

SPARKING CHANGE: A STORYTELLER INITIATIVE





Photo by Sirena White-Singleton www.theanericollective.com

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“It has prepared me to feel more confident when defending and advocating for big changes, and that I can have that confidence to tell my story, to be able to identify the changes we need in our state and nation.” —Merline, Olé



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton



Photo by Caleb Cobos



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INTRODUCTION

“Nothing about us without us”—this phrase stemming from the disability rights movement is now a widely practiced mantra for grassroots political movements. No matter the issue area, this phrase centers on the principle that people most affected by a problem should be the ones to guide and direct its solutions.



Yet, in the political world of lobbyists, interest groups, well-funded national nonprofits, and competing social media content, the voices of directly impacted community members are often drowned out or dismissed. Furthermore, when we are looking at socioeconomic imperatives, the challenge of including people with lived experience becomes even more profound: how do disenfranchised, under-compensated, overburdened individuals find the time, resources, and power to make themselves heard?

The National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) and its supporters recognized the importance of ensuring women and nonbinary people with lived experiences are not only included in our work, but that the work is centered around those closest to the problem. This effort requires more than bringing people into a room so they can speak. NWLC designed an intentional initiative that would build equity and community power by investing in leadership development for Black, Indigenous, and nonbinary women of color.

In 2022, the Income Security and Child Care (IS/CC) Team at NWLC conceptualized Sparking Change: A Storyteller Initiative. The IS/CC team began with a series of listening sessions with other organizations around the country that have implemented speakers bureaus for people with lived experiences. From those listening sessions, the team collected information about best practices, lessons learned, and strategies for success. The IS/CC team also worked with a consultant to develop the initiative’s structure. The team decided that Sparking Change would be more than a collection of storytellers; rather, it would be a space for BIPOC and nonbinary women to self-actualize into leaders of their communities.

In 2023, Sparking Change partnered with two state-based nonprofits who recruited 10 participants, five women from South Carolina and five ESL/Spanish-speaking women from New Mexico. All of the participants are mothers and caregivers who have navigated complex systems to provide for and raise their families. Sparking Change developed into more than a storytelling initiative; it is a community of changemakers and doers. It has been a conduit for strengthening the financial foundation of each participant, discovering new skills, building a supportive community, and developing a deeper sense of their own power.

This report will walk through the outcomes of investing in 10 women of color over the course of Year One of Sparking Change—what happened within each woman, their communities, and NWLC.

KEY NWLC STAFF

The National Women’s Law Center fights for gender justice—in the courts, in public policy, and in our society—working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls. We use the law in all its forms to change culture and drive solutions to the gender inequity that shapes our society and to break down the barriers that harm all of us—especially women of color, LGBTQ people, and low-income women and families. The following staff lead the Sparking Change Initiative at NWLC.



Toni Francis-Bowie
Director of Community Partnerships, Income Security and Child Care



Jessica Majano-Arriaza
Manager for Community Partnerships, Income Security



Jourdan Featherston
Program Associate, Community Partnerships

PART 1: THIS IS SPARKING CHANGE

ABOUT SPARKING CHANGE

“Sparking Change” is a storytelling and leadership development initiative that centers the voices and experiences of women or nonbinary people of color closest to the intersecting issues of income insecurity and child caregiving. Ten storytellers from New Mexico and South Carolina—all of whom are mothers and have experienced being the primary caregivers of their families—are sharing their expertise with the greater public and decision-makers so that policies and initiatives are grounded in lived experience and needs. This report focuses on the pilot year of this initiative as NWLC prepares for Year Two.

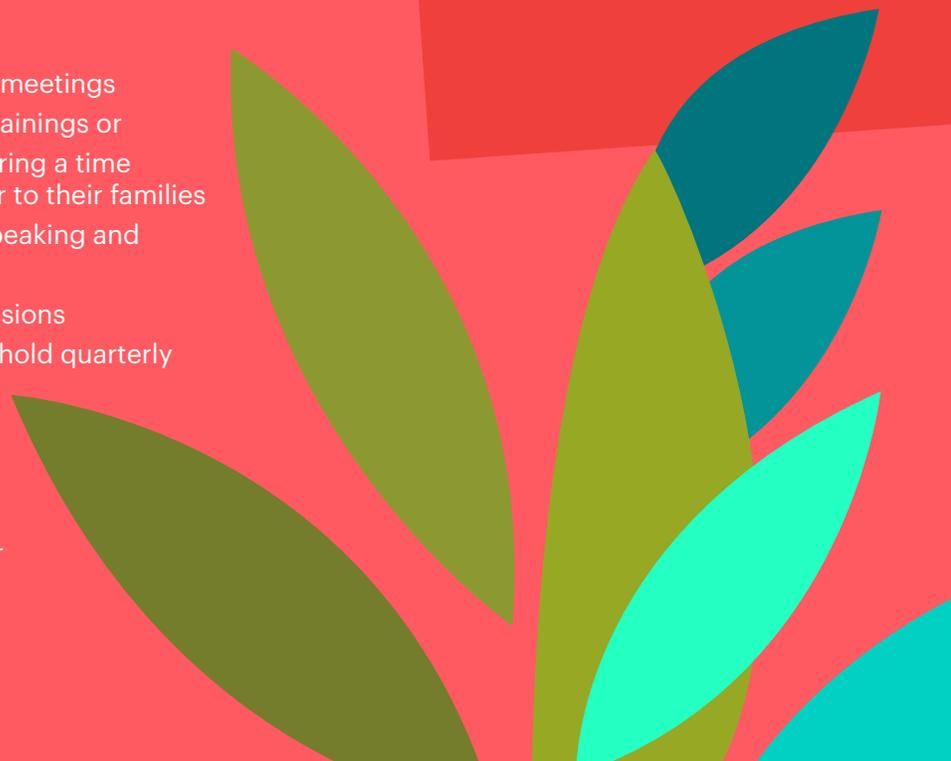
SUPPORTING THE JOURNEY

NWLC is providing multiple resources to ensure the storytellers’ needs are met. Having these needs met helps them focus on their learning goals and personal development. Supports include:

