



# Voices for Health Justice: Findings from interviews with state project teams

April 2022



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*ICH is a nonprofit consulting organization that provides participatory evaluation, applied research, assessment, planning, training, and technical assistance. ICH helps healthcare institutions, foundations, government agencies, and community-based organizations improve their services and maximize program impact.*



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*Development of this report was made possible through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation or the Voices for Health Justice Steering Committee (comprised of Community Catalyst, Community Change, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities).*



# Executive summary

## Background

As part of the evaluation of the Voices for Health Justice program, the Institute for Community Health (ICH) conducted semi-structured qualitative group interviews with state project teams in the Fall of 2021. Through these interviews, ICH sought to deepen understanding of how teams are thinking about and approaching their work within each of the six core domains of inquiry for the evaluation, which are: a) deep and broad community engagement; b) power ecosystems; c) sustained capacity growth; d) narrative change; e) policy, budget, and administrative outcomes; and f) community power.

Through the interviews, ICH also gathered feedback and recommendations related to the overall grant structure and the technical assistance support.

## Findings: Power ecosystems

Building on the notion that each state project team is its own local power ecosystem, project teams were asked to consider which factors made it easier for coalition members to work together. State project teams highlighted that shared values and history of collaboration between partners helped facilitate successful collaboration and strengthen the power ecosystem. Alongside these factors interviewees also noted that transparent and regular communication, complementary skill sets and/or capacities among organizational partners, and role clarity were facilitators. Some teams also said that the flexibility of the grant program created an environment of learning and adaptation that fostered relationship-building.

State project teams also identified collaboration challenges related to building and navigating relationships within newly formed coalitions, particularly when working with organizations with dissimilar goals, priorities and capacities. Additionally, coming together with a shared understanding of racial/health justice issues across different communities proved to be difficult for some state project teams. Finally, working virtually due to COVID-19 made it more difficult for team members to build relationships and required teams to develop new approaches for grassroots organizing.

Despite some challenges in developing their coalition relationships, many organizations described significant benefits and value added by working in collaboration with one another. Not least of these benefits was the emotional support and companionship that came from working closely together. Teams also described the productive thought partnership they found in their coalition relationships, and ways in which their partnerships increased their effectiveness, such as by increasing their credibility with different communities.

## Findings: Approaches to power-building and systems change

State project teams shared their approaches to organizing and leadership development as components of power-building, highlighting that they are focusing on the most marginalized populations, including low-income communities and communities of color. Many state project teams were in early phases of their organizing work, and described their efforts around building relationships,

earning trust, and learning from communities. Teams highlighted that they were hoping to build a broad base of support and bring together different communities of color to further the work. Interviewees also described their approaches to leadership development, including informal ways to identify and encourage leaders as well as more concrete leadership training programs and curricula.

Another important component of the Voices project is developing communications strategies that have an impact on the broader narrative in each project's area of focus. State project teams reported that they are in early stages of narrative change work, but consider this central to achieving their long-term goals. Teams are working to debunk misinformation and false narratives and replace them with positive narratives in support of their project goals. Interviewees described their communications strategies, which included community education, building narratives that connect health equity and racial justice, and building support for health equity policies by connecting them to universal moral values.

Through the Voices projects, teams are focused on building community power and also directing that power towards policy, budget or administrative goals. Since our interviews were done relatively early in the grant period, we focused the inquiry on understanding how teams identify policy goals and engage communities in this process. State project teams described how the organizational partners within their coalition have worked together to find a shared policy goals some noting that this was difficult due to differing organizational priorities. Additionally, state teams recognized the importance of involving community members in identifying and shaping policy goals. Interview participants also talked about the importance of being flexible and responsive to community needs and shifting political landscapes, and discussed how policy wins and losses can impact community members' engagement on issues.

Finally, state teams discussed how they center race and racism in their work. Many participants expressed that a racial justice or anti-racism lens is core to everything they do, although this was operationalized in different ways among the Voices organizations. Interview participants described activities such as internal trainings on racial justice topics, hiring efforts to diversify staff, looking at data disaggregated by race, centering race in communications, and re-orienting organizing work to have a racial justice focus by more intentionally following the community's lead in identifying priorities. Some interviewees also shared that the Voices partnerships have helped them further a racial justice priority.

### **Findings: Feedback on grant structure, TA, and supports**

In general, interview participants found that having access to TA provider knowledge, resources and training opportunities strengthened their project work. Project teams commented that TA providers bring added capacity, policy expertise, and relevant knowledge to support their work, and some expressed appreciation for TA providers' responsiveness. Some teams highlighted that TA support has helped facilitate communication within their coalition and/or has helped them connect with relevant outside organizations. Regarding areas for improvement, some teams felt that TA calls were too frequent or too oriented around progress updates, and expressed a desire for more flexibility with TA requirements and structures, as well as more focus on problem solving, idea development, and brainstorming.

Regarding the grant structure, several teams commented that the flexibility and openness of the Voices program has facilitated innovation and allowed them to be more intentional about spending time on relationship- building and maintaining focus on community priorities. Although a couple of state project teams noted having to navigate uncomfortable relationship dynamics during the process of identifying their Voices coalition, others felt that the coalition structure of Voices brought new capacities that have benefited their work.

State project teams provided feedback and recommendations for the RWJF and the Steering Committee, sharing that more funding is needed to adequately cover the time spent on project work and the efforts of all partners. Interview participants also offered ideas for how to structure future programs to reduce competition among organizations in coalition, such as allowing organizations to co-lead, developing a collaborative process for dividing funds, and dedicating extra time and funding for new coalitions to develop their relationships and processes for working together. Teams called for longer-term grants and for funding and TA that supports organizational development and infrastructure building. Finally, teams recommended that funders dedicate more resources to newer organizations and to states with a less robust power-building and advocacy landscape.

