



INTRODUCTION

As a national organization dedicated to advancing gender justice, the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) is committed to centering the perspectives and leadership of women of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women and families with low incomes in our work. In 2022, the Income Security and Child Care (IS/CC) team at NWLC decided to pilot two distinct yet connected initiatives to enable the team to have a continuous feedback loop with communities directly impacted by the policies the team advocates for, including:

- >>> A child care system that ensures every family has access to affordable, high quality child care and that every child care provider has adequate compensation and good working conditions;
- >>> Housing justice as gender justice, so that women and LGBTQIA+ people can have safe, accessible, and affordable housing in neighborhoods of their choosing;
- >>> Tax justice as gender justice by making the tax code more equitable and progressive, expanding tax provisions that advance gender and racial equity, and raising more revenue to support public investments in women and families, and;
- Modernized and strengthened social insurance programs (such as unemployment insurance and Social Security), retirement policies, and antipoverty programs to correct for the cumulative impact of systemic inequities and to ensure that women can live with dignity throughout their lives.

The team came to understand that to truly advance systemic change, those closest to the Center's issues—and therefore closest to the solutions—had to be meaningfully engaged in our work. It was critically important to hear directly from the women and families we center in our advocacy. Strategically engaging those who are impacted by the child care and income security policies we are working to improve and practicing power sharing and trust building in our relationships, mirrors one of the guiding principles of the Center's 2021 strategic plan and overall is aligned with the Center's goal to grow the power of the gender justice movement.

This center-wide commitment led us to launch two pilots in 2023 that seek to center community leadership, one of which was the Community Impact Fund (CIF)—a participatory or "community-led" grantmaking initiative that enables those closest to the issues to drive the change or solutions they seek.

Our theory of change was that by investing deeply right where communities live, work and play—through grassroots organizing, hands-on training, and genuine power building—we can spark real change from the ground up. From our perspective, transformational relationship-building between national and state and local groups means not just checking boxes or meeting goals; it's about enabling conditions for a powerful, bottom-up approach that genuinely supports women and families struggling to meet their needs. We're not just working for communities; we're working with them, building a movement that grows stronger with every conversation, every training, every moment of collective action, while also enabling us to meet our strategic goals.

The key questions we seek to answer through this initiative include:

- >>> What does it look like for a national organization without local or state chapters to build transformational and reciprocal relationships with grassroots or state nonprofit organizations and people with lived experience? And what would it look like for us to show up within states as a long-term partner that goes "beyond the check"?
- >>> How closely are we adhering to the best practices of participatory or community-led grantmaking?
- >>> As opposed to the impact traditional grantmaking may have on a community, what does impact and "success" look like when Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) leaders are trusted decision makers of resource investments? How is it different or the same? What work or strategies get prioritized in a community when we invest in their leadership and share (or cede) decision-making power?

Through the Community Impact Fund (CIF), NWLC is working to respond in real time to state and grassroots needs, building power and resilience within marginalized communities, creating feedback loops that center the voices of women and families closest to these issues, and investing in effective, locally developed and responsive interventions to address systemic inequity.

Through this report we want to share learnings that were both formally gathered through an independent evaluation and observed by NWLC staff from the initiative's first "planning" year (June 2023 – June 2024). We want to particularly lift up the feedback of our Design and Advisory Committee members who have brough the CIF to life. We're committed to radical transparency. By sharing our lessons and observations publicly, we do more than simply report on our work—we create a living, breathing dialogue that honors the trust placed in us by our grassroots partners and the women who generously shared their stories, dreams, and community aspirations. This isn't just about accountability; it's about amplifying voices, learning continuously, and inviting other organizations to reimagine what collaborative, community-centered work can look like. We especially hope that the lessons we share can be helpful to other national organizations or foundations seeking to be part of a movement toward community-led grantmaking.

These learnings are preliminary as they focus on the first year of planning and design of the Community Impact Fund. Though we start answering some of the key questions above, we expect most of the answers will be clearer at the end of the first year (June 2025) of the two-year grant cycle, at which point another evaluation report will be released.

WHAT IS A PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING MODEL (PGM) OR PROCESS?

