challenges that hindered grant implementation, including staff turnover and working with partner organizations, were noted across several grantees.** About one quarter (24%) of grantee respondents to the Field Partner Survey noted that staffing challenges made it difficult to implement their programming. Further, half of grantees shared in their interviews that they experienced staffing challenges related to hiring and onboarding, turnover, and leadership changes during the grant period. This included not finding candidates with the right skillset to support their grant-funded projects, having staff in critical roles leave partway through project implementation, and finding resistance to shifting from a hybrid to an in-person work environment, which was needed to develop the strong relationships with program learners to carry out grant activities.

“The hiring world is very different than pre-COVID. That’s the challenge of sustaining the current workforce engagement, but also bringing in new talent that is going to help supplement the team and round out the things that we need to happen to move the work forward.” – Grantee

A third of grantees also described challenges working with multiple stakeholders, which slowed worker and learner engagement. Difficulties including coordinating multiple schedules and considering multiple perspectives while ensuring that everyone felt heard. Staff at one grantee shared that they shifted their project timeline due to logistical hurdles in getting access to their employer partners’ facilities for worker focus groups. For another grantee, coordinating different timelines and cycles of events across organizations impacted project implementation.

Another grantee explained that as an organization that was not program-driven itself (i.e., they work with partners who deliver programming), they had trouble relating to other grantees in the Fund, which led to a sense of being a “square peg in a round hole.”

Members of the Fund Advisory Committee also observed the impact of staff turnover on project continuity and organizational capacity. One funder highlighted the importance of organizational change not relying solely on individual efforts but requiring team engagement and capacity building.

“Organizational change isn’t going to happen on the back of one person, no matter how dynamic that person is...That is another kind of thing that we’re going to be looking for: who are you bringing and who’s leading this work?” – Funder

- **The evaluation was also affected by capacity and administrative constraints and had to adjust its initial design accordingly.** In its proposal, SPR had outlined approaches to centering worker and learner voice in the evaluation process. This included convening a Participant Advisory Committee (PAC) where workers and learners would be paid a stipend for their time and contributions.

When the evaluation team began reaching out to grantees in Winter and Spring 2023 to recruit members for the PAC, grantees highlighted two significant barriers. First, projects were still in the early stages and grantees themselves were just beginning to build trust with workers and learners—it was too soon to ask them to commit a significant amount of time to evaluation activities. Second, grantees observed that workers and learners were already overwhelmed with personal commitments and would not have the time to contribute to a PAC throughout the year. As such, the evaluation team adjusted its approach and instead conducted several focus groups to surface worker and learner experiences. Focus groups were scheduled towards the end of the grant period as projects were winding down, giving grantees time to approach workers and learners and gauge interest. This approach proved to be less burdensome for grantees and workers and learners alike, and the evaluation could still capture valuable insights.

Relatedly, the evaluation had to adjust its approach to worker and learner compensation. To honor workers and learners for their time, SPR was to send stipends to individuals directly. However, certain contracting and labor laws precluded SPR from doing so. Instead, grantee organizations issued payments to participants in a way that was convenient for them and submitted an invoice to Workforce Matters for reimbursement.

Capacity constraints and systemic barriers further impacted worker and learner engagement

Workers and learners faced some challenges to participating in grant-funded activities. These challenges are described below.

- Workers and learners had limited capacity to participate in more involved or long-term grant-funded activities.** Most grantees noted that their workers and learners balanced multiple responsibilities, including school attendance, work, and family caretaking, in addition to their involvement in grantee programming, such as advisory committees. This level of busyness made it difficult for them to engage in grantee activities, especially those that lasted for long periods of time. Other worker and learner barriers included a lack of transportation to grantee activities and childcare during those activities.

“A lot of our families are week to week struggling with their basic routines. It’s hard to make these leaps to a commitment of a two-year program when each week might be different in terms of their capacity to even think about adding anything else to their lives.” – Grantee

- Workers and learners were up against significant systemic barriers to participation in grant activities.** A few grantees discussed balancing the need to provide flexibility and compensation with current labor regulations. One grantee noted that current state and federal labor laws discourage fair compensation to workers and learners who are participating in grant-funded activities.

“Of course [workers and learners] should be compensated for their time and expertise, but our current structural systems actually discourage that...So we've had some unintentional consequences. For example, in order to compensate our civic influencers for their time and expertise, we had to bring them on as employees. But that created unfair burden on them around employer-employee expectations...And then there's also restrictions around gift cards and how much you can give out.” – Grantee

Another grantee had to navigate their “biggest barrier,” the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), as conducting interviews with incarcerated individuals posed logistical challenges, including the difficulty of “clearing people, particularly people on parole, to go back into the prisons to do the interviews, which is not an easy thing in California.”

Two grantees also pointed to systemic barriers that, while not directly related to their Fund grant, highlight the complex landscape within which organizations operated. For example, one project fought labor law violations perpetrated against low-wage workers by doing culture change work: “We’re trying to be a resource for the community and help them exercise their own power to really push back against a feudal system.” Another grantee stressed the ongoing challenges of being a Black- and Brown-led grassroots organization that gets “put down so much because of structural racism and structural violence...it’s scary to be Black and to be attacked. There’s generational trauma around things like that.”

Opportunities in Centering Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

Despite the barriers, grantees navigated organizational and systemic challenges in innovative ways to engage workers and learners and center their voices in program design and implementation. We highlight these approaches below.

- **Strong partnerships and collaborations facilitated project implementation and expressions of worker and learner voices and engagement.** Eight grantees highlighted the pivotal role of collaboration with organizations, employers, business intermediaries, program alumni, among other partners. These joint efforts significantly informed decision-making processes around project development, design, implementation, and worker and learner engagement. For example, one grantee worked with two local labor organizations to hold monthly community spaces for workers to connect, share issues, and receive legal support. Another grantee worked with local partners to support their project’s data collection and engagement efforts, which would have moved more slowly were it not for these close ties.

“One of the things that has been impactful, and I'm really happy that we're able to do this, is that we have organizations that work in this space that get along well. And so our relationships with them have been greatly needed in terms of getting responses back on the survey...So that has been an awesome, awesome piece to this, and I don't think we could have moved as quickly had we not had those relationships.” – Grantee

Further, at least seven grantees emphasized the significance of sustained collaboration with alumni and workers of color in particular. Representation and involvement from these communities ensured that feedback was focused and relevant, which validated their needs and fostered community-led solutions.

“We have that kind of ongoing feedback with our community, but those power sessions [the Fund offered as part of the TA supports] really helped us think through and reflect on how we could do better...It was very much staff bringing the topics to our community that we thought they wanted. But after those [TA] discussions, we, as a team, reflected on what we could do, what changes we can make to include [community] in the agenda-building process in a way that makes sense.” – Grantee

Members of the Fund Advisory Committee also recognized the value of learning communities and cross-pollination of ideas between organizations. One funder particularly noted the importance of creating opportunities for organizations to learn from each other and share experiences, challenges, and best practices.