## **Recommendations**

A salient theme that cut across interview topics was the dynamic and long-term nature of this work, with teams highlighting multiple stages of work involved in the path to long-term change. This includes building relationships and trust within coalitions, as well as relationships with the communities of focus. Policy goals and associated plans identified in the grant proposal phase may need to be reoriented as the work proceeds, necessitating a responsive and iterative approach. Overall, based on the themes identified through our interviews, we suggest some ideas for structuring future programs that aim to advance community power-building for health justice. These include redesigning proposal templates to encourage responsiveness to community input rather than predetermined policy goals, funding a discrete planning phase to facilitate coalition-building, reassessing award amounts and grant period timeframes, more customization of grant objectives to meet groups where they are at, and more support to help grassroots organizations successfully take leadership roles.

# Background

Voices for Health Justice (VHJ) is a program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), that provides grants and other support to organizations committed to health justice, racial justice, and anti-racism work to increase access to health care, make health care more affordable, and increase the ability of the health care system to treat all people with dignity. With the core program, RWJF is supporting Community Catalyst, Community Change, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (together comprising the Voices Steering Committee) to fund 25 grantees across 24 states, each of which has between zero and six subgrantees. The program has also supported additional states and organizations by providing “Rapid Response” grants that are targeted at strategic and time-sensitive opportunities that are aligned with the VHJ overall goals; however, this report focuses on the core set of 25 grantee groups. The grantee funding began in December 2020 and runs through March 2023. Through this national funding and TA infrastructure, the Voices for Health Justice program aims to support projects that focus on the needs of low-income communities, communities of color (Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Latino/a/e/X, Arab/Arab American, Southeast Asian, Asian, Asian Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Desi and/or immigrant communities) and other groups facing disproportionate health inequities.

The Institute for Community Health (ICH) was contracted by RWJF starting in April 2021 to serve as the external evaluator for the VHJ program. ICH’s evaluation plan includes the intention to conduct semi structured qualitative group interviews with each state project team at three time points - approximately Fall 2021, Summer 2022, and Winter 2023. The interviews reported on in this memo are the first of this series of three interviews, conducted in Fall 2021.

ICH had three main goals for these interviews. First, we wanted to use the opportunity to begin building relationships with the project teams, get to know the individuals involved and understand more in depth what they were working on. Second, we wanted to begin developing a qualitative understanding of how these groups are thinking about and approaching their work within each of our six core domains of inquiry, which were co-developed with the Evaluation Advisory Committee, the Voices Steering Committee, and RWJF during the evaluation design phase. The domains are: a) deep and broad community engagement; b) power ecosystems; c) sustained capacity growth; d) narrative change; e) policy, budget, and administrative outcomes; and f) community power. In addition to these six domains, our evaluation has a cross-cutting focus on structural racism, and in interviews, we explored the ways in which state project teams center race and racism in their work. Finally, our third goal for the interviews was to gather feedback and recommendations related to TA provision and grant structure.

# Methods

ICH conducted group interviews with state project teams between September and October 2021. For each state project, we requested that at least one representative from each grantee or subgrantee organization participate in the interview, in an effort to learn from every organization involved. The number of interviewees present in the interviews ranged from one to nine. Although not all organizations were able to participate in the interviews, we were able to speak with someone from 74% of the total grantee and subgrantee organizations. We conducted a total of 26 interviews with 24 project teams. In one case, a subgrantee who was unable to participate at the scheduled time requested a separate interview, and in a second case, the lead grantee organization and the subgrantee organizations were interviewed separately.

The interviews were facilitated by ICH following a semi-structured interview guide that included questions across the main evaluation domains, which was developed by ICH and incorporated feedback from the Voices Steering Committee. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed using Otter.ai. An ICH team member reviewed transcriptions for quality before analysis.

The evaluation team developed and iteratively refined a codebook building off of the main topics in the interview guide. After finalizing the codebook, ICH applied codes to the transcripts and then analyzed the data to identify themes within each code or group of related codes. Key themes are summarized in this report.

The interviews took place less than one year into the grant period, and so many projects were still in early phases of the work. As such, discussions in some areas focused on planned or preliminary activities. At this stage, we are reporting on early learnings that help us understand how the work is taking shape, and lessons regarding grant structure and technical assistance and support. These findings have been shared with the Voices Steering Committee in order to inform ongoing program refinements. We will be able to more fully address certain areas of inquiry in our evaluation plan through future interviews and through additional data sources.

## Findings: Power ecosystems

By design, Voices projects are collaborations involving multiple organizations. We conceptualize each project coalition as a local power ecosystem, and a core focus of the evaluation is to understand the characteristics, capacities, and evolution of these power ecosystems, and how to support power ecosystem relationships. Here, we share findings about facilitators and challenges to successful collaborations and the ways in which the collaborative model has impacted the partners and projects.

## What are factors that facilitate successful collaboration?

There were a number of factors that made it easier for project coalition members to work together. These factors can be grouped under “values,” “history,” and “work practices.”

### Values

Shared values and shared goals were highlighted by several grantees as important to successful relationships and project work among coalition members. Some of these grantees mentioned intentionally spending time (both as a part of the Voices work, and before Voices) achieving alignment among their values, goals, and theories of change, and commented that this was an important investment in making sure their work was oriented in the same direction.

