



National Women's Law Center

**COMMUNITIES
DRIVING CHANGE:**
YEAR TWO OF NWLC'S
COMMUNITY
IMPACT FUND



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton www.theanericollective.com

INTRODUCTION

The second year of the Community Impact Fund (CIF) marked a profound shift - from collaborative design to action on the ground. After 12 months of planning alongside our Design and Advisory Committee (DAC), we were ready to see what happened when grassroots leaders had both resources and genuine decision-making power to advance advocacy on their own terms. What would they prioritize? What strategies would they choose? How could we at the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) show up as truly useful national partners, in addition to providing funding?

Our [Year One report](#) described the intensive planning process that brought together organizational leaders and women with lived experience from South Carolina and New Mexico to design the CIF. Together, we identified a critical problem—**early childhood educators face economic insecurity due to poor compensation, benefits, and discrimination**—and we created a grantmaking process that shared power at every stage. Year two would test whether our participatory model could support real advocacy wins in communities while building the kind of transformational relationships we believe are essential to lasting change.

As a national organization dedicated to advancing gender justice, we remain committed to centering the perspectives and leadership of women of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and women and families with low incomes in our work. The CIF is one of two pilot initiatives our Income Security and Child Care (IS/CC) team launched in 2023 to build advocacy infrastructure; strengthen collaboration between organizations working at local, state, and national levels; and resource the leadership of Black, Indigenous, and other women of color (BIPOC). Both the CIF and [Sparking Change](#) pilot initiatives focus on strengthening not just community capacity, but our own capacity as a national team to engage, collaborate, and learn from the communities leading change. And our work with the CIF reflects what practitioners are increasingly recognizing globally: that resourcing relationships—the coordination, trust-building, and collaborative infrastructure that enables change—is not supplementary to social change work, but foundational to it.¹

This report tells the story of what our inaugural grantees—the Beloved Early Education and Care Collective (BEE Collective) in South Carolina, and Partnership for Community Action (PCA) in New Mexico—accomplished in their first grant year (July 2024 - June 2025). It captures the organizing work, the advocacy wins (including New Mexico's creation of and plan for a career ladder for early childhood educators and the launch of their universal child care program in November 2025), the infrastructure they built, and the powerful ways their leadership transformed what we thought was possible. This report also reflects honestly on what we're learning about how national organizations can meaningfully resource grassroots power-building while sustaining their own advocacy work in a challenging fundraising environment.

We're committed to radical transparency. By sharing both victories and challenges publicly, we create accountability to our grassroots partners and invite other organizations and funders to learn alongside us as we work to reimagine what collaborative, community-centered advocacy can look like.

¹ Resourcing Relationships: Funding Community, Connection and Change
Catherine Dempsey | Jan 7, 2026
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/resourcing-relationships-funding-community-connection-dempsey-ahv8e>

WHY PARTICIPATORY GRANT-MAKING MATTERS

Community-led, participatory grantmaking is more than a funding approach—it's a commitment to shifting power. When we launched the CIF, we embraced a model that diverges from traditional philanthropy by sharing or ceding decision-making authority to communities themselves.

As we detailed in our [Year One report](#), participatory grantmaking centers several key principles:

- » Meaningful community engagement in decision-making, not just consultation;
- » Flexible funding that allows grantees to address complex issues in culturally responsive ways;
- » Recognition that those closest to problems hold the solutions; and
- » Trust-building and transparency at every stage.

Participatory grantmaking is part of a broader shift in how the field thinks about funding social change. There is recognition now that the most important work often happens in relationships, shared learning, trust, and collaboration—work that doesn't show up neatly in traditional logic models but creates the conditions under which transformative change becomes possible.²

Yet the literature on philanthropic support for advocacy describes a persistent pattern that contradicts this recognition: insufficient investment rooted in a lack of understanding of advocacy's power to address systemic inequities. Too often, government policy gets shaped by well-resourced groups with access to decision-makers rather than by the communities whose well-being hangs in the balance.

This gap matters. Systemic change demands that those most impacted by harmful policies are meaningfully engaged in creating solutions. Especially in the political moment we're in, it's important that national advocacy organizations like NWLC develop practices that establish genuine communication channels, share power, and build trust with people directly affected by the policies we seek to improve. The CIF is our attempt to practice what we preach—to not just advocate for communities, but to work with them, learning and adapting as we go.

In year two, we moved from design into implementation, continuing to practice these principles while supporting our grantee partners' advocacy work. We remained conscious of the power dynamics inherent in any funder-grantee relationship, despite not being a traditional "funder." Even with our commitment to participatory approaches, NWLC holds institutional power—resources, networks, and national visibility—very different from that of our grassroots partners. We worked to use that power in service to their goals rather than imposing our agenda, stepping back when they needed space to lead and stepping in when connections or resources could be useful. We didn't always get this balance right, and we're still learning.

² Resourcing Relationships: Funding Community, Connection and Change
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PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Our year one evaluation report, released in February 2025, described the design and planning year of the CIF, how we built the Design and Advisory Committee (DAC), how we developed the theory of change and request for proposals together, and what we learned about creating an intentional, inclusive participatory grantmaking process.

This report focuses on what happened next: the first year of grant implementation. It describes how our selected grantees used flexible funding to advance advocacy and systems change efforts in their communities, what impact they achieved, and what we learned together about the relationship between national organizations and grassroots movements.

