Building Civil Society Capacity to Rebuild State Capacity: Lessons for Future Federal Administrations

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Rajesh D. Nayak[1]
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Introduction

The next federal administration will inherit a governing challenge unlike any in recent memory. Years of budget constraints, attrition, and a wholesale attack from the current administration have left federal agencies with significantly diminished capacity to accomplish their missions. But even before these latest challenges, many communities were not served adequately by the federal government.[2] The federal government did not always know who was not being reached. Given its posture in recent years, it will now take years (if not a generation) for the federal government to rebuild trust with some communities.

Some of these challenges are not unique to the federal government. Too many state and local governments have long grappled with resource constraints in fulfilling their own complex missions, let alone in implementing federal programs, further complicating federal agencies' ability to deliver on their missions. And failures to reach some communities can be even more acute at the state and local levels, where the impacts can be felt more deeply.

One promising capacity-building strategy employed at the federal, state, and local levels alike has been to rely on civil society to extend government capacity. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) have for years helped governments at all levels disseminate information about rights and services to hard-to-reach populations, supported efforts to ensure that people receive the legal protections they deserve, helped inform and deliver key programs and resources, and have provided essential information and insights to federal agencies. For example, some of the most creative strategists in labor and workers' rights policy have advanced proposals to build partnerships between governments and community

[1] The author wants to acknowledge the many people who contributed their time to interviews, including Nicole Alvez, Laura Brown, Wendy Chun-Hoon, Bo Delp, Rachel Deutsch, Neidi Dominguez, Daniel Galvin, Terri Gerstein, Claudia Henriquez, Adam Kader, Steve Kest, Stewart Knox, Rachel Lauter, Anna Marin, Kate Miceli, Abdi Muse, Charlotte Noss, Doug Parker, Esther Sosa, Gabrielle Stevens, and a few additional experts who spoke on background. *See infra* Methodology. Special thanks to Alex Hertel Fernandez, Sam Berger, and Sophie Jacobson at the Empowering Democracy Initiative, and Mary Beth Maxwell, Pronita Gupta, and Seema Nanda at Workshop, for their support for this paper, along with feedback, referrals for interviews, and even suggested citations. Thanks too to the participants at the EDI White Paper Workshop and Conference for their feedback. All remaining errors or omissions are the author's own.
[2] *See* Exec. Order No. 13,985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (Jan. 25, 2021); and see The Growing Capacity Gap, below.

organizations for decades.[3] Partnerships between governments and civil society make a lot of sense, given that CBOs may be embedded in hard-to-reach communities, and they have community relationships and credibility that governments lack.

But this strategy involves a key limitation. Many CBOs themselves are chronically underfunded and under-resourced. Governments have a long history of relying on community partners to deliver services. President George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiative promised to bolster these partnerships for religious organizations,[4] although President Trump has stripped longstanding partners ranging from Lutheran Social Services and Catholic Charities to universities across the country of their funding.[5] Large providers are better placed to navigate complex government applications to receive such funding, but they are not necessarily on the ground and close to local communities. The result is a sector in which CBOs focused on underserved communities are singular in their roles yet starved of resources.

This report builds on the foundations of prior writing on government partnerships to explore a series of related questions about how government should choose, resource, and engage their CBO partners. How might government agencies benefit from efforts to build strong CBOs? Why should a government agency— focused on mission delivery, performance metrics, and stagnant or shrinking budgets — care whether community organizations are well-resourced, thriving actors, who are trusted by (and accountable to) their own communities? And how should government partnerships be structured such that CBOs may use those funds to extend the capacities that make them valuable partners in the first place?

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[3] *See, e.g.*, Janice Fine & Jennifer Gordon, Strengthening Labor Standards Enforcement Through Partnerships with Workers' Organizations, 38 Pol. & Soc'y 552 (2010), https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/1154/; Janice Fine & Jenn Round, Governing for Worker Power: Worker Centers Lead the Way on Labor Law Enforcement, 33 New Lab. F. 44, 44–53 (2024), https://workercenterlibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/fine-round-2023-governing-for-worker-power-worker-centers-lead-the-way-on-labor-law-enforcement.pdf. Terri Gerstein and Rachel Deutsch have written a comprehensive report exploring many of these partnerships in the workers' rights space. Rachel Deutsch & Terri Gerstein, Power in Partnership: How Government Agencies and Community Partners are Joining Forces to Fight Wage Theft (2023), https://www.epi.org/publication/community-enforcementinterviewedpartnerships-partnerships/.

[4] The White House, Off. of Faith-Based & Cmty. Initiatives, "President Bush's Faith-Based and Community Initiative," https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/government/fbci/president-initiative.html (last visited May 5, 2026).

[5] Nick Loomis, *DOGE and Former Trump Adviser Have Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska in Their Sights*, Neb. Pub. Media (Feb. 6, 2025), https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/es/news/news-articles/doge-and-former-trump-adviser-have-lutheran-family-services-of-nebraska-in-their-sights/ (Lutheran Family Services); Carol Marbin Miller & Syra Ortiz Blanes, *Amid Quarrel with Pope, Trump Strips Miami Charity of Funding to House Migrant Kids*, Miami Herald (Apr. 15, 2026), https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/immigration/article315410233.html (Catholic Charities); Patrick Jack, *U.S. Universities Count the Cost After One Year of Trump*, Inside Higher Ed (Jan. 23, 2026), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/politics-elections/2026/01/23/us-universities-count-cost-after-one-year-trump (higher education).

To answer those questions, we conducted approximately twenty interviews with key stakeholders designed to surface lessons that cut across programs, contexts, and levels of government. In the process, we have identified evidence for why government agencies can and do benefit from having well-resourced community partners. Especially at a time of diminished state capacity and low trust in government, strong community partners can be trusted messengers and validators to help make government work better and educate communities about what government can do for them, particularly for underserved communities that are too often left behind. Given that, strategic investments in community partnerships can be an imperative for an administration trying to rebuild capacity and trust in government in the face of substantial funding challenges.

Drawing from these conversations, we have identified government partnerships with CBOs, falling into three functional areas: know-your-rights outreach, enforcement, and program administration partnerships. We have compiled a series of observations and best practices for government agencies designing these sorts of partnerships with CBOs. But beyond that, we have also identified some key capacities that CBOs can build upon to make these partnerships work, especially by building strong relationships in communities and by engaging those communities to have a greater voice in the forces that shape them. In other words, we find that government agencies get the most benefit from partnerships with CBOs that enhance civic engagement in their communities. Given that, we find that government partnerships should be designed to enhance such capacities as well.

In this report, we start by laying out some background on government partnerships with CBOs, including why they are so promising in the current context. We describe how these partnerships work in practice, based in part on our interviews, and provide some general recommendations for designing them to be most effective. Then we explain how CBOs can be better partners if they enhance civic engagement of the communities they serve, and how government agencies can help CBOs enhance those capacities in order to make government partnerships most effective.

Background

Methodology

This report has been prepared primarily using more than 20 semi-structured interviews with a total of 23 current or former leaders from community organizations that have partnered with government agencies, current or former government officials who have partnered with community organizations, intermediaries who have helped connect these programs, and researchers and academics who have studied these partnerships, all of which were conducted between January and March 2026. In particular, we interviewed 8 leaders from community organizations, 12 current or former government agency officials, 3 intermediaries, and 3 researchers and academics (noting that some interviewees had worn multiple hats). About two-thirds of our interviewees identify as women, and about forty percent as people of color. Most interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes, and all but two were conducted by Zoom (with the remaining two by phone).

We ask our interviewees to share their candid experiences and insights, and we pledged that their individual assessments would be obscured in the final report. In practice, that means listing interviewees in the acknowledgments section, referring to their contributions by category (*e.g.*, former government official, CBO leader), and stripping out identifying information absent permission. For some interviewees, when requested, we also provided additional assurances that their assessments would be provided only on a background basis to allow them to provide candid and frank assessments.

The partnerships we explored spanned the federal, state, and local levels of government. Most, but not all, of the partnerships we explored involved governments providing monetary resources to community organizations, but for at least one program, most of the government funding was rescinded before it was released.

We cannot claim to have built a random or representative sample of partnerships between government agencies and CBOs. Instead, we started by identifying a few trusted interviewees to help build an interview list, and we systematically asked each interviewee if there were others with whom we should discuss. Our focus on workers' rights programs was not intended to be exclusive, but reflects our experiences and networks. We intentionally reached beyond workers' rights organizations for additional interviews, and we attempted to source interviews from a series of categories:

- Government leaders or staff who helped run partnerships;
- CBO leaders who worked with agencies;
- Intermediaries who worked to make partnerships work; and
- Researchers and academic experts.

While no balance is perfect, we believe we have reached a relevant cross-section of partnerships in our three targeted areas (know-your-rights outreach, enforcement, and program administration or capacity building). In that sense, we have aspired to apply something of a "case method" as described by Professor Mario Luis Small, who has proposed a sampling methodology built on sequential interviews, sampling for range, snowball sampling, and identifying unique cases.[6] At a minimum, we hope that our transparency about the methods we used and their limitations will allow for a fair assessment of the findings in this report.