*“I think, good values alignment [is important]. And I think that's really important to have organizations work together effectively, just in terms of the values for movement, building racial and economic justice, collaboration, and all of those things that help, you know, underlie the, the basic principles of what we do.”*

### History

Project teams overwhelmingly commented on how existing relationships among their coalition organizations had facilitated better collaboration. Interview participants commented that existing relationships and previous experience working together had created the necessary trust for strong collaboration (see below), and provided familiar dynamics and expectations among organizations that made work easier. For example, one participant mentioned that because of this familiarity, they did not have to spend too much time creating systems/shared expectations for their collaboration. Further, sharing a history of successfully overcoming challenges or difficult situations also built trust among participants. These teams mentioned that their previous experiences showed them that they could rely on each other for support and to carry out the coalition's best interests.

Some teams mentioned the importance of existing relationships between individuals from organizations participating in Voices - they found that when individuals had previously formed personal connections that related to shared experiences and interests, this facilitated more trust and collaboration in the coalition. Sometimes relationships were formed when people were in different roles or organizations, and those connections were maintained and then became helpful for the Voices coalition work. The importance of individual relationships becomes particularly evident when there is staff turnover; even if organizations continue to work together, individual relationships are disrupted and need to be re-built when staff leave.

### Work practices

The importance of building trust among coalition members was highlighted by many teams as an essential element of effective collaboration in their coalitions. They discussed several practices that

contributed to building trusting relationships. Transparent honest communication was mentioned by several participants as a key element of trusting relationships. Some mentioned that taking time for open, honest conversations with each other built trust. Others appreciated being informed about activities led by one organization in the coalition, even if their organization wasn't directly responsible for the tasks at hand.

Several teams mentioned that communicating regularly (whether through meetings, email/written communication, and having shared workspaces like Google docs) made collaboration easier by having members be on the same page about project progress, and enabling flexibility in responding to changes/challenges in project work. Some teams with newer coalition relationships mentioned making intentional space for checking in and syncing with their coalition members.

Some participants elaborated that having coalition organizations complement each other's work created successful and effective collaborations. This meant that the organizations' capacities, areas of expertise, and roles were appropriate for the project and could also come together effectively in service of a shared goal, without one organization having to learn new approaches.

A few teams highlighted that the flexibility provided by the Voices program (in terms of project outcomes, deliverables, and focus) created an environment where coalition members could learn from each other and iteratively adapt their work. They found this beneficial to building a relationship – especially when organizations were new to collaborating with each other – and in allowing them to be responsive to feedback from their constituencies.

Finally, having clarity around each organization's role, capacities, and areas of expertise was mentioned by a few teams as being crucial to effective collaboration, and to more impactful work.

### **What are factors that make collaboration challenging?**

Project teams identified a number of factors that make their collaboration more challenging. Some were the flip sides of the facilitators described above, including the challenges of building and navigating new relationships; organizations having different goals and priorities; limited capacity at some organizations, and the occasional communication breakdown. Other challenges were related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Navigating new relationships with partner organizations was challenging to the Voices teams that were working together for the first time as a full coalition; even if some subset of the organizations had worked together before, working as a full group could still present challenges. These teams required more time to learn how each individual organization works, decide what role(s) each would take in the work, and build the trust needed to work smoothly together. This was often difficult to do virtually, as personal connections are often more naturally fostered in person.

*"I think ...being new to this relationship, or in partnership in this manner, has been a little bit difficult because there's a learning curve on how folks work. You know, we don't necessarily have the personal relationships with folks."*

In some cases, part of the challenge of navigating new relationships was related to differing goals and priorities among partner organizations. In cases where some participating organizations have siloed priorities, it can be harder for the group to identify areas of work to come together on. One project team mentioned that having a structure for deliverables, meetings, and deadlines for tasks made it easier to come together in a situation like this. Another mentioned spending time discussing how different priorities among partner organizations could be aligned for the coalition work.

Some coalitions found that limited organizational capacity among some coalition members, particularly those which were smaller organizations, grassroots organizing organizations, or organizations experiencing staff turnover, made it more difficult to collaborate. These capacity limitations could cause breakdowns in communication or barriers to transparent/regular communication.

*"I'm the one consistent person in this campaign, but also like, I don't have as much capacity, or the capacity I wish I had to work on this campaign. And then we had a new [staff role]. So there's like some disconnection that definitely happened, that I feel like wasn't beneficial to the trust we have with our partners."*

Another challenge arose when coalition partners had differences in the communities they historically focus on. A number of project teams described needing to navigate differences in issue area priorities and in the ways racial justice was understood in the different communities they each worked with. These teams mentioned spending time considering how racism arises in different communities, including communities of color (for example, anti-Black racism in the Latinx community). Participants discussed having to spend time building relationships among members of these different communities. As coalitions, it was important for them to work together to build shared understandings of racial/health justice issues that would resonate among all of their constituent communities.

*"I think the other challenge is also knowing how to deliver the message that we both want, but it has to be culturally appropriate. So what I mean by that is [coalition partner] has a lot more experience than I would say ours when it comes to racial justice because of who they are, versus our members. Because our focus has always been around immigrant rights. We have been writing for about two years at this point, trying to integrate more racial justice, but it has been a challenge given that there is anti-Blackness within the immigrant community, I'm not going to say all, but there is that. So [coalition partner], for example, is able to very clearly and openly say we're working on white supremacy versus in our community, that phrase is not*

*going to make any sense. So having to really adapt."*

Taking time to build relationships, shared understandings, and solidarity among organizations with deep community roots was highlighted as key in navigating these dynamics in project work; as was being open and honest about differences in perspective.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic made work more difficult along a few different dimensions. First, as noted above, working virtually made it harder to build relationships with other coalition members, particularly for coalitions who were working together for the first time. Teams missed the richness of in-person interactions in building relationships, and the opportunities to build more personal relationships through casual interactions. In addition, the inability to do in-person work also made grassroots organizing more challenging, creating an extra layer of work for coalitions as they had to coordinate around shifting strategies and approaches.