THE QUESTIONS DRIVING OUR YEAR TWO LEARNING

As we moved from planning into implementation, our key questions evolved:

- » How effectively did our grantee partners use flexible funding to build advocacy infrastructure and power in their communities?
- » What was the impact of our “going beyond the check” approach—providing not just money, but technical assistance, national connections, and real-time support?
- » What did we learn about the relationship between national organizations and grassroots partners that can inform how we show up in this work going forward?
- » How did participatory grantmaking enable different strategies and outcomes than traditional philanthropy would have produced?
- » What does “success” look like when BIPOC leaders are trusted decision-makers? How did their priorities and approaches differ from what we might have expected?

Throughout year two, we worked to answer these questions through ongoing conversations with our grantee partners, quarterly check-ins, capacity-building sessions, evaluation interviews, and our own internal reflection. This report synthesizes what we discovered.



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton



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OUR THEORY OF CHANGE: HOW WE BELIEVE LASTING CHANGE HAPPENS

During year two, we partnered with research and evaluation consultants to articulate more explicitly the theory of change underlying our participatory grantmaking work. While a logic model reflecting our grantees' work guided year one, we realized we also needed clarity about our own assumptions regarding how national organizations can support community-led advocacy.

Our theory of change is grounded in a fundamental belief: **gender justice cannot be achieved by NWLC alone. It requires collaboration across national, state, and local levels, with genuine power-sharing that centers communities.**

Here's how we believe our participatory grantmaking model creates the scaffolding for systemic change:

We identify and resource trusted grassroots organizations already embedded in their communities, with deep relationships and cultural competence → We provide flexible funding that respects their expertise around what strategies will work in their context → We create spaces for connection across state and national levels, facilitating knowledge-sharing and relationship-building → We offer real-time technical support, advocacy guidance, and access to our networks—without imposing our agenda → Together, we build advocacy infrastructure, community power, and momentum for policy change that outlasts any single grant cycle.

This framework helped us stay grounded and assess both the impact of our grantees' work and the effectiveness of our participatory approach.

The resulting goals for the CIF are to:

- » Develop NWLC's ability to strategically and effectively collaborate with grassroots and state-level organizations and the BIPOC women they support to inform local and state-based initiatives;
- » Strengthen grassroots and state-level organizations serving BIPOC women and families by providing timely resources and support that enable them to lead organizing, training, and movement-building;
- » Build trust with and among organizations working with BIPOC women and families; and
- » Provide BIPOC women leaders with leadership development opportunities and access to decision-making tables and other spaces of influence.

This isn't about NWLC leading change—it's about enabling communities to lead their own change while we learn how to be better partners in that work.

OVERVIEW OF OUR GRANTEE PARTNERS

The DAC selected two organizations as inaugural CIF grantees: the Beloved Early Education and Care Collective in South Carolina, and Partnership for Community Action in New Mexico. These organizations are quite different—they have different advocacy capacity, operate in distinct state contexts, and work within very different legislative environments. Yet both share a commitment to addressing the economic insecurities early childhood educators face, and both are led by or center the leadership of BIPOC women.

What makes the CIF powerful is that each grantee partner used the funds in exactly the way that made sense for their community and their moment. One built internal organizing capacity from the ground up. The other shared resources across a coalition to strengthen collective advocacy infrastructure. Neither approach is “better”—each was precisely what that community needed. This is what flexible, trust-based funding enables.



THE BELOVED EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE (BEE) COLLECTIVE Berkeley County, South Carolina

The Beloved Early Education and Care Collective doesn't just serve its community—it is the community. This Black woman-led organization has spent eight years building trust with birth workers, early educators, and families in Berkeley County, South Carolina. When they saw children of color being pushed out of preschools at alarming rates, they organized. They conducted research that revealed stark racial disparities in preschool expulsions—what they named "preschool pushout." When they learned that those same educators caring for children were struggling to feed their own families, they knew it was time to build a movement for economic justice.

Context in South Carolina

South Carolina operates with an economic development strategy born out of slavery and steeped in exploitation-regressive taxes, minimal business regulations, and stifled labor protections. The state legislature is 75% white with no Latine representation.

The numbers tell a story of profound inequity:

- 36.6% of female-headed families live in poverty (vs. 30.6% nationally)
- 11.2% of women aged 19-64 are uninsured (vs. 9.6% nationally)
- Latine women are paid \$0.55 for every dollar white men earn
- Black women are paid \$0.57 for every dollar white men earn
- Early educators' median wage of \$10.96 is less than the living wage for single adults (\$15.73)
- South Carolina has one of the largest educator wage gaps in the country

These aren't just statistics - they're the daily reality for women BEE collective organizes.

BEE Collective's mission is to ensure that all families have access to quality maternal, child, and family health care. Their vision is to build upon the assets of their hardest-to-reach pregnant people, children, and caregivers so that they can co-create a beloved community in maternal health and early education where everyone is treated with dignity.

When selected as a CIF grantee, BEE Collective was on the heels of their first major local advocacy initiative around preschool pushout. They were ready to tackle a connected challenge: the economic insecurity of the predominantly BIPOC women doing the crucial work of early childhood education.

