



# Lessons from the Field

## LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS ABOUT EFFECTIVE WAYS TO ORGANIZE

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### Introduction

Millions of families rely on public assistance programs to help make ends meet when they cannot work or wages are too low. However, too often those programs are designed and implemented without input from the families they serve, undermining their effectiveness. To increase effectiveness and adequately address disparities, policymakers should work alongside families and individuals with firsthand experience and knowledge of poverty and public assistance programs to systemically improve these programs and their delivery.

New research from Children's HealthWatch and the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice highlights ways to successfully build programs, policies, and advocacy campaigns that work for the families they serve. Lessons come from organizers, advocates, and faith leaders about their experience of poverty and interaction with the public assistance system, as both participants and advocates. While this work primarily focused on direct cash transfer programs, the insights shared here have broader implications on how we can meaningfully integrate people with lived expertise into program and policy planning and implementation.

### Organizing to improve public assistance programs

Children's HealthWatch and the Kairos Center conducted four listening sessions to explore the personal and community impacts of direct cash transfer programs and discuss how these programs influence the lives of participants, their families, and their broader communities. The guiding objective of the listening sessions was to explore the personal and community impacts of direct cash transfer programs and discuss how these programs influence the lives of participants, their families, and their broader communities. Additionally, Children's HealthWatch and the Kairos Center sought to identify advocacy and organizing strategies to enhance the effectiveness

of direct cash transfer programs and support advocacy efforts to ensure they are inclusive and beneficial for all who rely on them.

During the listening sessions, participants shared effective strategies that enhance the design and implementation of direct cash transfer programs, putting strong emphasis on including the collective perspectives of communities directly impacted by these programs, rather than isolated individual experiences. Organizers across states also had experience pushing for systemic changes through statewide health care campaigns, using human rights frameworks and cross-cultural organizing to address systemic barriers and ensure the recognition of fundamental needs as basic human rights.

# LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY

## INCORPORATE IMPACTED PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

Many groups stressed the importance of including the perspectives of those impacted by program decisions. This must be done in a meaningful way, not just with individual or isolated experiences, but rather engaging entire communities and organizations of people who are directly impacted by public programs and actively attempting to improve them through advocacy, community organizing or related campaigns. Organizers felt that program administrators needed to understand the challenges of accessing public programs and that, in turn, deeper understanding could lead to meaningful work to address the problems.

### On engaging communities with lived experience

- "There is an increasing awareness of having the perspective of impacted people [in program design], but it really matters how that is done....[in one experience, task force administrators] identified two individuals who talked about their individual experience and that was all the committee took into account. It doesn't make any methodological sense. [You need to] speak to communities that are wrestling with this together, not just isolated in our personal experiences."

### On the experience of accessing public programs

- "I think if money is given to the community, the communities know how to spend that money... sometimes in these agencies there is a lot of bureaucracy, so the money is spent within the bureaucracy and is not spent in the community."
- "I was told I was denied because I hadn't sent in the proper documentation, but I had. And I sent in the receipt showing I had submitted everything. And still have to go through a long process of calling social services, being on hold

[for hours], being dropped, calling back...just to be told they don't know what happened...and had to wait another month [for my benefits].... The whole process is tedious and hard, we shouldn't have to go through all of that stress, just to get our basic needs met."

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH LIKE-MINDED PARTNERS IN COALITION

A coalition approach that invests in relationships, avoids pitting essential needs against each other, and builds broad-based support for systemic changes is essential for meaningful change. For example, groups in Vermont organized a statewide campaign for universal health care, building a coalition of diverse organizations. When the lead organization heard that pending legislation was going to exclude immigrant communities, they organized a large May Day rally with a broad range of coalition partners that specifically addressed this point. When the final bill was enacted, the exclusionary provision had been removed.

- "... We built a massive statewide organization. We were successful in the legislature in passing that law because of the organizing we had done."
- "We saw what was possible to actually expand access to people's basic needs with housing, with these programs, with child tax credits, and with health care, with Medicaid, in particular, with people not losing their Medicaid during the pandemic. And so really trying to grab ahold of that in particular for our health care campaign and seeing health care still as this unifying issue across that has the power to get us organized to be able to fight on any of these issues."

## USE A HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Organizers in Maryland and Vermont used human rights frameworks to assert that basic needs, such as living wages, healthcare, public benefits, and housing, are fundamental human rights and that their governments are responsible for protecting and ensuring these rights.

- “We’ve really used a human rights framework as a way of asserting that our basic needs are human rights and fighting for those human rights and ...out of various different organizing periods developed campaigns out of those to demand different things. Whether it’s living wages for the day laborers cleaning Camden yards or when we were organizing workers at Baltimore’s Inner Harbor.”
- “It took us a very long time to convince city leadership that affordable housing was an issue that needed to be addressed and it took the power of 100 people organizing to get that on the ballot...and thousands of people’s voices being lifted up.”
- “Ultimately what we would want to see is... health care and housing and all these things be taken out of the equation and treated as human rights. Everybody gets them, the basic things you need for survival are guaranteed. And then that takes out of the equation whether or not having a health care crisis like a child with cancer doesn’t call into question whether you’re going to lose your housing or not, or your Medicaid or whatever, or losing a job or a change in your situation.”

## ELEVATE MESSAGES THAT SHOW THE FULL IMPACT, INCLUDING HEALTH IMPACTS, OF POLICIES

Many groups stressed how important programs are for their and their households’ overall health and well-being. The loss of one benefit or change in policy to make benefits harder to access has a ripple effect to health.

