

The Innovation Fund Ecosystem Report

SPRING 2020

A Call for Innovation in Worker Supports



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Introduction

Overview of The Innovation Fund

The Workers Lab gives new ideas about increasing worker power a chance to succeed and flourish. Our signature program, The Innovation Fund, serves as the primary mechanism through which we source innovators. Each cycle, we invite entrepreneurs, nonprofit organizations, and public and private sector leaders to submit ideas focused on a topic relating to increasing worker power.

For the spring 2020 cycle, we called for new ideas that create or reimagine the support workers need to thrive. We designed this cycle's focus on worker supports in order to:

- » Understand how the field is defining worker support and where there are opportunities to make the greatest impact
- » Reach 300 applicants from communities across the country and from a diverse set of leaders
- » Compare and contrast innovations focused on worker supports to those surfaced in previous cycles

Purpose of the Ecosystem Report

The purpose of this report is to share high-level observations from the spring 2020 cycle of The Innovation Fund. This includes surfacing topical and demographic trends among the applicant pool, comparing this cycle's trends to that of the fall 2019 cycle, and spotlighting proposals on special topics, such as rural workers and benefits access. This report concludes with a snapshot of The Innovation Fund Spring 2020 finalists, and a look towards the future.

Open Call Highlights

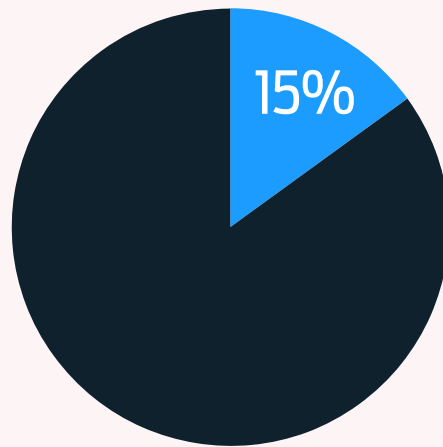
Overview of the Spring 2020 Application Process

Each cycle of The Innovation Fund begins with an open call for ideas focused on a particular set of questions. These questions give us a robust view of the idea, the problem it seeks to solve, and how the applicant plans to engage and impact workers.

Each application is read and scored three times, and the selected semi-finalists are invited to submit full proposals for the next round. This aggregate pool is where we derive observations about the ecosystem.

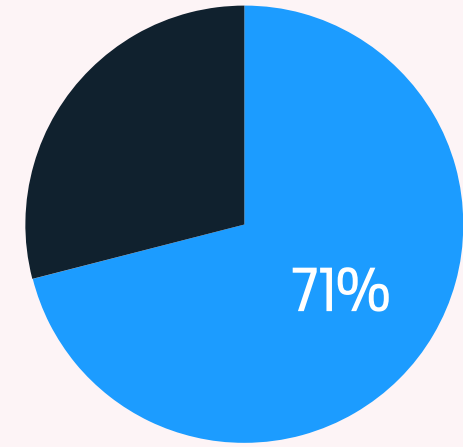
For the spring 2020 cycle, we invited submissions that reimagine wrap around services and just-in-time support for workers, that ultimately create the conditions for workers to have more agency and power. The application opened March 11, 2020 and closed April 22, 2020. On July 7, 2020, we announced the winners.

INNOVATION AT THE ONSET OF COVID-19



Indicated that their project started specifically as a response to COVID-19

Before the global pandemic, articulating a definition of worker support that was both broad and cogent was a delicate task. Once public discourse became focused on the increased risks and vulnerabilities for low wage essential workers, worker supports became a topic of great urgency. COVID-19 provided a timely and resonant backdrop for this cycle. In response to this, we added optional questions to assess whether the pandemic was a primary focus for applicants.