“For these grantees that we're working with, who is creating the learning community for this cross-pollination, particularly at the national level?...The opportunity to connect with peers and learn about this new kind of frontier for their work is valuable. And I think that's valuable for us, too, as funders. And I think that there is a lesson to be learned there about the need to create these communities of practice as a way to accelerate change.” – Funder

- **Building trust with workers and learners also helped to reduce engagement barriers.** One grantee transitioned from virtual to in-person grant activities to foster relationship building

between staff and workers and learners, which “made a huge difference” in “breaking down those barriers of distrust.” Similarly, another grantee partnered with workers to “co-create a mission and vision for the group” as a means of getting to know workers and learners and identify “what the community wants or needs right now.” A third grantee emphasized the importance of relationship-building with workers before trying to seek their input and involvement, especially in communities that have historically been denied services and support. Said one staff member from this grantee, *“Going into an area that has been extremely marginalized, that relationship-building takes a lot longer than most grant cycles ever could allow. Now that workers have been able to come to us for support, they are going to come in and be more connected to us because they hear that we can be trusted. And that creates that loop in community.”*

Other strategies were aimed at overcoming the barriers workers and learners faced to participating in grantee activities due to their competing responsibilities. These included offering more flexible meeting times and providing monetary and non-monetary compensation. One grantee scheduled project meetings according to worker and learners’ free time to accommodate their busy calendars, while two others added additional meeting sessions for their individuals so they had multiple opportunities to engage.

“Many [workers and learners] are working and trying to get everyone on the same page at the same time and engaged is a challenge. There are standing meetings, but there are multiple touch points in between because it just has to happen because everybody's not going to be able to make that meeting.” – Grantee

A third grantee compensated workers by hiring them to join their grant team so they would not need to work elsewhere. Three others tried to compensate workers by providing them with free skill building opportunities in different areas such as conducting surveys and interviews, conflict resolution, and parenting.

Funders, too, agreed that building trust with workers, learners, and staff is crucial and that it takes considerable time. One funder observed that the time required for program development, building trust, and educating stakeholders requires patience.

“We had a grantee who is...engaging employers around supporting undocumented workers and creating more access to quality jobs and programs. And the program officer leading that work was really disappointed in the first year's progress. But I was able to [say], ‘Actually there's this whole slate of grantees in this portfolio, and they've all been really moving slowly on this work. It just takes time.’ And that gave her confidence about making the recommendation that we have this wider sample size that kind of just calls for the need for patience and long-term strategy and long-term support for groups engaging in this work. It doesn't come quickly, undoing these systems.” – Funder

Necessary Institutional Supports to Center Worker and Learner Voice and Agency

Grantees named several institutional supports that could better position organizations to center worker voice and agency, including having a shared understanding of workforce equity, internal policies and practices to support workforce equity and inclusion, and access to resources and tools to deepen learning and understanding.

- **A clear articulation of “workforce equity” was important for centering worker and learner voice.** Grantees were guided by specific equity concepts. For example, they emphasized promoting community access to resources for education, employment, and career advancement while recognizing the impact of institutionalized racism and white supremacist values on the system. They also underscored the importance of centering the perspectives of workers and learners in program design and implementation and positioning workers and learners as leaders and advocates for change, emphasizing their crucial role in advancing equity within the system. If grantees were to develop a more formal definition of “workforce equity,” it would allow them to set specific goals and metrics, which would strengthen their ability to effectively center worker and learner voice.

Funders highlighted the need for a shared language around “workforce equity” to help overcome communication barriers and facilitate effective collaboration in the workforce development space. For example, one funder observed a distinction between “worker voice” as a form of empowerment and worker organizing, versus direct service provision aimed at addressing workers’ needs. Another funder recognized that workforce development intersects with other fields, such as worker empowerment and advocacy. However, not all funders may be familiar with the nuances of these fields, leading to challenges in communication and collaboration.

- **Hiring staff with lived experience was another opportunity to center worker and learner voice and agency.** One third of grantees highlighted the importance of ensuring those most affected by inequity were involved in setting programmatic direction. For example, one grantee made it a point to hire formerly incarcerated people *“to be able to center the things that fall through the cracks, the nuances that only somebody who’s experienced [can] understand.”* Other grantees similarly made it a practice to involve or hire program alumni or individuals from the communities they serve, or regularly convened advisory boards or employed participatory design processes to capture feedback from external partners. One grantee shared the importance of this practice, *“You need community members on board at the start... We would not have been able to do anywhere near as much without people that were already connected with the community.”* Another grantee expressed a similar sentiment about lived experience, *“The most important thing is to know what the lived experience is on the ground. Really just having a clear sense of the reality of the day-to-day there...and what life is like for people that are coming into your programming.”*

After receiving its grant, another organization began reviewing and revising its internal policies and guidance to promote workforce equity among staff, including revising salary bands and giving staff opportunities to provide feedback to the organization on paid time off (PTO) and holiday schedules.

Practices that served to advance an organizational commitment to workforce equity also meant embodying, as one grantee put it, a “deep learning and growth mindset,” to reframe the way equity work was conceptualized. Grantees recognized the long-term nature of equity work, which required patience, flexibility, reflections around power dynamics, time to build relationships and trust, and the creation of safe spaces where staff could provide candid feedback.

- **Equity resources, tools, and networks were key for deepening staff readiness to engage in equity work, including the centering of worker and learner voice.** Over one third of grantees described the importance of training initiatives to support staff learning related to equity and centering worker and learner voices. These training initiatives covered a range of topics such as racial equity, trauma-informed care, cultural competency, participant-centered design, motivational interviewing, and sensitivity training.

4 | “It Takes a Village”

Surfacing Learnings from the Fund for Workforce Equity Initiative

In the Fund’s first year, grantees successfully implemented projects to incorporate worker and learner voice in program design and delivery. They also had opportunities to reflect and learn from each other, partners, staff, and workers and learners about deepening equitable workforce practices for both their communities and their organizations. In this chapter, we pull out lessons from across the activities, outcomes, and challenges described above about how workforce organizations and funders may be able to better advance, progress, or shift practices to center and amplify worker and learner voice, and how workers and learners can continue to engage in workforce policy and program design and implementation. We also highlight larger lessons for the field, including implications for the workforce system that are emerging from this work.

Learnings for workforce organizations

The landscape of workforce equity initiatives is both dynamic and challenging as grantees strive to advance meaningful change within their communities. However, a recurring theme is the struggle against limitations in resources and staff capacity. Despite these challenges, grantees articulate innovative approaches to address these limitations, emphasizing the importance of internal conversations, mindful program expansion, and a nuanced understanding of organizational capabilities and constraints. Below we outline learnings from the grantee perspective.

- **Transparent communication to manage expectations, build trust, and ensure a more realistic understanding of the organization's role in workforce development was one approach to addressing capacity and resource challenges.** Grantees engaged in internal conversations to prioritize focus areas and refine program scopes, such as being mindful of organizational capacity when considering program expansion and increasing peer outreach and recruitment. This allowed organizations to streamline their efforts, ensuring that available resources were directed toward impactful initiatives, thereby mitigating the strain associated with stretched capabilities.

