

Request for Information Findings

NEW JERSEY HEALTH INITIATIVES

Summer 2024

Drive Evaluation
studio

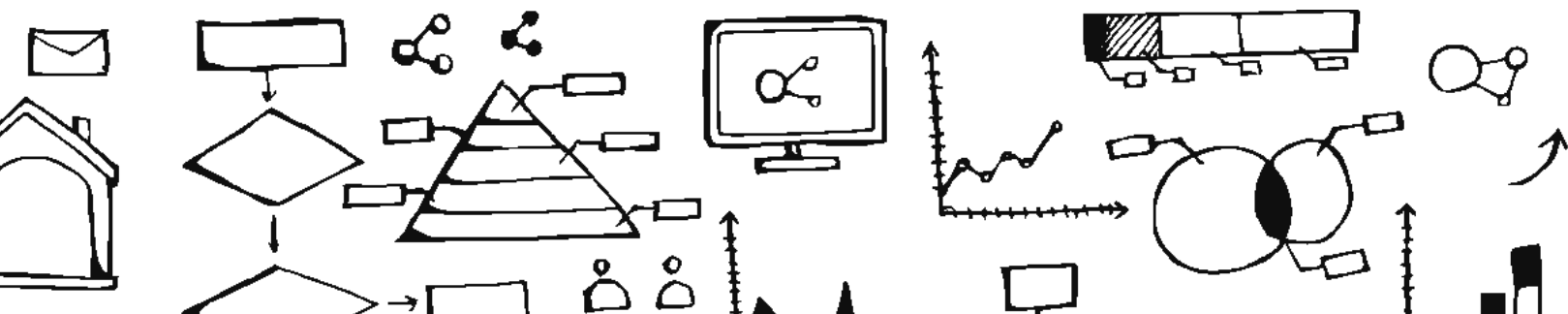


Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY	3
ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS	4
ABOUT THEIR WORK	8
WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED	10
WHAT THEY NEED	12
CONSIDERATIONS FOR NJHI	16
CONCLUSION	18

Introduction

Supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Community Foundation of New Jersey, and the Community Foundation of South Jersey, New Jersey Health Initiatives (NJHI) works to create a healthier, more equitable New Jersey by investing in resident-led community groups and networks rooted in racial equity and centered on systems change.

NJHI has undergone a strategic refresh focused on understanding the ecosystem of power-building organizations and reshaping its work to be led by and with the community. In spring 2024, NJHI released a three-phase Request for Information (RFI) to learn directly from community groups about what they need to guide NJHI's resource allocation and strategy development.

Methodology

NJHI designed the RFI and worked with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's New Jersey Department, Community Foundation of New Jersey, Community Foundation of South Jersey, and Drive Evaluation Studio to refine it. Drive Evaluation Studio hosted the RFI on its online survey platform in both English and Spanish and worked closely with NJHI to manage the administration in spring 2024.

The Request for Information began with a broad invitation to community groups, nonprofits, and organizations throughout the state to complete six eligibility questions. The introductory RFI email was shared with statewide partners with a request to distribute to their membership and community groups to which they were connected. One hundred thirty-nine groups completed the eligibility questions, representing varying-sized nonprofits, community groups, and collaborations throughout the state; of those, 106 were eligible for the second phase based on their alignment with NJHI's priority areas: led by the community, focused on systems, and centered on racial equity.

The second phase of the RFI was a ten-question organizational profile. The NJHI team reviewed each completed profile to determine how and to what extent the group's work aligned with NJHI's priorities. Of the 83 groups that submitted profiles, 37 were invited to the final phase.

The third and final phase of the RFI was a series of more complex questions about the groups'

work. Groups that submitted responses to all three phases received a \$1,000 grant to support their efforts. Thirty-three groups submitted the full RFI. A final review of the submitted RFIs determined that 26 aligned with NJHI's priorities. Those 26 comprised the final data set for this findings brief.

The Drive Evaluation Studio team qualitatively coded each RFI submission and determined key themes across respondents. Those themes are presented here, organized by demographics and descriptions of the groups, how their work is focused, what they have learned, and what they need to continue moving their work forward. The report ends with considerations for NJHI based on the RFI analysis.

This RFI prioritized identifying groups whose efforts are determined and led by the community itself rather than the more common approach of being community-informed. In a parallel approach, the RFI process was intentionally designed to be driven by, and responsive to, the community-led groups it was intended to attract. To that end, phases two and three of the RFI (from which the data for this report were pulled) were almost exclusively qualitative in nature. Open-ended narrative items offer several distinct advantages in gathering rich, detailed data. They allow respondents the freedom to express their thoughts in their own words, providing deep insights into their perspectives, emotions, and experiences. This flexibility enables evaluators to uncover unexpected themes and nuances that might be missed with closed-ended questions. Open-ended items are especially useful in culturally-responsive research efforts, as they allow for diverse viewpoints and cultural nuances; this was particularly important for NJHI as part of this outreach effort. However, this approach also comes with limitations. The variability in responses can make it challenging to quantify findings or to look at relationships across variables in the dataset. Therefore, throughout the report, data are not broken down by group characteristics, such as location and size.

