



National Women's Law Center

SPARKING CHANGE: A STORYTELLER INITIATIVE

YEAR TWO IMPACT REPORT | MAY 2026





NWLC and OLÉ staff, with New Mexico and South Carolina storytellers at the NWLC state child care advocates convening in Northern Virginia, December 2024

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Patricia Bustillos advocating for increased child care provider wages, in partnership with OLE, New Mexico



Sandra Ibarra with Elizabeth Groginsky - Cabinet Secretary for the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD). On this day in January, she joined other advocates led by OLE for the Kids First Day of Action.



Storytellers: Merline, Christine, Chantelle, Raynique, and Jamilla Harper of Metanoia, speak on a panel at the NWLC state child care advocates convening (Jan 2024) about the importance of centering lived expertise in state and national child care advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

About Sparking Change — Sparking Change is a storytelling and leadership development initiative that centers the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous and other women of color (BIPOC) closest to the intersecting issues of income insecurity and child caregiving. Over the past two years, 10 storytellers from New Mexico and South Carolina—all of whom are mothers and have experience being the primary caregivers of their families—have been sharing their expertise with the greater public, policymakers, elected officials and other decision-makers so that policies, campaigns, and initiatives are informed by lived experience and needs.

Abstract

This pilot program set out to build enduring skills in women who would in turn spread their knowledge within their communities and counter harmful narratives. This report reflects the many ways the NWLC Community Partnerships Team brought its theory of change to fruition, ultimately proving that when we invest in women’s leadership, advocacy, and self-care, we can shift narratives so decision-makers and voters now more accurately understand the needs of their communities. The Sparking Change storytellers demonstrated significant growth in leadership, a shift in relationship to their community, and influence on public narratives around child care and parental needs. This was evidenced not only through surveys and focus groups, but also through individual and group projects they implemented to serve their communities.

Report Methodology

This report focuses primarily on Year Two activities (July 2024 – June 2025) of this initiative, though it highlights the cumulative impact of Sparking Change. The data and reflections presented here were pulled using the following methods:

- Review and analysis of group and one-on-one meeting minutes
- Data review from monthly engagement reports completed by storytellers
- Interviews with NWLC staff, Sparking Change state partners, and other stakeholders
- Surveys completed by storytellers
- Focus groups with storytellers
- Review of social media engagement data
- Project data and reflections submitted by storytellers
- Outreach to venues and partners who hosted speaking engagements to gather feedback and any impact data around events that storytellers participated in

As an advisor and trainer working closely with the storytellers throughout these two years, Transformative Justice Solutions (TJS) has had a close view of Sparking Change since its inception, informing our approach to writing this report. That said, relying on concrete data points and feedback from participants and stakeholders was paramount to the integrity of our findings.

Report Focus

This is a pilot program; thus, our data collection methods are intended to review and reflect candidly on processes, infrastructure, stakeholder experience, and impact.

During [Year One](#), Sparking Change placed an emphasis on each storyteller's individual growth by training them in new skills such as public speaking, providing resources and compensation, creating a network of supportive advocates, and centering joy, rest, and community. For a more detailed analysis of Year One, please refer to the Year One report.

The intent of Year Two was to strengthen and employ the storytellers' leadership skills as they transitioned beyond storytelling and into leadership roles. NWLC approached this by supporting the storytellers in planning and executing group projects designed for their communities.

Supporting the Journey

Throughout [Years One](#) and Two, NWLC provided multiple resources to ensure the storytellers' needs were met. That way they could focus on their learning goals and personal development.

These included:

- Steady monthly compensation
- Monthly child care and internet/phone stipends for trainings and meetings
- Gift cards to purchase meals when trainings or meetings took place after work or during a time caregivers would be providing dinner to their families
- Group coaching and meeting facilitation, along with a speaker mentor
- Project planning tools such as worksheets and templates
- Monthly meetup and educational sessions
- Funding for state partner organizations to host quarterly community-building, "joy and connection" events
- Funding for state partner organizations to provide a supportive staff member
- Funding for mental health therapy
- Covering travel and lodging costs when a speaking engagement was in person or out of state

YEAR 2: TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout Year Two, NWLC provided a series of ongoing workshops to broaden topical knowledge based on the identified training needs of storytellers. They included:

- Conflict and Group Dynamics: Work Styles and Conflict Resolution Skills
- How to Create a Project Plan: An Interactive Planning Session
- Taking Care of Business: Legal and Financial Essentials for Women Business Owners
 - Getting Ready for Retirement – Basics About Saving for Retirement and Social Security
 - Access to Capital and Small Business Loans
 - Building Your Workforce as a Small Business Owner
- Measuring Success: Understanding and Analyzing Your Impact
- Local/State/National Strategies We Can Employ Under a Trump Administration
- Resetting in the New Year
- LinkedIn: Building Your Profile
- Op-Ed Writing and Building Credibility
- Advocacy in Uncertain Times: How to Stay Safe



Sandra coaching the other storytellers via Zoom, on what to expect from their first Hill Day visit, ahead of their upcoming trip to DC.



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

THEORY OF CHANGE

| IF WE | AND | AND | THEN | AND | IMPACT |
|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| Invest in Black, Indigenous, and women of color's leadership with training, well-being supports, & compensation | Cultivate community that fosters deeper understanding and support | Ensure storytellers have opportunities to confidently share their stories across platforms and continue to strengthen their advocacy knowledge | Storytellers will be brought into and centered in stakeholder conversations to represent their lived expertise | Storytellers will have the skills, confidence, and resources to lead advocacy work and mobilize others in their communities | Narratives will shift in a multitude of spaces where decision-makers and voters now more accurately understand the needs of BIPOC communities |

Goal 1: Prioritize and invest in the **leadership** of BIPOC women, allowing NWLC to work more closely with these communities.