Participatory grantmaking is an effort to push the philanthropic sector and national entities that engage in regranting funds beyond trust-based engagement to active and collaborative engagement with marginalized communities, creating a seat for communities at the philanthropic decision-making table.¹

The IS/CC subteam responsible for launching and overseeing the Community Impact Fund (CIF)—the Community Partnerships team—contracted consultants at the beginning of planning phase of the Fund with expertise in leading committees or groups through the participatory grantmaking planning process. In their literature review on participatory grantmaking they found that the key components of this process include:

- Meaningful and authentic community engagement and representation of diverse community members;
- Transparency and accountability that entails open communication regarding decision-making, timelines, and expectations for all stakeholders, as well as accountability mechanisms that include progress reporting, evaluation, and ongoing feedback, to ensure that projects align with stated objectives and learnings are shared and leveraged;
- Flexible funding models that allow grantees to address complex social issues in an effective and culturally responsive manner, including general operating support and multiyear grants. This approach can also include capacity-building support; and
- Recognition that **equity and inclusion underpin the strategy**, which aims to overcome systemic discrimination and marginalization, power imbalances, and injustice.²
- 1 Chapman, S. (December 18, 2023). A call to move beyond trust-based to care-based philanthropy. https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/commentary-and-opinion/a-call-to-move-beyond-trust-based-to-care-based-philanthropy



In essence, the process turns traditional grantmaking on its head by challenging funders to collaborate in or cede decision-making power to communities, who with intimate knowledge of their own communities decide where and how to invest resources to enable building community power, leadership, and resilience.

In addition, the literature review also captured a continuum that was developed based on a landscape analysis of participatory grantmaking conducted by the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance.³ The continuum maps participatory grantmaking along two dimensions: depth of engagement and power sharing. The continuum includes three levels of participatory grantmaking:

- 1. Consulting having input into foundation or grant priorities or processes without the expectation that input will be incorporated,
- 2. Involving participating in an advisory committee, and
- 3. Deciding having the power to make grant decisions and conduct evaluations.

"If you're going to distribute funds to a community, it's important to have community members that have experience and share their story, [that's] where the process should start," says a member of the CIF's Advisory Committee.

The assessment found that most philanthropic entities engage communities on a superficial basis—the consulting level—and the process is often exclusive and limited to engaging their existing grantees.

As a national organization seeking to engage grassroots organizations and people with lived experience, we were cognizant of both the power we held and the potential harm groups outside of a local context with their own (national) agenda can cause when engaging on local or state issues, and we sought to be incredibly intentional about building out a Design and Advisory Committee (DAC), stepping in only as needed, and moving through the process at the speed of trust. We recruited onto the committee four community-based organizational leaders (two from New Mexico and two from South Carolina), who in turn nominated two women community leaders from the Sparking Change initiative (one from New Mexico, and one from South Carolina), and they collectively undertook a 12-month planning process facilitated by an external consulting team.

And because our team was committed to building power alongside communities, adding to their local capacity, and building transformational relationships along a national-state- and local continuum, we aspired in our planning year to engage our DAC in a process of "involving" and "deciding."

Our approach reflects our commitment to authentic partnership—one that consciously disrupts traditional power dynamics and centers the wisdom of those most impacted by the work. By intentionally creating space for grassroots leaders to shape, guide, and ultimately decide, we're not just conducting a planning process; we're modeling a fundamental reimagining of how national organizations can support local movements. This isn't about extracting knowledge or checking diversity boxes, but about genuine co-creation, mutual learning, and building the kind of transformative relationships that can truly shift power.

- 2 Buhles, K. (April 10, 2023). Seven best practices in participatory grantmaking. https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/7-best-practices-in-participatory-grantmaking/ Fund for Global Human Rights (February 25, 2021). Fund 101: Intro to Participatory Grant-making. https://globalhumanrights.org/commentary/fund-101-intro-to-participatory-grant-making/
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 Husted, K., Finchum-Mason, E., & Suarez, D. (2021). Sharing power? The landscape of participatory practices & grantmaking among large U.S. foundations. University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy & Governance.

