



# COMMUNITIES DRIVING CHANGE: THE FIRST YEAR OF NWLC'S COMMUNITY IMPACT FUND

The **Community Impact Fund** (CIF) is a participatory grantmaking initiative led by the Income Security and Child Care team at National Women's Law Center (NWLC).

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

## KEY FINDINGS

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

*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 with the use of online tools, interpretation and translation, and the provision of stipends.*

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

*Through the CIF planning process, advisory committee 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.*

**“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.”**

—Member, CIF Advisory Committee

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.

*“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



## LESSONS LEARNED

**PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING ALLOWS FOR CONNECTING IMPORTANT LOCAL AND NATIONAL ISSUES, BUT EXPECT TO BUILD IN A LOT OF TIME.**

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

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

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

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.**

**“IT CAN OPEN EYES...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?”**

—Member, CIF Design & Advisory Committee