During their first grant year, BEE Collective focused on building capacity—both their own organizational infrastructure and their community members' power, particularly early educators. Their holistic approach included training in advocacy skills, policy literacy, effective communication, and legislative engagement. They conducted community listening sessions and surveys with impacted early educators of color, facilitated stakeholder focus groups and public forums, and analyzed existing care-related policies. But most importantly, they were building something that simply hadn't existed before: organizing infrastructure that could bring early educators together to recognize their power and use it.

“I have had moments where I have felt like this is really slow work, and this IS the work. It's not just changing the compensation but also equipping the community with how to move issues and say, 'you have the power'”

— BEE Collective staff member

PARTNERSHIP FOR COMMUNITY ACTION Albuquerque, New Mexico

Partnership for Community Action (PCA) has been building community power in Albuquerque and throughout New Mexico since 1990. This grassroots advocacy organization is deeply committed to advancing equity and justice while centering the needs of marginalized populations—immigrant and mixed-status families, women, and BIPOC communities. They focus on community organizing, leadership development and engagement, power-building, and advocacy for systemic change. They don't just advocate for communities; they build the capacity of communities to advocate for themselves.

Context in New Mexico

New Mexico presents both challenges and opportunities. Women face significant economic insecurity:

- [35.4%](#) of female-headed families live in poverty (vs. 30.6% nationally)
- [12%](#) of women aged 19-64 are uninsured (above national average)
- Latina women are paid \$0.61 for every dollar white men earn
- Black women are paid \$0.69 for every dollar white men earn
- The state ranks near the bottom nationally in child care worker wages
- Median hourly wage for early educators ([\\$12.03](#)) is less than the living wage for single adults ([\\$15.11](#))

But there's also momentum: New Mexico has become a model state for funding early childhood education, and the Department of Early Childhood Care and Education has made improving wages and ECE a priority.

"What has worked well is being able to utilize the funds the way we envisioned their use, so partners show up to meetings with some support for their organizations."

— PCA Staff Member

PCA came to the CIF with both urgency and opportunity. They had been working to address the challenges early childhood educators face—many of whom are BIPOC and immigrant women—including low wages, lack of access to benefits like health care and retirement plans, and inadequate professional and business development opportunities. And they had a powerful vehicle for change: the ECE Budget Coalition, a network of 14 community-based organizations committed to building support for New Mexico families and early childhood educators through policy design, research, advocacy, and movement-building.

PCA recognized something crucial: sustainable advocacy requires not just one strong organization, but a network of organizations with the capacity to coordinate efforts, track legislation, organize campaigns, maintain relationships with decisionmakers over time, and engage community members with lived experience to guide policy priorities.

So PCA made a strategic decision about how to use their CIF grant—they awarded subgrants to the community-based organizations forming the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Budget Coalition. The subgrants cover some of each partner's advocacy costs and enables the coalition to function as a true collaborative force, not just a loose network.

The timing couldn't have been better. In New Mexico, real resources were being directed toward early childhood education. The question was whether those resources would translate into better wages and conditions for the predominantly BIPOC women doing the work—and whether community voices could shape how those resources got deployed.

PCA's CIF grant advances capacity development, community engagement, and advocacy while leveraging the organization's 30-plus years of history, advocacy experience, and relationships with state and national entities. It's a model of how flexible funding can strengthen entire movements, not just an individual organization.

TWO STATES, TWO APPROACHES, ONE SHARED COMMITMENT

Though BEE Collective and PCA took different approaches—one building internal capacity, one building capacity across a coalition—both were doing the essential work of creating infrastructure for sustained advocacy. Both were centering the leadership and voices of BIPOC women. Both were organizing communities to recognize and use their power. And both were testing what becomes possible when grassroots organizations have the flexible resources and national support to lead change on their own terms.

What they accomplished in their first grant year exceeded what any of us anticipated.



KEY FINDINGS

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN WE TRUSTED COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

When we asked our grantee partners and DAC members what they hoped to accomplish through the CIF, their aspirations centered on three interconnected goals: *improving conditions for early childhood educators facing economic insecurity, building community power and voice, and strengthening organizational capacity for sustained advocacy.*

What made year two powerful is that we were able to watch those hopes translate into action—and the results exceeded expectations.

Through evaluation interviews with 11 participants in May 2025, semi-annual grantee reports, and ongoing conversations throughout the grant year, clear throughlines emerged about what happened when communities had both resources and decision-making power. These findings speak to both the impact our grantee partners achieved in their communities, and what we learned together about how national organizations can meaningfully support grassroots advocacy.

1 FLEXIBLE FUNDING ENABLED GRANTEES TO RESOURCE RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE THEIR WAY—AND THAT MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

One of the most valued elements of the CIF was the ability for grantee partners to decide how to use funds—not just what programs to run, but how to resource the relationships, coordination, and participation infrastructure that would enable sustained advocacy. This “resourcing relationships”³ meant that they were funded for the time, space, coordination roles, and participation costs that create the soil in which transformative ideas can emerge, spread, and last. We didn't prescribe strategies or require specific activities. We trusted that BEE Collective and PCA knew what their communities needed.

That trust paid off in powerful ways.

“CIF has helped us create a mechanism for ourselves internally. We have a weekly meeting now that is focused on this fund and work that has grown out of it. This is an internal mechanism that we didn't have in place prior to the fund. To me this is concretely important and rewarding.”