- Steady monthly compensation
- Child care stipends for trainings and meetings
- Gift cards to purchase meals when trainings or meetings take place after work or during a time caregivers would be providing dinner to their families
- Five-week trauma-informed public speaking and storytelling training
- Monthly meetup and educational sessions
- Funding for partner organizations to hold quarterly community-building events
- Mentors and available funding for therapy
- Funding for partner organizations to provide a supportive staff member



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton



PARTNER ORGANIZATION

NEW MEXICO



OLÉ is a nonprofit, grassroots member organization of working families. Since 2009, its members and staff have worked together to strengthen communities using issue-based campaigns and electoral engagement to ensure that working families play a critical role in shaping New Mexico's future with a united voice. By centering the experiences of people of color, early educators, parents, workers and Immigrants, OLÉ creates a space for people to grow their leadership and create lasting change.

STORYTELLERS



Sandra Ibarra



Patricia Bustillos R.



Patty Ortiz



Felicitas Torres



Merline Gallegos

SUPPORTING STAFF



Maty Miranda
Lead Organizer



Alejandra Gonzalez
Lead Organizer

PARTNER ORGANIZATION

SOUTH CAROLINA



Metanoia's mission is to amplify opportunities for a thriving community with families in Chicora and surrounding historically Black neighborhoods in North Charleston, South Carolina, by honing the unique assets that exist here. With a focus on youth leadership, affordable housing, and economic development, Metanoia's work is directed with neighborhood families and residents at the center of the decision-making process.

STORYTELLERS



Chantelle Mitchell



Christine Matthews



Tineaka Robinson



Raynique Syas



Melodie Ali

SUPPORTING STAFF



Jamilla Harper,
MA, Chief
Operating
Officer



Jacques Johnson,
MPH, Project Manager



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton

GOALS OF SPARKING CHANGE

Prioritize and invest in the leadership of women and nonbinary Black, Indigenous, and people of color

Contribute to narrative shift and center the voices and experiences of those closest to the intersected issues of income insecurity and child care.

PILOTING SPARKING CHANGE

While NWLC has previously engaged people with lived experience in its work, this initiative is the first of its kind. Because this is a two-year pilot, the Center is continuously calibrating its own internal capacity to do this work, and it is learning the nuances of collaborating on such an initiative with state- and place-based organizations.

NWLC has ensured multiple opportunities for one-on-one feedback from storytellers and partner organizations, as well as invested in a six-month analysis, listening sessions, surveys, and end-of-year reports.

In Year One, Sparking Change focused on reinforcing the professional skillset of the storytellers, promoting personal healing, and developing their network and immediate supports in advocacy. With a deep commitment to language justice, NWLC conducted its trainings and monthly meetings with Spanish interpretation.

Both Olé and Metanoia hosted quarterly events focusing on joy and rest, which was an intentional investment in building fellowship and promoting self-care for mothers and primary caregivers. Across the entire cohort, despite language barriers, the participants offered mutual support in virtual training spaces and on the communication platform Slack. Additionally in Year One, NWLC and its partners identified opportunities for the storytellers to exercise their leadership and advocacy skills. In addition to creating opportunities for their stories to be spotlighted on blogs, social media, and internally, they also sought engagements with outside entities.

Ultimately, Sparking Change aims to ensure BIPOC and nonbinary people of color are advocates and leaders in local, state, and federal spaces. The result will be that state and national economic justice and child care policy, advocacy, and research will better reflect their lived experiences.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE CHANGE?

“It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali.’ It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” —Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The economic and social policies that impact primary caregivers or single parents in the United States have long been shaped by what Adichie refers to as “the single story.” Often at the heart of political decisions, there exists a single narrative plagued with misperceptions about Black and Brown women, single mothers, what it looks like to experience poverty, and what women and families need to survive in this country.

The storytellers of Sparking Change are challenging this singular narrative. NWLC has worked with the participants to identify and challenge various misconceptions they hear about—and within—their communities. By sharing their personal stories with legislators, earned media, in blog posts, social media, and at community meetings, the Sparking Change storytellers are reframing the very narratives that are impacting policies and practices in their localities, states, and nationally.

Ultimately, the goal of narrative change is to ensure that economic justice and child care policy, advocacy, and research reflect the lived experience of families and communities—namely, those most impacted by low-wage and precarious work and unaffordable and inaccessible child care. NWLC believes that through training, coaching, and the support of Sparking Change, the storytellers won’t just be the passive subjects of a policy decision and instead will initiate a shift from others telling stories on their behalf, to becoming central and powerful forces informing the discourse.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Honoring the labor, expertise, and time of BIPOC women with low incomes.

We recognize that lived experience is an expertise and like any expertise, it should be compensated. A key part of honoring labor and time requires paying the women a consistent monthly stipend for this work and seeking their input on how they want to spend their time with us. Additionally, NWLC staff actively challenged the constructs that exist within capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy; namely, the emphasis on urgency, overwork, and personal outputs. Rather, NWLC made a point to uphold the values of prioritizing family and health, giving space for the women to set their own limits and goals.

Investing in fellowship, joy, and rest.

Building deep relationships is a strong counteraction against tokenization and extractive practices. NWLC holds monthly cohort meetings and individual check-ins, and its partners organize quarterly gatherings that focus on fellowship, joy, and rest. These concepts are often dismissed for BIPOC women and primary caregivers. Sparking Change radically challenges this status quo, understanding that self-care and nurture are prerequisites for learning and engagement.

Allowing participants to lead their own journey.

A key part of this required continuously seeking and incorporating participant feedback for quality improvement and program impact.

Creating leadership pathways for BIPOC women with lived experiences.

A key part of this involved building community among the storytellers, offering training, connecting them with opportunities to lead and grow, and uplifting the work they are doing on a local level.

Centering those with lived experiences to address the issues NWLC works on.