Goal 2: Through a **cross-racial and cross-geographic cohort**, facilitate insightful dialogue that promotes mutual respect and a deeper understanding of social issues and racial equity.

Goal 3: Build upon Year One skillset to **transition participants beyond storytelling and into leadership roles** by supporting projects designed by storytellers and executed for their communities.

Goal 4: Contribute to **narrative change** and **center the voices** and experiences of those closest to the intersecting issues of income insecurity and child care by intentionally building opportunities for the storytellers' perspectives to be embedded in NWLC's work and elevated to legislators, stakeholders, and the general public.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Back to the Theory of Change

Desired Impact: Storytellers teach or model their skillset to others in their community, which grows a network of community members who are empowered to civically engage and advocate for their unmet needs.

Desired Impact: BIPOC women will be advocates and leaders in local, state, and federal spaces.

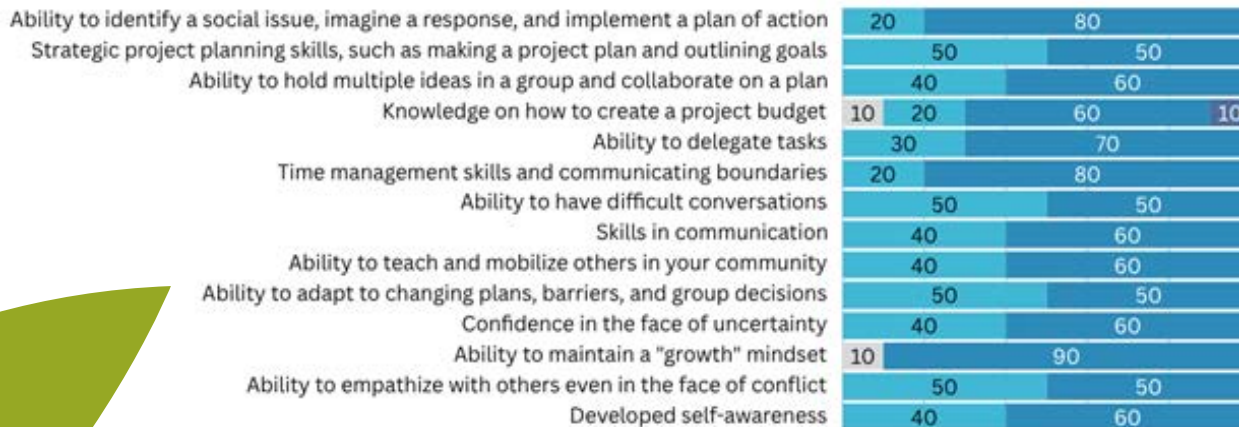
The following data sets look at short-term outcomes (within the past two years of Sparking Change) related to NWLC's goals of prioritizing and investing in the leadership of BIPOC women.

PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We measured improvement on 14 leadership and professional development indicators at the halfway point of Year Two following interventions such as the DiSC personality and communication style assessment and additional coaching. The chart below reflects significant improvement.

- No Change
- Some Improvement
- A Lot of Improvement
- Not Applicable

Please rate how much you feel these leadership skills have CHANGED through your experiences and training during Year Two of Sparking Change. (Results shown in percentages %)



“NWLC is not just a part of my leadership journey—it has become a part of who I am. Your support continues to shape my voice, my goals, and the way I show up in the world, both as a student and as an advocate.”

— Sandra, NM.

GROUP PROJECTS

In Year Two, NWLC and its partners aimed to transform each storyteller's individual skillsets honed in Year One into the power to organize others and build movements. The storytellers were given the choice to work as a group or individually to tackle a project that would both connect community members and counter common narratives about their power to effect change. After the groups held their initial events, NWLC and its partners did a process evaluation to identify challenges and requisite interventions that would facilitate effective group work in the second half of the year.

"I think this is a great opportunity for folks in the community to develop leadership skills and goes far beyond the child care initiative that we initially started with." — Raynique, SC

"I learned that I can be more of a leader when I want.... We have to hold each other accountable in love to keep each other honest and strong." — Tineaka, SC



Raynique, Melodie and Christine during the family engagement event they planned



Felicitas, Alma, Patricia and Sandra during the CPR event they planned

Albuquerque Group (Patty, Sandra, Patricia, Felicitas)

Project Goal: Create a community of early childhood educators that will foster learning and participation in advocacy.

Strategy: Hold a series of events that will build trust and community among teachers and educators. Focus on self-care and meeting their needs, and inform people about ways to advocate for better treatment and compensation.

Las Cruces Group (Merline)

Project Goal: Make advocacy accessible to home-based child care workers.

Strategy: Provide training for home-based child care workers. Through this network, gather reflections from rural child care providers who do not have the opportunity to participate in advocacy. This will culminate in a meeting with a representative who will facilitate their voices being heard.