APPROACH TO EVALUATING YEAR ONE

At the end of the planning year, the Community Partnerships team contracted a second consulting firm to evaluate the full year of work the Design and Advisory Committee (DAC) embarked on. By that point, our NWLC team had formed a DAC inclusive of six local representatives who over the course of 12 months determined the child care and income security issues the Fund would address; designed the grantmaking process and application document; and decided which community-based organizations in New Mexico and South Carolina would be awarded the inaugural two-year grant.

To complete their evaluation, the consultants reviewed all available literature developed by the DAC throughout the planning period—the CIF theory of change, logic model, and request for proposals, as well as public data related to PGM. Additional data from DAC participants, key NWLC staff, and the two state grantees were gathered through interviews conducted by the evaluation team and surveys conducted by the NWLC Community Partnerships team.

In total, 12 confidential, 60-minute interviews were conducted between August and October 2024, which sought to capture first-person reflections on the DAC and grant implementation processes, engagement processes and experiences, strengths, challenges, and opportunities, initial outcomes, and lessons learned during Year One of the CIF. The following sections highlight these findings.



KEY FINDINGS

The following are throughlines that we believe show the value and potential benefit of participatory grantmaking efforts and pertain to what DAC participants said they most appreciated about the CIF planning year.

A thoughtfully built infrastructure from the beginning enabled inclusive, meaningful, and authentic engagement.

All DAC participants interviewed talked about feeling heard, valued, and their perspectives were reflected in every stage of the planning process from identifying

"It seemed authentic to me because they selected someone like me—a community member not with an organization...I am someone who is directly impacted..." — DAC member

the problem statement to deciding on final grantees. "We were able to discuss proposals—what we liked and didn't...
This allowed me to make an effective decision that was valued and weighed," says a DAC member. "I liked the team-based decision...it felt empowering and that my voice was heard."

The NWLC team provided English/Spanish interpreters at every meeting, made sure that all written material was translated in English/Spanish, created important pauses in the process for clarity and group discussion, and when the group's assumptions or hypotheses needed to be validated, created a feedback loop to a community of local BIPOC women with lived experience.

A shared value of centering the leadership of women with lived experience meant NWLC staff and external facilitators had permission to pace the work and format the space in

such a way that everyone was brought along, including through the use of online tools to enable real-time collaboration and offering DAC members the opportunity to complete work asynchronously. These strategies were appreciated by DAC participants who only met once a month on average and were balancing this work on top of full workloads.

Along with appreciation for providing a participation stipend for each DAC participant, interviewees valued the NWLC staff's open, transparent, and consistent communication and the offer of resources like office hours between meetings. They described the team as thoughtful, collaborative, welcoming, and that they value everyone involved. One participant thought that NWLC's approach "created authenticity to relationships; it felt like a real group and although virtual, felt meaningful."

Ultimately, this intentional approach to engagement is far more than a process—it's a demonstration of how genuine inclusion can transform collaborative work. By centering the voices and experiences of women directly impacted by the work, creating multiple pathways for meaningful participation, and building an infrastructure that underscores access, respect and care, we modeled a fundamentally more human way of working together.

The CIF planning process reinforced how critical and powerful community voice and experience are to decision making.

DAC members interviewed, including women with lived experience, felt that the planning process allowed everyone to contribute to shaping the initiative. "We were a part of every part of the process," shared a DAC member. "There were no surprises because we were engaged in the entire process." A member new to the PGM process shared, "for the first time, felt like [they were] organizing", and "brought back issues that Black, Brown, LGBTQ communities were facing in child care."

All participants on the DAC were recruited either because their organizations serve and center in their work and leadership BIPOC leaders, or they themselves are BIPOC leaders in their community with lived experience of the child care- and income security-related topics the committee would consider. Interviewees spoke about the importance of leveraging one's experience and personal knowledge to elevate community voices and advocate for change and felt that participating in the CIF was allowing them to do so. They also expressed an appreciation and motivation for diving deeply into an analysis around the root causes of child care barriers, and poor pay and workplace experiences of child care workers in their states, and appreciated the dedicated space to have these difficult conversations, with one interviewee noting that the demands of their direct service work made it difficult to "step back and look at the problem."