Centering people with lived experience requires creating thoughtful feedback loops between local, state, and national income security and child care policy advocacy. Storytellers were brought into the fold for focus group conversations to inform NWLC's work. NWLC and its partners called upon them to engage in multiple aspects of their work.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE ACCESS

**“What I like is that we can speak in Spanish because it’s the language of our heart and it’s how we express ourselves best.”
—Patty, Olé**

Honoring its commitment to language justice, NWLC provided an interpreter for every session, translated its written materials, and worked with bilingual trainers in some instances. They chose a chat communication platform (Slack) that automatically translated between English and Spanish, so the storytellers could seamlessly communicate no matter what their primary language is.

This practice was particularly appreciated by the storytellers in New Mexico, who could better express themselves in their native tongue. In their focus group, they also pointed out how many agencies in New Mexico only speak English for the people they serve, which can result in a feeling that the services aren’t for them. There is a deeply rooted history of prejudice around using Spanish in the United States, and as one storyteller noted, there is a sense of loss when the next generation does not speak it. “In itself New Mexico is a state that has to be bilingual, and it is not,” she explained. “It’s not like that in a lot of states. In a lot of small towns they don’t even speak Spanish and I know that before here they forbade speaking Spanish. They beat the children who spoke Spanish, who didn’t learn English.”

NWLC’s commitment to language justice has also raised awareness for English-speaking storytellers. In South Carolina, Chantelle from Metanoia has begun her own primary parent workshop series, and as it spreads through her school community and neighborhood, she is exploring how to practice language access. She is working to secure a grant to include Spanish language access.



Photo by Toni Francis-Bowie

PART 2: YEAR ONE OUTCOMES

“[Sparking Change] has encouraged the need for sisterhood, and I needed that... I needed to be at a table with like-minded women.” —Christine, Metanoia

“We have a self-help group and we always send information there,” Felicitas from Olé shared in a focus group. Likewise, Sandra from Olé said, “[We’re] sharing information that can support each other... [such as] the benefit of a new food initiative for their daycare or how to do the paperwork to open a daycare or any questions they have about child care or a grant.”

ACHIEVING DESIRED OUTCOMES

The NWLC staff theorized that by concertedly investing in the leadership development of 10 BIPOC storytellers from New Mexico and South Carolina, they would observe the following outcomes. The data supports that many of these ambitions were achieved, with the potential for storytellers to lead their own projects in Year Two.

Storytellers are part of a community of support and a new network.

Survey data and focus group feedback strongly support that this outcome was achieved in Year One. When we compared their initial survey versus their six-month survey, storytellers showed a 28% increase in feelings of support in their advocacy work. They cited their fellow cohort members as a significant source of that support, along with NWLC and partners Olé and Metanoia.

It is telling that the initiative had a 100% retention rate. Participants not only continued to show up for the information and opportunities, but also for the sense of community the group provided.

Participants indicate that they have not only formed strong connections with their cohort, but also a newly developed network. They share opportunities and resources with each other, and they belong to community groups where they spread their knowledge further.

**“Just being around positive women and expressing my story, that’s what really changed my life with being unable to speak up on my story. That healed a lot in me.”
—Melodie, Metanoia**



Storytellers feel confident and are comfortable employing various advocacy tools.

On a scale of 1 to 5, where “5” indicates strong agreement, storytellers indicated an average rating in these post-training survey statements:

4.6: I feel increased comfort sharing my story on public platforms.

4.8: This training deepened my understanding of how to make an impact on policy and practice with my voice.

Confidence and comfort can be difficult to measure. During their focus group sessions, the storytellers reflected on the internal changes they experienced which led to new ways of outwardly engaging.

“It has prepared me to feel more confident when defending and advocating for big changes, and that I can have that confidence to tell my story, to be able to identify the changes we need in our state and nation.” —Merline, Olé

“Even at my job I was afraid to go and protest because I wasn’t paid a good salary. Not anymore. I can go and fight for those who can’t speak.” —Felicitas, Olé



**“I have more than 22 years working for an organization and I was always a volunteer...now, I know I can talk and I can’t be behind the scenes anymore... The important thing for me has always been to help people and now I can do that and I can speak up more than before.”
—Patricia, Olé**

“I am a lot more confident in my abilities to make an impact because I’ve been encouraged, yes, by my sisters.” —Raynique, Metanoia



Storytellers have access to critical resources and skill-building opportunities.

NWLC provided abundant resources, but what was the impact? In addition to providing the five-week storyteller training and monthly group sessions, NWLC ensured that the storytellers were provided internet stipends, iPads, child care support, and gift cards to purchase dinner during nightly meetings. Jacques, project manager at Metanoia, explained these little things made a big difference and “allowed them to be present.” In her NWLC-funded position, Jacques was a critical local linkage to the women, a strong source of moral support, and a community-builder.

Training served to better equip the women to challenge negative narratives. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very comfortable), storytellers increased from a 3.9 rating to 4.7 in answering, “When you hear people making negative, harmful, and untrue comments about whole groups of women like single moms, women of color, or women with low incomes, how comfortable are you in calling this out or challenging this comment?”

NWLC staff was available to prepare storytellers for speaking engagements. The NWLC press team noted the growth they observed in the women’s comfort with press interviews over the course of the year. Additionally, Jess Majano-Arriaza was highly attuned to checking in on the storytellers’ lives. She has developed a deep trust that continues to support an environment where the storytellers can approach her with any concerns.

On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much): Please rate how important it is for you to receive a monthly stipend for your time spent with NWLC. Average: 4.6

**Does your current stipend adequately meet the demands of your advocacy work?
Average: 4.3**

STIPENDS

A very significant source of support came from the monthly stipends the storytellers received. On one hand, the storytellers expressed a deep commitment to this work that would exist regardless of whether a stipend were offered. As one member put it, “You can’t put money on being there when [a] family needs you the most.”

However, the team learned that the additional money allowed the storytellers, all of whom are mothers and caregivers, to do more for their families and meet basic needs. One participant shared, “Financial support...has helped me a lot and is a blessing since my business suffered drastic economic changes” in the past few years since Covid. Another stated, “I was able to use that and child support to live off, pretty much, while I was pregnant because I could not work.”

