



# Centering community voice: Lessons from Working Places

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## Overview

### Introduction

Key lessons emerging from the Working Communities and Working Cities Challenge (WCC) and other initiatives by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (Boston Fed) underscore the significance of one of WCC's fundamental principles: community engagement. Stories from various Working Places initiatives in New England shed light on both promising practices and challenges when it comes to integrating residents or individuals with lived experience into their collaborative efforts. This research draws on interviews with 15 stakeholders involved in WCC and other Boston Fed initiatives as well as Mt. Auburn Associates' previous evaluation research of WCC to identify lessons related to centering resident voice in collaborative efforts to reach shared community goals.

### Background: Working Places and community engagement

Since the first round of WCC in Massachusetts, the initiative named community engagement a core principle that would contribute to each community's civic infrastructure and, in the long term, the economic conditions and quality of life of low- to moderate-income residents in small cities. While the focus on community engagement has remained constant since the outset, the Boston Fed has evolved its perspective on the role of community as well as its portfolio of strategies to center community voice.

In the initial round of WCC, the Boston Fed's expectations for the sites related to community engagement focused on collecting input and continuous feedback from the intended beneficiaries of their work and developing and adjusting team strategies accordingly. From Round 2 onward, expectations concerning community engagement evolved from collecting input to actively involving the intended beneficiaries in decision-making and nurturing resident leadership. Additionally, later rounds of WCC encouraged sites to operationalize strategies aimed at creating a more inclusive operating culture within their cities and to approach community engagement in a manner that is inclusive of "people who reflect the different races, identities, backgrounds, and ethnicities in the community."

In recent years, the Boston Fed launched two additional Working Places initiatives: Leaders for Equitable Local Economies (LELE) and an extension of WCC Rhode Island, Advancing Our Learning (AOL). These new initiatives signify a shift in programmatic orientation as the Boston Fed incorporated key lessons from the early rounds of WCC. Both initiatives explicitly focus on supporting leaders who are representative of their communities. This shift reflects the evolution of the Boston Fed's approach to community engagement, transitioning from encouraging organizational stakeholders to involve residents in their work to actively supporting residents in taking a more prominent role in leading the work from the outset. To achieve this, the initiatives were designed to

cultivate diverse leaders and integrate them into decision-making structures. The initiatives also prioritize providing direct support to organizations committed to economic inclusion for historically excluded communities and people of color. LELE supports emerging and midlevel leaders in Massachusetts working to make their cities more racially equitable and inclusive. AOL assists coalitions in Rhode Island working on various projects aimed at promoting economic equity and inclusion. This report draws on learning from across the Boston Fed’s Working Places initiatives, acknowledging that this evolution from community engagement to stronger resident leadership is still in its early stages.

Throughout rounds of WCC and in the field more broadly, the terms “community” and “residents” are often used when referring to the intended beneficiaries of an initiative’s work or people with relevant lived experience. Some WCC sites identified people living in a specific neighborhood as intended beneficiaries, while other teams focused on job seekers, parents within a school district, or single parents in the city, among others. For the purposes of this paper, the term “resident” refers to individuals with relevant lived experience related to the work, irrespective of their neighborhood or legal resident status, unless otherwise specified.

## Why focus on community engagement?

Previous evaluations of WCC have underscored the importance of keeping the purpose of different approaches to community engagement front and center. Utilizing a mix of approaches can add value in different ways, and having a well-defined understanding of why an initiative incorporates community voice provides guidance in understanding potential strategies or outcomes. Across Working Places sites, four common objectives of community engagement efforts emerge:

1. **Relationship building:** This objective revolves around developing and strengthening connections among community members or between residents and the organizational stakeholders involved in a program or initiative. Strategies aimed at fostering relationships may include hosting social events, like barbeques, where participants can connect on a personal level, rather than solely as professionals or even adversaries. Relationship building is often both a foundational and continuous goal of community engagement. Authentic relationships between residents and organizational stakeholders play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining trust, improving communication, and enhancing collaboration.
2. **Program or initiative design:** The purpose here is to ensure that a program or initiative’s design accurately reflects the needs and priorities of residents who would be affected by the work. Specifically, people with lived experience relevant to a program or initiative may offer insights into their community’s context, values, history, or unique needs. Strategies for achieving this objective may encompass community surveys or engaging residents as staff or leaders of the work. Ideally, when a program or initiative aligns with the needs and priorities of residents, it becomes more effective in achieving its goal.
3. **Civic engagement:** This objective aims to increase public participation, particularly among historically excluded groups, in civic processes such as voting in elections, attending public meetings, serving on local boards or committees, or running for election. Many community engagement efforts focused on civic engagement have a long-term goal of ensuring that local leadership and decision-making processes become more representative of their communities, thus aligning more closely with their priorities.