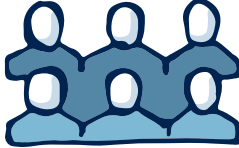




Indicated that the project had direct relevance to workers' needs in this time

Whether related to COVID-19 or in spite of it, the response to The Innovation Fund this cycle was outstanding. The highlights that follow demonstrate the critical value of hosting The Innovation Fund as a broad cycle, and the breadth of ideas and leaders this program attracts and serves.

This was our largest pool of applications ever.

- » 848 people created new user accounts on our grant application platform. Another 534 people started applications and 378 followed through with submission.
- » We wanted to increase our audience and invested in a robust paid media campaign to do so. We also created targeted content to attract new applicants. While we suspect some of the interest this cycle was driven by COVID-19, we know that leveraging paid advertising and focusing on creating new content for new audiences played a key role in spreading awareness.
- » Winners are often repeat applicants. While past applications are not evaluated, they do help us understand the evolution of the ideas, as well as the innovator’s needs over time.

	SPRING 2020	FALL 2019
Total Applications 	378	217
New Applicants 	303	181
Repeat Applicants 	75	36

In our most geographically diverse applicant pool to date, innovators were still majority women and people of color.

We received applications from 43 states, up from 28 states in the fall 2019 cycle. Whether due to our marketing and outreach campaign or other factors, we are reminded of the vast reach and untapped potential within this ecosystem. In addition to U.S. based applicants, we received submissions from eight countries: The United Kingdom, Mexico, Canada, Kenya, Sweden, Israel, Vietnam, and New Zealand.

As we have seen in previous cycles, The Workers Lab continues to source innovative ideas from a demographically representative group of leaders from under-served communities. It is crucial that we reach individuals who do not always see themselves in the broader ecosystem of actors focused on social innovation. We believe that the best ideas are informed by those with lived experience and proximity to the problems at hand. This trend reinforces our unique position as a hub for ideas that are led, designed, and executed by workers and communities disproportionately represented in low wage jobs.

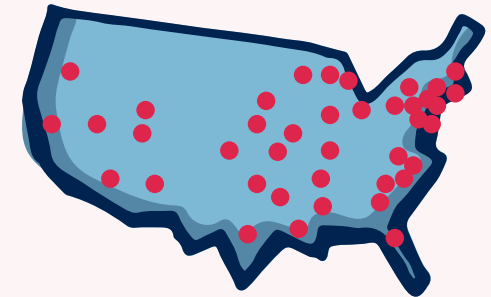
SPRING 2020

WOMEN

108
Women of Color
75
White Women



STATE BY STATE CHANGE IN APPLICATIONS FROM 2019 TO 2020



MEN

85
Men of Color
69
White Men



OTHER

41
Gender non-conforming, LGBTQ+, differently-abled individuals, etc.



+31	NY	+3	FL	+1	IA
+21	CA	+3	HI	+1	KS
+14	TX	+3	KY	+1	NE
+11	DC	+3	MN	+1	NH
+7	WA	+3	MO	+1	NM
+7	GA	+3	NJ	+1	OK
+7	MA	+3	TN	+1	RI
+6	PA	+3	WV	+1	UT
+5	LA	+2	IL	+1	WI
+5	MI	+2	NV	0	ME
+4	CO	+2	SC	0	MD
+4	CT	+2	VA	0	OR
+4	NC	+1	AK	0	SD
+4	OH	+1	AL	-1	MS
+3	AZ	+1	AR	-1	VT