Further, pressing basic needs in communities as a result of the pandemic also shifted some organizations' work away from doing advocacy/policy work - particularly among smaller organizations that are also focused on providing direct service. Finally, the human toll of the pandemic placed an enormous emotional strain on Voices organizations, particularly those working with the communities of color most heavily impacted by the pandemic. This emotional toll made it more difficult to find the bandwidth to exercise the creativity and energy needed to engage in coalition work.

### **In what ways has the collaborative model added value for the work?**

Despite some challenges in developing their coalition relationships, many organizations described significant benefits and value added by working in coalition with one another. Not least of these benefits was the emotional support and companionship that came from working closely together. As one participant said:

*"It's a really nice warm space to come together because the work that we're doing is difficult. And I just think in that space... I just think folks really take care of each other in that space."*

Another said:

*"...this is such a big project, and it can feel daunting and overwhelming, even with three of us working on it, but it would feel, I think, for me, at least, it would feel like an insurmountable mountain of opposition if we were looking at it alone, right? Like we would just be, you know, ants throwing rocks at a mountain and, and instead, you know, all working together, we can lean on each other tremendously."*

Several other teams described the productive thought partnership they found in their coalition relationships. Working together, these partners told us they were "constantly brainstorming" together:

*"I think the thought partnership is really rich. And, you know, I think it's really good to hear some different perspectives and different approaches, to solving problems, you know, which you may not necessarily get working solely within your organization. And so, I think that the opportunity to be in thought partnership and think through how best to overcome some of the challenges and barriers around, you know, these issue areas, I think, is really beneficial."*

In addition, many partners described ways in which their partnerships increased their effectiveness. Participants from organizing organizations described how partnering with policy-oriented organizations gave them added credibility among community members and even built up community members' beliefs that they could be effective in creating change. Likewise, policy and advocacy organizations described how bringing the community voices into policy-making spaces increased their credibility and effectiveness.

*"The benefit of this is, you know, each organization brought a unique strength to the table that complemented the work. So it wasn't just one group doing the policy work and one group doing the organizing, but they came together. And we had a shared common focus, and unique and different strengths that complemented each other."*

## Findings: Approaches to power building and system change

### A. Community engagement

Engaging with community members to build a base and develop community power is central to the Voices project and was a major focus of our interviews. We were interested in learning about organizing and leadership building activities, both planned and active. Interviewees shared that they are working to organize those most impacted by health inequities, particularly low-income communities and communities of color. Their organizing strategies focused on building relationships with community members, learning from them about their concerns, offering information about the program's efforts, and drawing people up through a ladder of engagement. Many organizations emphasized the importance of leadership training, to develop leaders from the community who could rise up through the grantee organization or to train leaders who will take what they learn back to their communities to develop new grassroots movements. This work has been heavily impacted by COVID-19, which made it harder to organize and build relationships with community members, but project

teams have been working hard to adapt their work to virtual models.

### How do Voices teams describe the communities that they are seeking to engage in their grassroots organizing?

When asked about the population of focus for their work, interviewees tended to say their work focuses on low-income communities, or specific racial/ethnic or other groups that they work with, such as Black communities, Latinx communities, or immigrant or refugee communities. Participants often emphasized that they wanted to serve people disproportionately affected by health inequities, which includes people in certain geographic areas and often orients the work toward low-income people and communities of color. A number of interviewees also reflected that they're interested in building broad bases, particularly across their Voices coalition, and they are interested in bringing together different communities of color to further their work.

*"Our core focus group - our group of interest are Black women and girls throughout [state]. And so, we unapologetically bring their interests into any room, advocacy work that we do. And when it is time to galvanize our base, when it is time to take action, they make up the majority of our base, and they come out, they show up and they do work."*

*"I guess the biggest inequities in the state occur in southwest [state] and the geographies that we listed. So that's how we got to that focus - [it] was really looking at the data and saying this is an area that really struggles with health outcomes."*

### What engagement and organizing strategies are project teams using or planning to use?

Organizations were still at a relatively early stage of organizing when we spoke with them, so many interview participants shared strategies they planned to use or strategies they had used in other campaigns that they intended to use as a model for their Voices project. The general principles of their organizing work were to identify advocacy campaigns based on the concerns of those most affected, elevate the leadership of people of color in the campaign, build trust and relationships with people who have a history of being marginalized, and mobilize the community to influence policy.

Many participants said that at this stage in their campaigns they are focused on getting to know people in the community and building trust with them, and engaging in learning campaigns (such as surveys and focus groups) to try and understand community concerns and feelings about issues. Some organizations have also started door-to-door canvassing and virtual meetings, often focused on story collecting and sharing. The goal is to build a base, with many interviewees planning to turn out that base in support of policies.

