

# Connecting People to Workforce Training

*Lessons and Insights from Collaborative Outreach – June 2024*

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DEACONESS  
FOUNDATION

*fund* for our  
**economic**  
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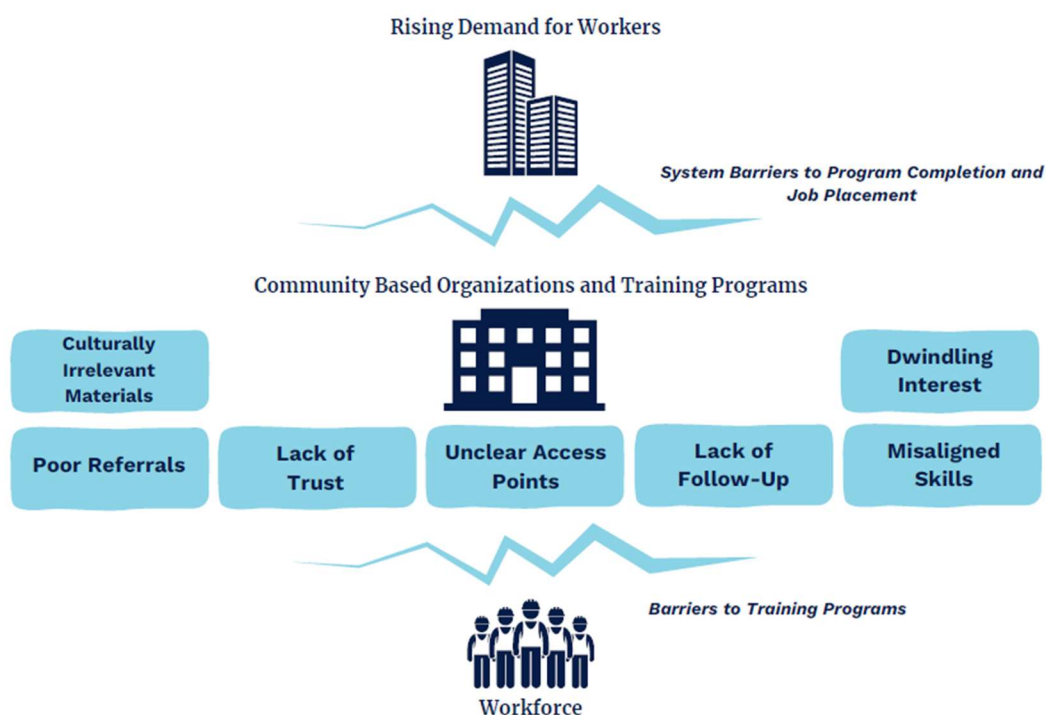
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# Introduction

The workforce has shown incredible resilience and adaptability in recent years, especially in the face of the disruptive effects of the pandemic. This period of upheaval has brought about significant changes in the way we work, challenging traditional ideas about work dynamics, schedules, and settings. In response, people have reevaluated their career priorities, leading to an increase in early retirements, gig work, and remote employment arrangements.

However, amidst these changes, a pressing issue has emerged: persistent workforce gaps, particularly among people of color and low-income individuals. Despite a growing demand for labor, many job positions remain unfilled.

## Current State: *Falling Through the Cracks*



A deeper look at our region shows that the gap in unemployment rates by race has decreased in Northeast Ohio from 8.3% to 8.1% between 2018-2022. Cleveland is a particularly poor performer here, with a gap of 9%. Akron and Canton fare significantly better<sup>1</sup>. There is still a lot of work to do. In addition to unemployment challenges, Black and Latinx workers are underrepresented in traded sector jobs further exacerbating existing disparities in economic opportunities. Traded sector jobs more often than not have higher starting wages for frontline jobs relative to other industries that don't require a college degree. Analyses show that although the gap in average monthly income by race has improved in NE Ohio, there is still more work to

do with Cleveland having an average income gap of \$2,000. This is not just a problem; it's an urgent call for action. The concentration of workers in lower-wage occupations or is often referred to as Occupational Segregation.<sup>2</sup>