“The fact is, we can't do all things for all people. In regard to workforce development, we're not a direct employer; we can't guarantee you a job. We can put you in position to have some success and maybe get to a position where we build relationships and create referrals. It's just clearly knowing what we can do and what we can't.” – Grantee

- **Another response to resource limitations was leveraging additional funding sources.** For example, one grantee received funding from philanthropic donors to build a training center. This was in response to recommendations made by learners in their Home Health Aid program to add more entry-level courses. The grantee observed that capital funding, when directed towards infrastructure development, can become a catalyst for expanded services and increased community. Seeking alternative avenues of funding also allows organizations to plan for long-term sustainability.

Further, grantees noted several crucial considerations for organizations engaged in community initiatives, particularly regarding of collection feedback, compensation for worker and learner involvement, and dissemination of findings:

- **Consistent feedback loops reflected a commitment to understanding worker and learner experiences and adapting programs based on their evolving needs.** Two grantees recognized the importance of fostering a culture where individuals felt safe expressing opinions and providing feedback. To do this effectively, organizations must employ reflective practices to help individuals and groups carefully think about their experiences and actions and establish mechanisms to implement changes based on feedback. One member of the Fund Advisory Committee noted that initiatives focused on community engagement and incorporating worker and learner voices into organizational decision-making processes are better positioned to develop programs that meet community needs and achieve more equitable workforce outcomes.
- **As discussed earlier, compensation was an important way to acknowledge and value the time and expertise that workers and learners brought to program design.** Two grantees observed that structural systems can discourage compensating community members for their time and expertise, sometimes leading to unintentional consequences such as creating burdensome employer-employee expectations. For example, one grantee had to bring individuals on as employees or offer gift cards that were not always helpful in meeting community members' needs. As a result, the organization began advocating for federal policy changes to support fair compensation practices. Funders were also keen to ensure that participants were compensated for helping shape programs and policies.

“We did have some expectation when we were reviewing the grant budgets that there was going to be money put into compensating workers and learners of color for the work that they're going to be doing to inform the program design. Whatever they were asking their participants to do, we wanted to see compensation for that time...Maybe you don't have to use grant dollars for it, but that should be part of your budget.” – Funder

- **Dissemination strategies contributed to advocacy efforts to center worker and learner voice and reached multiple audiences.** Grantees envisioned leveraging their project findings so worker and learner voice could reach a broader scope, such as advancing worker-driven policy advocacy efforts, replicating successful worker and learner engagement models in other organizations, and fostering increased engagement with funders and partners.

Relatedly, over half of grantees had plans to share or had already shared findings around amplifying worker voice and agency with their partner organizations, workers and learners, and the larger field. Dissemination plans spanned various platforms, including internal organizational channels such as staff, board, or partner meetings; work conferences; workforce board or government agency convenings, through reports or white papers, and through social media. For example, one grantee learner presented early findings from their grant project at a prominent workforce conference in Monterey, California attended by local workforce development leaders.

Further, for grantees, sharing findings was a way of “closing the feedback loop” with workers and learners who contributed to the project. One grantee stressed that it planned to share

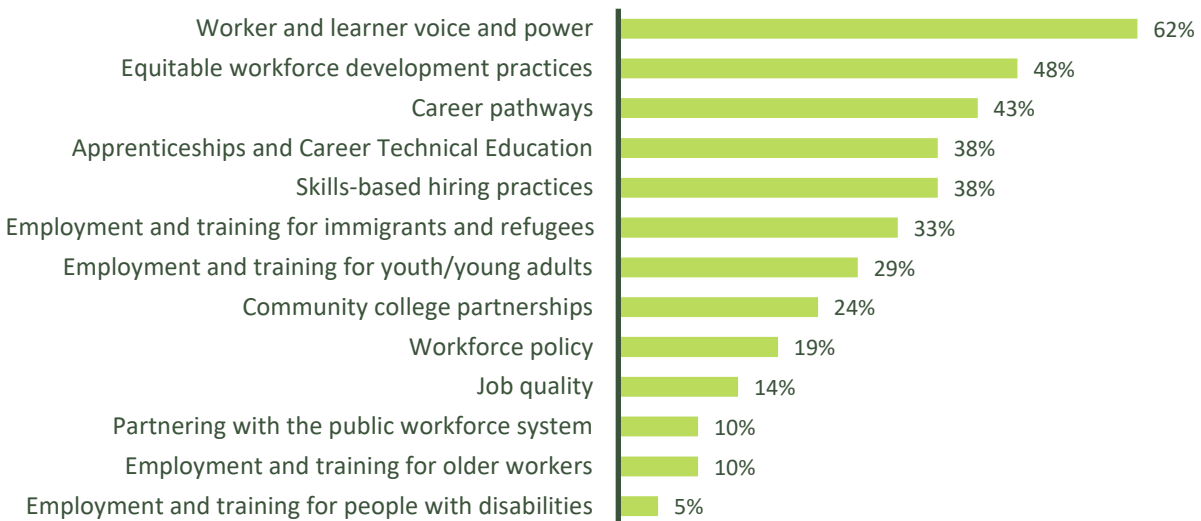
findings in a way that is accessible and culturally relevant for workers and learners and community members, for example through a bilingual one-pager or a video. The grantee added that communications with workers and learners could also provide an opportunity to address expectations around program and organizational changes. This strategic use of findings went beyond internal learning and aimed to create tangible impacts on policies, practices, and collaborations in the broader field.

“The other piece is how to engage our community and provide them with more information about the data collection process, about what they've told us...it's also mitigating expectations from our community members who may be expecting that we're going to have two classes...but there are just some things that we just don't have the capacity to do right now.” – Grantee

Looking ahead to future learning opportunities, the Field Partner Survey asked grantees to indicate which topics they would like to see represented in Workforce Matters’ programming in the following year, and how Workforce Matters could continue to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI).

Grantee survey respondents were most interested in continuing to center worker and learner voice and power, followed by exploring equitable workforce development practices, and career pathways programming. Almost half wanted to see more opportunities for field partners to inform funders about the work they are doing to advance JEDI. **Exhibits 4 and 5** illustrate these responses in more detail.

Exhibit 4. Grantee Interest in Future Learning Topics



Source: Field Partner Survey

Note: 21 grantee respondents answered these survey questions; respondents could select multiple topics.

Exhibit 5. How Workforce Matters Could Advance JEDI



Source: Field Partner Survey

Note: 21 grantee respondents answered these survey questions; respondents could select multiple topics.

Learnings related to worker and learner experiences

Workers and learners who were engaged in grantee activities shared several lessons about the delicate balance between personal and professional growth, and how employers can better support their educational and career pursuits.