"I liked the teambased decision and that it was not an **NWLC** decision, felt empowering and that my voice was heard." —DAC member regarding how the committee was engaged in the grantmaking process





"Interesting to take a step back to look at power, funding/money, power foundations hold, and we were in the process to change that. Exciting to use CIF to keep building power." —DAC member's recommendations about how to engage in the PGM process

The depth and authenticity of this process reveals a profound truth: when we create intentional spaces for those closest to the challenges to shape solutions, we unlock both wisdom and possibility. Through the CIF planning process, DAC members didn't just bring their expertise to the table—they brought the lived realities of their communities, the urgency of daily struggles, and the clear-eyed vision that comes from navigating systemic barriers. Their engagement transformed abstract policy discussions into grounded, actionable strategies rooted in real experiences.

This was most evident in the process of translating the theory of change (TOC) into actionable strategies that prospective grantees could respond to in the request for proposals (RFP). Drawing from their direct experience, DAC members identified specific root causes of economic insecurity faced by early childhood educators. For example, they explicitly named that systemic racial and gender discrimination led society to consider "care" and childhood education as "women's work" and therefore devalued. And this devaluing of "women's work" has greatest impact on Black, immigrant, and other women of color who have limited opportunities to meaningfully participate and be represented in the political system.

Based on these insights, the DAC developed three key strategies for systemic change: community engagement, capacity development, and advocacy. These weren't theoretical approaches—they were strategies the DAC members had seen work in their own communities. Their leadership throughout the process, including in selecting final grantees, fundamentally shaped both our understanding of the challenges, and the solutions we pursued. By centering the voices of those most impacted, we built a framework that we believe will create lasting systemic change.

When community leaders come together in meaningful decision-making spaces, they not only grow into more confident leaders and advocates, but also forge powerful cross-state connections, deepen their understanding of systemic challenges, and emerge as sustained voices of change in their communities. Some DAC interviewees talked about an increased sense of community—feeling less isolated and developing an expanded perspective around advocacy including beyond their own local community. Not only were they developing relationships across states, but so too were they learning about the depth of good work happening within these two states (New Mexico and South Carolina specifically).

They have been inspired and encouraged by the possibilities of community-led grantmaking and this process, "it continues to reinforce this issue is worth investing in—[to] support and create grants," said one DAC member. Half talked about participating in the CIF space as leading to building their confidence, especially those who identify as caregivers and child care providers. Women with lived experience suggested that they are seen as a resource (e.g., people talk with them about discrimination experienced at work and in the community) and as one participant shared, "[it] pushed me to be bold and courageous and use my platform."

"I believe the opportunity to have conversations that talk deeply about the possibilities and challenges gave the process more perspective and ability for participating organizations to think more intentionally, which is great when approaching funding," said another DAC member.

"It helped me learn how a grant fund works and helped me learn how grantees are selected...I learned how the selection process works and [am] now going to learn how to distribute [grants]...I acquired great learnings/experiences." —DAC member regarding engagement and participation in the committee and strengths of the PGM process

"I am grateful for the opportunity to learn of an inclusive process and believe the opportunity to expand networks and sharing of knowledge and resources will be helpful in our approach of building long-term power for our communities." —quote from six-month survey



The following are select throughlines from interviews and surveys and pertain to participant reflections on challenges and opportunities to advance the work.

>>> COMMUNITY-LED OR PARTICIPATORY
GRANTMAKING ALLOWS FOR CONNECTING
IMPORTANT LOCAL AND NATIONAL ISSUES, BUT
EXPECT TO BUILD IN A LOT OF TIME.

Many participants interviewed expressed excitement about this process enabling local communities to expand their reach with additional resources and connecting them to other resourced, connected and values-aligned organizations while benefitting from learning about successful national and state advocacy strategies. They saw an opportunity to make resources more accessible to the community, meaningfully engage community organizations and members as experts, shift power to communities, and strengthen relationships and networks for greater impact.

"The PGM process is iterative and back and forth and not effective otherwise."

