
Practitioners' Voice California Fund

Executive Summary of Phase Two Learnings

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In 2021, an evaluation of the Heising-Simons Foundation’s CA Early Learning and Care (ELC) systems change portfolio identified a need for and interest in more diverse representation within grantee organizations and the ELC advocacy field at large. ELC evaluation participants relayed that a lack of representational diversity had contributed to limited and insufficient engagement of historically underserved (e.g., BIPOC) communities in ELC-related policy advocacy efforts. In recognition of these learnings, a new collective action fund was seeded at Tides Foundation at the end of 2021, called the Practitioners’ Voice California Fund (PVCA).

Blue Shield Foundation of California, the California Community Foundation, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and Tipping Point Community joined PVCA. This group of funding partners (“the Steering Committee”) embarked on this new initiative to resource ELC practitioners in California as they organize and engage in policy reforms at the local, regional, and statewide levels, with a focus on practitioners’ wages and working conditions.

PVCA provides two years of flexible funding to practitioner-led organizations, prioritizing communities historically and currently subjected to marginalization and oppression. It began with an initial Interest Survey that was completed by 52 organizations. Ultimately, 11 organizations were chosen as grantees. This pool of grantees is diverse in nature, representing a range of geographic scopes, organizational types and sizes, and focal communities.

Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) was hired to facilitate and support the development of a theory of action and measurement plan for PVCA, both of which support aligned learning and continuous improvement for the Steering Committee and future practitioner partners. As such, between April 2023 and March 2024, SPR conducted a document review, analyzed PVCA Interest Survey data, conducted interviews with grantees and field stakeholders (i.e., policymakers, advocates, researchers), and held focus groups with the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) and funders. Additionally, SPR developed a grant report template and analyzed reports completed by grantees. This document serves as the executive summary of learnings from the measurement plan’s early implementation.

Characteristics of PVCA Organizations

Through their grant reports, PVCA organizations shared details about their organizations, the communities they serve, and their involvement in policy-related processes. In general, findings indicate that PVCA grantee organizations serve and, for the most part, represent PVCA’s communities of interest, and most are engaged in policy and systems change at various levels. Key findings include:

- **Staffing at PVCA organizations is small, with many relying on volunteers.** While two PVCA organizations do not have any full-time employees, one has a staff size of 15. In fact, at least 64 percent of PVCA organizations have five or fewer full-time employees. Relatedly, PVCA organizations greatly vary in their use of volunteers. While one grantee does not have any volunteers, another reported receiving support from 75 volunteers. Within this spectrum, at least 64 percent of PVCA organizations have six or more volunteers.
- **PVCA organizations serve historically underserved communities and most have staff or contractors that are representative of the community.** At least 72 percent of PVCA

organizations reported that 50 percent or more of the families served by their organization identify as people of color. Moreover, the greatest share of PVCA organizations reported that between 26 percent and 50 percent of families served by their organizations “speak a preferred language that is not English.” Only three PVCA organizations reported not having staff or contractors that represent the communities they serve.

- **PVCA organizations support policy and systems-change work across levels.** Grant report data suggest that at least 64 percent of PVCA organizations engage in policy and systems-change work at the national level. Meanwhile, at least 81 percent of PVCA organizations engage in policy and systems-change work at the city level, and at least 90 percent do so at the state level.

Grantees’ Advocacy Capacity and Activities

Through interviews and grant reports, grantees expressed several shared perceptions about PVCA funding and their capacity to engage in policy-related processes. These included positive perceptions of their ability to influence advocacy spaces and build relationships with diverse practitioners, particularly with PVCA funding. More specifically:

- **PVCA funding and other opportunities have contributed to increased advocacy capacity for PVCA organizations.** Through interviews, many grantees spoke to the ways in which PVCA funding, additional policy-related opportunities, and recent field experiences have increased their capacity to engage in advocacy. For example, some interviewees said that learning from other practitioners has equipped them with skillsets to advocate for policy change and has caused them to see the value in community-oriented advocacy training. As a result, some grantee interviewees plan to allocate some of their PVCA funding toward supporting providers, so they can confidently engage with legislators and otherwise increase their advocacy capacity.