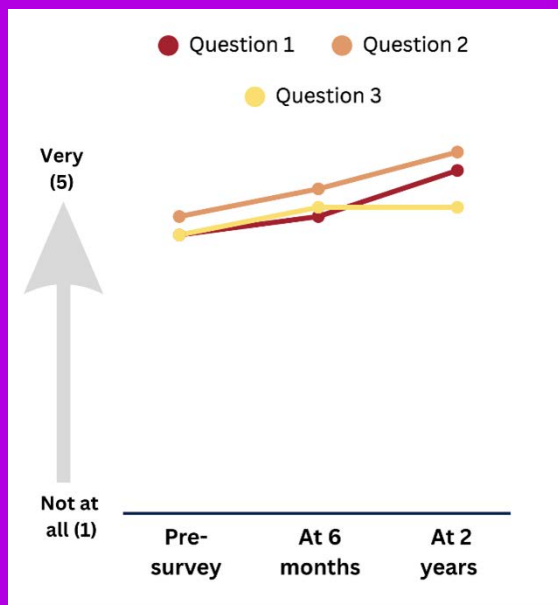
South Carolina Group (Christine, Tineaka, Chantelle, Raynique, Melodie)

Project Goal: Increase civic engagement in North Charleston through events and outreach.

Strategy: Mobilize community members to give their time, talents, and expertise to build a community network and strengthen connections between neighbors in the Chicora/Cherokee, Accabee & Liberty Hill areas.

THEN & NOW: SURVEY COMPARISONS

Throughout the program's two years, we measured several data points related to personal empowerment in advocacy. The charts below show improvements from surveys taken at the start of the programming prior to any interventions, at the six-month mark, and at the end of Year Two. Two questions (Q3 and Q5) showed improvements in Year One, but a slight decrease in Year Two. In the middle of Year Two, there was a strong shift in the political climate that may have contributed to storytellers feeling more uncertain about how to make a change and how much power their voices have.



1. How comfortable do you feel sharing your personal story in front of other people?

"I saw a shift between the women not knowing each other and then hearing each other's stories and realizing they're not alone. Then on the next level, there is a change in how I see the storytellers being perceived; for example, policymakers paying attention to their stories."

—Jamilla, Metanoia

"You all taught us how to talk and express ourselves, and I wasn't able to do that before."

– Patricia, NM

2. What is your current comfort level speaking truth to people in power about issues you care about and changes you want to see?

Patty and Felicitas felt empowered through their relationship with NWLC and OLÉ to successfully advocate with their CEO for staff to get raises at the early childhood education center where they work. "That is when I started losing fear," Felicitas says. Both women explained that Sparking Change gave them the confidence and skills to do this, including learning how to send emails and speak with other people. "We started the fight and kept going," Patty says. "And on top of it they recognized us at work, and this is something very gratifying."

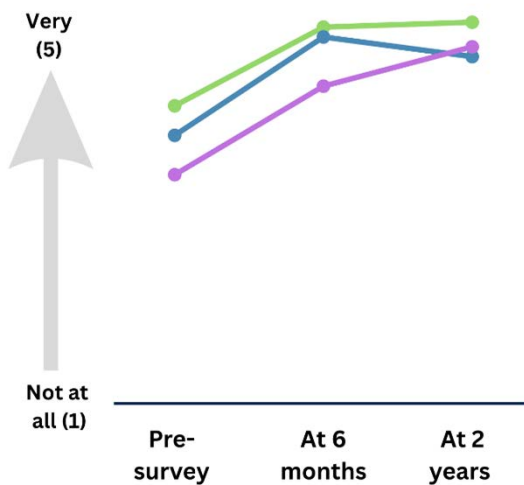
3. How knowledgeable do you feel about changes that need to be made within your county, city, or state so that people have better access to child care and income assistance?

In Albuquerque, Felicitas, Patricia, Patty, and Sandra organized six events related to their project, and in the process, they formed an advocacy group called, Comunidad Educativa en Acción - Educational Community in Action. The more the Albuquerque group held events and conducted outreach, the more they built trust among early childhood educators and learned about their community's needs. This culminated in two events serving 35 early childhood educators who were struggling to pay out of pocket for mandatory CPR training.

In South Carolina, the group organized a "Get Out the Vote" event in September 2024 that mobilized community members and local businesses to donate space, food, and activities. The group conducted extensive local outreach to promote a positive narrative around voting and to encourage their neighbors to register to vote, including posting and handing out fliers throughout the neighborhood. Christine noted that the event was successful and the group received "positive feedback from participants about how informative and empowering it was. It also helped raise awareness about local elections, and we were able to provide resources and guidance to ensure people knew how to vote and where to go."

4. 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?

● Question 4 ● Question 5
● Question 6



Through their projects, the storytellers learned how to give each other grace and develop greater understanding for everyone's capacity, abilities, and work styles. "I learned that teamwork is difficult when ideas aren't the same and everyone has a different direction," shared one storyteller who learned to speak up when she disagreed with the group's approach. "At another time, I wouldn't have expressed anything, and I would have been the only one left with that great fear. I learned that teamwork is easier when responsibilities are shared and everyone carries the entire weight."

Additionally, the South Carolina group held an event to promote conversations on "Total Health & Wellness," helping mothers to think about self-care and well-being in new ways. In partnership with the Metanoia Freedom School, a summer and after-school enrichment program, the group planned activities for a family night in June 2025. They mobilized to gather volunteers and in-kind donations from the community, including massages and gift cards. They navigated a budget to provide food as well as activities, and they co-created a vibrant agenda that included guest speakers, art therapy, music therapy, health checks, an activity for the children, and a home ownership class that was enthusiastically attended.

In our section on Narrative Change, we will take a deeper dive into how the storytellers pushed back on other pervasive, problematic narratives and shed light on their lived experiences and community's needs.



5. Rate how much you currently feel your story has the power to impact policies and social change.

Patricia Bustillos shares her journey from her beginning of feeling anxiety about being seen; in over two decades working as an advocate, she was most comfortable with behind-the-scenes roles.