Addressing these disparities isn't just a matter of fairness; it's a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive and prosperous society. Addressing these disparities will require a multitude of strategies, yet traditional workforce approaches will not work unless individuals are aware of the opportunities available to them and have supports to persist through relevant training. Conversations with grantees and community partners illuminated challenges in helping individuals even know where to begin or stay connected to training systems – causing job seekers to “fall through the cracks”. Conversations with community-based organizations (CBO) exposed three key factors contributing to individuals falling through the cracks: a mismatch between skills and job requirements, declining interest in specific sectors, and significant access barriers hindering workforce participation.

Breaking down barriers to success in often hinges on cultivating robust professional social capital. Jobs For the Future defines this as the vital “connections, networks, and resources that facilitate comprehension, access, and navigation of educational systems and the labor market.” Elevating connections and relationships, especially for people of color and low-income individuals, becomes imperative in building a thriving and sustainable workforce system.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing the urgency of bridging these divides, the Fund for Our Economic Future (Fund) and the Deaconess Foundation (Foundation) embarked on initiatives to dismantle occupational segregation and foster pathways to sustainable employment. Central to their strategy was recognizing community-based organizations (CBOs) as essential partners. Leveraging their deep-rooted connections and expertise, CBOs play a vital role in delivering targeted support to individuals, particularly within Black and Latinx communities.

Through a series of grants in 2021 and 2022, the Fund and the Foundation empowered CBOs to implement a range of projects to increase enrollment in training programs. These initiatives, spanning from career counseling to skills training and job placement services, provided valuable insights. The following sections encapsulate the learnings from these efforts across four key categories: the importance of trust and relationships, the necessity of cross-organization collaboration, the value of improved information sharing, and the effectiveness of community-specific solutions.

The report concludes with recommendations across stakeholders to promote further success in utilizing CBOs as agents for change. These recommendations include investing more heavily in casework management, lengthening funding periods for more impactful results, and cross-training CBO staff to bridge workforce gaps and empower individuals to secure sustainable employment opportunities.

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## Learnings

The collective programs undertaken by these CBOs yielded several valuable insights that can inform improvements to the Northeast Ohio workforce pipeline. The learnings that emerged fell

into four categories that, if embraced, could help generate more enrollments in technical training programs and guide future efforts to strengthen the region's workforce. Each of these four categories is outlined below in detail.

## Trust and Relationships Bring Results

CBO-led programs applied various approaches to reach out to potential workforce training program participants. These included setting up booths at local events, organizing information sessions, making phone calls, promoting on social media, and distributing flyers. Conventional promotional methods - flyers, social media posts, and website content - yielded low results. Successful enrollment was primarily achieved when program staff actively engaged with interested individuals through personalized case management, regular neighborhood conversations, mentorship, and substantial time spent exploring the program's opportunities. This indicates that creating awareness of training programs is not enough to convert potential participants into actual enrollees. Building relationships is required to establish trust and encourage enrollment. It is essential to point out that connection at this level also takes a great deal of staff time and energy. Robust case management is often undervalued and thus underinvested in, especially given the limited budgets of CBOs.

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***Spotlight:** Fairfax Renaissance Development Corporation, a grantee of the Foundation, has dedicated staff that does direct placement or referrals for people across Cleveland looking for employment. The staff follows up with potential participants, tracks their enrollments, and has referral partnerships with training programs such as Catholic Charities, First Step, and Cleveland Clinic. With such a hands-on, client-based model with significant follow-up, Fairfax Renaissance Development Corporation made 574 connections and enrolled 143 in training programs.*

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### Takeaways:

1. **Understand that traditional marketing will only go so far.** Base budget and resources accordingly and invest heavily in outreach staff, if possible.
2. **Prioritize relationship-building with potential participants.** While resource-heavy, relationships produce the best results.
3. **Follow-up is critical.** It often takes a few conversations before enrollment is made.