How participants used their stipends:

- Meeting basic needs such as food, electricity, and gas
- Paying children’s school fees
- Contributing to their savings
- Feeding or entertaining their children when they had speaking engagements



Photo by NWLC staff

Storytellers pursue local, state, and national leadership opportunities.

All of the storytellers were active in their communities prior to Sparking Change, but the way they showed up as leaders changed.

Tineaka (“Neaka”) has noticed a change in how her family and friends see her as a leader and seek her input. “I made a conscious choice to take the stuff I read...and share it on social media, among friends, and through the Black Educators Affinity Group.” She served on the planning team for a Black Wall Street event held at a local high school.

As recipients of the 2023 Women of Color School Board Fellowship, Raynique, Chantelle, and Neaka frequent multiple meetings for their Chicora neighborhood as well as the school board.

Both Patty and Chantelle serve as advisors to the NWLC’s Community Impact Fund. During the 2024 National Day Without Child Care, Patty and Merline spoke at a virtual press conference hosted by Community Change Action. They garnered attention from multiple local news outlets. Meanwhile, Felicitas became a campaign volunteer for an Albuquerque City Council member.

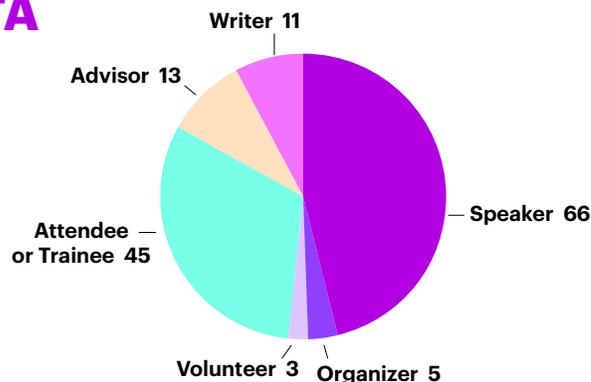
Storytellers have shown leadership in all roles they have taken on this year. When they show up as an attendee of neighborhood meetings, trainings, and school board events, they demonstrate their commitment to being present to their community, and they are actively learning about the social and political spaces that make up the community. They gain information and insights about local decision-making, leadership, and local/regional plans—all essential skills for organizing. The storytellers have also shown up as speakers and blog writers sharing their personal stories to push narrative change. In addition, they have taken on leadership roles as organizers and volunteers of events and initiatives and helped influence policy and practice as advisors on boards, focus groups, and planning committees.



CHRISTINE’S STORY

Christine was hired as a community organizer with Metanoia this past year. In March 2024, she testified before her state Chamber of Commerce. She also became the secretary of her neighborhood council and is currently starting a “village” for women to share resources. Additionally, she successfully led a petition and co-led a campaign against the county’s plan to develop a manufacturing plant on land designated for a neighborhood park.

CHART DATA



Storytellers are valued and participate regularly in internal NWLC and external opportunities that accurately portray the impact of inequitable policies on their lives.

143 Engagements

Over the course of the year, storytellers participated in a range of engagements related to income security/child care goals, building or educating their communities, and speaking with political leaders.

76 - number of times storytellers shared their stories with media outlets, focus groups, researchers, advocacy days, panels, blog posts or op-eds, and for NWLC/Olé/Metanoia social media

27 - number of times storytellers were interviewed by or featured in print or televised news, as well as radio

15 - number of times storytellers made national news

20 - number of times storytellers engaged with representatives in their state legislature as well as on Capitol Hill

PLATFORMS OF EACH ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY

While internally organized events (such as NWLC focus groups or blog posts, Olé’s advocacy days, and Metanoia’s block party) offer significant engagement opportunities for the storytellers, it is also important to note that the women are engaging beyond NWLC, Olé, and Metanoia. This indicates they are establishing a presence in a variety of spaces, sharing their stories on diverse platforms, and gaining exposure beyond their typical range of influence.

Data –	platforms of each opportunity
NWLC –	33
Metanoia –	16
Olé –	15
Outside Entities –	79

How storytellers have engaged with child care and income security issues

Narrative change – 29

- Blog posts and op-ed pieces on BIPOC mental health awareness, equal pay for educators, and more
- Social media features on child care worker wages, ARPA, and the government shutdown
- Panelists at the NWLC Annual Child Care Advocates Meeting

Local Influence & Community Building – 55

- Attended community meetings such as Chicora-Cherokee Neighborhood Meetings (in South Carolina), block party planning, and education events
- Participated regularly in school board meetings
- Led their own workshops and outreach initiatives, specifically in South Carolina

State Advocacy – 10

- Olé facilitated multiple advocacy days and State Capitol visits
- One storyteller became active with the South Carolina Black Educators Group

National Advocacy – 10

- National Childcare Changemakers
- Multiple storytellers shared stories on Capitol Hill as well as with the White House education team

Earned Media – 27

Interviews with *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, *NPR's This and Now*, *Albuquerque Journal*, *The Cut by Vox*, *Voz de America*, *Telemundo*, *Univision*, *The New Republic*, local radio and news outlets.

Guiding Research - 12

- Case Study interview with UC Berkeley Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
- Advisement to the NWLC Community Impact Fund
- Participation in focus groups to inform work plans
- Listening Session with United Parent Leaders Network (UPLAN)

WORK IN NEW MEXICO AND SOUTH CAROLINA

NWLC chose to partner with on-the-ground, grassroots organizations to carry out critical pieces of Sparking Change. The organizations would make it possible to fully support, engage, and create opportunities for storytellers in their home states in ways that could not be done remotely from Washington, D.C. NWLC provided grant funding to Olé and Metanoia to offset the costs associated with Sparking Change work as well as events focused on the storytellers' community-building, self care, and fellowship.