- “The help that comes to us comes from a place of pity, charity...most of the time, this system just eats away at your humanity.”
- [Speaking about the Child Tax Credit and stimulus payments] “I bought a house because I had a down payment because of those stipends, like they critically changed my life. I never would have been able ever to have more than \$1,000 in my savings account.”
- “...when I started working, they took away all my benefits up to Medi-Cal. And I stopped working because, I mean, my daughter needs Medi-Cal for her cancer. My daughter has battled cancer since she was 11 years old.”
- “When I graduated, I landed a job that I was really excited about. And then I lost my Medicaid, so I had no health insurance... my rent went up in my subsidized housing, which was right on the border of unmanageable. And then time came for me to get a raise at work... I got like a 75 cent raise and it pushed me right over the border where I was going to lose my childcare subsidy. I sat down to do the math and was like, this just doesn’t work. I either have to work less so that I stay on these benefits or I have to [do] what I ended up doing, which was a workaround that I’m sure not many people have an option for. I work for a really small company. And *I actually had to ask them not to give me a raise.*”

## ENSURE CROSS-CULTURAL ORGANIZING

Activists, organizers, and faith leaders also highlighted the necessity of uniting people across racial, ethnic, regional, and partisan divides to strengthen advocacy efforts and address systemic barriers at state and national levels.

- “It was qualitatively different to hear a group of parents who were organizing together, a group of moms standing with each other, not just as frosting [to the agency’s testimonies]... even when we don’t win, to say that that we’re organized and fighting back is really powerful.”
- “We need to really unite people across these racial and regional and partisan divides that have been used to isolate and divide us, to confuse us. And so, we’re really trying to unite across those really historic and challenging divides so that people can see that they have a lot more in common than what divides us.”

## ENGAGE DIRECTLY IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, BOTH TO ADDRESS IMMEDIATE NEED AND LONG-TERM COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Participants in California facilitated local events and direct aid initiatives, such as food distributions, which effectively supported community members, particularly during critical times like the pandemic. Attending and supporting these events created opportunities to connect with more people and to demonstrate the commitment of the group to the community. They also

emphasized building trust and confidence through long-standing relationships and consistent support, differentiating their approach from more transactional service interactions.

- “So, we have organizations that every Christmas and New Year give away the turkey. We are not that type of organization, we work together on the food distribution process, we do it because it is a survival project in the community, and during the time of the pandemic we saw that many were in need, they were left with rent debt. So, another organizational effort was to help the community apply for the income assistance that was being given in the city and the State. So part of our job was to go to the street corners. I was here in the office filling out applications where people were receiving help with their rent and help to pay their bills. In many cases, we also had to support people to apply for programs such as EBT stamps. I had to help people who were asking for more help with their Social Security, and unemployed people, and help them fill out the paperwork for unemployment.”
- “[We] also take the time to celebrate together, whether it be the posadas, the events of the Virgin, the Days of the Dead. So your civic participation within your community is complete. They know all the children, all the ladies in the community, they get together, they have their coffee, sometimes their wine!”

## Conclusion

Advocacy work and policy change are long-term processes that require significant work, relationship-building, engagement, and resources. Success requires weaving together data, messaging, policy, and lived expertise. Organizing is an essential component of policy-making. Building on a strong foundation of the knowledge of those who will be or have been directly impacted by the policies in question is critical to designing and implementing the equitable, inclusive policies we need to robustly address the conditions communities are facing.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact Kate Scully  
Director of Policy & Communications  
Children's HealthWatch  
kate.scully@bmc.org

**Listening Sessions:** From December 2023 to January 2024, the Kairos Center planned a series of four listening sessions with twenty-eight participants from New York, Maryland, Vermont, Wisconsin, and California. Conducted in collaboration with Children's HealthWatch, the listening sessions were organized together with several welfare rights and housing organizations, ensuring a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives. The listening sessions, which lasted approximately two hours on average, primarily took place over Zoom, with one session taking place in person. The in-person session was conducted mainly in Spanish, with English and Spanish interpretation. Each session was audio-recorded to capture the discussions accurately, and the recordings subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Our objective was to explore the effects of direct cash transfer programs on the lives of participants, their families, and their broader communities. We also explored advocacy and organizing strategies to help inform efforts to protect public assistance for recipients of direct cash transfer programs.

**Considerations:** This project had several strengths and a limitation. We interviewed organizers from across the country working in urban and rural environments and on statewide and local policy change. Organizers spoke from their own lived experience of cliff effects and direct cash transfer programs as well as their collective lessons and insights about advocacy and organizing. This wealth of perspective provides important lessons – some new, some aligned with existing understanding – for the direct cash transfer community as we seek to institutionalize these programs and policies with optimal protections for participants. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this group of interviewees is not necessarily representative of every location or population in the US.

This report accompanies the **Safeguarding Benefits: Addressing Barrier in Direct Cash and Tax Credit Delivery** report that can be found at [childrenshealthwatch.org/publication/directCASH](https://childrenshealthwatch.org/publication/directCASH).

## AUTHORS

Jarvis Benson, MA, Charlotte Bruce, MPH,  
Amrita Yeshi, Kate Scully, JD, Shailly  
Gupta Barnes, JD, Stephanie Ettinger  
de Cuba, PhD, MPH

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