
EXPLORING THE BENEFITS OF EMERGENCY CASH GRANTS

FOR BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AND MEMBERSHIP



Canary 

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Purpose of the Project



The Workers Lab and Canary will run an experiment and investigate how emergency cash grants can help grow the ranks and build the power of worker organizations that give them out. Our hypothesis is that the act of giving someone cash in an emergency could then translate into that same person becoming an active, card-carrying member of the organization that supplied the cash, thus building the organization's membership and power.

This presentation shares findings from the first phase of this project, in which we gathered information and research from six worker advocacy organizations and three experts in the field:

- [One Fair Wage](#)
- [National Domestic Workers Alliance](#)
- [Adelante Alabama Worker Center](#)
- [Twin Cities Hospitality Fund](#)
- [Massachusetts Immigrant Collaborative](#)
- [Workers Defense Project](#)
- [UpTogether \(formerly Family Independence Initiative\)](#)
- [Stanford Basic Income Lab](#)
- [Center for Advanced Hindsight](#)

Emergency cash grants have been, and still are, critical, to meet the needs of workers



"Something quite magical happened. Very quickly got into the space that we are in this together."

"Felt like a privilege that they could be in a position to help people. Helping so many more people, such diversity, and the sense of community -- it's priceless. Took something that is so horrible and created something that is so beautiful."

"The way that the philanthropic community expressed their solidarity was unprecedented. Not asking for reports, or specifics of how funds would be distributed. Said, we trust your judgment. Ability to make this decentralized empowered the organizations to reach out to the people who needed it the most. And, to not just hand off a check, but to say 'what do you most need? Tell us about your situation.'

The community was so surprised to be seen."

"People don't want to ask for help. They don't want charity."

Take-away #1: Cash grants are strategically important to increasing membership and trust.



- **Cash grants create trust in the organization and their brand.**
- **Cash grants drive member recruitment.**
 - This was especially true in 2020, but is expected to continue post-COVID.
 - Organizations used social media, local partnerships, volunteers, and word-of-mouth to reach people in need.
- **Cash grants drive member engagement.**

“When people are helped in this dire moment, there is loyalty and willingness to help and be part of the organization.”

“Cash grants -- given the size of the industry we work in and the level of devastation -- were the most incredible recruiting opportunity available.”

“Something members want.”

Take-away #2: Cash grants are a direct service that can lead to engagement in advocacy.



- **Responding to what workers need today often requires direct service.**
 - Cash grants, legal assistance, social service navigation, tele-health, and financial coaching were all mentioned by interviewees.
 - “Showing up” for people demonstrates organization’s effectiveness and builds trust.
- **Conversations with workers about direct services generate insights into what the advocacy agenda should be.**

“Sometimes people need some basic help before they can engage in advocacy.”

People have started asking them a broader set of questions. Since they helped people with rent, they are asked: Do you do housing justice work?

If enough people have the same problem, then they add that to their agenda.

Take-away #3: Direct services and organizing require distinct investments.



- **Direct services intake conversations and organizing conversations sometimes have different tones, time frames and requirements. The design of the program matters!**
- **Providing services without shifting from an organized mindset to an agent/beneficiary mindset requires celebrating the strengths of recipients, and deeply engaging the community.**

Many interviewees were concerned about creating an unhelpful power dynamic between the organization and workers.

“The script for services intake and organizing activation is different.”

They have six customer service agents working full-time just answering simple questions around payments. To have room in those calls for organizer activation, the calls would be two-four times as long.

The goal is to “avoid a messed up power dynamic where their members are their beneficiaries.”

Take-away #4: Administration was extremely burdensome for local organizations.



- **Tracking and accounting for grant applications, decisions and payments required a major investment by the national organizations, and continues to be a pain point for local ones.**
- **Payments themselves are difficult for everyone, an especially for undocumented/unbanked individuals.**

“Getting funds out was difficult”

“An outside accountant would have helped with the the headaches created from the bank, restricted grant funds, mailing checks, and manual data entry.”