4. **Advocacy for community priorities:** This objective involves preparing and supporting residents to advocate for increasing awareness of an issue or effecting system change, such as by launching a social media campaign or offering testimony before a legislative committee.

## Centering resident voice in Newport, RI

Newport Working Cities Challenge (NWCC) emphasized workforce development and education, working closely with residents right from the outset across all four common community engagement objectives. For instance, the team hosted social events, such as community dinners, throughout the WCC initiative to create opportunities for **relationship building**. NWCC engaged residents in **designing the application for WCC and identifying and implementing strategies**. Residents generated the concept of a “dream room,” which resulted in enhancements to a local community center, transforming it into a one-stop shop for employment and wraparound services. In addition to these efforts, NWCC concentrated on promoting **civic engagement** by empowering residents to assume leadership roles within the community. Several nonprofit organizations within the city extended their board representation to include members from NWCC’s focus neighborhood, along with BIPOC residents who were part of the NWCC team. Furthermore, NWCC worked with residents to address the negative impacts of the cliff effect by **advocating for changes** to RI Works, the state’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Residents testified before the state’s Housing Resource Commission, contributing to policy changes such as implementing a gradual decrease in benefits over the first six months of employment as adults transition into the workforce.

## Working Places: principles for centering community

A scan of WCC, AOL, and LELE sites and their approaches to community engagement reveals one thing for certain: there is no one-size-fits-all strategy for centering resident voice. Each community is different, and each site operates within a unique context, serving a distinct population, and employing unique strategies. The experiences of WCC, AOL, and LELE sites related to community engagement highlight several principles for authentically centering resident voice.

### 1 Reciprocity

A core value of community engagement efforts in Working Places sites is reciprocity. Instead of merely collecting input or feedback from community members, authentic engagement involves working alongside residents in a mutually beneficial manner. Since the needs of different communities vary, fostering reciprocity requires open communication on how to create value for residents. Examples across sites illustrate several approaches that can create a more reciprocal dynamic between organizational stakeholders and the community.

**Compensating residents for their time and expertise acknowledges the value of their contributions and helps alleviate the financial burden associated with their participation.**

Residents bring critical lived experience and skills to collaborative efforts, including knowledge of their community’s history, experience navigating complex systems, and the ability to leverage their personal networks. It is increasingly becoming standard practice to compensate residents for their valuable contributions. For instance, some Working Places sites compensated residents who

attended governance or subcommittee meetings, participated in events, or engaged in outreach efforts. In other instances, sites more formally hired residents as staff in roles such as community ambassadors or navigators, often receiving stipends.

However, it is important to note that compensating low-income residents for their work on collaborative efforts can sometimes create the potential risk of triggering the cliff effect. When a family's income exceeds a certain threshold, they may lose eligibility for critical public assistance. To mitigate this challenge organizations commonly use gift cards as compensation. During interviews, Working Places stakeholders suggested VISA gift cards over store-specific ones, as they allow the recipients more freedom in how they use the funds. In some cases, Working Places sites have organized to help mitigate the systemic barriers that contribute to the cliff effect. (See sidebar on Newport Working Cities.)

**Providing opportunities for professional development or specific training contributes to the growth of residents' leadership or advocacy skills, boosts confidence, and, in some cases, may contribute to career advancement.**

Several Working Places sites have offered training programs for residents, with a focus on leadership, advocacy, and racial equity. These trainings not only assist residents in their collaborative work with sites, such as in outreach or advocacy activities, but also support residents in their professional development and ability to become more civically engaged in their communities. In some cases, residents who received training have gone on to serve on boards or commissions, pursue postsecondary education opportunities, or secure employment in fields relevant to their experiences.

## Centering resident voice in Pawtucket, RI

LISC Rhode Island, the backbone agency for The Pawtucket Central Falls Health Equity Zone (HEZ), is supported by the AOL initiative to build on its work with residents, including resident involvement in participatory budgeting. In 2022, the HEZ received a grant from the Rhode Island Office of Health and Human Services, empowering the residents of Pawtucket and Central Falls to decide how to invest \$385,000 in their communities. LISC formed a steering committee comprised of residents who created the rulebook for the process. The resident "change agents" were compensated via stipends and were responsible for developing 11 project proposals from a pool of 600 ideas, with support from municipal agencies and local organizations. Organizational staff provided translation services and facilitated meetings. In June 2023, over 800 residents voted, including individuals as young as 13 and seniors. Ballots were available in Cape Verdean Creole, Spanish, and English. The selection process resulted in two winning projects: the addition of a splash pad at a park in Pawtucket and outdoor exercise equipment at a park in Central Falls, along with a mental health campaign to raise awareness and address stigma. HEZ is working with a committee of residents who shaped the proposal on the implementation of the mental health campaign. At the time of interviews, LISC was solidifying the structure for resident co-chairs of the committee to obtain a more formal position and participate in Community Health Worker Training. Throughout its engagement with residents for this process, LISC provided compensation, translation services, food, childcare, and Uber gift cards when appropriate. These practices reflect the principles of **reciprocity** (compensation and training opportunities), **accessibility** (removing barriers to participation), and **trust** (responding to community needs).