*"The first part is recognizing that a lot of the communities that we're trying to engage with... don't really know who we are. That's a first step; we have to introduce ourselves. We have to have really genuine conversations."*

*"And so, moving forward, one of our major organizing methods is reaching out to people, connecting, and then turning them out for a large turnout."*

### How are project teams thinking about creating pathways to community leadership?

The most common pathway to leadership discussed was a process of bringing people up the ladder of engagement. Many interviewees discussed identifying potential leaders by seeing who attended meetings and was engaged, and then inviting them to have a one-on-one conversation with someone at the organization, and then encouraging them to get more involved in activities that align with their skills and interests.

*"We typically try to engage folks and move them through leadership development. We are working on having a more structured way of engaging our leaders and developing them, and being more intentional about trainings and self-interest and stuff like that. But, typically, the way that it has gone in the past is that we find the issues that they are the most passionate about, and find ways to connect any of our current projects or initiatives with that issue, so that they kind of see that through line and how these are connected, and give them opportunities to engage."*

Some organizations shared that they have concrete leadership training programs and curricula. Much of this training is focused on advocacy, offering education on how legislative and political systems work and how to engage with them. Training programs could also include specific information about how things work in the local government, broader introductions to advocacy, and more general leadership skill development.

Participants shared different ideas about what kinds of things leaders could do. This included activities like speaking to policymakers about their experiences and sharing their stories, doing community outreach and building the base, facilitating meetings and events, or collecting and disseminating information. Some organizations discussed training leaders to focus on a defined area, like advocacy, while others focused on giving leaders a broad array of skills so they can lead in the ways that they want to.

*"The lower level tasks or engagement opportunities would be emailing and calling a legislator about a certain piece of policy that we are concerned about in the legislature. And then a level up from that might be attending an in-district meeting with that legislator, with another group with a group of constituents to sometimes talk and sometimes just sit and listen in and be present and be a body in the room. And the way that we develop folks through those processes is having them take a role in some of those meetings by talking about a piece on the agenda, talking about a piece of policy that ties to a personal story that they may have. Going a little bit further from there would be maybe going to a Lobby Day at the Capitol, where we have teams of people from each region who go and speak to legislators about our policy"*

*priorities that we've identified for that day."*

### What factors have impacted the success of the community organizing work thus far?

According to interviewees, COVID-19 was the primary factor that affected community organizing work. First, for some Voices organizations, the pandemic created extra challenges and delays in hiring and onboarding new staff that they needed in order to grow their own organizing capacity for the project. In addition, interview participants noted that the pandemic created challenges in building relationships with the communities they were trying to organize, as they could not meet face-to-face, some populations didn't have good internet access, and engaging with people over Zoom can be exhausting. Some interviewees shared successful approaches to overcome these challenges, such as having virtual meetings focused on offering support and building relationships rather than just being focused on the issues; distributing door hangers instead of talking to people door-to-door; and building leaders' tech capacity by providing trainings as well as hotspots and cell phones, so that leaders would be equipped to do virtual organizing in their communities.

*"The biggest challenges are the pandemic's limitations on how we engage with people."*

Finally, with the ongoing pandemic, communities are facing many competing crises, some of which relate to immediate urgent needs. In this context, it can be challenging for communities to focus their energies on Voices issues and longer-term systems change efforts.

*"These are communities that have been just hit hard by almost every angle in the last two years in particular, too. So already, we're having trouble accessing and feeling safe to access healthcare services, but on top of that are in many ways our members were worried about getting evicted, or were worried about paying their energy bill."*

## B. Narrative change

Building a communications strategy to have an impact on the broader narrative around areas of focus is an important part of the Voices theory of change and one of the domains of inquiry in our evaluation plan. We learned that many project teams are in the early stages of narrative change work but consider it central to achieving their long-term goals. Depending on their state contexts, teams were focused on challenging harmful and false narratives or building a positive narrative in support of their work, and were employing corresponding tailored communications strategies.

### What are the existing harmful narratives that Voices projects are seeking to change?

Interviewees shared that current narratives on the issues they work on are often based on misinformation, anti-immigrant sentiment, and racially-divisive rhetoric. Many of the projects focused on expanding healthcare access have encountered narratives related to why certain groups, such as immigrants, are not deserving of those benefits.

*"Because we know that the lie of the welfare queen, the lie of the immigrant, like coming to take your health care or your benefits or whatever, that that is what gets in the way of a lot of folks like supporting programs that actually would help themselves and help their neighbors."*

### What communications strategies are Voices project teams using or planning to use?

Grantees discussed three primary strategic approaches they are incorporating or plan to incorporate into their communications work, with a goal of both countering misinformation and building support for their projects. The first approach was to educate their communities. Education efforts focused on presenting clear, understandable information about the work Voices organizations are doing and the policy changes they are seeking in order to both build support for that work and to combat misinformation community members may have heard.

Another approach was to connect health equity and racial justice in communications. This included being explicit about the relationship between racism and health inequities to build support for policies, and being clear about how the opposition is using racial narratives to create division. A number of programs talked about how they are specifically trying to build solidarity among different racial groups in their messaging to develop a stronger base of support.

*"We use strategic race-class narrative messaging, which brings together race and class to talk about how racist dog whistles, to talk about how divisiveness is funded by the very same people who benefit from it, and prevent us from actually all getting what we need to thrive."*

A third approach was to build support for health equity policies by connecting to universal moral values. Here, communications are oriented around the argument that health care is a basic right and should be easily accessible for more people. With this strategy, project teams encourage people to support the expansion of coverage because it is the morally right thing to do.

## C. Policy, budget, and administrative outcomes

Through the Voices projects, teams are focused on building community power and also directing that power towards policy, budget or administrative goals. Since our interviews were done relatively early in the grant period, we focused the inquiry on understanding how teams identify policy goals and engage communities in this process.