— BEE Collective Staff Member

BEE Collective used their funding to build internal organizing and advocacy infrastructure that simply hadn't existed before. They hired two community champions to support education, awareness-building, training, and organizing among early care workers and the broader community. They contracted with a research and evaluation firm to develop their capacity to gather and analyze data from the communities they serve in real time. They created weekly internal meetings focused specifically on advocacy work—a structure that helped a small, passionate staff move from juggling multiple urgent priorities to sustained, strategic organizing.

As one BEE Collective staff member reflected: "We are a very small staff. We juggle a number of things and wear different hats and most of us don't get paid very much but a stipend, but we do this work out of our own commitment and passion and understanding of how important it is. If you understand small grassroots organizations and how they operate, sometimes you're in the field doing all this work and you do not have time for strategic planning and focus. This has helped us be more structured in this way. And because we have to be accountable to NWLC, this has helped us structure our processes for accountability. The system and structure is now in place."

PCA took a completely different approach—one that leveraged their role as a network hub. They awarded subgrants to 13 community-based organizations in the ECE Budget Coalition, covering some of each partner's advocacy costs and enabling coalition members to track legislation, engage community members with lived experience to guide policy priorities, coordinate coalition efforts, organize campaigns, and maintain relationships with decision-makers.

This flexibility to share resources across the network strengthened the entire advocacy ecosystem, not just one organization. Coalition partners could show up to meetings, bring community members to the capital, and sustain engagement over time—work that's essential but often unfunded.

The lesson is clear: flexible funding that respects community expertise allows grantees to deploy strategies that fit a particular moment in time and advocacy opportunity that traditional grantmaking might not have recognized—or supported—and those strategies work precisely because they're designed by people who know their communities intimately.

"[The CIF grant] has allowed us to expand who is at the table as coalition members, has allowed us to bring more community members to the [capitol]. Not sure if without these types of funding we would have been able to do that and [with] as many community members this last year.

— PCA Staff Member



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton



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2 AUTHENTIC PARTNERSHIP WITH A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION ACCELERATED ADVOCACY CAPACITY AND OPENED DOORS

Throughout year two, we worked to show up as genuine partners to BEE Collective and PCA—not just “delivering checks” but collaborating and investing in their success. We held quarterly check-ins designed not for compliance monitoring but for real conversation about progress, needs, and challenges. We offered capacity-building training sessions on topics grantee partners identified as useful, often tapping into our internal expertise, or contracting with external thought leaders. We facilitated connections to other organizations and advocates in their states. We shared information about the national policy landscape, as well as what was happening in other states. We elevated impact data on their work through annual reports we shared broadly with our funders and other stakeholders, and always made ourselves available for real-time support when they encountered challenges or opportunities.

"We're pretty fierce now. There's a season for everything. In the season we are in, to be in partnership with NWLC and our families, to me, is really profound. The people on our team see themselves as leading in this space in Charleston and feel empowered and equipped to sit at [decision making] tables."

— BEE Collective Staff Member

Both grantee partners named this "going beyond the check" approach as critical to their work. BEE Collective staff shared that conversations with NWLC affirmed their experiences and helped them realize they didn't have to wait for another entity in their state to rise up and lead early care workforce advocacy—they had the capacity to lead it themselves. When they faced the challenge of building partnerships with organizations they'd never worked with before, including groups with different values but critical roles in the early care ecosystem, they could bring those dilemmas to us and work through solutions together.

"Given the times and all that is going on across the country, and here in South Carolina in particular, the community coalition-building would probably happen but our engagement with NWLC has helped propel us even faster and in ways that have helped us take more leadership in that coalition-building," another staff member noted.

PCA appreciated the opportunity to understand the national policy landscape—how policies connect across different levels of government and the political dynamics shaping their advocacy goals. As they put it: "Sometimes we focus so much on what's happening locally and where [we are] noticing biggest impact, and unintentionally silo and just focus on the state level. So being able to have a space to have national conversations and listening to other organizations and sharing perspectives is valuable."

But perhaps most powerfully, both grantee partners named the ways their association with NWLC as a reputable national advocacy organization lent them credibility and social capital.

One DAC member who is also a community leader with lived experience as an early educator put it powerfully: **"I had not worked with national organizations before this. It's a way of transforming our communities. This has been a door toward change. I have a greater/broader perspective, and I have learned to dream bigger. Many times, we think it is just white people who can participate in these [national] initiatives and work in government. This type of program opens pathways for us [people of color] and has much more impact. It helped more than anything to educate me and help me believe in myself. It helped me get closer to my dreams and learn to be persistent. It deepened my sense of belonging in this country. I do belong here and I have rights here."**

This finding challenges us to think carefully about the ways national organizations can use our institutional power and social capital not to center ourselves, but to open doors for grassroots leaders.

"I know that when we name NWLC as a funder—other funders are like: 'Ok, there much be value to the work that you're doing.' I think we saw an investment from [another funder] that came out of nowhere and I would like to think that when they were looking at us... I absolutely name drop and not just in funding but also legislative space. I know that policymakers who have worked in this space understand the name and the power and unfortunately that's how these systems work."

— BEE Collective Leader

3 GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING BUILT ADVOCACY INFRASTRUCTURE, CREATED POLICY MOMENTUM, AND TRANSFORMED PARTICIPANTS

Both grantee partners made significant strides in building the organizing infrastructure and community engagement essential for sustained advocacy.