## 2 Accessibility

To enable residents to participate in collaborative work, organizational stakeholders should reflect on their operating culture, meeting structure, and any potential barriers that residents may encounter.

### **Removing obstacles like transportation, childcare, and language barriers enhances collaboration with residents.**

Many Working Places sites engaged in community engagement make concerted efforts to reduce any barriers to resident participation. For transportation-related barriers, organizations might offer hybrid events with a virtual option, host events in locations that are easily accessible by public transportation, or provide Uber gift cards. Many sites also offer childcare services during events so that people with children can attend, or engage interpreters to ensure accessibility for those who speak languages other than English.

### **Creating a welcoming and comfortable space is crucial for full resident participation in community engagement activities.**

When collaborating with residents, organizational stakeholders should be deliberate in considering how their culture and processes can be welcoming and accessible. This includes clear communication about expectations, terminology, procedures, and documents to ensure shared understanding among participants. Organizations may also reflect on meeting norms to avoid anything that is overly formal or intimidating. In some cases, Working Places sites enlisted facilitators in resident meetings to provide explanations of processes and ensure things run smoothly. Other sites engaged organizational staff in implicit bias or racial equity training so they were more prepared to contribute to a welcoming environment.

## 3 Trust

Trust is a fundamental component of any relationship, particularly crucial in working relationships where there may be a power imbalance or a history of harm. In many communities, residents have contributed their lived experiences to efforts but have seen no tangible effects. Organizational stakeholders should make continuous efforts to build and repair trust in their communities.

### **Engagement efforts should be responsive to community needs.**

While community needs vary, residents participating in collaborative work should perceive value in their involvement, feeling that it is worth their time. Fundamentally, this includes ensuring that an initiative or organization co-creates and implements work based on their community's priorities and guidance from the start. Centering residents' needs requires flexibility from organizational stakeholders—it is important to be open to addressing emerging or unanticipated priorities rather than rigidly sticking to a predetermined plan. (See sidebar on following page on East Hartford, CT.)

Moreover, community engagement efforts may respond to resident needs in various ways. For example, some Working Places sites hosted events focused on self-care or programming for children, assisted in responding to community needs during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, or attended events organized by residents to show support.

## **Making a commitment to open and honest communication can prevent loss of trust.**

In some cases, the fear of not being able to deliver on residents' priorities or lacking a concrete plan can deter organizations or initiatives from engaging residents early on in their work. Learning across Working Places sites suggests that instead of waiting, organizational stakeholders should build honest relationships with residents from the outset. Throughout the process, it is important to

### **Centering resident voice in East Hartford, CT**

East Hartford CONNects (EHC), a WCC CT site, identified three strategies—engage, educate, and employ—to support residents in the Silver Lane neighborhood and the city more broadly. The team connected with and supported the leadership of residents, with a specific focus on Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and low-wage earning households. EHC hired community consultants who served as ambassadors to increase visibility among residents and developed a Residents Advisory Council (RAC) to connect with and provide resources to residents. The RAC primarily comprised women of color from the focus neighborhood. Both community consultants and RAC members underwent training to bolster their leadership skills. While EHC initially intended to focus on workforce development, the RAC identified its own priority, the Safe Sidewalks Campaign, aimed at improving infrastructure in their neighborhood. The group lobbied local and state government stakeholders to address the longstanding issue of poor sidewalk conditions and the surrounding area. EHC responded to and supported residents in organizing around an issue that was important to them, leading to lasting impacts. In these examples of community engagement efforts, the East Hartford Working Cities team exemplified the principles of *reciprocity* (offering training opportunities) and *trust* (responding to community needs).

clearly communicate expectations, and how plans or strategies may change to avoid perceptions of broken promises. Rather than promising specific outcomes, organizational stakeholders should collaborate openly with residents to ensure everyone is aware of how and why things may change.

### **Community engagement efforts can be strengthened when led by people who have shared identities or experiences with their community.**

Shared identities, such as racial or ethnic identities, and shared experiences can contribute to trusting, understanding relationships between organizational stakeholders and residents. Community members may feel more comfortable with people who truly understand their community, their challenges and experiences, and who speak their language. Leaders who reflect the community bring expertise to the work rooted in their cultural and lived experiences, providing an understanding of other residents.