Likewise, we generally take our interviewees' assessments at face value. Given the assurances of confidentiality that we gave individuals, we feel confident that incentives were aligned to elicit their honest (if admittedly subjective) opinions. Where interviewees asked us not to repeat something – for example, because it was based on conjecture – we agreed to consider the information on background. While we used open-ended questions, we sometimes probed with follow-ups when we identified

[6] *See* Mario Luis Small, "'How Many Cases Do I Need?': On Science and Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research, Ethnography 2009; 10; 5, at p.28 https://www.bebr.ufl.edu/sites/default/files/Small%20M.%20L.%20(2009)%20How%20many%20cases%20do%20I%20need_0.pdf.

answers that were contradictory to what we had previously heard. Where there were divergences in opinions, we noted them, but answers were often in the vein of "yes and…"

We also benefited from several published papers and books cited throughout this article. They were instrumental in shaping our understanding of the situation here. In addition, we learned from a key unpublished report shared with us for background on a particular city-level program.

Why Consider Partnerships?

Government agencies and CBOs have been working together for decades at every level of government. But today, the growing government capacity gap and trust gap together make it more worthwhile than ever to explore the potential of such partnerships.

The Growing Gaps in Capacity and Trust

The federal government has long been significantly understaffed, given its larger goals. Despite complaints about the size of the federal government, the federal workforce has failed to keep pace with the nation's growing population, and especially with the growing mandates placed upon the modern federal government.[7] Federal contractors have filled some of the gap, but they are generally for-profit entities that lack independent forms of accountability to the public, beyond contract actions and popular attention.[8] The efforts of DOGE and the early Trump administration have exacerbated this gap by reducing the number of federal employees.[9] This gap likely contributes to significant programmatic challenges,[10] not to mention cratering trust in government.[11]

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[7] *See, e.g.*, Elaine Kamarck, *Is Government Too Big? Reflections on the Size and Composition of Today's Federal Government*, Brookings Inst. (Jan. 28, 2025), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-government-too-big-reflections-on-the-size-and-composition-of-todays-federal-government/.

[8] *Id.*

[9] *See* H. Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform Democrats, Press Release, "At Hearing, Nonpartisan U.S. Comptroller General Confirms Musk's DOGE Is Increasing National Risk and Undermining Services to Americans" (Feb. 26, 2025), https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/news/press-releases/hearing-nonpartisan-us-comptroller-general-confirms-musks-doge-increasing (quoting the testimony of US Comptroller General Gene Dodaro); Kaye Wiggins, *US Department of Justice Loses a Quarter of Its Lawyers*, Fin. Times (May 3, 2026), https://www.ft.com/content/a1316aae-83d9-4e2a-87aa-93de964bbbe0?syn-25a6b1a6=1, *available at* https://giftarticle.ft.com/giftarticle/actions/redeem/e86da9db-5927-4af4-b9b7-af48859f0304.

[10] Siobhan Standaert, *Worker Protections in Freefall: The Collapse of Federal Labor Enforcement Under the Second Trump Administration*, Good Jobs First (Dec. 2025), https://goodjobsfirst.org/worker-protections-in-freefall-the-collapse-of-federal-labor-enforcement-under-the-second-trump-administration/.

[11] Pew Rsch. Ctr., *Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025* (Dec. 4, 2025), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025/.

For state and local governments, the capacity gap is nothing new. For decades, many state and local governments have been underresourced and understaffed in areas ranging from public health[12] to education.[13] Even in terms of enforcing core workplace protections, where reports suggest that federal agencies have lost significant ground,[14] most states have even fewer resources available.[15]

Not surprisingly, some communities are more impacted by a lack of government capacity than others. As the Biden-era Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government described the problem, "Entrenched disparities in our laws and public policies, and in our public and private institutions, have often denied that equal opportunity to individuals and communities."[16] That Executive Order demanded that federal agencies assess the equity impacts of their programs and policies across all underserved communities, including "Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality."[17] Communities composed of these populations have always been more likely to face barriers to accessing government services and benefits due to capacity constraints, among many other reasons. These barriers — and the subsequent "anti-DEI" backlash to the Biden-era effort to reach underserved communities[18] — could also contribute to a lack of trust in government.

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[12] Jonathon P. Leider et al., *Staffing Up and Sustaining the Public Health Workforce*, 29 J. Pub. Health Mgmt. & Prac. E100 (2023), https://journals.lww.com/jphmp/fulltext/2023/05000/staffing_up_and_sustaining_the_public_health.25.aspx.

[13] Nat'l Ctr. for Educ. Statistics, Press Release, "Over Half of Public Schools Report Staffing and Funding Limit Their Efforts to Effectively Provide Mental Health Services to Students in Need" (May 9, 2024), https://ies.ed.gov/learn/press-release/over-half-public-schools-report-staffing-and-funding-limit-their-efforts-effectively-provide-mental.

[14] Jake Barnes, Janice Fine, Daniel J. Galvin, Jenn Roundsathethea a , & Hana Shepherd, *Driving Low-Wage Immigrant Workers Out of the Labor Market Hurts Everyone* (May 2025), https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/WJL/WJL_immigration_databrief_May2025.pdf.

[15] Daniel Galvin, Hana Shepherd, Jenn Round, Jake Barnes & Janice Fine, *Powers and Practices in Labor Standards Enforcement*, IPR Working Paper No. WP-24-30 (Inst. for Pol'y Rsch., Northwestern Univ., 2024), https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/documents/working-papers/2024/wp-24-30-2.pdf; Marianne LeVine, *Behind the Minimum Wage Fight, a Sweeping Failure to Enforce the Law*, Politico (Feb. 18, 2018), https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/18/minimum-wage-not-enforced-investigation-409644; Jake Barnes, Janice Fine, Daniel J. Galvin & Jenn Round, *Wage and Hour Report* (Workplace Justice Lab @ Rutgers Univ., Nov. 2016), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/577e9d93b3db2b9290cd7005/t/5834a2d820099e42204ea005/1479844570431/Wage+and+Hour+Report+FINAL_0.pdf; Irene Lurie, *Enforcement of State Minimum Wage and Overtime Laws: Resources, Procedures, and Outcomes*, 15 Emp. Rts. & Emp. Pol'y J. 411 (2011).

[16] Exec. Order No. 13,985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (Jan. 25, 2021), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government

[17] *Id.*

[18] *See, e.g.*, Ashifa Kassam, *Diversity Backlash: What Is DEI and Why Is Trump Opposed to It?*, Guardian (Jan. 24, 2025), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/24/diversity-backlash-what-is-dei-and-why-is-trump-opposed-to-it.

Rebuilding trust will be particularly difficult because it is a challenge that spans multiple agencies across the government. While there should be a more coordinated multiagency response to this challenge, each agency will need its own tools to build trust with communities.

The Promise of Civil Society

Some advocates and government officials alike are turning to CBOs to help bridge the gaps in government capacity and trust. To be sure, CBOs cannot and should not replace government agencies, which have ultimate responsibility and accountability for their programs, and which should be responsible for performing inherently governmental activities.[19] Doubtless, there should be careful consideration to ensure that any partnership program is not replacing an inherently government function.[20]

But CBOs can provide crucial complementary capacity that helps government agencies execute their missions more effectively, and they can bring goal alignment and relationships that can make them a key tool for rebuilding trust in government.[21] As Janice Fine and Jennifer Gordon wrote in their seminal 2010 article, Strengthening Labor Standards Enforcement through Partnerships with Workers' Organizations, giving worker organizations a seat at the table on enforcement has the promise to align incentives and improve enforcement by empowering "those with the greatest incentive and [who are] closest to the action."[22] These efforts tap into longstanding roles, with CBOs like the National Consumers League fighting for fair working conditions both before and after passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.[23] As Fine and Gordon note, this sort of "tripartism" – where government, employers, and workers' organizations all have a stake in compliance – was proposed as early as the New Deal era, and it has emerged in state and local case studies ever since, engaging established labor unions and grassroots workers centers alike.[24] And as one interviewee put it, "partnerships" are sometimes just a more formal iteration of longstanding relationships between government and communities.