"If there were more resources, would be more viable, but it still was a process that was worth it because developing a different way to think about building power and control resources in a movement, valuable resources." —DAC members regarding circumstances where PGM is more and less effective and applicable

"[I was] excited about CIF because it brought the concept of grantmaking to people most affected because grants often say what they're doing without knowing if that's most important to the community. CIF reinforces voices, which is different and unheard of in [my state]."

"It can open eyes and perspective about what's most important to community members and opportunity for grantors to think about their source of information. What are they hearing and making decisions based on? Opportunity for community to truly be at the center and for reframing of what's fundable."

—DAC members' motivations for involvement in the initiative and perceptions about PGM

DAC members described when participatory grantmaking might be most appropriate and useful. Participants thought the approach could be effective or viable when there is sufficient time to engage in an iterative process and build relationships, and sufficient funding and resources to compensate for the time and effort required.

"Our organization has been compensated; however it is another task on my daily full-time job. Situationally, I am the best placed person to be in this conversation. I want to put more time, focus and energy into the CIF; however my competing commitments make it challenging to do so," said one DAC member.

They thought it was a promising way to identify and address root causes of inequities, thoroughly understand community needs, build power, increase resources in communities, and deploy funds more effectively to address needs. They suggested though that it could be less appropriate when rapid response and immediate funds and action are required or when significant time is needed to develop relationships or engage with the community. One member stated, "Is [participatory grantmaking] useful, yes, is it more impactful, probably yes, is it fastest, no."

This is an important consideration for those seeking to embark on a similar process—time is needed to build trust among the group, and with the convening organization especially so, if the goal is to build collaboration among groups that are unequally resourced and not geographically connected. Conveners play a critical role in facilitating the forming-storming-norming of group development before getting into the "performing" stage of the work,⁴ which if done well, will bring the group to alignment on the group norms (and in our case a "Charter"), goals and expected outcomes of their collaborative efforts (including an RFP).

>>> AUTHENTIC AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT AND REPRESENTATION IS IMPORTANT—AND CHALLENGING.

Half of the DAC participants interviewed were familiar with participatory grantmaking prior to participating in the CIF and understood from previous experience that the process is challenging. One person described it as "messy and hav[ing] challenges," and "changing what's been done for a long time ('traditional' grantmaking) is difficult", including developing trust in relationships and ceding power to communities.

4 Using the stages of Team Development by Judith Stein: https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/teams/articles/stages-development



Research from the Ford Foundation and other leading philanthropic institutions emphasizes that transforming traditional power dynamics in grantmaking requires more than good intentions—it demands sustained commitment to navigating complex cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers. As documented in participatory grantmaking initiatives across the globe, building authentic trust takes time, especially in virtual settings where subtle cultural cues and nonverbal communication can be lost.

"[There were] a lot of words to condense; had to work hard to get to a concise, digestible message and size. A lot of information to condense. Making it more concise would be helpful."

—DAC member regarding challenges of the PGM process.

The challenge of language access goes beyond simple translation; it involves creating spaces where multilingual participants—and those with different levels of knowledge and expertise—feel genuinely empowered to express themselves fully and shape decisions. While technology can bridge geographic divides, it can also create new barriers to the kind of deep relationship building that makes participatory processes truly transformative.

>>> THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT WHO IS INCLUDED IN THE COMMITTEE AND HOW MEETINGS ARE FORMATTED.

Several interviewees commented on the opportunity to have greater community representation on the DAC, including representation from those unaffiliated with organizations and who identify as LGBTQIA+, suggesting that more community members at the table would balance the proportion of organizational leaders involved in the initiative, elevate the voices of people with lived experience, and increase empowerment and comfort to express views. Some also suggested that groups with expertise related to economic inequality, justice, and equity were missing from the initial year of CIF, such as early childhood education teachers, education experts, and local community-led advocacy organizations focused on worker and racial justice and civil rights.