### **A collaborative approach to designing community engagement efforts can mitigate bias and help address community needs.**

Organizations or initiatives conducting surveys, focus groups, or other research efforts in their communities should look for opportunities to co-create their approach. Without input from people with lived experience, research questions may inadvertently introduce bias. Additionally, after drafting a report based on community research, residents should have an opportunity to review it to ensure their experiences are accurately represented and to collaborate on implementing any plans emerging from the research.



## Common challenges

### Changing life circumstances of residents

Residents engaged in collaborative efforts may encounter challenges or unexpected life changes that make it difficult to commit significant time to this work, potentially leading to discontinuation of their participation in community engagement activities. These challenges have become even more pronounced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders from across Working Places have recommended taking steps to make participation as easy as possible for busy residents, such as by planning events around their work schedules or providing childcare. Furthermore, Working Places stakeholders have suggested maintaining an open door for resident participation. Teams or coalitions that adapt to allow resident leaders to engage more actively or step back as their life circumstances change can bolster more consistent resident participation.

Additionally, organizational stakeholders have access to resources and networks that can support resident participation by addressing their immediate needs when appropriate. Organizational stakeholders may ask residents what they need to actively participate and either provide or refer them to appropriate supportive resources. This may include assisting with employment, addressing mental health challenges, or ensuring access to food.

### Organizational capacity

Authentic community engagement requires intensive and sustained investments of staff time and resources, often requiring a high level of organizational capacity. These challenges underscore the importance of flexible and long-term funding to support this work.

*Limited or inflexible funding:* Stakeholders from across Working Places shared that the flexible funding necessary for working with community members, such as covering overhead costs, staff time, transportation, childcare, or stipends, is limited. Funding limitations make it challenging to sustain community engagement efforts over time. Many interview participants shared that the flexible approach of Working Places initiatives made a significant difference in their ability to collaborate with residents in their communities.

*Stretched staffing:* For initiatives organized as collective impact tables, such as WCC, the responsibility for community engagement activities often falls heavily on the initiative director. Initiative directors are typically responsible for advancing specific strategies toward team goals, collecting and analyzing data, conducting stakeholder outreach, and maintaining governance structures. All these responsibilities, in addition to operationalizing the team's community engagement vision, place a substantial demand on staff time and make it challenging to execute them effectively. This appears to be less of a challenge in communities where teams include organizations with pre-existing community engagement infrastructure, enabling them to build upon existing resources, history, and relationships. Collaborative organizations with this established infrastructure may be better equipped to sustain community engagement efforts once WCC funding ends.

*Low wages:* Some WCC stakeholders expressed concern about the sustainability of performing such demanding work for low wages, particularly as an initiative director, and in the nonprofit sector generally. Turnover of initiative directors and other staff poses a challenge to sustaining community engagement. As one stakeholder noted, "The people doing this work need to have a living wage. In

the nonprofit sector, staff are really struggling. Wages are low... we're going to lose people in the sector." In some cases, WCC sites have hired dedicated staff to support community engagement activities.

### **Grant requirements: competition and duplication of efforts**

Organizations participating in Working Places initiatives often receive their funding from multiple sources. However, when multiple funders contribute to grants required for a site to implement its work, the associated grant requirements may not align. For example, a WCC stakeholder shared that while the WCC Round 2 funding focused on system change and offered flexibility supportive of community engagement, the requirements of matching grants made it too easy for organizations to "fall back into old patterns" and revert to more programmatic approaches. Additionally, funder requirements could potentially hinder collaboration if many organizations are each expected to do community engagement for their funding sources. This may result in duplicating efforts instead of aligning and maximizing reach. These challenges suggest that funders should make efforts to reduce conflicting requirements, either by easing them in general or by aligning with other funders.

## Key themes

A scan of Working Places sites across New England provides valuable insights into centering community voice in collaborative efforts, including common objectives, values, approaches, and challenges. The Boston Fed is beginning to shift from a focus on supporting work that involves bringing residents in to approaches that empower residents to lead. While examples from Working Places vary in the degree to which they share power with residents, they offer valuable lessons for organizations, initiatives, and funders looking to work alongside communities.

- ✓ **Authentic community engagement is not about showing results quickly—it is a long-term investment in sharing power.** To establish honest and open relationships with residents and continuously work together throughout the course of an initiative, organizational stakeholders must invest sufficient time and resources. Funders should understand the long-term nature of this work and avoid placing unrealistic expectations on grantees to demonstrate immediate outcomes.
- ✓ **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to working with community.** It is imperative to be responsive to local needs and priorities and seek ways to create value for all parties involved.
- ✓ **Unrestricted funding is vital for supporting grantees to center residents in their work.** Conducting this work effectively requires a significant investment of staff time and resources. Organizations working alongside residents require unrestricted support to cover overhead costs, compensate residents, and cover expenses such as transportation and childcare.