- A flexible and inclusive engagement approach made it easier for workers and learners to participate in grantee projects.** Compassion, empathy, and understanding were key elements that created a positive experience for workers and learners. Individuals felt valued and heard when organizations engaged them not just as clients but as part of a community. Parents appreciated when organizations showed empathy as they navigated childcare challenges and sought to understand their needs and offer support, especially when it extended beyond childcare and focused on the whole family. Conversely, lack of personal connections between workers and grantees made it difficult to build trust with grantees and engage in project activities.
- Workers and learners carefully navigated family responsibilities, educational pursuits, and career goals when making decisions about balancing their personal and professional development.** Some individuals had come to a career later in life, having focused on raising children and caring for parents when they were younger. Now, as one person put it, they were “drifting away” from parental responsibilities to focus more on professional aspirations, such as returning to school. Here, individuals also highlighted the importance of being flexible and adaptable, especially when faced with unexpected challenges. One individual, who first lost and then found a new job during COVID used the metaphor “when one door closes, another door opens” to encapsulate the idea of embracing change and seeing opportunities in adversity.
- Workers and learners found that navigating challenges to participating in grant activities became easier when there were support systems in place, both personal (from family) and professional (from employers).** A few single parents attributed their accomplishments to the support of their own parents who helped meet their childcare and transportation needs, such as by “picking [children] up from school or watching them if they’re sick.” Several individuals also

highlighted the role of a supportive employee, observing that a positive work environment contributed significantly to their personal and professional growth.

“My parents have been my support system...It's like that saying: ‘it takes a village.’ You need people who are in your corner who are supporting you, who can help you out when you know things get tough. And the second part of that is having an employer who is just as invested in you and your own growth as you are. Someone who understands where you're trying to go and is going to help you get there. It's important to have both kind of supports.” – Worker

- Workers and learners defined “good jobs” as including multiple dimensions beyond pay and schedules, such as flexibility, benefits, and community-oriented values.** Individuals had a nuanced perspective on job quality and emphasized the importance of several factors that contributed to a balanced and fulfilling life. In particular, they highlighted the importance of flexibility, especially for parents, and the significance of work-life balance so they could be both a dedicated parent and a professional. Individuals also stressed the significance of job benefits, especially health benefits and paid time off. For them, a good job was one that provided supports during unforeseen circumstances such as illness or emergencies. Comprehensive benefits contributed to financial stability and the ability to manage family-related challenges. One individual shared a personal experience of the impact of health benefits during a family crisis: *“Two years ago when my dad passed I was able to help us when we lost the breadwinner at home. Since then it has always stuck in my mind to make sure I have a job with benefits to fall back on because we don't know what goes on and we don't know what's gonna come to you.”* Individuals also appreciated working for mission-driven organizations, on being part of something larger and impactful. One person stressed the importance of supporting the community, saying that their organization *“continues to look for things to do or to give back or provide opportunities to parents.”* Another appreciated being part of an organization that values families and has a genuine interest in the community’s well-being.

Learnings for funders

Through their participation in the Fund Advisory Committee, funders gained insights into the complexities of implementing worker-centered workforce development initiatives, including the importance of neutral learning spaces, the evolving discourse around worker voice, and the value of collaborative efforts to drive meaningful impact.

- Funders valued the Fund as a neutral learning space where they could engage in discussions without feeling judged.** The initiative served as a platform for collaborative learning and exploration of potential next steps based on project findings. Importantly, it allowed funders to engage in discussions about how to integrate worker rights and workforce development initiatives effectively. This type of collaborative effort demonstrates a commitment to aligning strategies and resources to center workers in the development process.

“I think what's really helpful is that because [this] is a learning space for funders, it is some amount of a neutral space that people can come to...and be in a learning mode and not feel like they're being assessed in their grant making or assessed in their engagement. There's not a moral judgment on it, which is helpful.” – Funder

- Funders were interested in tools and resources that help them center worker voices in their**

grantmaking processes. This included understanding the needs, challenges, and aspirations of workers and incorporating their perspectives into decision-making. There was also a desire for access to best practices and effective strategies in workforce development. In particular, funders are looking for concrete examples of successful worker-centered approaches that could inform their grantmaking strategies.

“What are some ways in which we can move an institution to be able to implement certain criteria, certain grant making processes, certain strategy developments?...What are some best practices in regards to certain populations, certain regions, certain communities? And then also sharing personal narratives and stories from [grantees] could be very helpful too as well...hearing stories and conversations around how workforce CBOs are doing work, how workers and learners are engaging in the work and how this has been beneficial for them, could help shape folks' portfolios and ideas around how they can better partner with different communities.” – Funder

Funders also reflected on the model of a pooled funding initiative. Overall, they viewed it as a successful platform for learning, collaboration, and strategic alignment. They also stated that the initiative provided valuable opportunities for networking, knowledge exchange, and innovation within the workforce development field.

- **Through the initiative, funders gained insights into project implementation, relationships with other funders, and innovative practices within the workforce development field.** They expressed interest in understanding the broader context within which funding activities take place, including the entities involved, such as grant-making organizations, investors, donors, and government agencies, as well as the processes and dynamics involved in securing funding for worker-centered projects, initiatives, or organizations. One funder noted that the collaborative and learning-oriented nature of the initiative provided participants with opportunities to share challenges, barriers, and best practices. Another funder described it as an opportunity for exploration and learning without encountering significant institutional hurdles.

“I definitely feel like there's been a lot of information-sharing...so I feel like I learn a lot from them...It's such a nice collaborative space where we can have these emergent learnings of what could we project for either our own organizations or how we work.” – Funder

- **Diverse priorities among funders made it difficult at times to reconcile and make decisions about grant recommendations.** Conflicting opinions among reviewers during the proposal review process and diverging priorities and timeframes may have created challenges.

“[In] the actual process of proposal review...there were very opposing positions on grants, almost diametrically opposed. And there was no mechanism for making sense of that...There was maybe three or four or five of us who all reviewed the same grants... We had a situation where if somebody gave somebody all fives, somebody else gave them all ones, and vice versa. And I don't know how that actually did get reconciled.” – Funder

- **Recommendations for future iterations of the initiative included more robust learning and feedback cycles, standardized evaluation criteria, and targeted funding opportunities.** Funders

wanted to see a more robust process for providing feedback to applicants who were not successful in receiving funding, such as guidance on other funding opportunities or resources that might be available to them. They also suggested developing and standardizing grant proposal evaluation criteria to ensure consistency among reviewers. This could be done through training and calibration sessions to ensure that all reviewers have a shared understanding of the criteria. Finally, the Fund could issue targeted funding calls that align with specific priorities or areas of interest, such as workforce development programs for previously incarcerated individuals or youth.

“In terms of the structure of the open call, I always wrestle with open calls that attract so many applicants and I'm only able to issue a fractional award. That's just the nature of it. But I think where the open calls can also be really specific in what they're looking for can be helpful. There were, from my recollection, a lot of groups that I scored low in my [review], and that happens in any open call, but we can be specific about what we're looking for.” – Funder

Cultivating Funder-Grantee Partnerships

Grantees shared central lessons learned about flexible funding and the dynamics of the grantee-funder partnership that could support funders' future grantmaking decisions, such as the value of flexible funds, the importance of adequate funding for project sustainability, considerations of project timelines, and the use of metrics that reflect holistic impact beyond numbers.