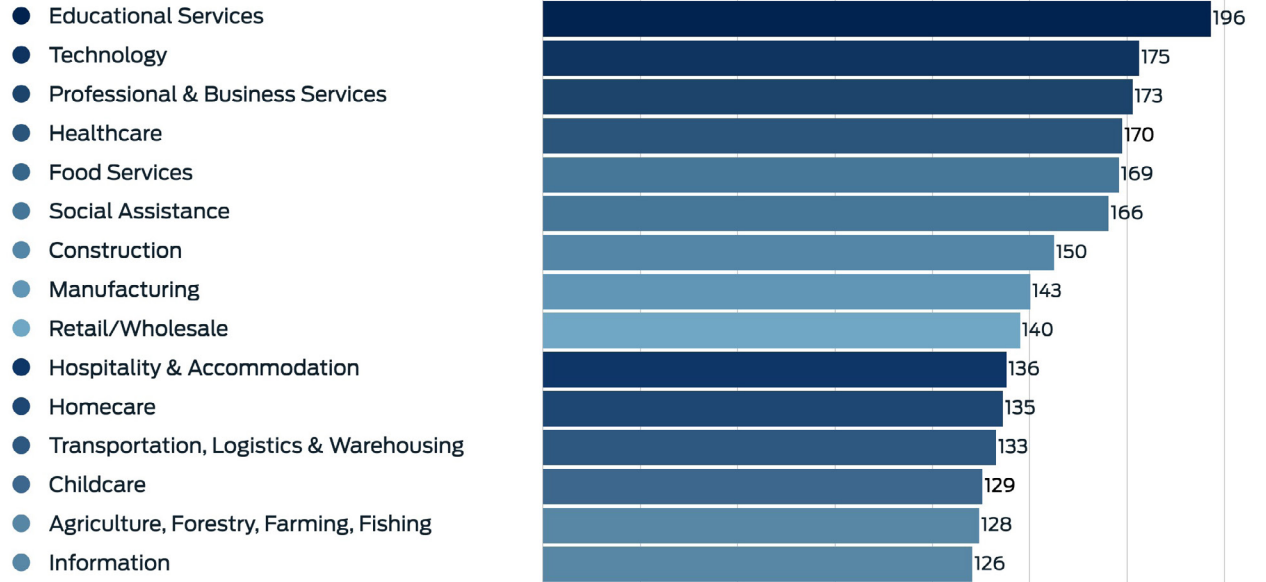
Innovative ideas for worker supports can be applied in many different contexts.

Innovators are addressing gaps in existing services and programs across a range of industries that both employ workers and serve them. When asked what sectors/industries are served by this project, a majority selected more than three which suggests that their projects take a cross-sector/industry approach.

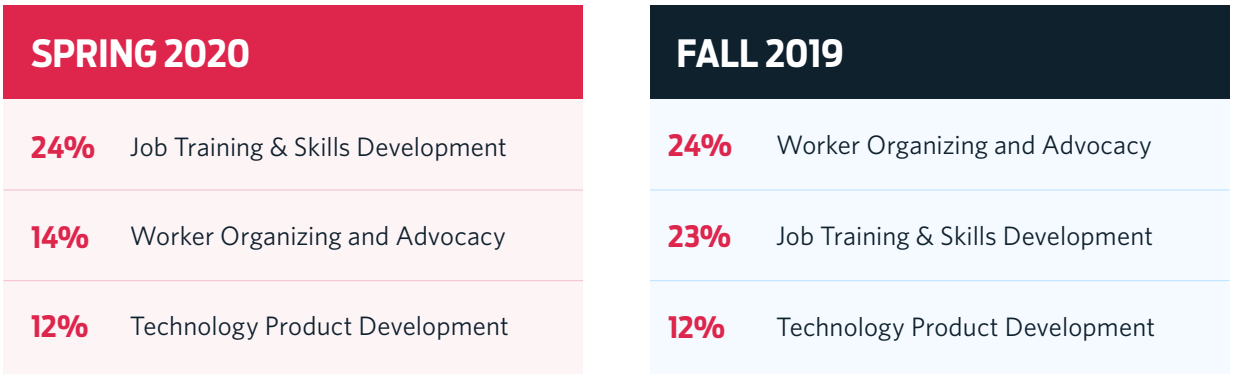
While we can see that workers are being served across sectors/industries, we also want to understand how they are being served. Each cycle, we ask applicants to select and rank the top strategies employed in their work. From a list of 11 strategies, we often see a broad range of selections with some notable clustering.