Activities Undertaken

Through their grant reports, grantees listed the following activities undertaken with PVCA funds:

- Provided a wellness stipend
- Funded activities (e.g., transportation, substitute teachers, professional speakers)
- Created a website
- Implemented a leadership and advocacy training series
- Provided mentoring, coaching, and a curriculum for leadership development for emerging Latina leaders
- Facilitated inclusion of eight Black providers in the Child Care Providers United (CCPU) rally and march for rate reform
- Joined Lift Every Voice, a campaign for racial wage justice for Black ECE providers
- Provided practitioner advocates with food delivery gift cards over Thanksgiving break
- Participated in a media-relations training
- Created surveys to inform advocacy efforts and supports
- Began bimonthly calls with organizations involved in similar advocacy efforts
- Participated in panels and forums
- More rigorously scanned proposed legislation and educational policy

- **A substantial portion of grantees feel sound in their ability to influence advocacy spaces to support practitioner engagement.** Grant report data reveal that at least 64 percent of PVCA organizations rated themselves as “able” or “very able” to influence advocacy spaces designed to engage practitioners. Relatedly, in interviews and focus groups, many grantees described meeting with local legislators and asking for support for their diverse care-setting needs. Grantee organization respondents indicated that, in these spaces, they felt they had successfully advocated for additional funding and supported bills that have been passed. They also expressed that, through mentorship and guidance to practitioners on how to operate in advocacy spaces, they are increasing the number of voices heard, which has the potential to influence policy outcomes for the ELC field.
- **PVCA organizations have positive ratings and views about their capacity to support relationship building with diverse practitioners.** Through interviews and their grant reports, PVCA organizations generally relayed positive messages about their ability to create and influence advocacy spaces designed to engage diverse practitioners. At least 82 percent of grantees rated their capacity to build new relationships with diverse practitioners as “able” or “very able.” Similarly, at least 73 percent of grantees rated their capacity to create advocacy spaces dedicated to engaging diverse practitioners as “able” or “very able.” However, through interviews and focus groups, grantee organizations expressed interest in technical assistance that would expand their capacity to serve diverse practitioners. A few also expressed interest in supporting practitioners whose first language is not English with grant applications, as they include legal terminology that can be challenging to understand. This area of expertise was described as an opportunity for grantees to build connections with and support a diverse set of practitioners.

Fund Practices

PVCA organizations generally expressed appreciation for the support and trust-based approach provided by PVCA funders but also offered the following suggestions for improvement:

- Provide reminders about the immediate and long-term goals for PVCA funding.
- Foster opportunities for grantees to come together, learn, share, and grow their knowledge.
- Clearly communicate grant requirements (e.g., how funds should be used, reporting efforts).
- Offer more clarity on the sustainability of the funding and the future of the program.

Funders and IAC members similarly highlighted lessons learned from their work thus far that can be replicated in similar efforts. Their ideas largely center on the structure of the opportunity and application processes, in addition to some reflections on management practices. Namely:

- **Flexibility around the duration of the funding is important.** As one IAC member explained, “be more open to a grant process and [...] how a grantee may get there or not. Also more flexibility and understanding around how long change takes. [...] To only provide one year of general flexible funding can be really hard for an org to get much traction.”

- **Future efforts should continue offering flexible funding alongside other resources that can assist grantees with developing their strategies and connections.** Several funders stated the value of providing flexible dollars was “so clear” and that this form of funding allowed early-stage groups in particular to “do the things that they need and want to do, and to take them really off the ground.” At the same time, another funder noted that “we as funders have a platform and a position of influence where we can help to support this or connect to others.”
- **Power-building efforts would benefit from breaking silos across movements and levels of advocacy, as well as across providers and families.** Several funders reflected on this effort’s role “within the [larger care system] and within the context of the communities that these organizations are working within.” They described hopes of connecting to other movements that are already established but that may not have an understood connection with the early care system. As one funder explained, “there is work taking place nationally that points to an opportunity for exploring what a statewide network of solidarity looks like a little more formally.” As such, related investments could expand on recent efforts to strengthen parent and provider relationships alongside loops between local priorities and state-level advocacy.
- **A trust-based design entails funder distance that can be particularly challenging in a collective action fund.** Notably, only one funding partner was not on the IAC. While PVCA provided learnings across funders (e.g., increased knowledge of ELC organizations), this funder acknowledged “I actually don't have a relationship with any of the [grantees]. I don't have a problem with it or anything, but it was an intellectual challenge for me because of my distance.” To that end, another funder acknowledged, “one way to think about trust-based values is funders fund and get out the way [...] which creates a different level of engagement and relationship. And when it's a pooled-based approach, you're one step more removed.”

Grantee Reflections on the Video Proposal Process

When applying for PVCA funding, applicants were able to submit a video proposal in place of a traditional written grant proposal. Many grantees regarded the opportunity as more “equitable” and demonstrative of PVCA funders’ interest in inclusivity. As one interviewee stated, “you get to see the presence and the humanity of the practitioner through this process.” Some practitioners felt the video length could have been as little as 5 minutes or as long as 10 minutes.

Looking Forward

In its early stages, PVCA has increased funders' knowledge of and support to BIPOC-led organizations across California. Through the fund’s trust-based approach, grantees have undertaken a range of activities intended to expand their presence in the ELC field and support to practitioners. While there is room for more aligned understandings across funders and grantees—including for grant expectations or requirements—evaluation findings suggest the fund holds potential for advancing equitable supports to BIPOC practitioners.