Importantly, this strategy of CBO partnerships is not limited to labor standards enforcement. Government agencies have long recognized the value of CBOs, and therefore partnered with them to do everything from helping seniors file their taxes[25] to administering public health programs in states

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[19] *See* Cong. Rsch. Serv., R42325, *Definitions of "Inherently Governmental Function" in Federal Procurement Law and Guidance* (Dec. 23, 2014), https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R42325.html.
[20] *See, e.g.*, Am. Fed'n of Gov't Emps., Press Release, "Expanding Definition of Inherently Governmental and Promoting Insourcing Must Be Top Priorities, Says AFGE" (Nov. 13, 2014), https://www.afge.org/publication/expanding-definition-of-inherently-governmental-and-promoting-insourcing-must-be-top-priorities-says-afge/.
[21] *See infra* Goals and Definitions of Success.
[22] Fine & Gordon, *supra* note 3, at p.553.
[23] *See generally* Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States 382 (1995).
[24] *Id*.
[25] Internal Revenue Serv., "IRS VITA Grant Program," https://www.irs.gov/individuals/irs-vita-grant-program (last visited Mar. 17, 2026).

ranging from California and Illinois to Utah and West Virginia.[26] The CBOs involved have ranged from established nonprofits like the American Cancer Society to much less formal community-based organizations.

Nor is government funding a new concept for these partnerships. Many CBOs rely on philanthropy, individual donors, or sometimes members to fund their day-to-day activities. And these revenue sources can be an important source of support for government agencies and CBOs to pilot partnership programs, providing proof of concept for how these programs can matter. But simply put, government agencies operate on a scale beyond what these private funding sources can support. Government agencies that find CBOs to be helpful partners must invest public resources in these programs to make them sustainable.

Taxonomy of Partnerships

There are countless types of partnerships between government agencies and community organizations, ranging from contractual relationships to deliver social services to informal communications. Some providers like Planned Parenthood have been lightning rods for opposition, despite their documented success in delivering reproductive care[27]; others like the United States Institute of Peace are so deeply intertwined that federal courts have to unravel where the government ends, and private organizations begin.[28]

This paper focuses on a subset of three basic categories of partnerships: Know Your Rights Partnerships, Enforcement Partnerships, and Program Administration. The lines between these categories are admittedly porous, and various programs could fit under each category.

Know Your Rights Partnerships

We define know-your-rights partnerships as those in which government agencies partner with CBOs to inform people of their rights and responsibilities under the laws the agency enforces. These partnerships are especially important for laws that provide basic protections that people may not understand, especially in underserved communities.

Some CBOs may be especially well placed to inform communities about their rights and responsibilities under laws. Many have developed relationships in underserved communities, and they can have

[26] Tr. for Am.'s Health, *Examples of Successful Community-Based Public Health Interventions* (2018), https://www.tfah.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Examplesbystate1009.pdf.
[27] Families USA, *Planned Parenthood: Still Essential, Still Under Threat*, https://familiesusa.org/resources/planned-parenthood-still-essential-still-under-threat/ (last visited May 5, 2026).
[28] *See, e.g.*, United States Inst. of Peace v. Jackson, No. 25-cv-804 (BAH) (D.D.C. May 19, 2025), ("Plaintiffs' statutory arguments thus cannot avoid the key characteristics that make USIP part of the federal government for constitutional separation-of-powers purposes.")

expertise in developing and delivering culturally competent resources and programs. Indeed, for many groups, know-your-rights trainings may already be a core activity.

Enforcement Partnerships

We also identified some partnerships that are focused on improving compliance with important protections. In these partnerships, the CBO partners take a more active role in helping agencies enforce laws more directly. For example, CBOs could help identify enforcement leads, or they could help agencies understand industry dynamics and operations more generally, which agencies could use to pursue the kinds of strategic enforcement efforts proposed by David Weil.[29] But CBOs can also help agencies advance nuts-and-bolts investigations, for example, by communicating with workers or other witnesses and helping to engage them as agencies develop cases to enforce laws. They could even be charged with helping agencies monitor compliance with settlement agreements after an enforcement action has concluded.

Program Administration Partnerships

Finally, a third category of partnerships that arose in our interviews involves program administration. This broad category encompasses everything from CBOs that help communities navigate the benefits application process to CBOs that administer benefits programs on behalf of government agencies. In particular, CBOs may have the networks to play a critical role in delivering services to underserved communities that are less likely to take advantage of government services for which they qualify.[30]

Admittedly, this is a category for which CBOs may face the greatest challenges. Few CBOs have the expertise and resources to administer a government program prior to receiving government funding. Government agencies may need to provide CBOs with resources to develop their capacity to deliver partnerships. Alternatively, CBOs may need to partner with larger CBOs or even state or local government to become credible partners. For example, we interviewed former federal government officials involved in two different EPA programs that fit into this category: the Solar for All grants and the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (TCTAC). Both programs relied on CBOs to administer

[29] *See* David Weil, The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can Be Done to Improve It (2014). Weil has written the canonical works on taking a proactive approach to maximizing enforcement agencies' limited enforcement resources to protect workers to the greatest extent possible.

[30] For example, numerous studies have documented how Black workers are less likely to take up unemployment insurance benefits at the same rate as other workers. *See, e.g.*, Elira Kuka & Bryan A. Stuart, *Racial Inequality in Unemployment Insurance Receipt*, 247 J. Pub. Econ. (2025), https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047272725000994; Austin Nichols & Margaret Simms, *Racial and Ethnic Differences in Receipt of Unemployment Insurance Benefits During the Great Recession*, Urban Inst. (2012), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25541/412596-Racial-and-Ethnic-Differences-in-Receipt-of-Unemployment-Insurance-Benefits-During-the-Great-Recession.PDF.

them or provide technical assistance, and CBOS in both programs relied on partnerships with other entities like state and local governments.[31]

Partnerships Help Governments Achieve Their Goals

Government agencies that partnered with CBOs have had various goals for these partnerships, including addressing the capacity and trust gaps that we expect at the federal level. In our interviews about how these programs have worked in practice, government agencies have generally found these partnerships useful in achieving these goals. In this section, we provide an overview of the goals that government agencies have had in launching these partnerships. We then provide an overview of some general insights for designing partnerships to help agencies achieve these goals.

What Government Agencies Want from Partnerships

At a time of strained capacity all around, it is no surprise that government officials see partnerships with CBOs as a way to stretch their own (public) resources, even if that requires finding ways to fund those relationships. In our interviews, they articulated a number of goals, many of which appear in the existing literature on government partnerships with CBOs.[32]

- **Reaching underserved communities.** The most common goal articulated by government officials was using CBOs to reach communities that the agency found hard to reach, whether for know-your-rights training or any other goals. As one former government official explained, "We were trying to get [government services] into the hands of actual workers who haven't had access to this before." Another official warned that reaching underserved communities involves more than a capacity problem, but also the trust gap. As another government official put it, especially in today's context, "[y]ou can't go to a neighborhood if you aren't from that neighborhood," because people are too scared to talk. One researcher looking across programs thought such distrust was especially present in communities of color, and communities with Black workers in particular. A former worker advocacy leader noted that this real reach requires not only language skills, but also cultural literacy and trusted relationships with communities.

[31] Both were threatened by the incoming Trump Administration. While it was difficult to comprehensively evaluate these programs in light of these attacks, we included some illuminating excerpts from our interviews. To be sure, other programs that are not discussed in this report have been more thoroughly evaluated as well. *See, e.g.*, Michele Evermore, Alex Hertel-Fernandez, and David Madland, Community Navigators Can Increase Access to Unemployment Benefits and New Jobs While Building Worker Power (October 2024) (evaluating the Maine Peer Workforce Navigator program, which it found to be succeeding in "increasing access to unemployment insurance, connecting the unemployed to jobs, and boosting interest in collective action"). https://www.americanprogress.org/article/community-navigators-can-increase-access-to-unemployment-benefits-and-new-jobs-while-building-worker-power/.

[32] *See, e.g.*, Fine & Gordon, *supra* note 3; Deutsch & Gerstein, *supra* note 3.

- **Improving leads for enforcement.** Numerous government officials felt that CBOs could help generate important leads for their agency's enforcement efforts. One state enforcement agency leader explained that CBOs could act as eyes and ears in (literally) dozens of communities where the agency had no presence. CBOs could identify enforcement leads among communities where potential claimants may not understand their rights or may be wary of seeking help. Eliciting better leads is especially important given studies suggesting that agency complaints may be unrepresentative of actual violation rates,[33] let alone the key cases needed to pursue strategic enforcement actions.[34] Another former government official framed this concept in similar terms, suggesting that having CBO partners could help the agency pursue a more strategic enforcement approach, multiplying the impact of inspection activities beyond the individual cases.

- **Keeping witnesses engaged in ongoing investigations.** Several researchers have noted that CBOs may likewise be useful in keeping witnesses engaged in ongoing investigations. At least two CBO leaders involved in enforcement-related partnerships mentioned that they spent real resources engaging with witnesses (or complainants) on behalf of the agency. For agencies that need to keep witnesses in communication and engaged over the course of a long investigation and even subsequent litigation, building trusted relationships with witnesses is a vital service to ensuring that enforcement actions can be successful.

- **Lending industry expertise.** Likewise, academics and researchers have long noted that CBOs could lend industry expertise in the context of enforcement partnerships, and CBO leaders confirmed the same. While CBOs may not develop the kind of industry mapping that better-resourced union research departments could create, they can explain connections between related companies and even community leaders that can be especially helpful in sequencing and targeting investigations that will have a strategic impact.[35] But CBO leaders engaged in program administration partnerships also underscored the value of understanding the industries involved in developing effective programs. For example, a union-aligned CBO discussed providing relevant industry knowledge for a program focused on better delivering job training attached to a government investment project.