They had a CRM and other tools that they used for their organizing. But, those tools didn't work well for their emergency fund volunteers and fund selection committee.

Take-away #5: Most want to continue with grants, but are concerned about resources.



- **Philanthropy isn't expected to show up in the way it did in Spring 2020, and government funds are complicated to administer.**
- **Funds are needed for grants themselves, administration, plus related organizing.**
- **Most organizations are thinking about how to continue on a smaller, more strategically targeted scale.**

We are "still in the center of this storm," with food and housing insecurity, and we are "concerned about ongoing funds."

We'll "need to figure out how to staff it. Because we don't want to take staff away from our field work."

"Likely not in the same scale, but it will still be useful."

Take-away #6: Emergency cash needs its own advocacy infrastructure and agenda.



- **The pandemic brought a lot of credibility to cash grants as a strategy, but this momentum will be lost without ongoing investment.**
 - Minimum/Basic Income has a growing support base, but doesn't always include emergency cash within its scope of work.
- **Expanding the evidence base through both data and narrative is important.**
 - Academics and experts have only just begun to look at the community effects of cash grants, and no one is developing data about the effect on power-building strategies.
 - Being more specific about desired outcomes will make it easier to be creative and disciplined about using cash grants to achieve and measure those outcomes.

Appendix: Worker Organizations Interviewed

Organization	Type	Organization Focus
Adelante Alabama Worker Center	Local Worker Center	Low-wage and immigrant workers and their families in the Birmingham area.
Workers Defense Project	Local Worker Center	Low-wage and immigrant workers in the Texas construction industry.
Massachusetts Immigrant Collaborative	Regional Coalition	Coalition of 15 grassroots organizations created during COVID-19 to distribute services to immigrant communities in Massachusetts.
Twin Cities Hospitality	Regional Coalition	Umbrella organization of 175 Minneapolis area unions.
One Fair Wage	National Advocacy Organization	Service sector workers across the United States.
National Domestic Workers Alliance	National Advocacy Organization	Domestic workers across the United States.

Appendix: Fund Descriptions

Organization	Funds Distributed	Grant Size	How?	To whom?
Adelante Alabama Worker Center	\$215k + \$750k NDWA	\$500	In-person cash	Initially to workers ineligible for government funds but ultimately to any worker affected by COVID.
Workers Defense Project	\$4M	\$250-\$2,000	FII and mailed checks	Any worker ineligible for federal aid (not restricted to construction industry workers).
Mass. Immigrant Collaborative	\$4.4M	\$100	Checks, giftcards, bill payments, paypal	Massachusetts immigrants.
Twin Cities Hospitality	\$120k	\$200	Mailed checks	Any financially insecure worker in the events or hospitality industry.
One Fair Wage	\$22M	\$500	Mailed prepaid cards	Tipped and gig workers nationwide.
National Domestic Workers Alliance	\$30M	\$400	Mailed prepaid cards	Domestic workers facing financial instability due to COVID.

Appendix: Experts Interviewed

Organization	Type	Description
Stanford Basic Income Lab	Academic Center	Academic home for research into the politics, philosophy and economics of UBI.
UpTogether (formerly Family Independence Initiative)	Non-Profit	Using their online UpTogether platform, FII accelerates the exchange of financial and social capital in low-income communities across the US.
The Center for Advanced Hindsight	Research Group and Consultancy	Behavioral researchers who design and test solutions to increase the financial well-being for low-to moderate-income people living in US.



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The logo for 'Canary' features the word 'Canary' in a white sans-serif font, followed by a yellow icon consisting of three curved, overlapping shapes that resemble a bird's tail or a flame.

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The logo for 'OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS' consists of the words 'OPEN SOCIETY' on the top line and 'FOUNDATIONS' on the bottom line, both in a white, all-caps, sans-serif font.