Olé and Metanoia were chosen based on their alignment on child care and income security issues, as well as their investment in centering the voices of women of color. In both New Mexico and South Carolina, women make up 67 to 69% of the states' low-wage workforce. Additionally, both states are in the top percentile of the highest overall poverty rate for women, and 40 to 49% of single mothers live in poverty.

The two organizations have very different infrastructures. Olé is a member-based organization that mobilizes early educators, parents, workers, and immigrants of color using issue-based campaigns and electoral engagement. With over 3,000 members and around 80 active leaders, Olé was well set up to foster opportunities for the five New Mexico storytellers, including opportunities to speak with state legislators, access to local press, and resources to politically mobilize.

Metanoia, by contrast, is a place-based organization focusing primarily on the Chicora neighborhood in Charleston and its surrounding historically Black neighborhoods. With initiatives addressing housing, youth leadership, and economic development, Metanoia was well set up to foster opportunities for the five South Carolina women that revolved more around community engagement, serving local initiatives, and developing their leadership in neighborhood councils and school boards.

The next page reviews, in more detail, how each state's storytellers engaged differently.

“We build power through relationships, and the cohort was really able to build those.”
—Miles Tokunow, Deputy Director, on how Sparking Change impacted Olé

“This initiative is a wonderful thing, which is being able to come back to listening to the community and deepen partnerships within the community.”
—Jamilla Harper, COO, on how Sparking Change impacted Metanoia

While NWLC aimed to present equal national speaking opportunities to the women in New Mexico and South Carolina, the storytellers also had the freedom to choose and guide their work on the ground in each state. As supporting organizations, Olé and Metanoia were critical in finding and connecting them to such opportunities.

The data show that Olé organized multiple state advocacy days and placed an emphasis on supporting political organizing and media coverage. They were pivotal in engaging storytellers in actions during the 2024 National Day Without Child Care.

Metanoia supported many opportunities for hyper local engagement, such as school board engagement and community meetings. As mentioned previously, Metanoia hired one storyteller to be a local organizer and also assisted storytellers in securing the Women of Color School Board Fellowship

Olé – New Mexico

- Narrative Change – **18**
- Local Influence/Community Building – **2**
- State Advocacy – **7**
- National Advocacy – **4**
- Earned Media – **21**
- Guiding Research/Practice - **2**

Metanoia – South Carolina

- Narrative Change – **11**
- Local Influence/Community Building – **53**
- State Advocacy – **2**
- National Advocacy – **6**
- Earned Media – **6**
- Guiding Research/Practice – **10**

MENTORSHIP VS. THERAPY

NWLC hired “mentor speakers”; one served the five women in South Carolina, with a personnel change mid-year, and the other served New Mexico. The mentors were intended to provide moral support, guidance in goal setting, and coaching prior to or after speaking engagements. The mentoring component brought fresh perspectives for some participants but overall proved challenging. As the peer mentors encountered their own personal barriers and the storytellers juggled multiple responsibilities, scheduling meetings became difficult. A couple of the storytellers also were uncertain about what role a mentor should play in their lives and professional development.

These challenges may be inherent to the concept of structured peer mentoring with adults, as they occurred in both states and after a change in mentor in South Carolina. As added support, Metanoia hired a therapist with funding from NWLC, and the women connected well with her and found meaningful support.

PART 3: THE STORIES BEHIND THE DATA

"I wasn't even able to say my child had autism. I just was staying in the house. My friends and family didn't know. My parents weren't very receptive to the idea of me giving her therapy; her dad wasn't either. [But] I was able to get my child in all the therapies, and things of that nature, and she's talking. She's thriving again. But without the cohort, I don't feel like I would have been able to be that type of mom or even have that type of experience because you guys empowered me to think that's okay. It's okay and this is a safe space. You guys made it so." —Christine, Metanoia

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Sparking Change created a safe space where some of the mothers developed new ways to advocate for their children.

"Each class had something that taught us. And it's being able to [copy] those strategies... and be able to help someone else... I did it with my own son because...he couldn't say, for example, what happened to him [when he testified against a boy who shot him]...Now he said everything and was calm. He didn't have anxiety attacks...he was able to hold back his feelings to be able to speak...With all confidence, with that same security that you taught me in the trainings, I know I transmitted it to him." —Merline, Olé

Storytellers share their new knowledge generously with other women.

“What it did with us is to empower us, to make us women with greater strengths to be able to share with our colleagues.” —Sandra, Olé

“We’re not just taking this and not doing anything with it. We’re receiving it and we’re giving it off to others so somebody else may be able to benefit off of something that we learned.” —Christine, Metanoia

“Because we’re giving them these intangible jewels, you will start to see a change within our community. You will start to see us more thriving because we understand that we don’t have to let our trauma be the focal point of our decision-making.” —Chantelle, Metanoia

Storytellers’ civic engagement increased in various areas since starting Sparking Change:

100% increase: Participants indicating they are talking about current events or government with friends and family.

125% increase: Participants indicating they have shared stories with legislators on social media.

70% increase: Participants indicating they are reading or watching the news regularly.

Storytellers advocated in their own lives for better paying jobs.

Six storytellers acquired higher paying jobs or received raises in the past year. ALL felt that Sparking Change directly impacted their ability to acquire these new jobs.

In our anonymous survey, the storytellers wrote:

**“I was told that I came across very confident in my interview. Because I have been speaking with a group or in the front of a group with my Sparking Change family, I felt so comfortable expressing my thoughts and feelings. A portion of my job will be facilitating group training sessions, and I am comfortable and eager.”
—South Carolina Storyteller**

**“I feel more confident in myself, I value who I am, I know what I’m worth and everything I can do in this country, now I know that I have rights and I feel more free and valued.”
—New Mexico Storyteller**

STORYTELLER HIGHLIGHT

Throughout the first year of Sparking Change, Chantelle Mitchell found the space to discover more about herself as an individual and hone the skills within her. “At one point, I used to just feel like I know there is something in me, but what is it? And you all helped me discover that ‘it.’” Chantelle says. “You all let me know that it was just not me and my speaking, it was really the things that I went through that made me powerful.”