- **Broadening the pool for government staffing.** Academics and researchers have noted that CBOs could help expand the pipeline of potential candidates for agency hiring. One former CBO leader explained that building these relationships with CBOs not only helped recruit candidates for leadership positions in city agencies but also helped the city identify potential entry-level candidates as well. Either way, he noted that this is a win-win, as the CBO candidates will help

[33] *See, e.g.*, Janice Fine et al., *Wage Theft in a Recession: Unemployment, Labor Violations, and Enforcement Strategies for Difficult Times*, IPR Working Paper No. WP-21-09 (Inst. for Pol'y Rsch., Northwestern Univ., Feb. 18, 2021), https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/our-work/working-papers/2021/wp-21-09.html.
[34] *See generally* Weil, *supra* note 29.
[35] *See generally supra* note 29.

the city understand potential partners and will also learn the city's processes well enough to prepare to be helpful partners in the future.

- **Presenting ideas for agency improvement.** CBOs could also help the agency identify concrete ideas for improving its processes and operations. One CBO leader explained that his organization sent an annual letter to the agency offering up areas for improvement in each of its first four years in existence. Remarkably, he credited this practice as helping his organization build a stronger trust relationship even before they received funding.

Our government agency interviewees highlighted some other, more novel goals for these partnerships as well:

- **Engaging new partners or nontraditional organizations.** Some government officials described partnerships as a way to engage new partners or nontraditional organizations that did not previously have government relationships. For program administration partnerships, this was closely related to the goal of reaching underserved communities. One former federal official described a grant program designed to engage new service providers, for which the explicit goal was to ensure that 45% of funded groups were new grantees.

- **Building trust through responsiveness.** A closely related goal is to build trust with communities by better aligning government programs and community goals. The same former federal official explained that expanding grants to new community partners empowered groups that had a deep and intimate knowledge of community priorities. Another former federal government representative explained that by building partnerships with CBOs into their program, the federal government helped encourage partnerships that responded to local needs, generated support from local communities, and potentially even rebuilt trust in government. In that sense, CBO partnerships could be designed to encourage the sorts of intentional "policy feedback loops" that scholar Alex Hertel-Fernandez has described.[36]

- **Responding nimbly to changing circumstances.** Former government officials highlighted that CBO partnerships could help their agencies more nimbly respond to emerging needs or changing circumstances. Especially in the context of the federal government's transition in 2025, CBO partners were able to pivot and innovate in response to new challenges in ways that government agencies simply could not. As one former government official described, it would take years to make the programmatic changes to outreach curricula that CBOs could make in weeks. Former federal government officials likewise noted that a grant program could evolve over time to better respond to emerging agency priorities, for example, shifting from general know-your-rights training to a focus on specific claims.

[36] Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, *Beyond Deliverism*, Democracy: A J. of Ideas, Spring 2025, at https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/76/beyond-deliverism/.

- **Changing agency culture.** Some former government officials explicitly described using CBO partnerships to intentionally change the culture of their own agencies and government partners. Part of this involves helping agencies learn to communicate more effectively with communities, but it goes beyond figurative (or even literal) translation. An intermediary pointed out that the government and CBOs may have different theories of how to reach the same goal, for example, improving compliance with the law. But as one city enforcement official put it, CBOs can be allies in changing agency culture from a focus on "law enforcement" to a focus on helping workers.[37] In one particularly compelling case, government officials wanted to educate their colleagues about the connection between gender-based violence prevention and other important issues. They initially struggled to articulate the connection between gender-based violence prevention and their colleagues' work. But by focusing their community partnerships on gender-based violence prevention and leveraging relationships between CBO partners and agency staff, they made the connection more visible to other government agencies. Their colleagues began to shift their views of how their agencies were connected to these particular issues.

It is important to recognize that many successful partnerships arise in part due to strong champions within government agencies, for example, an agency official or a lawmaker who fights for the program. Often, these champions are developed by CBOs themselves through their ongoing and formal or even informal advocacy over the years. Sometimes those champions are high-level agency leaders like Julie Su, who led the California LWDA as it launched the California Strategic Enforcement Partnership (CSEP) that paved the way for the California Worker Outreach Project (CWOP),[38] or Wendy Chun-Hoon at the US Department of Labor's Women's Bureau, who launched that agency's groundbreaking FARE grants.[39] But some of our interviewees also pointed to lower-profile champions. One former worker center director indicated that "there was really one person who pushed hard inside" to make a city-level program happen, and that it was key that the person in question was not a senior official but someone who knew how to navigate the bureaucracy and identify existing funding opportunities.

How to Design Partnerships That Work

In conducting the interviews discussed above, we collected significant data on government partnerships with CBOs and some top-line assessments of their effectiveness in practice. Our interviewees expressed substantial agreement on the importance of CBO partnerships to government agencies. Indeed, our interviewees with government agency experience were generally even more positive about their

[37] One CBO leader described this shift more succinctly: "[A state enforcement agency] sees itself as a neutral adjudicator. Police see themselves as justice crusaders. How do we make wage enforcement look more like that?"
[38] James Irvine Found., *Advancing Worker Rights in California: Where We Began, What We Learned* (2023), https://www.irvine.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Fair-Work-initiative-Advancing-Worker-Rights-in-California.pdf.
[39] U.S. Dep't of Lab., Women's Bureau & Emp't & Training Admin., Press Release, "US Department of Labor Announces $1.4M in Grants to Prevent, Respond to Workplace Gender-Based Violence, Harassment" (Sept. 11, 2024), https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/wb/wb20240911.

experiences with partnerships. As one government official put it, "We couldn't do our work without our community partners," which is why their grant program is so important.

In this section, we summarize general insights from our interviews and some recommendations for how government agencies should design partnerships to be effective. Importantly, they reflect (and are indeed informed by) scholars and practitioners who have written on these programs previously, cited above.

Partnerships Need Clear Goals

Government agencies need to establish clear goals for any partnership, and they should share those goals with CBO partners to ensure alignment. Of course, CBOs may have their own goals as well,[40] but government agencies and CBOs need to be strongly aligned on the goals and deliverables of the partnership so that neither is frustrated later in the program. While our interviews did not uncover significant misalignment of goals at the outset, both researchers and intermediaries have identified this as a potential problem, and some misalignment may make partnerships unworkable.

Alignment also needs to be deep across both government agencies and CBOS, respectively. Even if government leaders are champions of a partnership program, they need to ensure that the staff who are writing the funding opportunity announcement, not to mention implementing the program, understand the program's goals and vision. Likewise, line staff of CBOs and intermediaries need an understanding of the program's shared goals in addition to their own goals for the program. Taking the time to ensure alignment within each organization is important to program sustainability.

Government agencies should also take care to identify realistic goals. One expert warned that these programs should not be seen as a replacement for strategic enforcement efforts by agencies, even if they could be designed to complement such efforts.[41] Even then, as another researcher noted, more generalist organizations that lack specific expertise – say in an industry – may have less helpful feedback on strategic enforcement efforts.

Finally, government agencies should consider updating and evolving the goals over time. One former federal official noted that their program was able to opportunistically evolve over time from a general and broad program to one that focuses on amplifying a specific new administration-wide goal. That flexibility ultimately made the program significantly more effective.

Recommendations:

[40] Indeed, government agencies should carefully consider other goals that CBOs may have to enhance their own capacities because these goals may help CBOs better partners as well. *See* Enhancing the Capacities that Make Partnerships Work, below.

[41] For more on strategic enforcement, *see* Weil, supra note 29. For more on the interplay between agency partnerships and strategic enforcement, *see* Deutsch & Gerstein, *supra* note 3, at p.10-11.

- **Agency and CBO leaders should build a strong understanding of shared goals among their respective staff to ensure that the partnership is sustainable.**

- **Program designers should ensure a rigorous selection process is in place so agencies choose the right CBOs to fulfill the program's goals and identify any fatal misalignments of goals that would make the partnership unworkable.**

- **Program goals should be written broadly enough to encompass the overlapping goals of government agencies and CBOs alike, to the extent that there may be divergence between the two.**

- **Government agencies should not be afraid to reconsider program goals as needs and opportunities evolve over time.**

Funding is Vital for Building Capacity

Early efforts to back government-CBO partnerships in the workers' rights space were backed by philanthropy.[42] These efforts have been vital to establishing that these partnerships are possible, identifying potential stumbling blocks, and providing evidence (if not always hard data) about benefits.

But most of the programs that we explored involved some form of government funding, though the amounts varied significantly. City-level grants to CBOs providing know-your-rights outreach or legal services range from $100,000 - $250,000.[43] These are important programs, and even "modest" funding at the city level can be transformative for CBOs. As one former federal official put it, even a large federal grant from a CBO's perspective can be a relatively small amount of money for the federal government.