“Before, I would have this fight with myself, that I couldn’t express what I needed to say, and now I can go to the Roundhouse [New Mexico State Capital] and meet with representatives, even be in pictures, now that I feel more secure in this role.” She adds, “I used to say if so-and-so doesn’t go, then I’m not going, but now I’ll even go alone.”

Virginia Perez-Ortega, a community advocate who has worked alongside Patricia for over 20 years, shares, “I knew Patricia to be the quiet community leader who knows everything in terms of resources and solutions, how to get by and support people. When she shared about this project, she shared how great she was feeling, how she was finally feeling seen and heard. I also started noticing a different level of confidence in her valuing her contributions and owning her agency to show up as an authentic leader in different situations.”

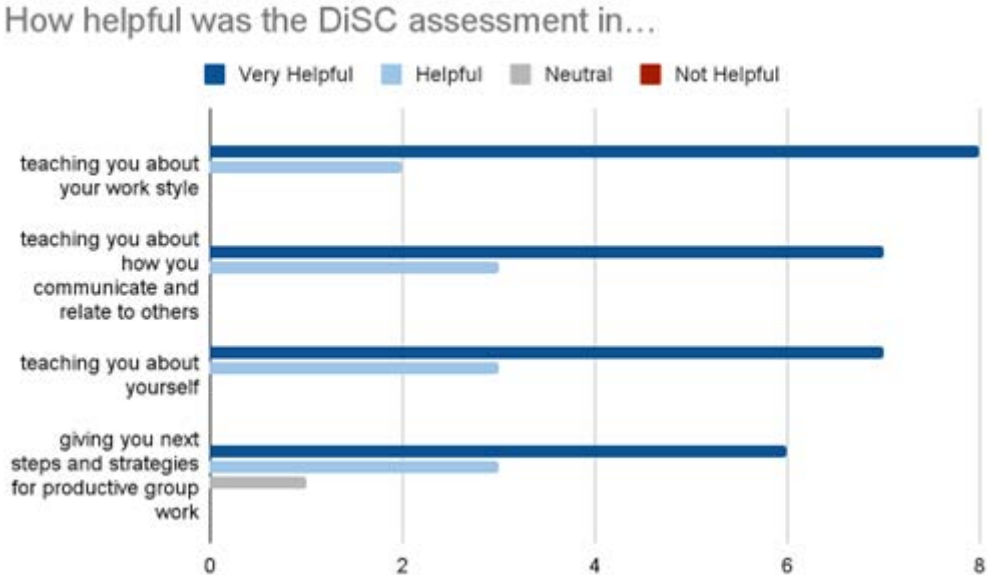
Patricia is now providing classes to adults, teenagers, and kids impacted by domestic violence. Today, she shares her journey from being a recipient of domestic violence services to now teaching classes about emotional regulation, self-esteem, healthy relationships, and how to be in a relationship with yourself. “I never thought I’d be able to carry out a class,” Patricia says, and now she is imparting valuable wisdom to multiple generations.

6. How much support do you feel you have right now in your advocacy work?

Merline executed her project independently, partnering with Central New Mexico Community College to teach classes to home-based child care providers on topics related to running a child care business. Merline provided this training series with a 55% average attendance from nine directors in the Home-Based Provider Network (HBPN) of the New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department. These directors received resources and information about relevant topics such as submitting paperwork, budgeting and planning home-based child care expenses, classroom management strategies, self-care strategies, and how to hold successful parent-teacher conferences. “Having the necessary support to be able to facilitate my sessions has given me more confidence and, above all, experience,” said Merline. She also submitted a write-up of her work to the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department News and Child care Bulletin, which was published in March 2025.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

- In an effort to give storytellers space to dream, NWLC intentionally abstained from giving too many directives around the projects. However, the ambiguity was difficult for most storytellers and the state partners supporting them. State partners were concerned about their capacity to help, because creating project alignment demanded more time and resources than expected. The storytellers initially struggled to pinpoint a central focus and became overwhelmed with big picture thinking. More direct support could have helped shape their projects earlier on, and the storytellers specified that an on-the-ground group coach could have provided this needed support. Despite funding being available for a project coach, project implementation timing and local staff capacity meant that a coach or mentor could not be secured quickly despite an expressed desire for a physical touchpoint during the planning process.
- One state partner helpfully suggested more workshopping and coaching on the topic of “advocacy” before project kickoff in order to help the storytellers understand what advocacy can look like in the community. The NWLC team had initially planned a boot camp to prepare for launching the projects but ran into funding constraints.
- The Year Two project rollout could be further honed and streamlined in the future. Initially, the groups moved faster than the speed of planning (for instance, holding their first events before submitting a budget or requesting funds). Going forward, NWLC may benefit from working with its partners first to create a “container” for the projects and then to provide more concrete, written guidance around the project parameters and the process for accessing the financial resources available.
- While NWLC held sessions on leadership and group dynamics ahead of the project implementation, it would have been beneficial to do the DiSC assessments sooner to allow the storytellers to learn more about how their work styles could impact work in a group setting.



NARRATIVE CHANGE

What is Narrative Change?

“Narratives, if framed in the right way, can be used to communicate with your audience, spark changes in their thinking, [and] shift difficult conversations in a positive way to create more resilient and inclusive societies.”¹ – Social Change Initiative

Narrative change is a shift in the way individuals, communities, and the broader public understand social issues.

At the heart of NWLC’s narrative change work is a simple but radical premise that women and girls are the experts on their own lives. Their voices drive efforts to dismantle harmful myths and replace them with the full, complex truth of their lived experience.