BEE Collective exceeded their outreach, education, and engagement goals. They hosted worker circles where early educators could safely discuss working conditions in a state where workers are "scared to talk about worker conditions and perceived lack of protection." They created Community Action Labs where parents learned that the high fees they pay for child care weren't actually reaching the workers caring for their children—an eye-opening realization that built cross-constituency solidarity. They conducted focus groups; provided trainings to coalition members on legislative advocacy, policy literacy, and power-building; and did outreach at numerous collaborative meetings and community events.

They exceeded their partner development goal threefold—building 25 partnerships with movement building and advocacy organizations instead of the projected eight. And they were grateful for connections NWLC facilitated with other entities in South Carolina through the CIF initiative.

Most significantly, they built their research capacity, contracting with a research and evaluation firm to learn how to identify research questions, design data collection tools, and analyze findings. This capacity empowers them to understand their community's needs, challenges, assets, and solutions in real time—to lead with data they generate themselves rather than waiting for others to study their community.

The culmination of all this capacity-building came at a Legislative Action Day. BEE Collective staff and community members participated in lobby day, meeting with state senators—an experience many had never had before.

But perhaps the most important impact was broader community consciousness. As one staff member observed. **"I do think the broader community has [developed awareness]—a lot more of the community is talking about child care worker benefits, more than did before. Parents, in their mind, are paying so much for child care and assuming that this money gets to workers. It has been eye-opening for them to know that what you pay does not get to the worker and it feels like this understanding will continue to grow."**

One key success was the implementation of the state's Wage & Career Ladder Taskforce. Our coordinated advocacy pushed ECECD to formally address this issue and recognize experience and specialized skills in its draft framework. As a result of sustained pressure, the department also received an increased distribution from the Early Childhood Trust Fund, marking a significant budget win."

— PCA Staff Member

PCA strengthened local advocacy capacity by hosting bi-weekly coalition meetings covering legislative strategy, policy development, and narrative framing with community representatives, early childhood educators, and advocacy organizations. The ECE Budget Coalition grew and built powerful momentum through increased collaboration among members and alignment around pay equity and income security for BIPOC early childhood educators.

That alignment translated into action. The coalition mobilized communities through advocacy events including the Children's Day of Action, Worker Rights Day, and Early Childhood Day—surpassing attendance goals sevenfold. They engaged directly with legislative representatives, providing input on legislation to increase wages and recognize providers' experience and specialized skills.

In partnership with relevant actors across the state, the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department developed a comprehensive wage and career ladder that establishes a robust wage scale that increases early childhood workers' wages based on their level of experience and education. This plan will help New Mexico retain and attract high-quality workers and meet the current and future needs of its families and children. The coalition also supported broader legislative efforts including baby bonds, paid family and medical leave, and guaranteed income while monitoring ten key bills related to income security, early childhood care, and workforce equity.

Their sustained advocacy paid off in an historic victory: on November 1, 2025, New Mexico launched a universal child care program. This transformative policy win—the result of years of organizing, base-building, and advocacy by PCA and coalition partners—will fundamentally change access to early childhood education in the state.

While House Bill 2 and House Bill 71 didn't pass with significant investments into early educator wages during the 2025 legislative session in New Mexico, PCA recognized that their coalition's advocacy around educator wages was laying crucial groundwork—in partnership with other state organizations—building on over a decade's worth of advocacy. That groundwork created the conditions for the governor to launch New Mexico's universal child care initiative.

This is what sustained, community-led organizing achieves. The infrastructure PCA built, with the help of CIF funding—the bi-weekly coalition meetings, the community engagement at the capital, the coordinated messaging, the relationships with legislators—all contributed to this remarkable victory.

"There is a lot of success with us going and advocating at the state capitol. I do not think many of us have had that experience - doing a lobby day and talking to state senators. We had good attendance and participation from staff and parents. It was a good relationship-building experience and just to get this experience - 'oh, this is what this is like."

— BEE Collective Staff Member

"That we have all these young people charged up. Even if they don't know how. Their energy level and willingness is there. Being done in a way that's collaborative. [They're] learning coalition-building and advocacy. That's a big success for me."

— BEE Collective Staff Member

Beyond policy outcomes, participants experienced personal transformation. Young people got "charged up" about advocacy even when they didn't initially know how to advocate. Women with lived experience as caregivers and immigrant early educators, saw themselves as resources in their communities, people whom others came to with questions about discrimination and rights. Coalition members learned advocacy and organizing skills they'll carry forward.

This is what sustainable organizing looks like—not just moving one policy, but building the people and infrastructure who lay the groundwork for transformative change, and who can keep moving policies for years to come.

4 THE PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING APPROACH PRODUCED INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

DAC members and grantee partners celebrated the community-led participatory grantmaking model as critical for developing solutions informed by those most impacted, dismantling inequities, and bringing long-term financial security and quality child care closer within families' reach.

One DAC member captured why this approach matters: "I feel excited about being a part of a participatory process, especially in the field of grantmaking. As someone in the nonprofit space, it is hard to find groups that listen to people and create funding priorities instead of saying, 'I know the problem based on these statistics and articles,' and decide this is where we're going to invest...Being in a room with people with deep knowledge of the challenge and how we take what we know and believe are the best approaches, and how to provide funding for what we deemed as best approaches."