On the other end of the spectrum, major EPA grant programs authorized by the Inflation Reduction Act were slated to provide billions of dollars for funding for program administration partnerships.[44] These programs were slashed early in the Trump administration, underscoring the precarity of government funding – a double-edged sword for CBOs.

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[42] See, e.g., Jeanne Kuang & Lil Kalish, *Worker Centers Are a Behind-the-Scenes Ally in California's Fight Against Wage Theft*, CalMatters (Nov. 2022), https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2022/11/california-wage-theft-workers/ (describing in part a strategic enforcement partnership funded by the James Irvine Foundation to support worker organizations coordinating with the California Labor Commissioner).

[43] City of Chicago, Dep't of Bus. Affairs & Consumer Prot., Press Release, "BACP Awards Grant to Arise Chicago to Raise Awareness of Chicago's Labor Laws" (Sept. 2021), https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/bacp/provdrs/business_support_tools/news/2021/september/awardsgrants.html; Off. of the Att'y Gen. for the District of Columbia, "Workplace Rights Grant Program," https://oag.dc.gov/workplace-rights-grant-program (last visited Mar. 17, 2026).

[44] *See supra* note 31 and text accompanying,

Partnerships also vary in what expenses can be covered. As one scholar put it, some programs are extremely narrow and cover only the staff needed to perform the program activities "to the decimal." Other programs allow CBOs to cover administrative and overhead costs ranging from supplies to office space. This flexibility can enable CBOs to take advantage of these programs without tapping into additional external subsidies.

Government-CBO partnerships are more resilient if they have dedicated or even multiyear funding that is less reliant on annual appropriations. At least one partnership program in California benefits from dedicated funding upon which the state can draw for this purpose and others. The state's Private Attorneys General Act (PAGA) allows plaintiffs to retain 35% of penalties the state would otherwise collect under the labor code, in addition to back wages and damages workers would otherwise recover, thereby incentivizing private enforcement. The remainder of the penalties go to the state, which can use them to fund programs like CWOP. These programs build awareness and commitment within CBOs around the larger labor enforcement ecosystem, enabling them to defend PAGA, advocate for more labor commissioner funding and structural solutions to the agency staffing challenges, and advocate for improvements to enforcement law.

Other cities like Seattle have created a transaction fee on each app-based worker's delivery of goods or provision of services that contributes to the city's labor standards enforcement more broadly.[45] Advocates for Seattle's program have considered pressing for an automatic increase in this fee over time to keep pace with inflation, so that the real value of enforcement and administration does not erode as operating costs rise. This proposal illustrates a broader principle: dedicated funding streams are most durable when they are designed from the outset to keep pace with program needs, rather than requiring annual advocacy simply to maintain their real value.

Recommendations:

- **Effective partnerships require funding for CBOs to participate and expend resources to support the program.**
- **Funding should be flexible enough to cover sufficient administrative overhead, such as operating space and supplies, to support CBO activities.**
- **Program designers should consider creating dedicated funding streams to insulate these programs from budget pressures.**

[45] An Ordinance Relating to the Regulation of Network Companies, Seattle Ordinance 126953 (2023) (codified at Seattle Mun. Code ch. 6.700), https://seattle.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6404512&GUID=8A359C8D-4D57-47F2-A68A-9A27A671B81B&Options=ID%7cText%7c&Search=&FullText=1

Investing in Intermediaries is Important

Relatedly, in many of our interviews, intermediaries were identified as key to successful partnerships, given that they may regularly convene CBOs and government to build relationships. Some programs are structured from the ground up around intermediaries, including the DOL Strategic Enforcement Project (DSEP), and at least two city-level partnerships involved a lead CBO pressing to establish the initial programs and then serving as an intermediary to other organizations.

As an example, in the DSEP, both the National Employment Law Project (NELP) and Workshop served as intermediaries that could help agencies and CBOs work together more effectively, given their strong relationships of trust with the grantees and the agencies alike. Intermediaries were also key to training grantees to ensure that their public statements did not prejudice the cases at trial. In another state-level program, the state agency provides additional funding to three state university programs around the state to help support the smaller organizations that participate. In another city-level program, one key organization serves as the main grantee, subgranting to smaller CBOs and handling government reporting and compliance for organizations that are less equipped to do that work.

At least two city-level partnerships we explored were structured as partnerships between the city and an experienced CBO, which, in turn, subgranted to smaller, less experienced groups, including less formal immigrants' rights groups. In that case, the intermediaries could manage the paperwork and reporting requirements and serve as the front-line group handling any investigations or political backlash that might arise. As one scholar noted, these arrangements gave the lead groups a certain cachet, for example, putting them in the driver's seat to build coalitions. While such an arrangement may have troubling implications for equity, it does give smaller and more inexperienced organizations the opportunity to apply for funding.

In fact, one former federal official said that they recruited a trusted CBO intermediary to help engage grantees even though the CBO received no funding from the project. The agency began to treat the intermediary as they would other grantees because they found it so helpful to have a trusted ally to help translate for grantees. Another well-funded federal partnership launched its effort with an early grant to an intermediary firm to work with CBOs and help them prepare to turn their ideas into shovel-ready projects for funding. A state agency leader discussed the value of intermediaries in streamlining the state's administrative engagement with CBOs, allowing them to devote more time and resources to programmatic work. A scholar and expert noted that labor unions could serve as effective intermediaries or even partners with CBOs, given that they have significant experience scaling programs.

Meanwhile, an experienced intermediary identified an important role for intermediaries with government agencies as well. An intermediary can build a different kind of trust relationship with the government agency and can help CBO partners navigate internal dynamics that may be impacting the partnerships. One CBO highlighted the importance of hiring a former government official to help navigate the partnership process.

One CBO leader identified a key challenge to relying on intermediaries: they create another potential breaking point for the partnership. Strong partnerships may rely on the relationships built between government officials, CBO leaders and staff, and intermediaries. If key individuals leave intermediaries, it can be another point of weakness for the partnership. This underscores the importance of treating intermediaries intentionally and ensuring that they have adequate resources.

Recommendations:

- **Design programs from the ground up to leverage intermediaries.**
- **Dedicate funding for intermediaries, if possible, so that they can support CBOs, including smaller groups, in navigating programs and becoming successful partners for government agencies.**
- **Look to established nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, or even unions as potential intermediaries, relying on existing trust relationships and clear, but content-neutral criteria.**

Some CBOs Need Technical Assistance Resources to Access Partnerships

Government agencies should recognize that some CBOs – particularly smaller ones – will need significant technical assistance to enter into partnerships. Programs can expand the pool of potential partners by providing such technical assistance.

One former CBO leader – and former city official himself – noted that it was remarkably difficult for an organization without significant resources to navigate city bureaucracy. He needed to tap into former City Hall contacts to strategize on shaping a strong partnership proposal. As another former federal official explained, the upshot of this dynamic is that well-established CBOs were best positioned to respond to new funding opportunities, making it even harder to reach underserved communities.

Even government officials who were the strongest internal proponents of partnerships found it challenging to help CBOs translate community goals into a proposal for a program that they could administer. As one former federal official overseeing environmental programs put it, CBOs were very well placed to identify community needs, such as soaring energy bills and interrupted water services, and they had helped bring neighbors together to discuss the problems. But they needed help to turn this into a concrete funding proposal, not to mention recruiting the necessary partners. Programs like TCTAC were intentionally designed to provide significant technical support in identifying CBOs and helping them design programs they could propose for funding and ultimately administer. They used grantee partners in regions around the country to provide some of this assistance.[46] In practice, TCTAC was also thoughtful

[46] See, *e.g.,* The WE ACT thriving Communities Technical Assistance Center for EPA Region 2: New Jersey and New York, https://weacttctac.org/ (last accessed Mar. 17, 2026).

about helping CBOs seek state, local, or even philanthropic funding if they were not yet ready for federal grants, not to mention engaging with other federal agencies.

Beyond this sort of intentional technical assistance, some CBOs may need startup capital just to take part in partnerships. A former federal official and a CBO leader each mentioned that government grants were challenging when they required CBOs to hire and pay staff up front while waiting for reimbursement. Some partnerships explored whether government agencies could provide groups with advance funding.

One particularly striking observation from our interviews was that CBOs that receive even modest grants can improve their capacity for seeking funding in the future. One former federal official described CBOs that were initially "afraid to apply for $25,000" in federal funding — intimidated by paperwork, audits, and unfamiliarity with the federal bureaucracy. Yet once they cleared the hurdle of a small initial grant and built trust with agency staff, those same organizations went on to compete successfully for grants of $20 million or more over a period of fifteen to twenty years. It turns out that the capacity-building impact of early, small-dollar partnerships extends far beyond the initial grant itself; instead, it starts a relationship, provides real-world compliance experience, and sets organizations on a multi-year trajectory from community group to credible institutional partner.