Back to the Theory of Change

Desired Impact: Lived experience shared by directly impacted women will counter harmful narratives, laws, and policies that are rooted in racist and sexist tropes.

Desired Impact: State and national economic justice and child care policy, advocacy, and research are reflective of the lived experience of storytellers, families, and communities most impacted by core advocacy issues, including low-wage work and unaffordable and inaccessible child care.

In Year One, the storytellers participated in over 140 engagements to inform research, be featured in national news outlets, and speak with state and federal legislators. Year Two zeroed in on how they could strategically place their stories, challenge specific narratives, and grow power in their local communities and networks to seed deeper change. The following are just a few of the critical opportunities storytellers engaged in to shift harmful narratives related to caregiving, work, and economic mobility.

Countering False Narratives About Caregivers and Immigrant Child Care Workers Through the *Who Cares* Blog

The *Who Cares* blog series developed by NWLC is dedicated to busting myths surrounding child care, such as the false narratives that caregiving is the primary responsibility of a mother and that early education workers are “babysitters,” not teachers or educators. Ultimately, the blog reinforces the affirmative narrative that child care providers are the backbone of our communities and our economy and deserve fair wages along with critical resources and benefits like health care, paid leave, and retirement. The Sparking Change storytellers contributed to the following blog pieces:

- [“Caring Through Crisis: Immigrant Caregivers Speak Out,”](#) which garnered 211 views from 150 separate users within one month of publication (May 2025).
- [“Balancing Acts: Stories of Women at the Crossroads of Working and Caregiving,”](#) which garnered 169 views from 128 separate users between December 2024 – June 2025.
- [“Stress, Strain and Support: On the Front Lines of Child Care in the United States”](#) / [“Estrés, esfuerzo y apoyo: al frente del cuidado infantil en los Estados Unidos,”](#) which together garnered 272 views from 171 separate users between September 2024 – June 2025.

Sharing Stories in Solidarity on A Day Without Child Care

A Day Without Child Care is a national advocacy event that takes place annually in May. Across the country, hundreds of child care workers close their doors to demand wages that allow them and their families to thrive, an equitable child care system built on racial and gender justice, affordable and accessible child care for all families, and benefits access.²

The Sparking Change storytellers contributed to the following in 2025:

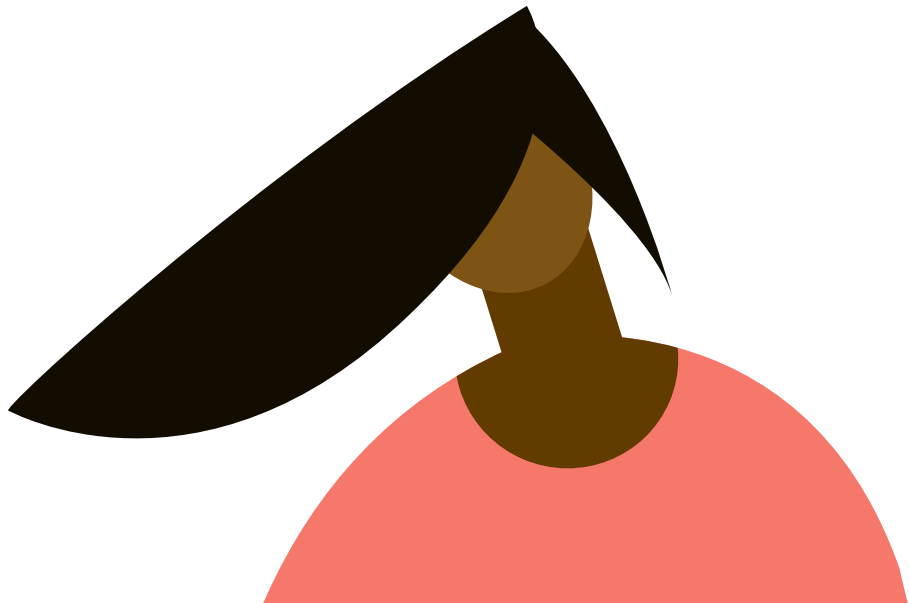
- Bilingual Instagram carousel post with care provider quotes about the importance of their work. This garnered 4,078 views on Instagram within one month.
- A video from Raynique Syas about the struggle to access child care and how it has impacted her child's development. Her story reached 746 Instagram users within a month.

Challenging Narratives Around Deservedness, Individualism, and Meritocracy

A common myth in the United States about economic mobility is that people who struggle financially must not be working hard enough. The storytellers of Sparking Change have challenged this narrative, demonstrating that single mothers, immigrants, and people in early childhood education do work that families and the economy as a whole deeply depend on, yet their work is not respected or fairly compensated, undermining their economic stability and mobility.

This narrative change work included:

- In May, Merline flew to Los Angeles to speak at the Early Childhood Development (ECD) U.S. Initiative Convening. This convening focused on building a prenatal-to-3 system that works for whole families, and Merline spoke about the impact of storytelling. Stephanie Brueck-Cassoli, Senior Program Manager at the Aspen Institute, which was a key organizer of the panel, reflected, "The response was incredibly strong to her session and specifically what she was able to share. She was able to bring a stronger perspective to the importance and power of storytelling."
- In February 2025, Chantelle was a panelist on the Gender Justice in Housing webinar by the Opportunity Starts at Home Campaign.



Informing and Shaping Economic Policy Recommendations

NWLC has focused much of its work this past year on researching and informing tax and economic policy. The policy and research staff have continuously centered the storytellers in this work.