## Cross-organization Collaboration is Key

Collaboration is crucial across CBOs and with training programs in providing individuals with the best possible services. Often, a client may have diverse needs that require the assistance of more than one organization. By collaborating across organizations, a comprehensive approach can be taken to meet individual needs while allowing each organization to focus on their respective areas of expertise. Each grantee that the Fund and the Foundation worked with has its own strengths, resources, and expertise to bring to the table. When resources are pooled, data is shared, and services are improved, organizations can better address the diverse needs of individuals, which can be challenging for a single organization to handle alone. Collaboration can also inspire more creativity and innovation by sharing ideas and best practices.

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***Spotlight:** Smart Development, an organization that aids immigrants and refugees, utilizes an intensive case management model. Due to the nature of Smart Development, connections come in from diverse backgrounds and with a wide range of needs. Their model allows each individual to be connected to the services they require, whether job training, schooling, food, housing, etc. The Foundation grantee received a total of three grants which resulted in 368 job placements (full-time and part-time) and 211 referrals to post-secondary and certification programs.*

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### Takeaways:

1. **Familiarize staff with referral information.** Referral information should span a variety of resources that potential participants may need concurrently or before workforce training.
2. **Facilitate connections and networking between service organizations.** These connections help workers and volunteers become more knowledgeable and connected to other regional services. Successfully fostering these connections requires long, concentrated efforts; networking programs and events need to be intentional and continued over time.
3. **Elevate cross-organizational successes and mine for best practices.** Hold cross-organizational meetings to brainstorm and share successes and challenges. Such sharing can support collaboration among organizations and identify potential issues sooner.

## Improved Information Sharing is Essential

Improved information sharing is crucial to effectively track connections and ensure successful enrollment in programs and services. Many organizations reported not receiving enough or any information about the people referred to their services. Following up or tracking someone's

interest and progression is difficult without information. When individuals are referred to multiple organizations for resources, keeping track of the connections and relationships can be challenging. By implementing shared data agreements, organizations can ensure that clients are connected to the proper organization with a menu of services that meet their unique needs. This can go a long way toward preventing individuals from falling through the cracks and confirming that they receive the required support. By improving information-sharing practices, it is possible to establish more effective connections between organizations and individuals seeking support, leading to better outcomes for all involved.

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**Spotlight:** *The Fund-supported pilot in Canton, led by Strengthening Stark, offered a great example of the power of shared, aggregated data. The pilot was able to hold bi-weekly meetings with providers to assess individual cases and collectively determine which organization was best suited to serve them. Cases were tracked within a centralized data system, which allowed the organization to keep track of where an individual was in the pipeline, what connections they had made, and what was still left to do. Information-sharing enabled collaboration and the adoption of best practices*

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## Takeaways

1. **Explore implementing shared data agreements with other organizations to increase pipeline visibility.** Such data agreements can decrease work duplication and lead to better outcomes.
2. **Build in staff time and resources for organizational linkage and data reporting.** This can help staff prioritize data recording and keep records up to date.
3. **Prioritize strategic referrals.** Handoff cases to a specific individual and communicate the next person to all three parties. Track progress, if possible.:

## Community-specific Solutions Work

Community-specific solutions can be incredibly helpful when creating a sense of belonging and establishing a clear career path. Organizations can tailor their programs and resources to provide relevant and impactful support by understanding a community's unique needs and challenges. This can include connecting individuals with mentors with experience in their field, providing training and educational opportunities designed to address a community's needs, and investing in social capital. ESOL resources are also critical. Language can be a substantial resource barrier and deter individuals from accessing workforce training programs. By connecting individuals to resources in their language and more extensive ESOL resources, organizations can help break down barriers and create opportunities for individuals who might otherwise feel excluded or marginalized.