Recommendations:

- **Government agencies should provide technical assistance and other non-monetary support to applicants to increase the number of representatives from underserved communities in these programs.**

- **Agencies should also consider advancing resources to CBOs rather than waiting to reimburse them only after their work is completed.**

- **Program designers should consider structuring grant programs with explicit "on-ramps" for new entrants, including small seed grants, so that a wider range of CBOs can eventually qualify for larger funding opportunities.**

Building Strong Relationships Matters

Relationships are, of course, key to successful partnership programs, and government agencies, CBOs, and intermediaries can all play key roles in establishing productive working relationships.

It is important to note that our interviews surfaced a recurring form of internal skepticism from government agency staff that program designers should anticipate: the question of why the government should fund outside community organizations when it could simply hire more agency staff directly. One former city labor official reported that colleagues sometimes framed the choice as an either/or between investing in CBOs versus investing in in-house capacity. In practice, the two are complementary rather

than competitive: CBOs reach communities and build relationships that government staff cannot easily replicate, while a well-staffed agency provides the legal authority and institutional continuity that CBOs lack.

In order to address this concern, each partner should endeavor to identify staff who are open to (or even experienced in) building partnerships, and then work to engage them and seek their buy-in on programmatic goals from the beginning. As one former longtime federal official described, they were tasked with launching a new partnerships program simply because they had previously built significant relationships, even though those historical relationships involved *different* outside stakeholders. As another former federal official described, they would engage new colleagues by rigorously framing the partnerships around facts, programs, and collaborative opportunities, so that partnerships are not dismissed out of hand as wasted time or resources. Numerous CBO leaders cited the importance of having government leadership that understood the value and promise of partnerships, for example, to reach people in underserved communities during a time of significant challenges (then, the COVID-19 pandemic).

Likewise, successful relationships require honest communication. One intermediary explained that a key benefit of a formal partnership is giving agencies the opportunity to explain their decisions more openly and honestly – for example, why they are not pursuing a particular investigation referral. Another former federal official said that they knew the partnership was going well when a CBO asked them to help navigate a program at another federal agency, suggesting that they had a relationship of trust.

Of course, relationships can evolve over time. Such evolution could be rooted in shifting priorities or programmatic changes, but it can also stem from changes in staffing, especially where there are single points of contact between partners. An experienced intermediary noted that government staffing needs to be consistent – as does CBO staffing – to build strong relationships. Several interviewees noted that these staff transitions – whether from the government, CBO, or intermediary side – present substantial threats to any partnership.

Finally, government agencies need to be able to articulate what support they can offer communities as well. One former federal official said it took them longer than they would have liked to develop a streamlined list of supports the federal agency could offer potential grantees. The agency and potential grantees would have benefited from presenting a list at the beginning.

Recommendations:

- **All partners should strategically staff these efforts with teams that are open to partnerships and seek their buy-in for the program.**

- **Agency leaders should be prepared to make the case to agency staff for the government's interest in maintaining partnerships, demonstrating the value proposition, and providing training and learning opportunities to develop new skills and practices.**

- **Government agencies should communicate honestly with CBOs and intermediaries, and each partner should share as much information as possible under the terms of the partnership and other applicable laws, to build trust.**

- **Government agencies need to assign strong, consistent staff to build strong relationships as well, and any staffing changes should be handled intentionally, with notice periods, staff redundancies, and multiple points of contact, to the extent possible.**

- **Government agencies should intentionally develop lists of supports for CBO partners to help them navigate these programs.**

Coordination is Vital to Strong Partnerships

Government agencies should think carefully and intentionally about how to build strong coordination between partners. Agencies can use a variety of tools to foster this sort of coordination.

Many agencies start with a launch event. For some partnerships, this is a small kickoff meeting between senior agency leaders and CBO leaders. Or it can be more involved, like a multi-day session hosted by intermediaries NELP and Workshop for DSEP. For that program, their second session involved an in-person meeting in Atlanta with government officials, CBOs, and experts in the field; it was a critical opportunity for local community leaders to meet directly with Agency leaders, for them to learn from each other, explore case studies, and participate in strategic problem-solving. Together, that group discussed frameworks, aligned on goals and expectations, and deepened relationships. The US Department of Labor found that meetings were especially helpful in building buy-in from staff on both sides of the partnership.

Many interviewees discussed training as another key element of early partnerships. Of course, that could involve training by government agencies, for example, on the agency's operations and laws. But the power of partnerships is that training can go in both directions. Under one privately-funded program, the CBO partners have trained state labor standards investigators on how industries like car washes and restaurants in certain ethnic communities operate on the ground. Other CBOs described – formally or informally – using their expertise to inform government agencies on how to better serve their communities.

Government agencies and CBOs described other mechanisms for ongoing coordination, for example, quarterly (or otherwise regular) meetings to check in on progress and provide feedback. In some cases, these meetings could focus on the CBO's activities and progress toward its grant goals. They could be a place to review written reports required under the grant terms. This can, of course, be instructive for the agency as well.

In other partnerships, regular check-ins involved assessing how the agency was supporting the CBOs, for example, full reviews of the status of cases referred by the CBO to the agency. These same meetings could also include representatives from other government agencies at the federal, state, and local levels.

Recommendations:

- **Consider using an intentional launch event and some early training to help jumpstart coordination.**

- **Government agencies should create opportunities for CBOs and intermediaries to coordinate with and cultivate relationships with government agencies.**

- **Partnerships should integrate CBOs as much as possible into the government's existing processes – not to privatize services, but to ensure that partnerships are providing real and measurable benefits to the city, for example, through additional referrals.[47]**

Concrete but Streamlined Reporting Can Make the Case

Government agencies and CBOs described a variety of metrics that they collected to measure and amplify the success of partnerships, which could often help make the case for continued or even additional funding. Key examples include the number of contacts made,[48] additional geographic areas covered, or even the percentage of nontraditional (new) participants identified for a federal program.[49] While metrics like individual worker contacts may not capture the most impactful aspect of a particular partnership, they are concrete and straightforward to track and measure, even for the vast majority of CBOs that lack dedicated evaluation staff. Indeed, this area is fortunate to have drawn strong academic interest, and strategically targeted data collections could allow for rigorous analysis that could help design and justify additional programs. Partnerships should build in adequate funding to support this sort of rigorous outside evaluation, which can provide significantly more support for partnerships.

Along those lines, we could also envision creating metrics that place the onus on government agencies rather than CBOs to collect particular data. For example, an agency could measure its ability to build trust with communities by tracking the percentage of community members who are willing to engage directly with the agency or who may be willing to conduct interviews with the agency. Successful partnerships should be able to help drive that percentage up. Likewise, agencies could assess their own

[47] To be sure, this design element sits in tension with the prior recommendation to provide durable, in-kind support that does not have strings attached. But the two goals can be balanced.

[48] CWOP in particular measured more than 5 million touchpoints, 830,000 interactive, two-way conversations, 14 state-led trainings for CBOs, and 99 intermediary-led trainings for CBOs over the course of one year alone. *See* Cal. Dep't of Indus. Relations, *California Workplace Outreach Project Campaign Report: Program Year 2023–2024* (2024), https://www.dir.ca.gov/outreach/cwop/docs/CWOP-Campaign-Report-2023-2024.pdf, at p.5.

[49] To be clear, quantified metrics are not the only data partnerships that CBOs can provide. One intermediary noted that a government agency relied upon key CBOs to provide more qualitative information, not to mention relationships, to help an agency open a new office in an underserved area.

understanding of key industries or impacted communities, and could track the measurement of that understanding before and after the partnerships.

Concrete metrics not only help agencies and CBOs measure success but also help insulate programs from unfair political attacks. Numerous former CBO leaders noted that the program took pains to have clear, quantified goals against which to design outreach efforts and measure progress. A former federal government official said they needed metrics because "we always had to justify ourselves" when agency leaders asked about the partnerships program. Another former federal official said they "documented everything," including "why we decided, who did we engage," and they did all of this as part of a larger process with multiple stakeholders. Several CBO leaders agreed that their effective outcomes were key to defending these programs from reconsideration by lawmakers or in times of political challenges. Indeed, there is an argument that agencies should proactively announce and define these partnerships and their desired impact to ensure that they cannot be attacked as vectors for fraud or corruption, especially those where CBOs are involved in program administration.[50] When asked whether they were concerned about such attacks, another state government leader proactively reeled off both formal and informal metrics, calling the partnership "one of the [agency's] most successful programs," citing everything from the number of workers it touched to a recent Friday night meeting that drew 150 people in a mid-sized city.