“I’m not just telling Chantelle’s story; I’m telling my story also for the mother who’s afraid to tell hers.”

One woman and her network

“I can go on social media and someone’s tagging my name because they know that I’m going to try to help this family. The only way they know that is because I felt comfortable to say I’m out here doing this work.”

One woman and her community

“Within this community, you see poverty, you see crime. So [people] think that they’re stuck here, but when I speak to them... I make the women and the men in our community feel like they don’t have to remain where they’re at. And I think when you stand in those spaces, that’s what makes the difference.” Chantelle has now launched her own single parent workshop series.

One woman and a movement

Chantelle advises the NWLC Income Security & Child Care Community Impact Fund, has participated in multiple media interviews including with The New York Times, is a member of National Childcare Changemakers, and has advocated for primary parents on Capitol Hill. This year, she also completed the Wayfinder Foundation’s School Board Fellowship for Women of Color.



STORYTELLER HIGHLIGHT

Before Sparking Change, fear was a factor for many of the New Mexico participants. “I come from Mexico, and I’ve never really done any of this. I had worked with the communities, participating, supporting, but minor things,” Sandra explains. “The fact that you’re an immigrant can...limit you to a certain extent and [cause you to] be afraid [of getting] retaliated against.”

“I think this organization has helped us not to be afraid of change, to face situations, to be able to speak up, to be able to express ourselves.”

One woman and her network

“I worked in a place where I was very poorly paid, let’s say they abused my experience, my knowledge of everything...and I was afraid to go out and look for another job. But I empowered my sister so much based on what I learned [and] shared it with my co-workers.” Last year, both Sandra and her sister made the switch to higher paying jobs. In addition, she says, “I’m glad I was able to help other teachers find a better workplace.”

One woman and her community

Sandra shares her story to teach and inspire other immigrants doing child care work. “Back here in Albuquerque there is a lot of need...There are many women who need support, who bow their heads, who don’t speak, who don’t say anything, who don’t defend themselves.”

One woman and a movement

Sandra has participated in four advocacy days at her state legislature in the past year. She has shared her story with Univision Network, Voz de America, Albuquerque Journal, and on blogs and social media. She also shared her story to inform research being conducted on early educator compensation by the Berkeley Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Photo by Toni Francis-Bowie



PART 4: CHANGE WITHIN NWLC

FINDINGS & FEEDBACK

An important goal of Sparking Change is to transform the way National Women’s Law Center thinks about and approaches its work. Beyond bringing storytellers into its space for days of action, social media, blog posts, and news stories, NWLC ensured that storyteller voices were also brought to the Community Impact Fund and to focus groups that informed internal agendas and work plans. The following information comes from reflections from NWLC policy and press team staff on how Sparking Change storytellers impacted their work.

Access to storytellers energizes NWLC’s internal work.

Multiple staff members reflected on how grateful they are to work directly with the storytellers and experience mutual growth. Staff joined monthly cohort meetings to offer their expertise on various topics, and they coached storytellers for press interviews. Likewise, staff benefited from listening, and they implemented many of the storytellers’ ideas.

Furthermore, the New Mexico storytellers have focused a lot on the intersection of child care and immigration. For NWLC, this focus ignited more internal conversations about where this intersectional issue has a place in their work.

“I had been accustomed to thinking about our tax work as being very ‘wonky’ and insular. The excitement and interest from the focus group actually made me more convinced of how important our tax advocacy is.” —Amy Matsui, Senior Counsel and Director of Income Security





In a focus group around tax reform, storytellers were asked about:

- Whether they felt NWLC’s advocacy around corporations and the wealthy paying their fair share of taxes was relevant to their lives;
- Whether they have experienced workplace conditions like unpredictable schedules, low wages in tipped jobs, lack of paid sick days/paid leave, and other experiences;
- Social Security and retirement savings, and what barriers they face in their lives around preparing for retirement;
- What resources or information would be useful for them.

Storytellers have impacted certain focus areas and project development.

Changes Based on Storyteller Feedback

- One team is collaborating more with Community Partnerships when creating resources.
- One of the focus groups prompted staff to think more about the issue of paid leave. As Julie Vogtman, director of job quality and senior counsel, noted, “This policy historically has only been a small part of our job quality work, but our conversation made me think about how we might do more to uplift it.”
- The Income Security team expanded its public education work on retirement and has partnered with pro bono counsel at Citibank and Ropes & Gray to offer additional financial literacy and business education webinars.

Storytelling is an influential part of NWLC’s federal advocacy.

In April 2024, Melissa Boteach, Vice President of Income Security and Child Care/Early Learning, wove Merline’s story into her testimony before the U.S. Joint Economic Committee.

Four storytellers participated in the NWLC Annual Child Care Advocates Meeting in January, sparking other organizations to ask questions around how they can replicate this initiative.

Additionally, the storytellers’ subsequent visit on Capitol Hill was highly impactful and led to one member of Congress reaching out to NWLC for help drafting potential legislation.

“We can share our own details and data and research [with legislators], but it’s really hearing stories from the ground and from their constituents that makes a huge impact in our work.” —Karla Coleman-Castillo, Senior Policy Analyst

PART 5: CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

PARTNER, STAFF, & STORYTELLER FEEDBACK

Partners requested more clarification in roles and reporting hierarchy.

Multiple staff from each organization were interviewed for this report. A common thread during interviews with both organizations was that more clarity was needed around hierarchy and the appropriate party to speak with when different needs arise. Due to the way Olé directs and supports its organizers and staff, it has a specific chain of command that was important to them to uphold. Metanoia leadership, due to the number of programs they are managing, saw a challenge in following all that the storytellers are doing.

Both organizations recommended that at the beginning of partnering, it may have been helpful to provide an organizational chart with all Sparking Change actors (including mentors, trainers, advisors, partner leaders), reporting structures, and how the pieces fit together. At the beginning, it may also be helpful to outline any redress processes to course correct when challenges arise.



Photo by Caleb Cobos



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton

With more information sharing come more opportunities.