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**Spotlight:** *The Fund-supported Lorain County pilot focused on the work of El Centro, a Latinx-led organization providing various services to the immigrant community in Lorain. Through the employment of bilingual employees, El Centro staff connected 71 individuals to resources. About 25 individuals expressed interest in schooling, which resulted in 11 enrollments at Lorain County Community College. In addition, another 12 enrolled in GED programs, 11 enrolled in ESOL services, and another five sought internships and early college programs.*

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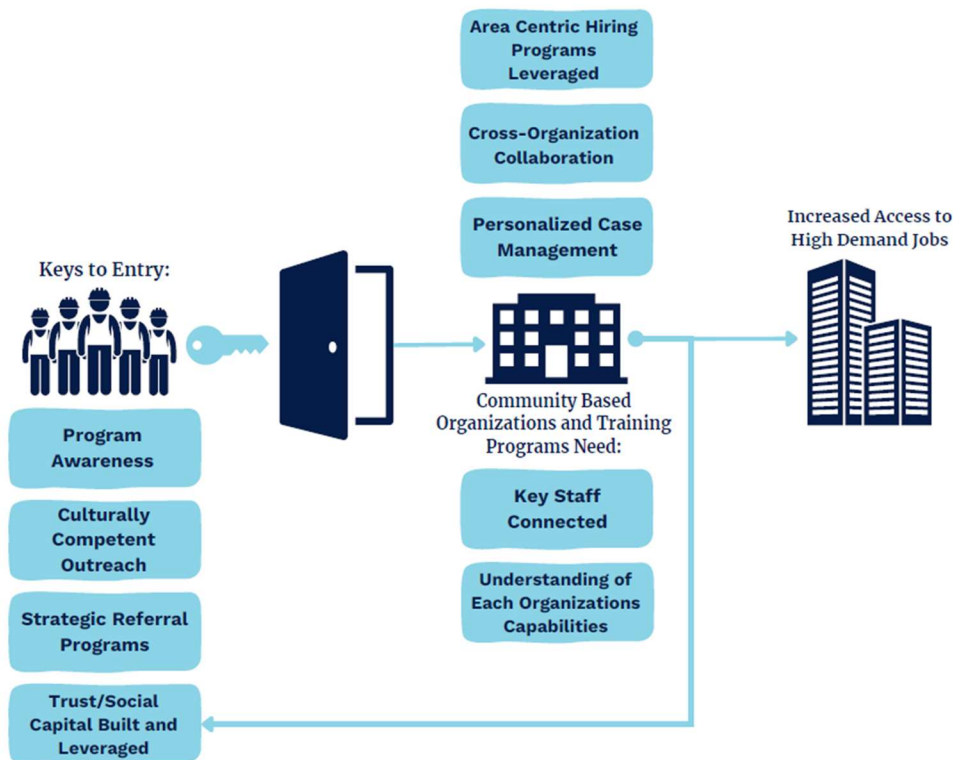
**Takeaways:**

1. **Community-based events, programs, and outreach should be culturally competent.** Access the community where they are and through materials that appeal to them.
2. **Social capital matters.** Trust is built within the networks of society.
3. **In your organizations, employ individuals from the same areas you are looking to serve.** Increases the likelihood of building connections, bridging language gaps, and overcoming cultural barriers.

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## Recommendations

## Future State: No Wrong Door



### For Training Programs

To optimize training programs, several key recommendations should be considered:

- **Realistic Staffing Management:** Ensure staffing referral follow-up is manageable by setting realistic expectations and caseloads for staff members. Providing staff positions with adequate support is crucial for fostering program effectiveness and sustainability.
- **Fair Compensation and Support:** Offer competitive and salaried positions to attract and retain qualified personnel. Provide staff cross-training and foster understanding and appreciation among team members to enhance program cohesion and effectiveness.
- **Exploration of Shared Resources:** Explore the potential for organizations to share a workforce development person. This collaborative approach can streamline efforts and maximize resources. Implement shared staff models based on geography, industry, and expertise to optimize program effectiveness.
- **Partnership and Collaboration:** Engage in co-fundraising efforts and form strategic partnerships with access point organizations. This broadens the program's reach and impact, facilitating a more comprehensive approach to workforce development.
- **Referral Management and Communication:** Define what constitutes a good referral and ensure warm hand-offs with clear communication between referring and receiving

parties. Establishing a feedback loop among members promotes continuous improvement and program refinement.