But overly detailed reporting can make it harder for small CBOs to administer the programs. CBOs were generally supportive and understanding of the need for metrics to improve performance outcomes and to defend against potential allegations of fraud, but they grew frustrated with overly involved reporting requirements. One city-level program required all purchases to be supported by an invoice, receipt, credit card statement, and bank statement, which together necessitated substantial cross-checking. Another required for a time "wet-signed" (non-digital) printed timesheets that divided each employee's hours between public grant-funded and otherwise funded. One CBO leader reported that a nontrivial portion of the grant has to support back-office staff who help manage this grant (and others). Most CBOs cautioned that reporting requirements need to be streamlined to keep the partnerships worthwhile.

In terms of the program, an experienced intermediary cautioned that the metrics should recognize that there is a difference between what can be measured and what is being accomplished. Another former federal agency leader noted that metrics are important, but they are no replacement for regular coordination between partners to ensure that CBOs have the support and oversight that they need.

Recommendations:

- ➢ **Agencies should engage with CBOs to establish concrete metrics that are easy to capture and explain to the public, balancing the burden on the agency versus the need for data, while also**

[50] *See, e.g.*, *See Cal. Dep't of Indus. Relations, id.*; *cf*. Jon Allsop, *Why Trump's Shamelessness Hasn't Ended His Presidency*, Colum. Journalism Rev. (Oct. 4, 2019), https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/trump_ukraine_china_shameless.php.

recognizing that qualitative data surfaced through strong coordination can be equally important, particularly early in a relationship.

- **Agencies should engage with CBOs and academic experts to evaluate program success, including by suggesting additional key data to collect separately from program performance data.**

- **Agencies should streamline reporting requirements to the extent possible, allowing electronic reporting and relying on structured coordination rather than requiring the submission of duplicate materials up front.**

- **Agencies should consider deploying intermediaries to help CBOs navigate reporting requirements.**

- **Agencies (and intermediaries) should train CBOs on compliance with public grant or contract requirements, and make staff available to answer questions.**

Potential Downsides Should Be Acknowledged

It is important to recognize that, as with any program or strategy, partnerships between government agencies and CBOs can have significant downsides. For example, partnership programs can be captured by institutions (even nonprofits) that may be skilled at acquiring government funding without actually serving the interests of communities – an all-too-common concern for any government program.[51] Relatedly, these partnerships should not be used as a step toward privatizing agency duties, even to well-meaning CBOs. For one thing, it would be counterproductive for the partnerships. It would not make sense to divert resources toward know-your-rights training or enforcement support if the agency has insufficient staff to handle the incoming complaints. As explained above, agencies also need to invest in their staff with a deep understanding of the community and strong outreach skills in order to make partnerships effective. Beyond that, as one scholar and expert argued succinctly, agency officials have real expertise, and we should invest in the public sector and public sector employees.

Likewise, another CBO leader made it clear that they prioritized establishing a dedicated city-level enforcement agency before advocating for partnership funding because partnerships are no substitute for fully funded agencies. Agencies should be strategic and deliberate about their use of partnerships to complement and even shape the agency's mission, not to replace it.

Finally, partnerships also have potential opportunity costs for CBOs, including the time required to manage them and the transfer of credibility to government agencies. CBO leaders should be very careful about entering partnerships that lack aligned goals or that may not deliver for their communities, even if

[51] *See* In the Pub. Interest*, Out of Control: The Coast-to-Coast Failures of Outsourcing Public Services to For-Profit Corporations* (Dec. 2013), https://inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/1213-Out_of_Control-FINAL.pdf.

they promise short-term resources. Entering into a partnership that will erode trust with communities may be worse than not entering one at all.

Recommendations:

- **Agencies must have strong screening criteria to determine whom to choose as partners, aligned with clear goals. This means ensuring alignment among staff who are responsible not just for creating partnership programs, but also for developing grant or contract scoring criteria and evaluation. Absent strong alignment, the staff writing requests for proposals might dilute or abandon key principles behind the partnership.**

- **Agencies should not use CBO partnerships to replace existing staff or perform inherently governmental duties, but need to invest in their own capacity as well.**

Enhancing CBOs' Civic Engagement Capacities to Improve Partnerships

We know how government agencies can design their partnership programs to be more effective. But across our interviews, we also identified some key capacities that CBOs rely upon to maximize their effectiveness as partners for government agencies, in general, by enhancing the civic engagement of the communities they serve. In this section, we explain those capacities, and then we provide a set of recommendations for how governments can structure partnerships to enhance these capacities and ultimately make the most of these partnerships.

The Types of Civic Engagement Capacities That Make CBOs More Effective Partners

Of course, on a very basic level, CBOs need to exist and have stable enough funding to be active participants in the partnership. But in our interviews and engagement for this project, we identified core capacities that would make CBOs better partners to government agencies, mostly related to enhancing civic engagement in their communities.

As described above, government agencies partner with CBOs for a reason. Whether they are seeking to engage with underserved communities, help people claim their legal rights, target potential participants in government programs, or simply build more trust through responsiveness, government agencies need CBO partners that can deliver on these goals.

First, effective CBO partners need the capacity to reach and engage their communities. For some groups, this engagement could be measured by membership – how many people join and pay dues. Other CBOs may engage communities through meetings and events or even by connecting one-on-one, whether door-to-door, house-by-house, or in neighborhood businesses and community centers. For other groups, this could be measured by how many community members they provide services, whether regularly or at key moments of crisis. While engagement metrics are not the only measure of a CBO's effectiveness – nor are they necessarily the most important measure – they can serve as a rough indicator of a CBO's reach, and any CBO needs some amount of engagement to be an effective partner.

But CBOs can also be more effective by helping to provide their communities with a greater voice in the policies that affect them. Completely aside from any government partnerships, many CBOs are focused on helping their communities develop their own collective capacity to have a voice in government, which is especially important for communities that can be left out of decision-making that impacts them. CBOs can help their communities identify opportunities to take part in bureaucratic or opaque public input processes, translate information, develop their own issue agendas, or forge coalitions with other groups to amplify their influence and, equally importantly, to counterbalance other interests that may have more resources or capacity to be involved in government.[52] In other words, CBOs can help communities gain a voice in government and ensure that government is responsive to their concerns.

To be clear, CBOs may express these capacities differently, and there is no one "right" method. Some CBOs may participate in mass actions, while others help prepare community members to speak at public hearings where a government entity is seeking input. CBOs providing legal services may testify at legislative hearings, or they may simply submit reports demonstrating a greater community need for their services.

Indeed, building these capacities can have a multiplier effect. For many CBOs, enhancing civic engagement can help them contact more community members, build credibility in their communities, and attract sufficient resources to be durable and sustainable organizations – and in turn, become stronger partners to government agencies.

We found widespread recognition of these principles in our interviews with current or former government officials. Most government officials recognized that having strong, thriving CBOs was key to successful partnerships, and generally, that the lack of such partnerships made their ability to meet their missions harder. This is true for know-your-rights partnerships, where CBOs can disseminate more information if they reach more people. For enforcement partnerships, CBOs that have enhanced civic engagement can more credibly reach complainants, support their willingness to come forward, and assure witnesses that they will be protected in any enforcement action. And CBOs that have these capabilities can more effectively administer programs as well. They need to navigate and potentially

[52] *See generally* Daniel J. Galvin, *Building Power, Forging Capacity*, in *Alt-Labor and the New Politics of Workers' Rights* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2024); K. Sabeel Rahman, *Policymaking as Power-Building*, 27 S. Cal. Interdisc. L.J. 323 (2018), available at https://www.thecre.com/pdf/20171005_power.pdf (internal citations omitted).

partner with a variety of government actors and private organizations, which requires them to have the stature and track record to secure both authority and attention when needed.

Beyond that, we recognize that many of the partnerships we explored would not have existed but for the civic engagement of the CBOs involved. Lawmakers and agency leaders alike have tight budgets, and they are unlikely to create programs that aren't in demand from stakeholders. Nearly every CBO leader we interviewed could trace the partnership's launch – or key design elements – to some kind of community effort. Sometimes the CBO squarely aimed at starting a partnership program; other times, a partnership was an organic outgrowth of the prior engagement between a government agency and the CBO that was creating opportunities for communities to participate in government.[53]

How Partnerships Can Enhance These Capacities for the Good of Government Agencies

Given that government agencies draw substantial benefit from partnerships with CBOs that enhance civic engagement in their communities, we propose that governments should design partnerships so that they can help CBOs enhance these capacities – or at least, so that they do not hinder CBOs from doing the same. While this is not currently the norm, in our interviews, several government officials (past and present) recognized the importance of CBOs in advancing their agency goals and expressed interest in building programs that helped to advance these participatory capacities.

But government agencies that seek to build these capacities should design their programs to advance these goals from the ground up. Of course, CBOs need stable funding, access to decision makers, and real input in the policy process. But beyond that, we have identified some other concrete recommendations to help CBOs enhance civic engagement capacities.