Both partners and NWLC staff requested stronger communication on what the storytellers are engaged in or have interest in. Without this communication, they feel a missed opportunity to leverage their network in support.

Additionally, the communications team and child care campaign team at NWLC want to be more plugged into what Storytellers are doing on a state and local level. “Most of the time we are the ones that are pitching the stories,” noted Diana Casillas, media manager. “I would love to see it the other way around, for them to reach out to us” for help with press coverage and to bolster what they are doing in their local communities.

Storytellers and partners expressed a desire for these resources to touch more women.

Leadership at Olé described tension between their large membership base and the small Sparking Change cohort of five women. Not only did their members feel left out at times, but also the storytellers wished their colleagues could reap the benefits of this initiative too. For them, in a state where resources are scarce, concentrating resources into five women can at times feel counterintuitive when the membership’s needs are so great.

It is worth noting that Metanoia leadership did not share this tension, pointing out that Sparking Change is quite different from their other initiatives, and it is rare for most women in their neighborhood to want to share their stories on a platform. Structured to provide group events and meet personal needs, Metanoia also appears to have a culture of promoting self-care and fellowship.

Still, there is a desire among all the storytellers to spread this to others with similar life experiences. In their focus groups, multiple storytellers expressed a desire to bring more women in, to teach them the same skills and to present them with the same opportunities. One storyteller even offered to forfeit her seat so that another woman could experience it.

This aligns with much of what we've already seen: this is a group of women with a communal mindset. They share resources with each other. They use their stipends to support their families. They uplift and celebrate each other's successes. Naturally, they want to see others around them experiencing the benefits of Sparking Change.

Year Two presents an opportunity to alleviate this tension by supporting storytellers in projects that engage their immediate communities.

Storytellers and partners were sensitive to changes in momentum.

Throughout the year, speaking engagements are bound to fluctuate. Additionally, between the holidays and the State Child Care Advocates conference in January, there was a pause in cohort meetings. One storyteller mentioned feeling disconnected when things slowed down. Partner leadership also expressed a desire to keep engagements rolling at a consistent pace.

Partners need more room and inclusion to plan for transitions.

Both organizations have felt included in NWLC's work—from joining the storytellers on a visit to the White House and Capitol Hill, to feeling that NWLC opened their network and access to national media, to feeling included in the early initiative design process. Both organizations expressed an appreciation of how Sparking Change has shifted the cohort's energy and eagerness to participate in their initiatives.

However, leadership expressed a desire for more inclusion leading up to transitions so that they could strategize on their end on how to collaborate and create alignment with their own initiatives. For instance, in Year Two, which will be more project-focused, leadership may have a helpful view on identifying projects where their organization is equipped to provide the most support.

Leadership also suggested having an initiative timeline available so they could better anticipate and plan for transitions. The partners need more time to onboard and create alignment within their own organization, as well as ensure they are properly resourced.

Partners shared thoughts around Year Two.

Olé recommended that Year Two include an opportunity to orient the storytellers toward strategic organizing. Year One was successful at developing storyteller leadership and ability to recognize problems as well as their ability to tell stories that connect their personal experiences to larger causes. Going forward, the storytellers are positioned to move toward learning strategic engagement that deepens the work and is politically intentional.

Similarly, Metanoia pointed out how the women have so many paths to choose from when it comes to engaging. In Year Two, where they choose to direct their power is important. Leadership emphasized the need to build spaces “that are supportive of their brilliance and help them move policy, without getting burnt out.”

Metanoia discussed how they have witnessed the storytellers' power to influence—now how do they measure it in Year Two? This will be an important consideration as this cohort develops their projects in the new cycle.

PART 6: YEAR ONE BLUEPRINT

STAGE 1: PARTNERING

Identify partners who are values-aligned and have the infrastructure to support storytellers in holistic ways. They also will be better positioned if they have connections to community and/or state actors to develop engagement opportunities. Intimately involve partners in early initiative design and selection of storytellers. Additionally, allow prospective storytellers to interview NWLC about the initiative. Ensure that organizational, programmatic, and hierarchical structures are clear. In the contract, outline a reporting and redress process.

STAGE 2: HIRING

Provide an onboarding training for mentors and a hands-on approach to guiding them through the tangible tasks of their role. Mentorship often takes time to “stick” and will require ample encouragement from leadership to be successful.

Based on previous successful hires, supportive program staff hired by the partner agencies should have the following core competencies:

- Strong sense of organization
- Affinity for building relationships
- Ability to observe and reach out proactively to participants about what they might need
- Investment in uplifting women of color and building community power
- Comfort in holding people accountable in compassionate, informed, and relational ways.
- Strength in planning community-building events and engagements



Key staff member behaviors that contribute to the success of the support role include:

- Listening in on trainings to better understand any areas of discomfort the storytellers might have faced during the training, as well as learn more about their stories.
- Building strong relationships that allow them to celebrate successes and also hold participants accountable.
- Staying informed of the storytellers' lives and stressors, remaining in tune with them to listen, watch, observe, and identify their needs.
- Communicating regularly with storytellers, NWLC, and supports like the mentors or therapist.

STAGE 3: TRAINING

Provide an upfront intensive training to create foundational knowledge and create community within the cohort. Language access is critical.

Monthly cohort meetings alternate between fellowship-building conversations and knowledge-building trainings. Topics include: tax preparation, finding your “why” in storytelling, civic engagement, press training and Fed 101, and power mapping.

Additionally, staff should consistently seek professional development opportunities that apply to the speakers and share them.

STAGE 4: POWER BUILDING

Presenting ongoing opportunities and fellowship will ensure storytellers remain engaged with the initiative. Both NWLC and partner organizations are expected to find opportunities for the storytellers to share their stories on various platforms, broaden their network, take on leadership roles, participate in civic engagement, and follow projects they have an interest in.

Building trust and power for partner organizations is also important. Mentoring leadership, sharing resources, and opening NWLC's network to them helps elevate their work. It also exposes NWLC to movements happening on a local level.