While the top three selections remained the same across the fall 2019 and spring 2020 cycles, we did see 10% fewer applicants focused on Worker Organizing and Advocacy. These top three selections cover about half of all applicants which begin to tell us about the general resource and capacity needs within this ecosystem.

SECTORS/INDUSTRIES SERVED BY THE INNOVATION FUND APPLICANTS



TOP STRATEGIES



Innovators were most focused on improving career mobility and least focused on ensuring workers have recourse at work.

We began piloting a tool, our worker power framework, to test its utility in organizing projects by the kind of power they aim to actualize. We developed this framework to acknowledge that power is multidimensional and often takes many forms. Applicants were asked to select the categories that best characterized the thrust of their efforts.

Of the 333 applicants who answered this optional question, 53 selected one category, with another 74 selecting two, and 206 selecting three or more. This trend suggests that the majority of projects are cross-cutting and aim to achieve multiple outcomes. Notably, less than a quarter of applicants selected the categories for Safety and Health at Work and Recourse at Work.

OUR WORKER POWER FRAMEWORK

	Safety & Health at Work	Harm Reduction + Protection	Workers are able and activated to reduce threats and ensure safety for themselves and others, and guarantee restitution and recovery when any harm has been caused and suffered.	90
	Recourse at Work	Formalized Rights + Just Outcomes	Workers are able and activated to secure their rights on the job, fully know their rights, freely exercise their rights, and ensure just outcomes when invoking or exercising their rights.	83
	Security in Life	Pay Benefits + Guarantees	Workers are able and activated to ensure their work and work life support the rest of their life; meeting their needs and basic ambitions while they work and when they retire, and preventing employers from renegeing on any related promises or agreements.	209
	Control of Work	Rules & Norms + Ownership Stakes	Workers are able and activated to influence decision-making related to the norms, policies and practices of the organizations in which they work (from workplace culture to social impact), and share directly in the profits they have contributed to creating.	179
	Mobility in Work & Life	Pathways + Opportunities	Workers are able and activated to ensure viable, accessible, timely pathways for growing and advancing in their work and career trajectory--whether rising-up in the ranks, moving laterally to a new role, or accessing opportunities to change sectors.	219
	Participation in Society	Political Power + Social Influence	Workers are able and activated to ensure their freedom and capacity to participate in the democratic process and the process of social change--whether through their union and work-related means, or outside of them.	197

A closer look at 'rural' and 'benefits', two key topics of interest, offered ideas for future learning and engagement.

9%

Rural

34 unique mentions of Rural

Many of our applicants are engaging workers in urban centers. To better understand what innovations are taking root outside of cities, we looked at all applicants that mentioned the term 'rural' to see what we could glean.

Our primary observation was that the strategies employed by these projects looked similar to those of non-rural ones. Even still, rural applicants lamented that there are few jobs that provide living wages and dignity; and, barriers to reliable transportation and broadband services make education and training opportunities inaccessible. While we see a prevalence of these issues in non-rural geographies, the disparities that rural innovators point to are exacerbated by geographical isolation and limited economic development activity. As such, solutions focus on addressing these disparities with tools and campaigns that improve access to core services, training opportunities and quality jobs.

This cycle we saw applications covering rural regions in a range of states including New York, North Carolina, Maryland, Texas, Utah, and Massachusetts to name a few. Below is a sampling of ideas focused on rural workers:

1. Know Your Rights education and outreach to farmworkers facing exploitative working conditions
2. Professional development and capacity building for underpaid and under resourced educators
3. Accessible tele-mental health services for essential workers
4. Reentry transition support for returning citizens
5. Local digital marketplace to match workers who have lost work due to COVID-19 with community members who have available gig-type work

There is more to learn about how to support and cultivate innovation in rural communities, especially where Black, Indigenous, and immigrant workers are concentrated. As an organization invested in lifting up voices from the margins, we are committed to bolstering outreach to rural leaders, both to source new ideas and better understand their unique needs.