### How do Voices project teams identify their policy, budget, or administrative goals and how are communities involved in this process?

The Voices partners talked about how their coalitions have worked together to identify common policy goals, which arose from complex discussions with members of policy and organizing teams, as

well as keeping a close eye on national, state, and local policies. While some state teams found it easier to identify and work towards an issue that resonated with each participating organization, other teams had competing organizational priorities and found it more difficult to align their organizations toward one unified goal.

Interview participants also spoke about the importance of involving community members in the process of identifying policy goals. Community members, for one state team, “planted the seed” of an issue that was important to them, which helped to mobilize coalitions to orient their focus to that area. Another project team discussed the importance of being intentional about seeking impacted individuals in the community to share their stories and participate in their activities. Another team has their Voices project leadership team made up exclusively of community members impacted by the policy issue that they are focusing on.

Another theme was the importance of being flexible and re-orienting policy goals based on the needs of the community and the political landscape at the state legislature. Some state teams discussed having to take a step back from their original policy plans after hearing the priorities of the community, while others noted that changes in state-level issue priorities necessitated changes in their project policy goals.

Interview participants also talked about how policy wins and losses can impact community members’ engagement on issues. For some people, wins, even smaller ones, provide motivation to keep the work moving. In other cases, policy losses can make the community push harder for the changes they want.

*“So we were able to continue to try to build momentum, we had some local fights, like expanding tiny pieces of access to health care, in different ways that kept us not just engaged with people who are lacking or not able to get the health care they needed. But also like they’re feeling tiny wins in different places. And so having that longer picture, I think, you know, we talk a lot about trying to be a movement organization where when the moment arises, we can really push hard and be in a good position to do it.”*

## D. Structural racism

By building power among communities of color, Voices aims to create change that combats structural racism, and this is a cross-cutting focus in our evaluation plan. For these interviews, we asked participants to describe the ways in which they center race and racism in how they think about and execute their work.

### How do project teams center race and racism in their work?

In interviews, many participants expressed that a racial justice or anti-racism lens is core to everything

they do, with some variation in the specifics of how different organizations and teams think about and incorporate this lens into their work. Many participants referenced their organization being on a journey when it comes to centering racial justice and that they have been evolving their approach as they proceed on this journey; for example, by more explicitly naming race and/or racism in their strategic plans or communications. One organization noted that they are in a state where there is significant pushback against race-focused approaches; as a white-led organization, they felt extra responsibility to be explicit about centering race, saying:

*"It's making sure that we who can kind of take the flack, in some ways do that. ... We don't have a lot to lose. So increasingly, we want to talk about race, even if it's a tough crowd, because I think not talking about it hasn't gotten us where we want to go either."*

Centering of race and racism was operationalized in different ways among the Voices organizations. Interview participants described activities such as internal trainings on racial justice topics, hiring efforts to diversify staff, looking at data disaggregated by race, and re-orienting organizing work to have a racial justice focus by more intentionally following the community's lead in identifying priorities. As noted above in Section 3B (Narrative change), some participants described specific communication strategies that center race in how they talk about issues; for example, intentionally talking about how race is used to divide communities, retain power among those who already have it, and make people work against common interests.

A number of participants shared that they are furthering their racial justice work through partnerships; for example, taking the lead from BIPOC-led partners who are already doing this work and figuring out how best to support them, or purposefully selecting partners based on whether the partnership aligns with and can help advance racial justice goals. This highlights that in some states, the coalition structure of Voices has been helpful for furthering the racial justice priority in a way that individual organizations would not have been able to do on their own.

*"If we're centering equity, maybe there's some groups that we aren't going to work with as much anymore, because they're not centering equity. Maybe there's other groups that we want to more intentionally build relationships with, so that we can center equity."*

*"[Our partner organization] has always been ... a BIPOC-led group serving BIPOC people in BIPOC communities ... we follow them to a great extent, in their direction on how to engage in the community and be leaders ... in a way that is not top down offensive"*

Several project teams described taking an intersectional approach in how they center race, for example focusing on intersections between race and other dimensions of underrepresentation or marginalization, such as poverty, immigration, language, gender, and/or class. Some elaborated that their organizations have historically not oriented their work around race and they are now seeking to incorporate a more race-focused approach, such as specifically working to engage people of color within a broader community of focus.

*"We focus, perhaps a little too much, on Spanish speaking immigrants, when our goal is to help all immigrants, and so we've been working very intentionally, to expand into ... Black immigrant communities."*

Finally, a few participants who are people of color noted that they approach everything with a racial justice lens, and for them, this is simply their way of being. As one participant said, *"Myself, being a woman of color, fighting for racial justice is in my blood, in my bones, that's my life"*. A couple further specified that when race is totally interwoven into how you and the communities you work with look at the world, there is no need to name it or call it out with specific vocabulary, because *"it's already part of your normal way of thinking when approaching strategies or approaching the work."*

## Findings: Grant structure, TA, and supports

A core goal for these interviews was to gather feedback and recommendations from project teams about the TA they were receiving through Voices, as well as the overall grant structure. Note that all recommendations in this section came directly from the grantees and subgrantees that participated in the interviews, not from the evaluators.

### A. Feedback on TA and supports

In general, interview participants found that having access to TA provider knowledge, resources and training opportunities strengthened their project work. Project teams commented that TA providers bring added capacity, policy expertise, and relevant knowledge to support their coalition's work. Teams also mentioned that the perspectives and insight of TA providers helped them come up with new ideas, drew attention to relevant policy topics that their teams may not have been monitoring already, and provided appropriate and productive feedback.