- **Grantees emphasized the value of flexible, unrestricted, and general operating funds.** Three grantees noted the importance of the flexibility in their Fund grants because it allowed them to pivot, make real-time decisions, and explore innovative approaches that might be constrained by more rigid funding sources. One grantee shared that they were able to “test the waters” and try a new approach to worker retention that would typically be unallowable through other funding sources because participants were not required to provide personal information. Without this requirement, participants felt more comfortable approaching support staff for assistance with services or resources, which improved the grantee's touchpoints with participants.

“There is a plasticity and an elasticity in how we were able to do this [project] with [Fund] money that for most government grants would cause any number of our funders to just implode... [Participants] didn't have to give us their social security number or their birthdate or things like that, so I think this gave us some freedom. We let people come in and get a sip of services or talk to the navigator without having to join anything, so it made the on-ramps better.” – Grantee

Another grantee noted that flexible funding helped them to adequately staff their programming and allowed them to adjust their original plans in order to continue working toward a network of family-supportive employers. The grantee explained that flexible funding is connected to sustainability because pivoting when needed helps propel their work, “We can make changes or make things better or tweak it and then continue to move forward. To me, sustainability is the adaptation of what we've done with some of the new information [we've learned] to sustain it going forward.”

Relatedly, three grantees highlighted the critical need for adequate funding to cover project or program costs, including staffing and workers and learner stipends. One grantee noted that

when funds fall short, organizations are forced to look for other funding sources or scale back projects, potentially limiting their impact. Grantees stressed that insufficient funding could lead to frustration and hamper the intended outcomes.

“I think that when you request a certain amount to implement the grant and [funders] come back with less, that's frustrating... We still have to find the funding to make up for it or cut the project short.” – Grantee

- **Grantees shared that holistic metrics may be better suited to capture the value they bring to their communities.** Two grantees appreciated that Fund grants were not numbers-driven or tied to specific metrics and stressed the limitations of metrics solely focused on job placements and wages may not accurately reflect how workers and learners move through career pathways. Emphasizing the need for holistic metrics, these grantees suggested that funders should recognize the broader value they bring beyond numerical outcomes.

“Unrestricted funding is really important for us...A lot of the government funders are really trying to push us into this workforce development stuff and it tends to be very numbers driven...it's very much about ‘Tell us how many people you've placed in jobs? What are the wages that they're getting? How long are they in those jobs?’ I think they're missing the mark on the value that we bring...It's very hard dealing with funders who are so results-driven through numbers.” – Grantee

- **Grantees identified flexible timelines and multi-year grants as two approaches for improved funder supports.** A third of grantees expressed the need for improved supports, including flexible timelines and multi-year grant terms. Grantees observed that developing and implementing projects and programs is a process that requires time, and having multi-year funding can ease the pressure of having to constantly secure funding to continue operations. As one grantee described their experience with their Fund project, *“We finally got this freight train rolling and it is going to stop and we got to figure out something else.”*
- **Grantees appreciated having the space and time to learn and iterate individually and with one another.** Grantees saw immense value in the learning sessions, individual coaching, and technical assistance supports provided by the Fund. These became trusted spaces where grantees could connect with and learn from peers and colleagues and share pitfalls and successes openly and without judgement. Discussions around journey mapping and power dynamics were especially resonant and compelling.

“I'm sitting here listening and I [realize], ‘Whoa. Yeah, there's a power play that goes into a lot of the work that we do.’ The information that you armor us with allows us to see things in a bigger picture. What am I missing from my projects? What am I not incorporating? That was a big need...You're providing us[an opportunity] to look at things from a different scope.” – Grantee

- **Grantees noted that partnership dynamics with funders could be strengthened.** One grantee emphasized the importance of an approach where grantees drive the narrative around their programs rather than being in a “parent-child relationship.” The grantee appreciated that they did not experience a “parent-child” dynamic with the Fund. Similarly, another grantee shared that their relationship with the Fund was different from other funders because they could be

open and transparent about their experiences implementing their project. The grantee expressed that they felt validated, *“I feel like I cared about this grant more than any other funding because it felt like we were seen in a way that we hadn’t been seen before.”*

The same grantee also underlined the unique needs of smaller, grassroots organizations in securing equitable funding and argued for intentional grantmaking decisions and longer funding periods to support organizations building capacity over time. Equity, in their view, involves recognizing the potential for growth in organizations that may lack immediate capacity.

“A lot of times, the bigger organizations...get the bulk of the funding. But then the little guy like us are run by the people who are impacted. Oftentimes, it is really easy to look over the little people, and I think the little people often need more support and longer funding...When we talk about equity, it isn’t always, ‘everybody gets the same grant for the same amount of time.’ Organizations that don’t have capacity are looked at like, ‘Oh, well you don’t have the capacity’, but if you hung in there with me a little longer, I could have the capacity.” – Grantee

Learnings for the field

Funders highlighted a growing recognition of the importance of workforce development in philanthropy, alongside a need for more equitable and innovative approaches to address the diverse needs of communities and individuals.

- **Funders observed that philanthropic interest and investment in workforce development are increasing.** They started that this interest is coming from both from traditional and newer education and economic mobility-focused foundations. In the same vein, philanthropic organizations are shifting their focus towards workforce development due to changing societal needs and a reevaluation of traditional funding models. Particularly, there is a notable shift towards emphasizing job quality—organizations and agencies are increasingly concerned with aspects such as wages, benefits, career progression, supportive services, and employee ownership.

“The number of folks focused on workforce development foundations is growing [and] there’s a couple of places where I see that happening. One is through higher education funding foundations who have discovered workforce development as a new place to invest...And then, I think there’s also some folks in the intergenerational wealth or economic mobility space where workforce development...has become a bigger piece of the work that they do...So I think there’s always been a group, and I think that group is growing.” – Funder

- **Funders and grantees saw an increased push towards incorporating a racial equity lens in workforce development.** They acknowledged the need to center the experiences of people of color in the workforce system and address historical inequities, and some called for greater inclusion of underrepresented communities, such as Native and tribal communities, justice-involved individuals, and people with disabilities in workforce development efforts. At the same time, there was a recognition that some organizations were ahead in this regard while others were still catching up.

“Even within our institution, we're the one initiative that's new to racial equity. Everybody else is doing worker rights or social safety net or doing place-based strategies. [We are] trying to shift the field when the field is just getting to a place of being open to even talk about race and equity and gender. The field of philanthropy in regards to workforce is still nascent, and folks are trying to learn, but the mechanisms that they're using to learn are more so invested in traditional workforce models.” – Funder

- **Funders recognized the importance of partnerships between local and national organizations, as well as with governmental bodies, to address workforce challenges effectively.** Efforts included aligned funding, support for worker voice initiatives, and collaboration with government agencies to address workforce challenges. Workforce boards are seen as having significant potential but were criticized for being outdated and ineffective in serving the needs of marginalized communities. There was also a recognition of the importance of engaging employers in workforce development efforts, as well as challenges in establishing such partnerships.

As the field navigate these challenges, effective solutions demand collaborative efforts, innovative strategies, and a collective commitment to reshaping the workforce landscape for a more inclusive and supportive future. Grantee and funder insights can be considered a call to action for policymakers, program developers, and employers to make transformative changes to advance equitable employment opportunities.