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Because DAC participants are based in New Mexico and South Carolina, all meetings were held over Zoom, with simultaneous interpretation provided, and one in-person convening was held at the end of the first year in South Carolina. The benefits of meeting virtually are multifold and extend beyond bringing two states on two different time zones together, however, there are limits to the depth of relationships a group can develop when meeting virtually unfortunately. Two interviewees suggested that meeting online versus in-person posed challenges, with one member discussing missed opportunities for interactions and dynamics that can only occur and be discerned in person, "Virtual'ness of conversations. It would be great to be able to feel the energy of others in the room."

DAC members were interested in continued opportunities to connect and build relationships and trust, and as a team we are committed to creating more opportunities for the DAC, and grantees, both in person and virtually, to build connections amongst themselves, including exploring digital platforms that enable real time and bidirectional engagement.

Our first year revealed both the power and potential of this work. While virtual platforms successfully bridged geographic divides, we heard clearly from our partners: we need more voices at the table—LGBTQIA+ community members, early childhood educators, and racial justice advocates who can deepen our collective impact. We also learned that screens alone can't capture the full dynamism of human connection that sparks when people share physical space. Moving forward, we're expanding our approach: creating more opportunities for in-person gatherings while leveraging digital tools to maintain our cross-state momentum. This isn't just about better meetings—it's about building the robust, sustainable networks needed to drive real change in our communities.

>>> BE FLEXIBLE; GATHER FEEDBACK CONTINUOUSLY AND INTEGRATE LEARNING FOR AN IMPROVED ONGOING PROCESS.

After every monthly meeting, NWLC staff solicited feedback from DAC participants related to meeting facilitation, through the use of Zoom meeting polls, surveys, or plus-deltas. As a result of this ongoing feedback, facilitators changed the pacing of the meeting, the amount of time certain meetings were, the time of day meetings were held, and incorporated asynchronous opportunities for engagement including through the use of office hours.

This commitment to continuous feedback and adaptation proved crucial to our success. By treating each meeting as an opportunity to learn and adjust—whether it meant shifting meeting times, adjusting session lengths, or creating new pathways for engagement—we built a more responsive and effective process. The result wasn't just better meetings; it was deeper engagement, stronger participation, and a clear demonstration that when organizations truly listen and adapt, they create spaces where everyone can fully contribute. This flexible, feedback-driven approach sets a foundation for lasting collaboration and hints at a broader truth: the best processes are those that evolve with the needs of their participants.

CONCLUSION

As we write this report, the two inaugural grantees (one in New Mexico and another in South Carolina) are implementing the activities in their proposals that they believe address the DAC-developed problem statement: early childhood educators face economic insecurities due to poor compensation, benefits, and discrimination. The grantees were chosen by the DAC to receive a two-year CIF grant based on the strength of their proposals and their ability to address the root cause of this problem. Helpfully, DAC members have unanimously agreed to stay on for a second year in order to support NWLC staff in overseeing the impact of the first year of the grant cycle, to provide on-the-ground technical assistance support to the grantees—their peers—and to advise us, NWLC staff, on how a second CIF could be designed and implemented as we look to scaling our work.

As we look toward the culmination of the first year of the grant cycle, we are committed to continuing to facilitate an intentional and participatory initiative, trusting deeply in the expertise and leadership of the community partners and leaders on the Design and Advisory Committee to get us to the kind of systemic change and community impact only possible when those closest to the pain are closest to the solution.

In subsequent reports, we look forward to sharing more about the steps we took to build a participatory, culturally relevant, and equitable evaluation rubric in collaboration with the DAC and our two inaugural grantees and the intention we took to integrate less conventional data collection methods in order to minimize the burden on grantees and to facilitate their own learning.

We also look forward to contributing knowledge to the field related to what we have found to be effective participatory processes and strategies for overcoming some of the common challenges of PGM initiatives, including how one goes about evaluating the initiative itself. Beyond the initial questions we had for ourselves at the onset of work (listed on pages 2 and 3),

we also hope to answer how this PGM process (different to a traditional model of grantmaking) impacted the *quality* of relationships and trust built among the DAC and grantees and with us, and the extent to which we truly shared or ceded decision-making power to our community partners and leaders. Please visit the CIF landing page to stay up to date on the work of the grantees and to get alerts of new report releases.



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