This included:

- In June, Sandra and OLÉ staff met with a staff representative of Secretary Elizabeth Groginsky, the Cabinet Secretary for Early Childhood Education NM, where they discussed the proposed pay scale for early childhood educators.
- Alma, Patricia, Sandra, and Felicitas participated in multiple OLÉ advocacy days that involved visiting the New Mexico State Capital to share their stories with legislators. They also participated in action days related to immigrant workers.
- Tineaka, Patty, Merline, and Melodie provided in-depth interviews to inform an NWLC advocacy campaign. In June, the policy team released a fact sheet titled, “Harm to Families, Giveaways to Billionaires: How the House Republican Reconciliation Bill Makes Our Tax Code Less Equitable and Leaves Women and Families Behind.”³ This resource, which featured quotes from the storytellers, was distributed widely to nonprofit organizations and coalitions.
- In June, NWLC CEO Fatima Goss Graves shared Patty and Tineaka’s stories with Senator Klobuchar, Senator Warren, Senator Schumer, and several other senators on the U.S. Capitol steps as part of an Instagram live event opposing the cuts to programs like Medicaid and SNAP in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.
- Tineaka and Christine provided in-depth interviews for an NWLC policy and research report around retirement security. In March 2025, NWLC released a series of fact sheets, a policy agenda, an executive summary, and a resource sharing their stories as part of a resource called Left Behind: The Retirement Crisis for Women and LGBTQIA+ People.⁴
- Tineaka, Chantelle, Christine, and Merline contributed to the comprehensive research report, The Recovery Paradox: Women and Families Need More Support to Sustain and Improve Economic Gains⁵, which examined women’s unemployment, federal supports, and wages for underpaid workers.

Challenging Beliefs on the Government’s Role in our Lives and the Impact of Benefits Like SNAP and Child Care Assistance

- In April, Melodie, who is working full time and in school, contributed to the NWLC blog post, “Robbing the Food Off Our Tables to Give Tax Cuts to Billionaires,” which focused on the importance of SNAP for single mothers.⁶
- In January, Patricia and Sandra participated in New Mexico Kids First Day of Action. They visited the state capitol to talk to senators and the state education secretary about better teacher salaries and paid family and medical leave.
- In October, Raynique was a speaker at the 33rd Annual Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Conference in California.
- Patty and Sandra were interviewed by Partnership for Community Action (PCA) to inform their research on baby bonds.
- Sandra was interviewed by Telemundo about the expiration of child care funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) in September.

Reinforcing the Critical Role of Immigrants in our Communities and Reframing Narratives About the Immigrant Community

In the current political climate, many immigrants live in fear of deportation and family separation. NWLC recognizes the intersection of immigration with the rest of its advocacy work. The storytellers in New Mexico stepped into new roles as leaders in their communities to counter harmful narratives about the immigrant community as well as promote messages around safety and personal rights, including:

- Merline accepted a diplomatic invitation to the Mexican Consulate of Albuquerque to talk about a security plan for Mexican immigrants.
- During Hispanic Heritage Month, Sandra was interviewed by Telemundo to discuss an NWLC Latina educators brief.

Creating Stronger Narratives Within Their Own Communities

Narrative change also involves challenging our internal narratives—the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are capable of. The Sparking Change storytellers focused a lot on these internal narratives in Year One, and in Year Two, they worked to outwardly promote alternative narratives to their communities.

This included:

- In June, Chantelle joined the Children’s Defense Fund’s (Freedom School) Parent Advocate Training as a panelist alongside Metanoia to discuss “The Art & Power in Storytelling: Helping Parents Turn Their Voice into Advocacy.”
- Patricia taught a series of eight classes for elementary school parents titled, “The Incredible Years,” covering social and emotional development skills for families. Additionally, she created sessions for kids and teenagers to teach them skills in emotional recognition and regulation.
- In April, Christine spoke at the Pennsylvania Strengthening Families Conference in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, about how Harambee (a tradition based in “uniting or pulling together” to provide self-help for communities) builds the human spirit and resilience within children, adults, parents, and families.
- Tineaka participated regularly in school board meetings for the Chicora-Cherokee School District. She also was a board advisor to the Low Country Alliance for Model Communities (LAMC), a nonprofit organization founded for the purpose of advocating for environmental justice and promoting community development and education. Additionally, she continued her work with the Black Educators’ Affinity Group with her employer.
- Christine and Tineaka worked with the Children’s Defense Fund to create Get Out the Vote content to encourage voter registration.
- Felicitas volunteered with OLÉ for early voter canvassing and voter information events.



Toni Francis-Bowie and Chantelle Mitchell at the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School- Parent Advocate Training, Tennessee, June 2025. Chantelle presented on the topic of the power of storytelling in advocacy.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

- Having access to people with lived experience navigating the challenges and programs that are a focus of our advocacy continues to be an important part of shaping NWLC's policy platform and focus areas. "Working with storytellers has really helped us to emphasize why we are advocating for certain policies. When you hear their stories, the need to advocate for them hits you. The first-hand experience has helped me understand the weight of the ask." – Shrija Shrestha, Campaign Associate
- While the 10 storytellers of Sparking Change have versatile and powerful stories, the NWLC Campaigns and Communications team cannot always recommend the same people for media interviews. A recommendation is that storytellers, as part of their work with NWLC, help connect NWLC to their broader communities by inviting peers and others in their networks to share their stories and providing them with emotional and moral support throughout the process. Funding additional cohorts can also grow this pool of potential storytellers to pull from.
- NWLC teams sought more clarity on how they can access the storytellers, specifically given the boundaries around the time they dedicate to working with NWLC. Since their involvement with Sparking Change already places demands on the storytellers' limited time each month, NWLC staff are uncertain what they can reasonably ask for and how to coordinate and prioritize multiple asks from NWLC. This is particularly important if NWLC considers expanding Sparking Change's focus beyond income security and child care issues.
- The storytellers and partners expressed a desire to have had more speaking opportunities in Year Two. While the year's focus was on the group projects, some members were eager to continue their visibility in media.