DATA, FEEDBACK LOOPS, AND COMMUNICATION STREAMS

The success of this initiative relies on staff ability to incorporate feedback from storytellers and partner organizations about what is working and what they need assistance with. Prioritizing the needs of participants over the needs of NWLC is a part of ensuring that lived expertise is actually impactful to the work.

In Year One, it is important to have streamlined data collection and communication between internal teams and external partners. Important metrics include: engagement title, host or news outlet, date, and type of engagement; what role the storyteller took on; topic of the speaking engagement; and audience.

Lastly, storytellers need ways to communicate with each other. Before starting, gather participant feedback on what platforms are best for them.

PART 7: GOALS FOR YEAR TWO

YEAR TWO

In the next year, this group seeks to scale impact. The storytellers will develop their own projects to address harmful narratives and pollinate their community with the knowledge and skills they have honed.

Measuring narrative change.

This past year, storytelling connected, uplifted, and instructed the 10 participants of Sparking Change. But the impact stretched beyond that, as the women carried their stories into acts of community service and leadership—just as Christine created and mobilized her peers around a petition against a manufacturing plant that was going to replace a neighborhood community park; just as Chantelle initiated a primary parent learning and support group; just as the storytellers in New Mexico created a self-help group to share resources with their broader community.

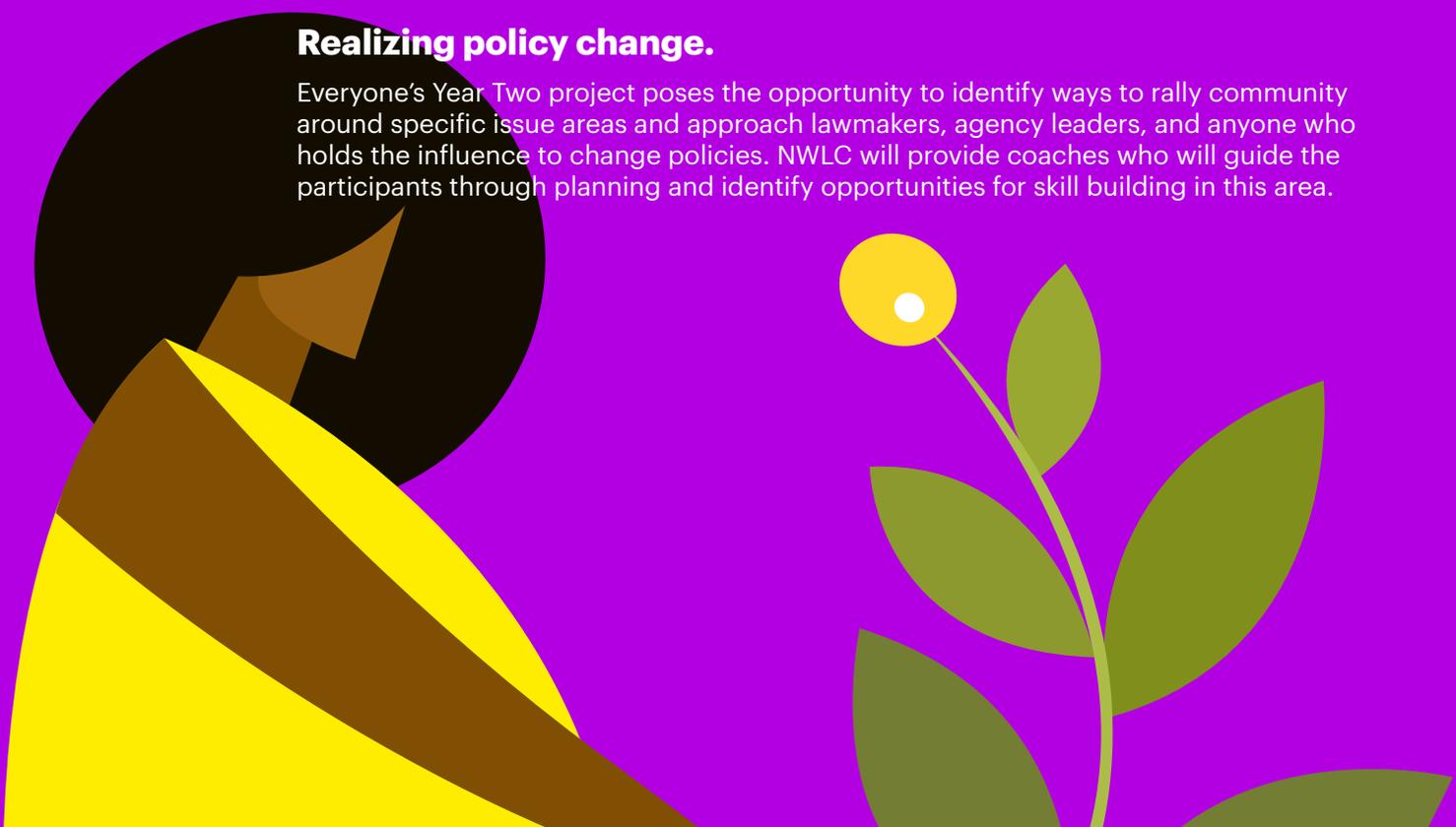
Capturing the impact of these actions is critical. As the women develop their projects for Year Two, NWLC will provide training and coaching in how to measure their impact; namely, how to observe and capture shifts in thinking and behaviors, and how to identify outcomes when advocating around specific policies and practices.

Becoming decision makers.

As the storytellers design their projects, they will identify community spaces where they want their voices to be heard. Their project planning phase will involve researching and identifying new territory where they can become decision makers and hold influence.

Realizing policy change.

Everyone's Year Two project poses the opportunity to identify ways to rally community around specific issue areas and approach lawmakers, agency leaders, and anyone who holds the influence to change policies. NWLC will provide coaches who will guide the participants through planning and identify opportunities for skill building in this area.



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To follow the progress of Sparking Change, please visit our landing page for updates on our work.



OLÉ





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