17%

Benefits

63 unique mentions of Benefits

In every cycle, we see applications focused on benefits. This cycle, we looked more closely at these ideas as a group to better understand how they were alike or dissimilar in their approach.

First, we scanned the entire pool for applicants that mention the term 'benefits'. Of those 63 applicants, a subset of those not only discuss the challenges workers face as a result of lacking benefits, but offer an innovative solution to this exact problem.

While the solutions varied, collectively they all aimed to reduce barriers to benefits by making them more affordable, accessible, and relevant to workers' needs.

Innovations focused on benefits can be organized into the six approaches below. For each approach, there were multiple applications.

1. Policy advocacy aimed at redressing misclassification and ensuring all workers, including independent contractors, have access to benefits and basic worker protections
2. The promotion of worker ownership as a pathway for workers to set the terms of the wage and benefit offerings for employees
3. Companies or organizations that negotiate group purchasing rates for benefits plans and services for nontraditional workers (gig workers, worker owners, etc.)
4. Digital interfaces (marketplaces, websites, or apps) that help workers navigate disparate information on benefits eligibility and availability
5. In person interventions (financial coaching or resources navigators) that help workers navigate disparate information on benefits eligibility and availability
6. Emergency loans or cash assistance programs offered as a benefit to workers offered through an employer or not

All applicants focused on benefits decry that too many workers have little to no safety net; that they work hard and are still unable to make ends meet or have few options when unexpected life events occur. The fraying social contract between workers, employers, and government has left workers bearing all the risk while receiving none of the benefits and guarantees they are due. Innovators are proposing these approaches to disrupt this trend and increase workers' economic security and stability.

We are committed to reimagining the social safety net to meet the needs of 21st Century workers. To that end, we are excited about investing in ground up innovations that prove out new models for the provision of benefits. In this cycle, we advanced two such innovations, IndyHub and Leap Fund, that are poised to surface crucial learnings in this area.

Finalist Highlights

Finalist Engagement and Selection Process

The application review process has three phases:

- 1 A close review of each Open Call application to determine whether the solution is innovative and addresses a critical problem facing workers today;
- 2 An evaluation of 20+ semi-finalists based on project financials, team capacity, and their plan to assess challenges and share learnings. Additionally, semi-finalists submitted three-minute video pitches;
- 3 The last phase of The Innovation Fund process is a Finalist Showcase, where the nine finalists pitched their project ideas in front of a live audience of partners. After this, they also participated in a final question and answer session with The Workers Lab Board of Directors. Three winners were selected shortly thereafter.

Throughout the application process, we share our values as a lab and our vision for a society in which workers are powerful drivers of economic, social, and political transformation. Applicants are encouraged to put the worker at the center of their projects and articulate a plan for engaging workers in all stages of development and implementation.

Irrespective of whether an applicant is selected to receive funds, we provide direct support to innovators at every phase. By fielding inquiries from innovators via email, webinars, and office hours, we are able to provide much needed information, feedback, and affirmation. In preparation for the Finalist Showcase, we offered coaching and communications support to ensure finalists' pitches are sharp in their approach and compelling for a live audience.

Our finalists embody the creativity and commitment to workers that we strive to surface through our work. More details on our nine terrific finalists is provided on the succeeding pages.