The participatory approach—from having DAC members select which organizations to invite to apply, to trusting grantee partners to determine how to use funds, to co-designing evaluation tools—produced outcomes that a more traditional grantmaking approach may not have:

Different strategies were funded. Because many funders restrict regranteeing, would they have supported PCA's decision to distribute resources across a coalition rather than build their own organizational capacity? Would they have understood why BEE Collective needed to invest in hiring community champions and building research capacity before jumping into legislative advocacy? Our participatory approach enabled strategies that emerged from intimate community knowledge.

Different voices shaped priorities. Rather than NWLC determining which early childhood education issues in New Mexico and South Carolina should be addressed, the DAC—which includes women with lived experience as early educators and parents navigating the child care system—identified economic insecurity among educators as the root cause that mattered most to them. Their analysis led to the problem statement that guided all grantee work.

Different experts led. One DAC member with lived experience shared: "I wanted to continue to allow us to bring awareness and solutions and bring this in front of people who are responsible for legislation and bring them the statistics, but data doesn't capture everything that [we] see in the community...to be able to tell the story and see how to get those things changed."

Participants valued having a reputable national partner with shared values and a broad vantage point to situate their policy change initiatives. But more than that, they valued being treated as the experts they are—organizations and individuals whose knowledge of their communities and what works there was respected and resourced.



LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT WE'RE TAKING FORWARD

As we reflect on year two of the CIF, we see evidence that NWLC is meeting the goals we set for ourselves: collaborating strategically and effectively with grassroots and state-level organizations to advance their ability to advocate for local and state-based policies; strengthening organizations with timely resources; building trust among organizations working with BIPOC women; and providing women leaders with leadership development opportunities that facilitate their access to decision-making tables.

But we also see clearly where we need to keep learning, what questions we're still sitting with, and where the work is harder than we anticipated, especially in 2026 as we balance resourcing our own advocacy. Participatory grantmaking isn't a formula to be perfected—it's an ongoing practice of power-sharing, trust-building, and mutual learning. Here's what year two taught us.

FLEXIBLE FUNDING FOR ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY IS CRITICALLY NEEDED BUT HARD TO COME BY


Both grantee partners stressed the critical need for flexible funding that supports organizing and advocacy work, and specifically for 'relational infrastructure':

- Core staffing and coordination roles
- Convening time and spaces
- Participation costs (travel, childcare, food, stipends)
- Time to build mutual understanding
- Frameworks for shared decision-making
- Support for the emotional and relational labor of organizing.

The CIF funding enabled them to establish and expand the networks and infrastructure needed to challenge policies and regulations created by powerful interests, and to advance the policies needed in their communities.

BEE Collective built organizing and advocacy infrastructure from the ground up by hiring community champions, developing research capacity, and creating internal accountability structures—work that's essential but often unfunded because it requires sustained financial support or doesn't produce immediate "deliverables."

PCA needed funds to help community members cover the costs of travel, child care, and food to enable them to engage with the officials elected or selected to represent them. These are costs for basic supports without which people could not exercise their rights, amplify their voices, and build power to ensure policies aren't harmful and inequitable. But it is often challenging for organizations to procure funding to support these kinds of costs because they seem like luxuries.



As our grantee partners' experiences underscore, effective organizing and advocacy require intentionality and resources. Community-led participatory grantmaking is an opportunity to meaningfully invest monetary and other capacity-building resources that contribute to sustainable personal, organizational, and community change.

Yet this kind of funding remains rare. With limited resources available to invest, funders often prefer to support direct services or specific policy campaigns with measurable outcomes on tight timelines. Building power and trust takes time. And building infrastructure is messy and unpredictable.

We're committed to continuing to make the case—both through the second year of funding this work and by sharing what we're learning—that funding grassroots groups is essential for driving real change and that flexible, trust-based funding produces powerful results on multiple levels.

TRUST-BUILDING TAKES TIME AND INTENTIONAL INVESTMENT IN RELATIONSHIPS—ESPECIALLY IN-PERSON CONNECTION—IS ESSENTIAL

Participants emphasized that in-person meetings at the start of the participatory grantmaking process are essential for building trust and comfort within groups and enable more open sharing and collaboration. While we held most of our meetings virtually throughout year two—a practical necessity given geographic distance and budget constraints—we learned that screens can only take relationship-building so far.

Grantee partners and DAC members noted that a key benefit of the CIF was the opportunity to partner with and learn from those closest to early childhood education, income insecurity, and equity issues. This included women with lived experience of caregiving and economic insecurity, grassroots organizations, and groups with track records of policy change success.

But as one participant reflected after our first in-person convening at the end of year one: "[Virtual] conversations [are challenging]. It would be great to be able to feel the energy of others in the room."

Another noted: "...Not being able to see/talk to people face to face make[s] it a challenge to feel able to talk openly/freely."



Photo by Sirena White-Singleton

If we could go back in time, we would have prioritized more in-person convenings—not just at the beginning of the process, but throughout. We believe that the investment in travel and meeting costs is worth it if it facilitates trust building from the onset and strengthens ongoing relationships that make this work possible. Earlier and more frequent in-person gatherings, we believe, would have led to a more thorough understanding of the state work being implemented, and richer relationships being developed amongst the group. Despite this, we're mindful that relationship-building takes time, and that it's important to move at the speed of trust. We were intentional about creating virtual space for the forming-storming-norming stages of group development before getting to the "performing" stage of collaborative work and we've seen that when we invest in that relational foundation, the quality of collaboration that emerges is worth the considerable time invested.