- **Utilization of Technology:** Implement shared data systems and explore emerging technologies like Superfit AI to enhance program efficiency and effectiveness. These tools can streamline processes and improve outcomes by leveraging data-driven insights.
- **Participant Incentives:** Incentivize participants based on their time and expertise to ensure sustained engagement in the program.
- **Prioritize Inclusivity:** Address bilingual needs to promote inclusivity and accessibility within the program.

By implementing these recommendations, training programs can enhance their capacity to effectively prepare participants for the workforce, ultimately contributing to broader societal and economic advancement.

## For Funders

Funders play a pivotal role in supporting workforce development initiatives, and several key recommendations can guide their efforts:

- **Extend Funding Periods:** Consider funding initiatives for longer durations beyond six months to a year. Extended programs often yield better results and give organizations the time to implement and iterate effectively.
- **Regular Dissemination of Learnings:** Push out learnings frequently to keep stakeholders informed and engaged. Sharing insights and best practices fosters a culture of learning and continuous improvement within the community.
- **Invest in Community-based Organizations:** Recognize CBOs as critical partners in workforce development. These organizations foster trusted relationships within communities, particularly with Black and Latinx communities, and serve as essential conduits for outreach and engagement.
- **Flexibility in Trust-Building:** Acknowledge that trust-building takes time and adopt flexible timelines to cultivate meaningful relationships. Investing in sustained engagement fosters trust and collaboration over the long term.
- **Adjust Measurements for Impact:** Adjust measurements to gauge the impact of outreach investments effectively. Metrics should accurately reflect the diverse needs and contexts of the communities served.
- **Invest in Shared-Data Systems:** Allocate resources to the development and implementation of shared-data systems. These systems facilitate collaboration, effective case management, and informed organizational decision-making.
- **Address Language Needs:** Invest in bilingual resources to ensure inclusivity and accessibility within programs.

By implementing these recommendations, funders can effectively support workforce development initiatives and contribute to building more resilient and inclusive communities.

## For Community-Based Organizations

CBOs are integral to the success of workforce development initiatives, and several key recommendations can empower them to maximize their impact:

- **Utilize Shared Data Systems:** Offer training to effectively use available data resources. Access to comprehensive data enables informed decision-making and enhances program effectiveness.
- **Offer Competitive Compensation:** Ensure staff members receive competitive compensation for their contributions. Fair compensation is essential for attracting and retaining talented individuals who can drive positive change within their communities.
- **Cross-Train Staff:** Encourage cross-training initiatives with other organizations to broaden staff members' skill sets and perspectives.
- **Pursue Collaborative Opportunities:** Actively pursue collaborative opportunities with other organizations and stakeholders for grant purposes. Collaborative grant applications leverage collective strengths and resources, increasing the likelihood of securing funding for important initiatives.
- **Advocate for Inclusion in Grants:** Advocate for inclusion in grants that support workforce development initiatives to ensure access to vital resources that support their work.

By implementing these recommendations, CBOs can strengthen their capacity to effectively serve their communities and contribute to the success of workforce development programs.

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## Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the lessons presented and exploring their ability to be adopted. The main limitation is related to the availability of resources, as organizations often need more funding and may not be able to implement all the recommendations provided. However, the goal is to offer guidance on where investments can be made, even on a minimal level, to create a more significant impact.

Another limitation is that the evaluated programs were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted the workforce. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that the implications of these programs may differ in a post-pandemic environment.

Finally, the programs were relatively small in scale, so the results might not necessarily generalize to larger organizations or different contexts. Despite these limitations, the findings presented provide valuable insights into practical strategies for promoting workforce training program enrollment and workforce recruitment program success.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the programs funded by the Deaconess Foundation and the Fund for Our Economic Future have shown the importance of personalized case management, relationship-building, and cross-organization collaboration in connecting individuals with workforce training programs. Organizations can convert potential participants into actual enrollees by investing in outreach staff and prioritizing follow-up. Additionally, by collaborating across organizations, a comprehensive approach can be taken to meet the diverse needs of individuals. By implementing these four key learnings and taking into account the provided recommendations, Northeast Ohio can strengthen its workforce pipeline and increase access to high-demand jobs for all individuals.