COMMUNITY

“The projects were such a mutually reinforcing loop and something I have been aiming for in my own community. I’ve been thinking about how we can advocate for a broader, healthier sense of community, spaces for families, and a sense of thriving and well-being.”

- Jamilla, Metanoia

The storytellers reflected on their growth from Year One to today, exploring how the training, community building, and project support they’ve received have deepened their leadership and expanded their impact in their local communities. Below are the trends we identified.

Back to the Theory of Change

Desired Impact: Storytellers will leverage their own growth and support to empower, connect with, and teach their own communities.



Felicitas Torres at May Day 2025 in support of International Workers' Day

Since the program's inception, storytellers found a strong network of support and community among themselves and with NWLC, and this fostered personal growth and self-esteem.

"I feel like I've grown in many ways. I feel more prepared to speak in public. I feel confident speaking to a senator, a government representative, or any public servant."

- Sandra, NM

"The resources and guidance offered have been invaluable, particularly in terms of skill development and community engagement and the creation of a wonderful sisSTARhood. This experience has been truly enriching, and I am grateful for the opportunities it has given me to grow both personally and professionally."

- Christine, SC

"You're a source of support that motivates us to put our whole hearts into fighting for change."

- Merline, NM

As a result of their group projects and relationships with NWLC's local partners, storytellers also became more intimately connected to their communities.

"My relationship with the community is much stronger and trustworthy. I believe that citizens within the community know I have their best interests, which allows me to continue to build relationships for and with them. As an advocate I'm more confident in standing firm on what I'm saying and my beliefs on what the community needs and how I can be a voice on what they need."

- Chantelle, SC

"I am recognized as a leader who supports the community."

- Patricia, NM

"Now, it feels like there's no room I walk into where someone doesn't feel the impact of the work I do. Sparking Change didn't just connect me to my community—it made me a trusted part of it."

- Christine, SC

"Sparking Change has changed the way I see the world in different ways. I feel more connected with my community. I have connected with different people in ways I didn't know was possible. I have told my story and it has healed me very much."

- Melodie, SC

"People now know me through Sparking Change, and it has transformed my horizontal and vertical relationships, and obviously that brings change and satisfaction because people approach me. People now know me through Sparking Change, and it has transformed my horizontal and vertical relationships, and obviously that brings change and satisfaction because people approach me with confidence."

- Felicitas, NM

For Metanoia, Sparking Change fueled an appetite for more community movement building.

"It has me setting my eyes on movement building more as a leader. My curiosity has been sparked around how we build power and network to move the needle around issues important to our storytellers."

- Jamilla, Metanoia

In contrast, OLÉ shared that Sparking Change did not have an impact on its movement building. This is largely due to the fact that OLÉ is already an entity focused on organizing and was responsible for leading a lot of the New Mexico storytellers' advocacy activities, whereas Metanoia more closely resembles a service provider.

The partnership built a new kind of support for OLÉ and Metanoia, who work on a state and local level, respectively.

"I really appreciate the partnership in that it aligns with the aspirational goal deeply rooted in our base of advocacy and community leadership."
- Jamilla, Metanoia

"The press opportunities NWLC opened up were great," says Matthew Henderson of OLÉ, adding that the storytellers became more effective at engagement and narrative change due to this initiative.

Storytelling continues to have a ripple effect, from personal development to knowledge sharing with their family and community and capturing the attention of policymakers.

"On the level of the women learning more, they have gained the knowledge and language to articulate their stories to people. They have also been sharing that within their families, friends, and locally, and through each press and blog opportunity."
- Jacques, Metanoia

"I helped host Teacher Appreciation Week last year and continued that commitment by helping organize a day of celebration again this year. That experience allowed me to build stronger relationships with local educators and families and to show our teachers the love and recognition they deserve. I've also stepped into a formal leadership role as the secretary of the Chicora Cherokee Neighborhood Association, a position that has given me a greater voice in local decision-making and helped me stay connected to the needs of my neighbors."
- Christine, SC



Toni, Chantelle, Raynique, Christine and Neaka at the Child Care for Every Family Network's Grassroots Assembly, Baton Rouge, Oct 2025



Merline speaking on a panel for the Hilton/Ascend ECD US Initiative Convening in Los Angeles, Feb 2025



DATA RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

DATA RECOMMENDATIONS

Tracking storyteller engagements continued to be a challenge in Year Two. Over the course of two years, NWLC staff and the TJS consultant experimented with several methods for collecting information about who, what, where, and when storytellers were contributing their voices, including texting reminders, using basic survey tools, and conducting 1:1 calls with staff inputting data manually.

When surveyed about barriers to reporting engagements, the storytellers shared the following:

- I had too much to share.
- I was unclear on what to report.
- I had trouble remembering engagements for that month.
- I was too busy.