*"The [TA provider] knows what we're up against. And she knows more or less what to offer and what we need. And that's really helpful to have someone who knows the lay of the land here real well."*

Participants also shared that being part of the Voices program has allowed them to establish connections with other states and organizations implementing similar work. Additionally, some teams, especially those that were earlier in developing their working relationships, mentioned that TA check-ins were useful for facilitating regular communication and coordination between coalition members. Several grantees appreciated that TA providers were available and responsive to their requests or

questions.

*"I think the biggest help in terms of technical assistance usually is being able to hear what other advocates are doing across other states, and especially if it's similar to what we're trying to do. So any opportunities for those connections, I think, are the most beneficial things. And also, if the national partners steering committee level see resources around messaging or policy that could benefit or help to facilitate sharing of that, I think that's always really helpful."*

Some teams felt that TA check-ins either occurred too frequently or were not used effectively, mentioning that at times the time is spent more on reporting back to the TA providers and less on receiving support. These teams elaborated that frequent check-ins and reporting place a burden on organizations, and can be unnecessary given the organizations' expertise and capacity to undertake their work. A few participants also suggested that conversations during TA calls should focus more on problem solving, idea development, and brainstorming that is directly in support of the Voices project work. Several also expressed feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information they got from their TA providers in emails.

Teams had varied experiences and preferences around how TA decisions were made. Some grantees expressed that TA providers were not in a position to fully make decisions about what TA is needed or provided, or to set agendas for TA calls, given the expertise that the state teams have about their own work. One team expressed that TA providers were overstepping in their management of the project, and mentioned that their interactions with TA providers felt like unnecessary supervision. However, other groups appreciated that TA providers would take the lead on setting or starting agendas for their calls that they could then add to or edit.

## B. TA recommendations

Grant partners recommended more flexibility around the TA requirements and deliverables, including frequency of meetings and TA formats. More flexibility would allow some groups to build relationships with TA providers on their own terms, and to engage only in the TA services that they need while preserving more time for them to focus on executing project work. Meanwhile, a more flexible approach would also allow other groups who would like more frequent meetings or support to receive that based on their needs. Teams also expressed that they were very busy and suggested that spending less time in meetings and receiving more concise, direct written communication would help them access TA support more efficiently without taking too much time away from their project work.

Many teams expressed wanting more opportunities to be connected with other state teams, coalitions, or organizations engaged in similar work. Participants said that capacity building experiences thus far have largely been in webinar formats, rather than opportunities to discuss and connect with other teams. Teams noted that they would like opportunities to

exchange ideas and build relationships in addition to receiving helpful information.

## C. Feedback on grant structure and process

Several teams commented that the flexibility and openness of the Voices program has allowed them to be more intentional about spending time on relationship-building without worrying as much about meeting pre-defined milestones or concrete deliverables. This openness also allowed them to be more intentional about planning their project work according to community priorities, and to take more innovative approaches to their work that they may not have had opportunities to implement before. A couple of participants also specifically compared the Voices program structure to other foundation or federal grant programs, where they felt that they were more constricted. Additionally, several participants noted that the coalition structure of Voices brought new capacities that have benefited their organization's work.

*"Voices has given us a voice, so to speak. It's given us a voice, it's given us, you know, the opportunity to leverage a capacity that we normally wouldn't have."*

A couple of grantees discussed having to navigate awkward experiences during the formation of their Voices coalition in the grant proposal phase; for example, the Steering Committee reaching out to an organization that the other partners did not want to include in the coalition. In one case this was framed as negative interference, as it created an uncomfortable situation and a need to repair relationships with organizations that would continue to share similar spaces in the state.

## D. Recommendations for the Steering Committee and RWJF

Grant partners recommend additional funding for state teams to further support their Voices project work and the time spent on grant commitments. There was concern among teams about the dilution of funds when it was split among the grantees and subgrantees, and consequently not having enough funds to adequately support their work over the grant period. Some participants elaborated that the time commitment for the Voices grant - including monthly check-ins, the capacity assessment, and evaluation - is too much for organizations that only get a small portion of the grant funds. A couple of grantees also wanted more funds to be able to pay community leaders and others they engage in their work.

A few participants mentioned specific ways that RWJF and the Steering Committee could structure future grants like this to reduce competition among the organizations in coalitions, including allowing organizations to co-lead, developing a more collaborative process for dividing funds, and creating a process to ensure that all organizations listed on grant applications provide approval on the proposal

before submission.

Some grantees recommended building in extra time and extra funding for new coalitions to develop relationships, build trust, figure out roles and responsibilities, and coalesce around the styles of communication that would work best for the organizations involved.

As mentioned above, teams appreciated the flexibility in grant scope and deliverables, as this allowed them to be more responsive and adaptive, and to spend necessary time on relationship building and community engagement. A few participants suggested going further and providing general operating support so that the funded work does not have to be towards a particular deliverable or scoped grant project. This would also allow organizations to support staff salaries without having to divide up staff time across different grant-funded projects.

Several teams expressed the need for more sustainable sources of funding and longer-term grants in order to achieve their project goals, and in some cases, foster longer-term partnerships and collaborations. One team also mentioned that they would like to hear as soon as possible about renewals for grants so that they can plan and secure other funding if needed.