GRANTEE PARTNERS WITH DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES NEED DIFFERENT KINDS OF SUPPORT BUT CAN STILL LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

While participants valued the diversity among entities engaged in the initiative, we learned that grantees with very different organizational focuses and capacities need more intentional structure to facilitate direct collaboration and peer learning.

BEE Collective was building their advocacy and organizing capacity essentially from scratch—they came to this work with passion, community trust, and a track record on preschool pushout, but were developing legislative advocacy infrastructure in real time. PCA brought 30-plus years of advocacy experience, established relationships with state decisionmakers, and a functioning coalition infrastructure. They were in different phases of development.

Both organizations appreciated learning about different power structures and legislative contexts in the other's state. Both valued receiving national-level insights from NWLC about policy dynamics and how federal forces could affect their local communities. The grantee developing their organizing capacity found it particularly valuable to hear about policy victories from the grantee engaged in longstanding advocacy efforts and in a differing political context.

But we realize we could have been more intentional about creating structured opportunities for peer exchange and mutual learning, and about ensuring that the less-resourced organization didn't feel they had less to contribute. The truth is, both had profound wisdom to offer—just different wisdom based on their different contexts and phases of work.

As we implement the second year of funding for the CIF, we're thinking about how we could have better:

- Created peer learning structures that make space for different kinds of expertise;
- Matched capacity-building offerings to where organizations actually are rather than where we assume they should be; and
- Facilitated exchanges where grassroots organizations building infrastructure could learn from those with established capacity, while those with established capacity can learn from grassroots innovation and community connection.

PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION CAN MINIMIZE BURDEN WHILE CAPTURING WHAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

Community-led participatory grantmaking demands evaluation methods that go beyond the requirements and processes typically used by more traditional funders. We worked with our evaluation consultants to co-create data collection tools with NWLC, grantee partners, and DAC members. Grantees and DAC members appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback on the design of the reporting template.

The semi-annual grantee report combined narrative reflections and quantitative data about implementation, impact, and aspirations. It included space to report on goals stated in the original proposals but also captured anticipated and unanticipated outcomes—recognizing that organizing and advocacy work rarely unfolds exactly as planned, and that emergent opportunities and challenges are often where the most important learning happens.

Virtual evaluation interviews provided space for reflection and storytelling that reporting templates alone can't capture. Several grantee partners appreciated the interview process as a welcome departure from standard philanthropic reporting methods. Rather than focusing solely on quantitative data, the conversational format allowed them to reflect deeply on their work, share the stories behind their impact, and provide feedback about the CIF model. As one grantee partner noted, conversations during check-ins and interviews allowed them to discuss the nuances of advocacy that quantitative or narrative reporting alone doesn't fully capture.

We're learning that evaluation can be both rigorous and humanizing when it's designed with and for the people being asked to participate in it. The question isn't just "what data do we need?" but "what reflection and learning would actually be useful to our grantees, and how can we gather information in ways that respect their time and wisdom?"

WHAT WE'RE STILL FIGURING OUT

We don't have all the answers. Year two raised as many questions as it resolved, and we want to be transparent about where we're still learning:

- » **How do we create meaningful connections among grantee partners with different organizational capacities without inadvertently making less-resourced partners feel "behind"?** Everyone brings different strengths to this work, but traditional markers of "capacity"—budget size, staff numbers, years of operation—can create implicit hierarchies we want to disrupt.
- » **What's the right balance of structure and flexibility in our engagement approach?** We want enough touchpoints to genuinely support our partners, but not so many meetings and reporting requirements so as to become burdensome. How do we stay connected without overwhelming small staffs already stretched thin?
- » **How can we leverage NWLC's national platform to amplify grantee partners' work without centering ourselves in their stories?** We have access to media, policymakers, and other funders. How do we use that access in service of grassroots leaders' visibility, without seeking to elevate our own organizational profile?
- » **How do we honestly assess whether we're truly sharing power or inadvertently recreating traditional funder dynamics with a participatory veneer?** Are we comfortable with community decisions we wouldn't have made? Do we intervene when we see grantee partners struggling, or trust them to navigate their own challenges? When does support become control?

These questions keep us humble. They remind us that this work is ongoing, that we will make mistakes, and that the most important thing we can do is stay in relationship with our partners and keep asking them—and ourselves—whether we're actually showing up the way we aspire to.

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING AS NWLC

Throughout year two (2024-2025), we continually questioned whether we were truly sharing power or inadvertently recreating traditional funder dynamics. Our team had to examine our assumptions about what "success" looks like, learning to celebrate infrastructure-building and relationship-development as much as policy wins.

We discovered that being a useful national partner means sometimes stepping back, sometimes connecting dots, and always respecting that grassroots leaders know their communities better than we ever will. It means offering what we have—advocacy expertise, national connections, understanding of the national policy landscape—without assuming our priorities should be our partners' priorities. It means being okay with not being at the center of the story.

We also learned that this work changes us. We're better at listening and we're more comfortable with uncertainty. And perhaps most importantly, we've learned that investing in relationships—even when those relationships feel like they're moving slowly, even when we can't immediately point to policy wins or measurable outcomes—is sometimes the most important investment we can make. Because lasting change doesn't happen through transactions; it happens through transformation. And transformation requires trust.