5 | Conclusion: “Thank You for Seeing Us”

The Fund for Workforce Equity supported learning among funders and workforce organizations to expand the use of effective strategies to center and amplify the voices of workers and learners of color. The findings detailed above highlight areas of success, challenge, and opportunity as projects considered the sustainability of their efforts and how to use lessons learned as a “springboard” for future initiatives. Grantees used funding and TA supports to assess the needs of their communities and build inclusive structures to ensure the voices of those most impacted by programs—workers and learners—were involved in decision-making. Despite barriers to engagement, workers and learners were eager to be involved in workforce program design and noted that the benefits were both tangible (e.g., gaining valuable professional skills) and emotional (e.g., gaining a sense of empowerment and confidence).

“Thank you for seeing us and really for just giving us a chance. It's been very life-changing for a lot of people and for me, too.” – Grantee

In addition to the insights about project outcomes, partnerships, and ways to support organizations described above, this report also provides an opportunity to reflect on the initiative’s first year and consider where learning efforts can be deepened or redirected. Centering worker voice and agency takes time, particularly with communities that have been historically excluded from decision-making efforts. It also requires trust building, mutual respect, and shifting institutional power to those at the margins. The Fund played a key role in shaping organizations’ worker and learner engagement strategies by offering them resources (i.e., funding, time, and space) to test out innovative approaches. In its second iteration, the Fund can continue to push for increased engagement of workers and learners of color in setting programmatic directions, the shifting of organizational policies and procedures to center worker voice, and an examination of the role of philanthropy in workforce development. SPR would like to extend our deep gratitude to the Fund partners, including Workforce Matters, the Fund Advisory Committee, grantee organizations, and workers and learners engaged in this initiative, for their thought partnership throughout this learning and evaluation effort. We look forward to seeing all that the Fund accomplishes in its future endeavors.

Appendix A: Grantee Descriptions



Alternatives For Girls, *Detroit, MI*

Alternatives For Girls (AFG) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help girls and young women avoid violence and teen pregnancy, by helping them access supports, resources and opportunities to make positive choices and be safe. AFG primarily serves at-risk young women and girls of color, including those that are experiencing homelessness, human trafficking, and domestic violence. Their workforce development services provide multiple pathways for at-risk women for social and economic mobility which include integrated career exploration and planning, training and placement services. In the course of its work, AFGs has developed various partnerships with local employers and training providers. AFG has prior experience incorporating the voices of youth and young adults within other agency programs, and ensure two board seats are reserved for AFG participants or community members with lived experience, and have Youth, Parent and Community Councils that provide feedback on AFG Prevention program services.



California Indian Manpower Consortium, *Sacramento and San Diego County, CA*

California Indian Manpower Consortium (CIMC) is a non-profit consortium of 104 reservations and rancherias in California, which is owned and operated by Native Americans and advocates for the educational and economic advancement of the first Americans', including Native American, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian individuals who are low-income, unemployed or underemployed. CIMC's workforce development services include employment, training, education, nutritional assistance, housing assistance, childcare, eldercare, follow-up services, and other supportive services that ensure career success while also reserving the cultural integrity of its participants.



Chicago Commons Association, *Chicago, IL*

Chicago Commons is a neighborhood focused non-profit organization that supports and empowers under-resourced individuals, families, and communities in overcoming poverty and systemic barriers. Chicago Commons utilizes a multi-generational approach to its available services, which primarily focus on childhood education, family -centered adult education, and senior services and care. Their Family Hub programs includes a range of supportive services and educational opportunities, including workshops, individual coaching, strengthening families' economic mobility, financial security, and health/well-being. Their Family Hub workforce development program includes employment coaching and pathways for parents, as well as cohorts of parents in college classes. The majority of their participants are low-income working families who fall below the federal poverty line, and 95% of parents are African American women or Latinas. Chicago Commons has previously centered workers and learner voices in programming and decision making. For example, they have various programs that integrate participants and parents in their development, operation, planning and programming, including the Family Hub programs, and Pathways for Parents program.



Encuentro, Albuquerque, NM

Encuentro comprises Latine immigrants in Central New Mexico who have come together to support and engage New Mexico residents for social inclusion and economic mobility by providing educational and career development and opportunities and addressing the barriers. The organizations goals are two-fold, and include addressing workforce skill-building needs crucial for employment and social inclusion within the immigrant community, particularly language, literacy, and technology, and in turn supporting individuals in applying those skills and tools for leadership and civic engagement. Encuentro primarily serves English-language learning Latine immigrant adults, most identify as women, and a majority do not have a high school diploma and lack digital literacy skills. Adult education is the primary focus, and includes multiple classes, such as ESL, computer literacy, and those for citizenship. Encuentro's uniquely centers worker and learner voice within the development of programs and ongoing activities, because its staff and board is made up of constituents.



Fair Work Center, Seattle and Yakima Valley, WA

Fair Work Center is an organization with a grassroots worker base, focused on raising and upholding labor standards and building worker power, while fighting for economic and racial justice. Fair Work Center engages in education and learning about the rights of workers and developing tools for exercising those rights, organizes and advocates for changes in the workplace, including industry practices, laws, and work values, and uses legal services and the law to build the movement and hold employers accountable. In Yakima, all of Fair Work Center's participants are Spanish speaking, monolingual, and Latino communities, additionally their participants for trainings in Yakima are all people of color, and the majority are woman. In centering workers and learner voices, Fair Work Center has multiple committees focused on new rights that brings in workers to help with the policy campaign, including developing priorities and strategizing.



Gideon's Army Grassroots Army for Children, Nashville, TN

Gideon's Army is a community-based grassroots workforce development organization made up of black individuals that have been impacted by mass incarceration, the school to prison pipeline and youth violence. They are violence prevention organization focused on eliminating the root cause of the prison pipeline by guiding youth to success through community self-empowerment and leadership based off of restorative healing. They use restorative justice programs to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, and their programs address school pushout, youth violence, policing, and juvenile justice.

Their workforce program is called Gideon's Army University, and it is run like a school by quarters where they focus on just training and education, alternatives to violence, dialectical, behavioral, and skill building. Gideon's Army's workforce development model has two components, the first is hiring people from their community for their internal staff workforce program, the second is that their workforce development program is designed to accommodate the broader community and is part of their Economic Justice Initiative. Gideon's Army serves youth and young adults in North Nashville community between the ages 14 and 25, who are high risk for participating in violence or being directly impacted by violence. The majority of these youth are Black/African American.



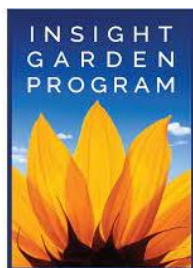
Hack.Diversity, Boston, MA and New York, NY

Hack.Diversity is a nonprofit focused on transforming the economy and breaking down barriers as it relates to Black and Latine professionals in the technology industry. Their program focus is on upskilling both ends of the talent and employer hiring and retention and bridging the gap between employers and Black and Latine in the field. In doing this, their program partners with employers and companies on their culture and readiness to recruit, retain and accept leaders of color while focusing on technical talent and ensuring a diverse team, and for fellows provides technical project skill-building, career skill-building, industry social capital building to generate competitive salaries for their fellows within the tech industry for their future success and ability to generate wealth. Hack.Diversity's primarily serves their fellows, who predominantly self-identify as Black and/or Latine, the majority are also immigrants or first-generation American. Hack/Diversity's recent work in centering worker and learner voices is captured in their regular feedback from Fellows and program Alumni at regular intervals.