FINALIST HIGHLIGHT

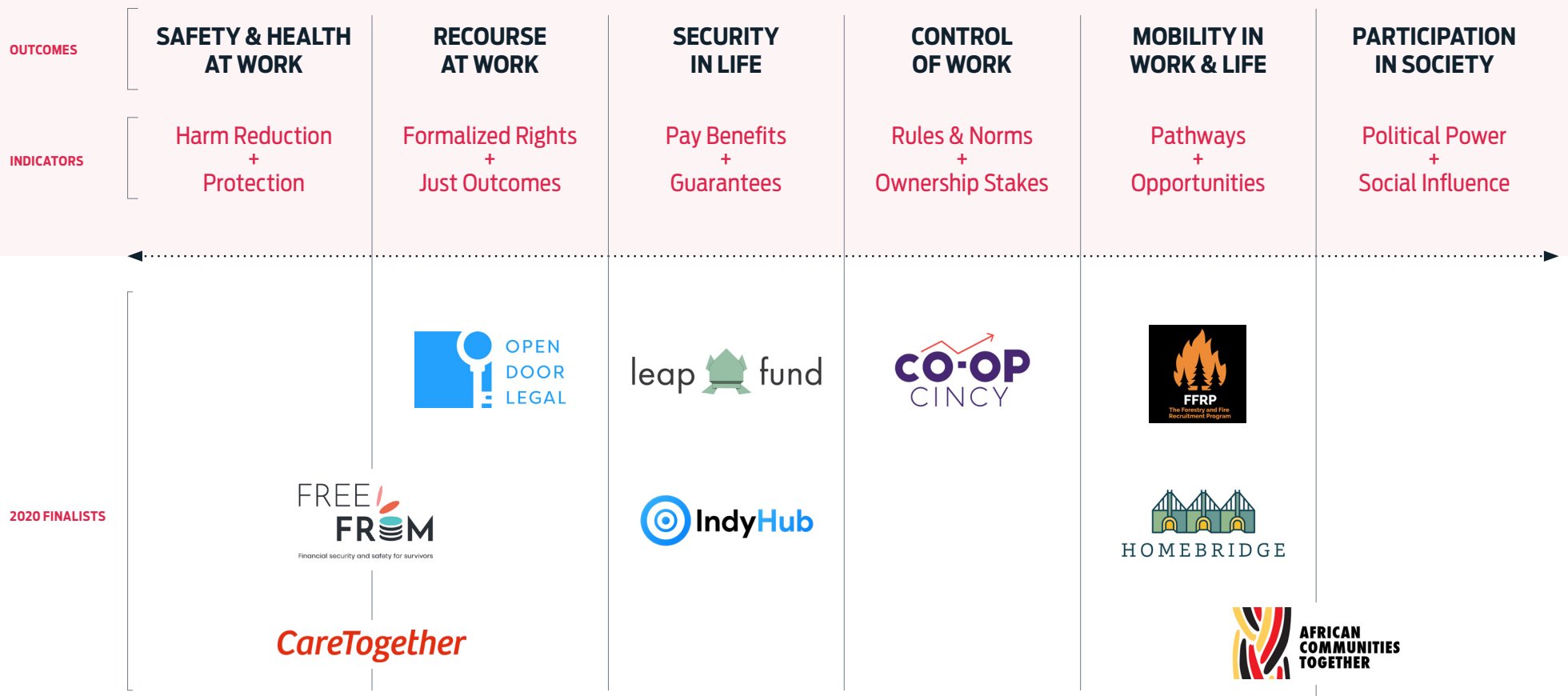
As in the broader applicant pool, our finalist cohort is diverse in the workers served and the strategies employed.

SPRING 2020 FINALISTS

Finalist	Organization Type	Worker Focus	Project Description	Stage of Development	Strategy
IndyHub	For-profit	Contingent Workers	Platform that offers portable benefit options at no cost to user companies, while also increasing flexibility for workers	Implementation	Technology Product Development
FreeFrom	Non-profit	Survivors of Domestic Violence	Workplace supports and policies tailored to survivor needs for flexibility, privacy, and confidentiality	Pilot	Strategic Partnership with Employers, Consumer Engagement
Leap Fund	Fiscally Sponsored Project	Workers Receiving Public Benefits	Benefits cliff calculator and financial product for deferring pay raises until worker 'clears' the cliff	Pilot	Research, Tool or Framework Development
African Communities Together (ACT)	Co-op	People who speak Languages of Limited Diffusion (LLDs)	LLD interpretation services cooperative for workers and immigrants	Pilot	Job Training & Skills Development
Open Door Legal	Non-profit	Workers with Wage Theft Claims	Paralegal support for wage theft filings in small claims court	Scale	Legal Protections
CareTogether (National Domestic Workers Alliance)	Non-profit	Caregivers	Text-based peer support to alleviate the isolation and pressure of home-based care work	Implementation	Worker Support in Real-time (Professional and Emotional)
Co-op Cincy (CareShare)	Co-op	Child Care Workers and Working Parents	Worker-owned home-based childcare business poised for national expansion	Scale	Worker Ownership
Homebridge Inc.	Non-profit	Home-based Caregivers	On the job training and job placement support for home health aides to become Certified Nursing Assistants	Pilot	Job Training & Skills Development
The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP)	Non-profit	Former Fire Camp Workers	Workforce development program for returning citizens to build on their fire camp experience once they reenter the workforce	Implementation	Job Training & Skills Development, Job Placement