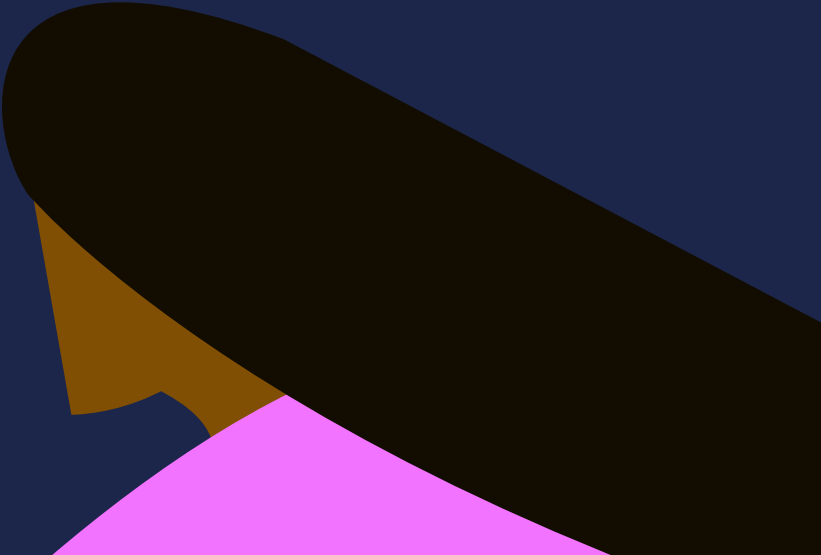
Potential Remedies

Collecting this data is critical to tracking program outcomes and understanding impact, not to mention supporting storytellers appropriately before and after engagements. In the future, NWLC might want to build engagement tracking more explicitly into NWLC staff responsibilities and workplans so that they will plan to conduct one-on-one calls with storytellers each month or after an event and input the appropriate data into a tracker.

Another recommendation is to leverage AI for this task. There are SMS survey tools through SurveyMonkey and SurveySparrow that allow questions to be scheduled weekly and delivered through text and for the responses to be recorded. AI can ensure that gaps in responses are filled (such as if the response does not include information about the person's role). Answering texts in this way might feel like an easier lift for storytellers than filling out an online form at a separate link; additionally, it will relieve some burden on staff.

Capturing Long-Term Outcomes

The first cohort has completed its two-year term but remains involved with Sparking Change as alumni. Now, NWLC has the opportunity to capture long-term impacts of this program, including following future growth in alumni leadership, community engagement, and advocacy activities. One critical recommendation is to provide alumni with the tools and training to capture their own data, such as through creating their own polls or canvassing techniques, to gather deeper information on challenges observed in their community, and methods to record reflections on their personal impact, specifically around narrative change and community engagement. These on-the-ground reflections can be invaluable to NWLC's understanding of how storytelling moves communities and reshapes the way they engage to effect long-term change.



CONCLUSION

Between Year One and Year Two, the Sparking Change pilot clearly delineated the impact of investing in women's leadership, personal growth, and self-care. Where Year One looked like a ripple effect—that one woman would spread her knowledge outward from her family, to her workplace, to her community at large—Year Two showed us something that resembled a river picking up speed. In other words, when we invested in the storytellers, they didn't just merely educate others; they implemented their own ideas for change and ushered their communities along with them in their work. This is the power of pouring resources into burgeoning advocates who know and love their communities; they will model the same support and care that they received along their journey.

Additionally, there were clear takeaways around the ideal local partner organization for a project like this, as the commitment is highly relational. Advocates with lived experience may be navigating complex problems in their personal lives and may need support that is deeper than occasional check-ins solely rooted in their work. An ideal partner has the capacity for ongoing engagement, wraparound support for basic needs assistance, and a paradigm of deep investment in the community's well-being. There is also a lot of benefit to partnering with local programs that have the connections and capacity to link advocates to leadership opportunities locally. Together, a positive symbiosis develops between NWLC's national work and resources and the local organization's extensive knowledge and on-the-ground connections.

In Year Three (Fall 2025), NWLC launched its second cohort of storytellers, this time focusing on women from various parts of Virginia. Through intentional recruitment, NWLC will access perspectives of home-based child care providers, parents of children with special needs, women who live in areas most threatened by federal program cuts, and women who work in elder caregiving. This cohort will engage in deep conversations around the dilemma of the dueling needs for affordable child care for families and pay equity for providers.

As we embark on Year Three, we do so with both conviction and uncertainty. The nonprofit sector is experiencing significant funding pressures, and initiatives like Sparking Change—which invest substantial resources in individual storytellers and their development as leaders, as well as in relationship building, long-term leadership development, and narrative change that unfolds on its own timeline—can be particularly vulnerable in climates demanding lean programs and immediate, measurable impact. The approach and theory of change modeled by Sparking Change requires real resources: staff capacity for deep relational engagement, fair compensation for advocates' expertise and time, and multi-year commitments that honor the reality that transformative change doesn't happen overnight.

Yet we are confident that the evidence from Year One and Year Two affirms how this approach can make a difference for individuals and communities. When we resource women's leadership with patience, trust, and wraparound support, we don't create isolated success stories—we cultivate advocates who become enduring agents of change. We see storytellers implementing their own ideas, mentoring others, organizing their communities, and modeling the care they received. This is the work that builds movements, precisely because it honors the organic pace of community-led change.

As we launch our Virginia cohort and continue learning with partners who share our values, we remain grounded in the premise that has guided Sparking Change from the beginning: those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, and they deserve the resources and relationships that allow their solutions to flourish. Whatever constraints we navigate, that conviction will continue to light our path forward.



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To follow the progress of Sparking Change, please visit our [landing page](#) for updates on our work.

Report illustrations provided by ajijchan / iStock.com.



ENDNOTES

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