Allow CBOs Flexibility in Implementing Partnerships

Government agencies should understand that CBOs all have their own goals and priorities, and few are built primarily for these partnerships. As a result, partnerships should be structured flexibly enough that CBOs can integrate them into existing programs and projects to the extent possible. Government agencies should clearly authorize integrated service delivery that does not violate other enumerated laws (for example, involving campaign coordination).[54]

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[53] One community coalition we interviewed described this dynamic vividly. Their partnership grew out of years of engagement that gave them the standing to co-design the application, negotiate strong labor standards, including Community Workforce Agreements, and ultimately win a federal grant worth multiple millions of dollars.

[54] Another CBO received mixed signals from the federal government about the allowability of integrating government service delivery alongside their other activities. If a government agency has decided that integrated delivery is legally allowed and programmatically justifiable, it should document this clearly to ensure that service providers are able to rely on the guidance in response to any future inquiries.

Recommendations:

- **CBOs should have the explicit flexibility to experiment and pursue other core activities alongside their partnerships. Agencies should not require firewalls between grant-related activities and other activities, both of which adversely impact the programs and the communities they serve, and both of which are inappropriate for smaller CBOs as opposed to larger government contractors. Partnership programs should require recordkeeping that is flexible enough not to impede such coordination of services.**

- **Government agencies should reimburse partners for their overhead and support expenses that enable the activities provided under the grant, not just the staff time. CBOs need to be compensated for leadership and administrative support, benefits, training, office space, transportation, and other expenses required for a successful program. Consider providing durable, in-kind support for an organization's activities, like office space, or even funding that allows an organization to purchase (or put down a down payment on) office space or evergreen materials. For even smaller partners, this funding may need to be front-loaded rather than reimbursed.**

Boost the Profile of CBO Partners

Government agencies can also enhance their impact by strategically boosting the profile of community partners beyond the partnership itself. This attention can help CBOs build their civic engagement capabilities, lend credibility to government agencies, and, therefore, become more effective government partners.

In some of our interviews, government agency leaders articulated the connection between enhancing the profile of CBOs and enhanced government capacity. Some former federal officials described using a combination of blog posts, regional events, and even a large national event with White House engagement to draw attention to and amplify the work of CBO partners. As a former federal official explained, when a federal agency brings a community partner to a White House meeting, that partner may become a go-to resource for the White House Office of Public Engagement for the remainder of the administration. That partner's (current and potential) funders, local elected leaders, community members, and even campaign targets take more notice of their work all around. As a result, that partnership program built significantly greater awareness in subsequent years, drew more applicants, and better equipped participants to carry out the agency's goals.

This sort of engagement can have a spillover impact in reinforcing the program as well. As one CBO leader described, these partnerships gave CBOs a deeper understanding of how the government can and

should work and influenced how they talked about the agency's mission.[55] And in that particular case, the corresponding state agency leader volunteered in our interview that the partnership had brought more external and legislative support, not just for the program but for the agency overall. Agencies can benefit from relationships with CBOs that may be better known in certain communities than relatively opaque government agencies.

- **Government agencies should take steps to elevate the profile of CBO partners to enhance agency capacity.**

- **Agencies can use intermediary relationships with particularly mature CBOs both to enable other, smaller CBOs to take part, but also to boost the profile of those intermediaries.**

Create Institutional Liaisons for CBO Partners

Some of the most compelling examples from our interviews involved government agencies taking steps to more institutionally engage with CBO partners. This engagement could be accomplished through existing structures or by developing new ones aimed at engaging partners and other CBOs.

For example, some agencies began to convene CBO grantees not only for training but also for sharing victories and best practices. As one former federal government official described, they wanted "to coach the grantees" on what the agency does and how it can be helpful to communities, but they understood that this coaching could be accomplished in cohorts.

Sometimes these relationships helped lead to dedicated structures to help engage with CBOs and address core problems for their communities. Two different CBO leaders noted that their organizations were early advocates for building dedicated, city-level agencies to address issues of interest to their members.

- **Consider using existing governmental structures or developing new ones to engage partners and a diverse array of CBOs and others about their priorities and concerns.**

- **Consider drawing skilled leaders from CBOs, when appropriate, so that they can bring their lived experience and shed light on community concerns during their time in government. After they leave, future CBO leaders will also be informed partners for government agencies, given their firsthand knowledge of how the system works and how to represent their communities most effectively.**

Acknowledge that Durability Is a Challenge

Programs that can enhance civic engagement can also make these programs vulnerable to outside attacks or cuts in the event of agency leadership changes. For example, many of the major federal

[55] *Cf.* Hertel Fernandez, *supra* note 36.

programs that we explored – including the EPA programs authorized by the Inflation Reduction Act – were scaled back by the presidential transition in early 2025. While litigation continues over many of these federal cuts, most grantees in those programs lack funding, at least for now. Former high-level leaders from other federal agencies lamented that they did not have time in one term to establish these programs. And several CBO leaders suggested that fewer organizations might pursue federal funds after their experience with the early days after the 2025 transition, where the DOGE team was loudly and publicly cutting funds and launching politically motivated attacks on grantees. Organizations understandably fear additional politically motivated audits if they accept federal funds.[56]

Federal funds are not unique here; any state or local transition could be susceptible to the same cuts. One CBO leader noted that they always fear losing next year's grant, as it would lead to significant layoffs. To be sure, even programs that have been lost can provide some impact. For example, they can help to build durable relationships between CBOs and also between the CBO partners and civil servants. And one scholar and expert suggested CBO leaders should consider what more tangible investments they can make with public funds when they have them, ranging from purchasing office space to creating evergreen training materials.

This strategy has implications for philanthropy as well. Major government partnership programs are not a starting point for CBOs, but platforms for organizations that have already taken part in substantial planning and major investment. For example, CWOP was built upon work crafted by savvy advocates in California,[57] not to mention prior relationships between government agencies and CBOs through the California Strategic Enforcement Partnership (CSEP). CSEP, in turn, was funded by the James Irvine Foundation, which recognized that CBOs required external resources if they really sought to work with government agencies.[58] And the Inflation Reduction Act itself was shaped by years of advocacy by environmental justice groups and visionaries who have shaped the demand for equity in clean energy investments.[59] As one interviewee put it, advocates like Helen Chin spent years planning the program that became EPA's TCTAC.

Philanthropy should therefore focus significant energy on helping organizations build the capacities that make these partnerships possible as far in advance as possible, both to make the case for these programs and to equip organizations to take part when they are available. In this sense, government partnerships are not a replacement for philanthropic funding; instead, philanthropic funds can be leveraged to plan, design, and advocate for more strategic government partnerships. For example, the

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[56] *See* Cristin Dorgelo & Jacob Leibenluft, *DOGE Interference in Federal Grantmaking Adds Burden, Uncertainty, and Risk*, Ctr. on Budget & Pol'y Priorities (May 28, 2025), https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/doge-interference-in-federal-grantmaking-adds-burden-uncertainty-and-risk.

[57] James Irvine Found., *California Coalition for Worker Power: Weaving Together a Movement* (Aug. 6, 2024), https://www.irvine.org/insights/california-coalition-for-worker-power-weaving-together-a-movement/.

[58] James Irvine Found., *Advancing Worker Rights in California: Where We Began, What We Learned* (2023), https://www.irvine.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Fair-Work-initiative-Advancing-Worker-Rights-in-California.pdf.

[59] *See, e.g.*, Race Forward, "Communities First," https://www.raceforward.org/communities-first (last visited Mar. 17, 2026).

Ford Foundation and Public Welfare Foundation have both provided trainings for CBOs seeking to apply for government health and safety grants.

In addition, philanthropy has stepped in to salvage some programs after they faced government cuts. Of course, foundations have limited funds as well and simply cannot replicate the full scope and scale of the largest government programs. But they can play a role in helping prepare for times of government opportunity and transition out when funding is lost.

Recommendations:

- **Agency leaders should pursue partnership opportunities as early in their terms as possible, understanding that it takes time to develop grant vehicles, solicit proposals, and choose awardees, not to mention launch and institutionalize programs.**

- **Government agencies should treat CBOs as institutional partners, not vendors, backed by multi-year funding structures whenever possible.**

Recommendation for Philanthropy:

- **Philanthropy can play an important role in resourcing groups to prepare them for effective partnerships.**

- **Philanthropy should seek opportunities to help CBOs scale up and invest in early partnerships with government agencies to bridge the gap in funding and demonstrate return-on-investment, then smooth the transition to other sources like state-level funding, or even scale down again, during less flush times.**

Conclusion

In the end, in the face of mounting and overlapping challenges of capacity, the next federal administration should enter into partnerships with CBOs. Based on the recommendations outlined above, government agencies can improve CBO partnerships to deliver on a range of important goals, for example, engaging with underserved communities, helping people claim their legal rights, and reaching potential participants in government programs. They also show promise to help make government work better and educate communities about what government can accomplish, both of which are important components of rebuilding trust with communities.

But importantly, doing this effectively will require government agencies to help CBOs enhance civic engagement in their communities, and in turn, become better partners. By making a robust investment in CBOs that are trusted in their communities, government agencies are more likely to achieve their missions and deliver for the communities that they serve.