Hired, Minneapolis, MN

Hired's work centers on advancing economic opportunity and justice, and career advancement for individuals deeply affected by historic and systemic inequities. This includes engaging individuals who face barriers to career advancement as a result of limited work or educational experience, justice system involvement, unstable living conditions, and other situational barriers to employment. The core services include individualized support and planning, life and career-focused coaching, and career training. Hired serves a majority of individuals that identify as BIPOC and identify as having an annual income below the federal poverty level. With regards to centering worker and learner voices, Hired has incorporated family experience and suggested changes in the MFIP (MN Family Investment Program) pilot program, and they are engaging participant feedback in the design and development of the Economic Stability Indicator (ESI) tool.



Insight Garden Program (IGP), Berkeley, CA

Insight Garden Program (IGP), a grassroots non-profit led by people who were previously incarcerated and most impacted by incarceration, provides a "re-connection through nature" restorative rehabilitation approach for transforming the lives of incarcerated individuals. IGP's in-prison programming and reentry support provides an "inner" and "outer" gardening approach and curriculum that includes vocational gardening, and landscape training so that incarcerated individuals can successfully reintegrate into community and the broader world and transform their lives and end the cycle of incarceration. IGP operates inside nine prisons across the state of California, working with individuals who have been in prison for a very long time, which are disproportionately people of color. IGP centers worker and learner voices by having participants lead engage and provide feedback. Participants will co-facilitate the curriculum, and they even host focus groups and invite reflections from participants.



New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals (NYATEP), Albany, NY

New York Association of Training & Employment Professionals (NYATEP), is New York's premier workforce development association representing over 250 organizations, including workforce development boards, community college systems, economic developers, career and technical education providers, labor unions, literacy associations, transportation associations, among others. NYATEP

advocates on behalf of the workforce development community for equitable systems change and promote economic mobility, provides training to create opportunities for advancement, and promotes improvement of the state's systems and local practice in providing workforce services. NYATEP serves over one million New Yorkers, who are predominantly Black, Indigenous, and BIPOC individuals. In centering worker and learner voices, NYATEP believes participants should inform public policy, and they have previously utilized young adults in informing the needs for youth workforce services.



Café Reconcile (RNO), New Orleans, LA

Reconcile New Orleans (RNO) is a nonprofit that addresses disconnected and out-of-school youth and communities living in poverty, and encourages personal growth, provides workforce development, training, promotes entrepreneurship, and reconnects them to opportunities in order to help transform their lives and build strong communities. Services provided include access to mental health, counseling, support services, training, and occupational skills training. Their Workforce Development Program is a 4-tiered customized learning structure, which includes foundational life skills training, occupational skills training at Café Reconcile, career exploration opportunities in line with meaningful career pathways, and job opportunities with RNO's employer partners or certification through community college pathways. RNO services opportunity youth in New Orleans between ages 16 and 24 who may be disconnected from school and the workforce, and those impacted by the legal system. Nearly 100% of participants are people of color. In Centering worker and learner voices, RNO's strategic plan captures youth voice through ongoing survey collection, and program feedback.



Rocky Mountain Partnership (RMP), Thornton, CO

Rocky Mountain Partnership (RMP) is a coalition of cross-sector community members and community partners focused on improving the economic and social mobility by breaking down silos, removing obstacles, and supporting resources and policy change so that all community members in Adams County, the City of Aurora, and the City and County of Broomfield can earn skills and credentials, access to top job, advance in their career so they and their families can thrive. As such, the coalition works to transform systems to empower community members by focusing on four priority areas, which include: improving hiring and retention practices, increasing the number of pathways to top jobs, removing housing barriers, and addressing the opioid crisis. Over half of the community RMP serves identify as people of color. In centering worker and learner voices, RMP has three pillars to community engagement, which include qualitative data from community members to inform actions and decision, the co-development of solutions with those impacted by systems and/or those with lived experience, and retaining leadership and decision-making power and positions for community members most impacted by systems and/or lived experience.



Roots Community Health Center, Oakland, CA

Roots Community Health Center is a multiservice healthcare agency that addresses systemic inequities and poverty by combatting the historically neglected health needs of the African American/Black communities in East Oakland. In doing so, their services and programs address community needs via community engagement and transition services, workforce enterprise and training, health and wellness services, and community advocacy and capacity building. The majority of their participants identify as Black/African descent. In Centering worker and learner voices, Roots prioritizes hiring individuals with situationally diverse lived experience so that employees

have deep relationships in the neighborhoods being served and they engage personnel in feedback allowing staff to debrief and decompress.



Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.), Cleveland, OH

Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.) is a nonprofit workforce development collaborative organization that serves under-resourced teens and young adults prepare for the workforce and become economically self-sufficient. Y.O.U.'s workforce development services focus on supporting teens and young adults through career development, HS graduation and Post-HS success, career exploration internships, youth employment, and young adult job placement and credential training. Resources include a young adult resource center that provides employment and career-planning assistance, support, and case management services. The teens and young adults served in Cuyahoga County are predominantly Black/African American, and the majority are eligible for TANF or WIOA funding. In Centering worker and learner voice, Y.O.U. through participant surveys to ensure feedback is collected to provide program growth, and collects satisfaction data from constituents.



Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA San Antonio), San Antonio, TX

Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is a national multicultural women's organization dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity so women and girls can thrive. YWCA's focus areas include racial justice and civil rights, increasing economic advancement for women and girls of color, improving health and safety of women and girls of color, providing safety and security for women (including domestic and sexual violence services), and serving kids through childcare services and programming. Their Economic Empowerment and Workforce Readiness Programs include financial literacy classes, RESET (Re-engagement for Self-Sufficiency, Empowerment and Transformation) which serves disconnected young women, assistance to banking, legal and financial resources, and a Ready to Work workforce development program. YWCA serves the most vulnerable in Bexar County, which is primarily those low-income individuals and people of color. In centering worker and learner voice, YWCA listens to the needs of participants through interviews and case management, which they use to continuously improve services and to receive information about barriers they face.