SPRING 2020 FINALISTS

When plotted along our worker power framework, the nine finalists touch every category, with some projects straddling more than one. Visualizing our finalist cohort in this way sheds light on how we are allocating our resources and where we might strategically invest in the future. It also proves particularly helpful in advancing our organizational learning about how we relate individual innovations to the ultimate goal of increasing worker power. From an ecosystem perspective, this tool helps us understand where there is rich experimentation and where innovation may be opportune. Using this initial data as a point of departure, we will continue to refine the framework to map the worker power innovation ecosystem in aggregate terms, as well as illuminate trends in our investment decisions.



Finalist innovations pose key learning questions about the provision of worker supports.

How can we activate employers to address workers' needs?

When we think about worker support and the ecosystem of actors who can be mobilized to provide it, how do we bring employers into the conversation as proactive partners? These three projects offer different opportunities for employers to play a role in supporting workers when they need it most. IndyHub and Leap Fund offer benefits products that employers can easily make accessible. FreeFrom is advancing the conversation on workplace policies and practices that reduce barriers to pursuing refuge from domestic violence.

How can we reach workers where they are and when they need it most?

African Communities Together (ACT) and Open Door Legal are tackling public systems head on. ACT by filling critical language service gaps and Open Door Legal through helping workers collect unpaid wages from employers. CareTogether and Co-op Cincy are addressing the challenges of home-based care work and offering supports to workers who are often underpaid, undervalued, and isolated. What happens when we give workers the tools they need to more confidently navigate the public systems they rely on for benefits and services? Can more information and support improve working conditions and pay for home-based caregivers? These four finalists stand to shed light on the impact of just-in-time support that is culturally relevant, accessible, and affordable.

What training and job placement supports are needed for workers facing critical barriers to opportunity?

Homebridge helps us understand what it takes for an employer to create advancement pathways for in-home caregivers. The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP) provides insight into the dearth of career pathways available to returning citizens despite performing skilled labor while incarcerated. We receive many applications focused on training and wrap around supports; these two finalists really stand apart for the workers they focus on and their innovative partnerships with higher education and the public sector. They can teach us about the role that credentialing (Homebridge) and contracting (FFRP) can play in forging new pathways for workers locked out of healthcare and natural resource management careers.



Looking to the Future

Winners

The three innovators selected this cycle were The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program, FreeFrom, and Leap Fund. Winners received \$150,000 and will have access to ongoing technical assistance, networking opportunities, and cohort programming to help them strengthen their ideas and share their learning. Read more about our spring 2020 winners of The Innovation Fund [here](#).



Future Goals

We will host two more cycles of The Innovation Fund in 2020. Each cycle presents an opportunity to map the ecosystem, learn what innovators need, and most importantly, take stock of the strategies, products, and services that are helping workers gain crucial ground.

We will be experimenting with different approaches to sharing what we learn from each cycle of The Innovation Fund. This ecosystem report is one tool for sharing our learnings and we will continue to build on these efforts with other new and exciting tools.

We invite you to follow our journey [@theworkerslab](#) on social media. If you have any questions about this report or want to partner with us, please email our team at innovationfund@theworkerslab.com.