Several participants recommended funding and other support, including TA, for organizational development and infrastructure building. A few acknowledged the good intentions behind wanting to have grassroots organizations of color leading the Voices projects, but noted that the reality is that these organizations often do not have the capacity, time, or resources to effectively lead the administrative side of large grants. Teams suggested long-term organizational development support for these organizations (such as IT and administrative support), continued investment in their work, providing funding that allows them to offer competitive salaries and hire skilled and experienced staff, and connecting them to mentors and leaders of color in other organizations and states. This would equip these organizations to have greater impact over time.

Participants also reinforced the need for more funding and support for newer, growing organizations, and those in states where the power-building and advocacy landscape is more sparse. As one participant said:

*"And so to really address equity, the equitable thing, I think, is to over-resource, the groups that have less in order to be able to have more capacity to do things. Because right now, even with what we have, they still don't have the capacity to have a real presence all the time at the state house when they need to be."*

Lastly, a couple of grantees emphasized that funders should trust that organizations at the local level know how to do their work effectively, and that they are making progress even when there are not concrete policy wins or deliverables to report.

# Discussion

One of our primary goals for the Voices evaluation is to develop recommendations for RWJF, other funders, and the power-building field as a whole about what kinds of structures and supports best advance community power-building for health justice in different contexts. We reflected on the interview findings with this goal in mind, to highlight early learnings that could be informative to funders and other stakeholders.

A salient theme that cut across interview topics was the long-term nature of this work, and the critical importance of building trusting relationships and developing thoughtful processes for engaging various partners. In the interviews, project teams shared their perspectives about the different stages involved in laying the groundwork for long-term change. For Voices, this began with the development of the project coalitions in each state. Interview findings highlight that these collaborative structures can provide significant value and make the work more effective; for example, by following the lead of organizations of color and contributing to their work, coalitions can move forward on racial justice goals more successfully. However, strong coalitions with authentic partnerships require relationship building (particularly for partners who had not worked together before), trust, role definition and clarification, alignment of priorities, and development of collaborative work processes - all of which take time and focus. Furthermore, some organizations may require organizational development and infrastructure support in order to be able to take a bigger role in the project coalition.

Next, project teams emphasized the importance of relationship- and trust-building with people in the community as an essential stage of power-building. For Voices, the central focus on racial justice required some organizations with deep roots in certain communities to begin building connections in new communities or with specific subpopulations. Without a foundation of trust, organizations will not be able to engage community members and support them to take leadership and ultimately influence the policies and practices that affect them. Trust-building takes time and consistent presence, and cannot be rushed.

Regarding policy change, true community-led processes may require organizations to pivot or reorient their issue areas and policy goals in response to community priorities and needs. Policy goals and windows of opportunity are also influenced by the political landscape at the local, state, and national levels. Furthermore, as shown in the Voices theory of change, policy changes can create positive or negative feedback loops with community power, and policy wins do not guarantee improvements in healthcare access, affordability, or dignity - the work does not end with a policy win. Thus, policy goals and associated plans identified in the grant proposal phase may need to be changed as the work proceeds, and this may in turn necessitate new partnerships being added to the coalition and/or outreach and engagement with different communities. The work is iterative rather

than purely linear.

Based on these themes that arose from interview participants' input, we identified some preliminary ideas for how funders can structure programs that aim to advance community power-building for health justice. While Voices has already incorporated some of these concepts in its design and ongoing evolution, there may be opportunities to go further or try new things in the future.

- Consider options for redesigning proposal templates to allow even more room for responsiveness to community input; for example, eliminate the requirement to specify a policy goal up front in the proposal phase; rather, ask applicants to outline a community-engaged process for identifying policy goals.
- For coalition-based work, consider funding a discrete planning phase for groups to develop their coalition relationships and work processes before engaging in the actual project work together. This may not be essential for all groups, but would be particularly helpful for groups that have not worked together before. This could also be an opportunity for groups to have funded time to refine their project plans together as they learn more about each other's strengths and experience.
- In determining total grant sizes, continue to consider how funds get diluted when divided among multiple partners (as Voices has already been doing), and ensure that the awards are large enough to support each partner to take a meaningful role. This includes both the overall grant amount and the funding for individual components, including evaluation. Also consider whether more funding needs to be added to allow organizations to pay (or pay more to) the community members and leaders who they are engaging through the work.
- Provide longer-term grants to allow states to focus on moving their work forward without simultaneously trying to plan for the end of the funding. Longer-term funding can also help support better staff continuity, to facilitate building collaborations with less disruption related to staff turnover.
- Lifting up an idea that came from the Steering Committee in a reflection session: Consider separating the lead role of the grant into two components - the administrative lead and the project lead. Small grassroots organizations may not have the infrastructure or capacity to take on the administrative leadership, even if they have the expertise to do the project leadership, and a co-lead structure would allow groups to separate these roles if needed. Alternatively, provide organizational development and infrastructure capacity building funding to grassroots organizations to support them to be able to successfully take the full lead role if they want it.
- Identify ways to explicitly recognize the multiple, iterative phases of work that are necessary in order to lay the groundwork for community-led systems change. Different groups start at different points, based on their history of work and their state context. As such, the progress expectations should be tailored to meet each group where they are - not all teams will reach the same destination; instead, progress can mean taking the next

appropriate step from where one is at a given point in time. This may also call for funding levels and grant objectives that vary significantly among awardees; for example, providing pre-project coalition-building grants to some groups, while others receive funding for community engagement, organizing, and/or creating advocacy campaigns, based on their experience and prior work in the area of focus. In addition, groups in more politically challenging contexts could receive a higher level of resources and support. More customization would require more intensive work for those designing and running a program, but it is worth considering how to authentically meet states where they are at and provide the support to help them get to the next stage.