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## Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the nonprofits that participated in these grant programs. Their unwavering commitment, innovative approaches, and collaborative spirit were instrumental in the successful implementation and outcomes of these initiatives. Together, we have taken steps towards helping individuals get connected to workforce training programs.

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## About the Funders

### **Deaconess Foundation**

Established in 1997, Deaconess Foundation is a private foundation committed to helping people impacted by poverty build careers which sustain themselves and their families. For more information, please visit [deaconessfdn.org](http://deaconessfdn.org).

### **Fund for Our Economic Future**

The Fund for Our Economic Future is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization working to advance a more equitable economy in Northeast Ohio. This civic collaborative brings together leaders across sectors and throughout the region to collectively invest in, test and amplify strategies to enable the region to achieve its full potential. Since 2004, the Fund has developed enduring strategies to grow the everyone economy—where good jobs and rising incomes are within reach for all residents. Learn more at [thefundneo.org](http://thefundneo.org).

# Appendix

## The Deaconess Foundation Program Grants

Organization	Program	Target	Connections	Enrollments	Grant \$
<b>Bellaire Puritas CDC</b>	Held employment resource fair attended by OhioGuidestone and Centers for Families and Children.	10	11	1	\$6,000
<b>Burten Bell Carr CDC</b>	Participated in a collaborative outreach project through which 3 CDCs connect neighborhood residents with Towards Employment, the CDC will invest additional funds in outreach through existing public-facing programming and use the funds to support job seekers to soften the initial costs of being hired.	25	25		\$12,000
<b>Enterprise Community Partners</b>	Created connections with the workforce development system, bridging the gap between workforce and homeless services.	NA	NA	NA	\$9,000
<b>Esperanza</b>	Family Engagement Team made referrals to workforce services through general case management. Two grants total.	25	29	10	\$27,500
<b>Fairfax Renaissance Develop. Corp.</b>	Workforce program with dedicated staff did direct placement or referrals seeking help with employment. Follow-up to track enrollments. Three grants total.	60	574	143	\$60,000
<b>Family Promise</b>	Employed someone to hold online calls with residents. Three grants total.	10	12	2	\$34,000
<b>Greater Collinwood Development Corp</b>	Implemented monthly, quarterly, and semi-annual workforce programming that connects residents to local employers, employment opportunities, and training providers.	50	60		\$15,000

Organization	Program	Target	Connections	Enrollments	Grant \$
<b>International Student Services Association Inc.</b>	Conducted bi-monthly career readiness and college prep workshops, career mentoring sessions 4 hours monthly, and worked with students to develop career portfolios. Also provide additional resources on work-based learning activities. This work is done with all of the seniors at CMSD Thomas Jefferson School. Three grants total.	25	27	22	\$33,000
<b>LegalWorks</b>	Focused on two-way referrals with Towards Employment. People who attended an in-person legal clinic were given info about Towards Employment.	75	75		\$9,000
<b>MetroWest CDC</b>	Neighborhood canvassing and organizer conversations at three community events, including one with Young Latino Network. Three grants total.	25	45		\$44,500
<b>MidTown Cleveland</b>	Held direct 1:1 canvassing and tabling at local establishments. Connected to Towards Employment for assessment and services or referral to another organization.	25	91	23	\$9,500
<b>Near West Side Corp / May Dugan Center</b>	Created the position of Workforce Development Coordinator to connect clients with tools and programs that provide living wages. Two grants total.	25	35	11	\$33,000
<b>OhioGuidestone</b>	Conducted a pilot for initiatives to increase recruiting outreach through student stipends, incentives, and advertised through bus ads, etc.	90	235	107	\$23,912
<b>Reach Success Inc.</b>	Continued work with youths, community residents, and returning citizens to connect them with educational, training, and employment opportunities to support career advancement.	50	63	51	\$10,000