CONCLUSION: VICTORIES, LEARNINGS, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

As this report is being written, both grantee partners are entering the final months of their two-year grant cycle with us and we're watching closely to see how the infrastructure they built continues to generate impact. One historic victory we are celebrating is the November 2025 launch of New Mexico's universal child care program—a transformative, first-in-the-nation policy win that Partnership for Community Action and the ECE Budget Coalition helped make possible. This achievement represents years of organizing, coalition-building, and advocacy by community leaders who refused to accept that early childhood educators should live in poverty while doing essential work that makes all other work possible. PCA's use of CIF funding to strengthen coalition infrastructure, bring community members to the capital, and sustain advocacy momentum, contributed to the conditions for this victory.

This is what community-led advocacy can achieve when it's properly resourced and given time to build power!

BEE Collective, meanwhile, continues to build the organizing infrastructure in South Carolina that will enable sustained advocacy for years to come. They've trained dozens of early educators in advocacy skills, brought parents and educators together to understand shared struggles, created research capacity to document their community's needs in real time, and equipped community members to sit at decision-making tables they'd never accessed before. While South Carolina's legislative landscape remains challenging, BEE Collective has laid groundwork that will outlast any single policy campaign.

Reflecting internally, NWLC is not the same organization we were when we started the CIF. As we enter 2026, we're doing so in a profoundly challenging funding and political landscape. As funders face increasing scrutiny and threats to their very existence, nonprofit organizations are left competing for shrinking resources precisely when their work is most needed. This makes the CIF's approach—multi-year, flexible, relationship-centered funding—feel increasingly critical.



The reality is that participatory grantmaking, done well, is costly: it requires dedicated staff time, resources to compensate community expertise, capacity for ongoing support, and financial sustainability for multi-year commitments. The challenging climate we're navigating underscores both the value of this approach and the honest acknowledgment that sustaining it requires resources many organizations—including ours—are struggling to maintain.

As a result, the CIF will sunset in the Fall of 2026 at the conclusion of our grantee partners' two-year cycle. This was always designed as a pilot—an experiment in how a national organization without state chapters or offices could build transformational relationships with grassroots partners through participatory grantmaking. The pilot has succeeded in teaching us profound lessons about power-sharing, trust-building, and what it takes to genuinely support community-led advocacy. And as we approach the end of the CIF pilot, we're asking ourselves: what will we carry forward? How do we ensure that the relationships, practices, and commitments we've developed don't end when the formal grant cycle does? How do we continue partnering with BEE Collective, PCA, and the communities they serve beyond this particular funding stream?

We plan to release a final evaluation report in Winter 2027 at the conclusion of the two-year grantee cycle, sharing comprehensive analysis of what changed in South Carolina and New Mexico over the full grant period, what policy victories were achieved, how communities were strengthened, and what we learned about the conditions that enable national-grassroots collaboration to thrive. We're particularly interested in exploring how the participatory grantmaking approach impacted the quality of relationships and trust built among DAC members, grantee partners, and NWLC.

As the CIF pilot comes to a close, we're deeply grateful for what we've learned and the relationships we've built. The practices, commitments, and ways of showing up that we developed through CIF will continue to inform how NWLC partners with advocates, organizations, and communities on the ground. The pilot may be ending, but our commitment to community-led advocacy, power-sharing, and authentic partnership is only growing stronger.

To quote one of our DAC members: "This is the work. It's not just changing the compensation but also equipping the community with how to move issues and say, 'you have the power.'"

That's the work we're here for. And we're grateful to have learned how to do it better alongside our partners through the CIF pilot.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


This report was written by Toni Francis-Bowie, Director of Community Partnerships at the National Women's Law Center, in collaboration with Marjorie Nemes-Galarza and LaKeesha Woods of Arcstratta. But this work—and the learning it represents—belongs to our community partners who have taught us, challenged us, and trusted us.

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- **The Beloved Early Education and Care Collective (BEE Collective):** Adrienne Troy-Frazier, Dr Kim Archung, Stephanie McFadden, Treva Williams for your tireless work building power among early educators and families in South Carolina, for your willingness to build organizing infrastructure even when it felt slow, for teaching us what it looks like to truly center community voices, and for your courage in challenging systems that would rather silence the women you serve. Your commitment to treating everyone with dignity shines through everything you do.
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- » **Jamilla Harper**, COO, Metanoia
- » **CJ Gathers**, former Women & Youth Programs Director, YWCA Greater Charleston
- » **LaVanda Brown**, CEO, YWCA Greater Charleston
- » **Chantelle Mitchell**, Sparking Change storyteller and community leader, Charleston
- » **Miles Tokunow**, former Deputy Director, OLÉ
- » **Vic Gomez**, OLÉ
- » **Matthew Henderson**, Executive Director, OLÉ
- » **Aline Gonzalez**, Campaigns & Programs Director, Semilla Project
- » **Patty Ortiz**, Sparking Change storyteller and community leader, New Mexico



Your two years of commitment to this work transformed not just the Community Impact Fund but how NWLC understands our role in supporting community-led change. You shaped every aspect of this initiative, from identifying the problem statement early childhood educators face, to designing the request for proposals, to selecting grantees who would advance solutions rooted in community wisdom. Your candor in evaluation interviews, your patience with us when we didn't get things right the first time, and your willingness to help us improve our practice has been transformational. You've taught us what it means to share power, not just talk about it. Though our formal work together concluded in June 2025, the relationships we built and the lessons you taught us continue to guide us.

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