Appendix B: Grantee Overview

Grantee	Population(s) Served	% People of Color	Location	Focus/Service Area(s)	Examples of Experience Centering Workers & Learners
Alternatives For Girls	Young women and women of color experiencing homelessness, human trafficking, and domestic violence	100% (74% Black, 24% Hispanic, 2% Asian)	Detroit, MI	Emergency services, educational programming, outreach and education services, housing, workforce development	Two board seats reserved for people with lived experience; Youth, Parent, and Community Councils to provide program input; Peer Educator/Leader model provides opportunities for paid work experience within agency; gathering participant feedback
Café Reconcile (RNO)	Young adults and opportunity youth	97%	New Orleans, LA	Mental health counseling, support services, training, occupational skills training	Ongoing participant survey collection with feedback presented to staff and board; prioritizing lived experience in decision making
California Indian Manpower Association	Low income, unemployed or underemployed individuals of Native American, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian descent	100%	Sacramento and San Diego County, CA	Employment services, training services, follow up services and other supportive wrap-around services	Programming uses a worker and learner centered approach; gathering feedback from participants through surveys
Chicago Commons Association	Low-income working families, primarily women	100% (70% Latina and 30% African American)	Chicago, IL	Early childhood education, family-centered adult education, and senior services	Parent committee; assessments to learn about participant needs and strengths; using a participatory action approach that engages participants in design, implementation, and governance of programming
Encuentro	Latine immigrants	100%	Albuquerque, NM	Education and career services, opportunities for leadership and civic engagement	Culture of shared power and leadership; constituents are part of staff and board

Grantee	Population(s) Served	% People of Color	Location	Focus/Service Area(s)	Examples of Experience Centering Workers & Learners
Fair Work Center	Gig workers, restaurant workers, nannies, agricultural warehouse workers	100% in Yakima	Seattle and Yakima Valley, WA	Advocacy and labor standards enforcement, worker education and organizing	Worker rights campaigns and industry committees developed with participants
Gideon's Grassroots Army for Children	Youth and young adults	100%, primarily Black	Nashville, TN	Restorative justice programming	Incorporating lived experiences and voices of organization leadership and staff across all levels of the organization
Hack.Diversity	Black and Latinx professionals in tech	0% of Fellows identify as white or Caucasian	Boston, MA and New York, NY	Tech fellowship, career coaching, internship opportunities	Centering fellows' needs and perspectives; using fellows' feedback to inform programming
Hired	People and families living in economic poverty facing barriers to employment, opportunity youth, low-income unemployed and underemployed individuals	68%	Minneapolis, MN	Individualized holistic support, career coaching, job readiness, career pathway training	Programming is responsive to evolving needs of job seekers and their families
Insight Garden Program (IGP)	Justice-involved individuals	79%	Berkeley, CA	Holistic reentry supports and services, policy and advocacy	Participants are trained to be curriculum co-facilitators and focus group hosts; participants provide input on program development; feedback collected through surveys; program graduates serve as staff and board members
New York Association of Training and Education Professionals (NYATEP)	BIOPC communities	Predominantly BIPOC	Albany, NY	Statewide workforce development association	In the process of developing learning communities that incorporate participant voice

Grantee	Population(s) Served	% People of Color	Location	Focus/Service Area(s)	Examples of Experience Centering Workers & Learners
Rocky Mountain Partnership (RMP)	Individuals within RMP's geographic scope in Colorado	51%	Thornton, CO	Training and credentialing, employer engagement around hiring, retention, and promotion, housing services, addressing opioid crisis	Approach to community engagement and decision-making is centered around: 1) Community Voice and Perspective; 2) Qualitative data gathered from community members informing action and decisions; 3) Co-Development of Solutions
Roots Community Health Center	Individuals impacted by systemic inequities and poverty	86%	Oakland, CA	Health and wellness, workforce and training, community advocacy and capacity building	Hiring staff with diverse lived experiences reflective of the communities served; continually gathering and responding to staff feedback
Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.)	Young adults in under-resourced communities	83% Black/African American, 5% Bi/Multi-racial, 1% Asian, 8% Hispanic/Latinx	Cleveland, OH	Workforce development services	Youth participation in roundtable business discussions and workforce system youth council meetings to inform programming and employer engagement strategies
Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA San Antonio)	Low-income communities	95%	San Antonio, TX	Employment and job skills training, early childhood education and youth development	Gathering data around challenges and barriers participants face through interviews and case management sessions; commitment to improving career trajectories for childcare staff

Appendix A: Evaluation Questions

We see the evaluation as having three core areas of inquiry: (1) Assessing Grantee Activities, (2) Understanding Outcomes of Grantees' Work, and (3) Surfacing Learnings from the Fund. Within each inquiry area are detailed learning and evaluation questions. Many of these are taken fully or in part from the Request for Proposals (RFP). Others have been added by SPR and reflect key analytical frameworks we have used in our past work.

Assessing Grantee Activities

1. How were grant funds used? How did these funds help grantees advance workforce equity in their organizations?
 - a. How do grantees define or understand "workforce equity?" How do participants define or understand "workforce equity?"
2. In what ways did organizations center workers of color in workforce policy, program design, and implementation?
 - a. What were grantees' strategies or approaches to center workers of color in workforce policy, program design, and/or implementation?
 - b. How did grantees develop their strategies or approaches? What helped or informed these strategies or approaches?
 - c. How did grantees utilize Fund resources (technical assistance, individual coaching, and the learning community) to implement their projects?
 - d. What other tools or resources did grantees utilize to implement their projects (e.g., leveraged funding, existing tools or practices, partnerships)?
3. Are grantees planning to sustain or expand their projects?
 - a. What will it take to expand the adaptation and use of strategies to center and amplify the voices of workers and learners?
 - b. To what extent did Fund resources contribute to grantees' broader goals to center workers of color in workforce policy and program design and implementation?
 - c. What other ways are grantees advancing workforce equity within their organizations and/or in the larger field?

Understanding Outcomes of Grantees' Work

4. What resulted from grantees' strategies or approaches to center workers of color? What were the successes? What were the learning opportunities?
 - a. To what extent did grantees successfully implement their projects and meet their anticipated objectives?
 - b. What were the barriers and facilitators of project implementation and outcomes?
 - c. How are grantees integrating and sustaining equity-based practices?
5. What are the lessons learned from the grantee, participant, and funder perspectives?
 - d. What and how are grantees learning about increasing learner/worker engagement and creating more equitable workforce outcomes especially for workers and learners of color?
 - e. What and how are participants learning and/or benefiting from being engaged in grantee projects?

- f. What and how are funders learning about increasing learner/worker engagement and creating more equitable workforce outcomes especially for workers and learners of color?

Surfacing Learnings from the Fund

6. To what extent are mindset shifts or narrative change evident as a result of grantee projects?
 - a. How are grantees advancing, progressing, or shifting organizational policies and procedures based on these learnings?
 - b. How are participants continuing to engage in workforce policy and program design and implementation based on their involvement in grantee projects?
 - c. How are funders advancing, progressing, or shifting funding and engagement strategies based on these learnings?
7. What are applicable lessons for the field as other partners work to center and amplify the voices of workers and learners?
 - a. What pre-conditions are necessary for organizations to undertake this work? How does organizational context facilitate or inhibit progress?
 - b. What tools, resources, and supports do grantees need to find, support, and engage proximate leaders who are workers and learners of color?
 - c. What tools, resources, and supports do workers and learners of color need to engage in this work?
 - d. What strategies can philanthropy use to support field partners interested in undertaking this work? Are there ways funders can be better partners to grantees?
 - e. What implications for the workforce system are emerging from this work?