Organization	Program	Target	Connections	Enrollments	Grant \$
<b>Seeds of Literacy</b>	Partnered with CWRU students to conduct interviews with Seeds' graduates/students. CWRU students brought Seeds' graduates/students on-site to complete the O*Net for career assessment and job analysis, discuss career interests, and provide immediate linkage to appropriate training programs. Two grants total.	20	153		\$21,500
<b>Smart Development</b>	Provided intensive case management for immigrants and refugees. Most clients were connected to other services needed before they could start work. Warm-hand offs when interested. Three grants total.	75	368	11	\$53,000
<b>The Centers for Families &amp; Children</b>	Developed and implemented a marketing strategy for recruitment of young adults aged 18-24 to El Barrio.	378	267		\$20,000
<b>The City Mission</b>	The Workforce Development Specialists connected residents to opportunities through a variety of outlets and experiences. Each resident receives one-on-one meetings with the Workforce Development Specialist and discusses interests, previous work experience, and career goals. Ongoing grant.	130	TBD		\$12,000
<b>Thea Bowman</b>	Conducted 1:1 outreach, training, and job expos that help adults ages 18+ and those who are re-entering the community after incarceration. Two grants total.	10	8	3	\$37,000
<b>Towards Employment</b>	Launched pilot with Neighborhood Connections.	51	34		\$25,000
<b>University Settlement</b>	Conducted research on the workforce needs of the Slavic Village neighborhood.	NA	NA		\$6,000

Organization	Program	Target	Connections	Enrollments	Grant \$
<b>West Town CDC</b>	Held several information sessions that attracted graduating seniors, other school community members, and members of the Somali community.	25	25	5	\$17,000
<b>Women of Color Foundation</b>	Hired project managers to develop curriculum and conduct outreach for enrollments in the Equity Project.	15	0		\$15,000
<b>Youth Opportunities Unlimited</b>	Conducted incentive programs to engage youth to participate in and complete programming.	450	450		\$25,000

## Fund for Our Economic Future Pilot Grants

City	Organizations Involved	Program	Results	Grant \$
<b>Akron</b>	Akron Urban League; Open M; The Well Community Development Corporation	Led by the Akron Urban League and The Well Community Development Corporation. These two organizations worked together to support Black and Latinx jobseekers. They offered culturally relevant support through mentors.	20 jobseekers were connected with mentors; 16 enrollments	\$25,000
<b>Canton</b>	Strengthening Stark; Greater Stark County Urban League; ICAN Housing; Stark County Community Action Agency; Ohio Means Jobs of Stark and Tuscarawas County	Strengthening Stark led the Canton pilot. This program focused on enrolling recently unemployed jobseekers from high-poverty communities in job training.	21 enrollments	\$25,000
<b>Cleveland</b>	Midtown Cleveland; Burten Bell Carr CDC; Metro West; Towards Employment	Midtown Cleveland; Burten, Bell, Carr, Inc.; and Metro West led the Cleveland pilot in partnership with Towards Employment. The program created a neighborhood career hotline that linked jobseekers with a coach and job training resources.	160 people engaged, resulting in 25 enrollments.	\$75,000
<b>Lorain County</b>	El Centro; The Community Foundation of Lorain County; Urban League in Lorain County	The Lorain pilot centered around El Centro. They employed a bi-lingual navigator to connect individuals to Lorain County Community College.	Connected 71 individuals to resources, resulting in 11 enrollments.	\$25,000

## Endnotes

1. Fry, Richard, et al. "STEM Jobs See Uneven Progress in Increasing Gender, Racial and Ethnic Diversity." *Pew Research Center*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/04/01/stem-jobs-see-uneven-progress-in-increasing-gender-racial-and-ethnic-diversity/>. Accessed 1 May 2024.
2. JFF. "Professional Social Capital Framework." *Jobs for the Future (JFF)*, February 2023, <https://info.jff.org/social-capital-framework>. Accessed 1 May 2024.