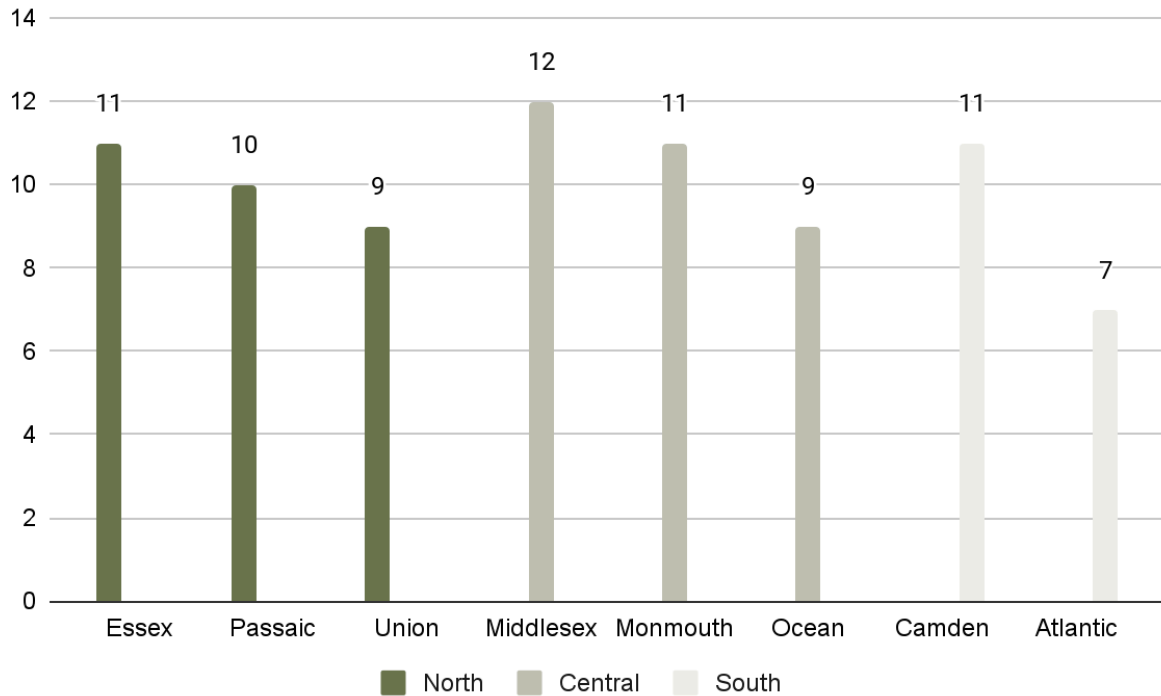
About the Respondents

Where they work

Respondents were well-distributed across New Jersey, serving all of the state's counties. The most-served counties, represented in the chart below by region, aligned with the areas that house towns with some of the greatest economic, social, safety, and public-health needs throughout the state (e.g., Newark, New Brunswick, Camden, Atlantic City). Regardless of where they directly serve community members, most groups indicated that they partner with

groups or organizations in other communities and counties to expand their impact.

Number of groups¹ working in most-mentioned county by region



Their communities

Not surprisingly, given NJHI's focus, all respondents work with populations historically impacted by oppressive systems. As described in their RFI, most groups work with individuals with intersecting identities that leave them at increased risk of oppression – such as women of color working in fields that are historically underfunded (e.g., early childhood, laundry workers) and immigrants of color living in a particular neighborhood. When focusing on one specific element of identity, those were typically:

- People of color or specific subgroups of color (e.g., Latino, Black).
- Residents of particular neighborhoods.
- Individuals experiencing life circumstances that leave them vulnerable, such as food insecurity, low wages, and immigration to the U.S.

Regarding location, respondents indicated working “where there is the greatest need.” That need is determined primarily by population density, i.e., a large proportion of the impacted

¹ Groups were asked to select all counties that applied and can therefore be counted multiple times.

population living or working there. Other reasons identified for the geographic areas of focus included:

- Existing structures (e.g., other organizations doing this work in the area allow groups to use established community structures for outreach).
- Cultural significance of a location.
- Their assessment of the potential for impact in a particular geography.
- “Because it is home,” i.e., wanting to improve the conditions and systems in the community in which they live.

Their budgets and funding sources

Respondents were asked about their annual organizational (operating) budgets. They answered the question in different ways, with some offering line-by-line expenses and others giving a budget range. Some focused on expenses related to specific program areas, while others included full annual operating budgets. The variability in these responses limits the ability to draw significant conclusions from these data and to look at them relative to other variables. However, the information provided still highlights the variability in the responding groups.

Respondent groups varied widely in size, with reported budgets ranging from \$5,000 to \$10.4M and median budgets in the medium range (see table below)

Groups organized by budget ranges

Budget range	Number of groups
Micro (reported \$10,000 or less)	2
Small (reported between \$10,001 and \$100,000)	5
Medium (reported between \$100,001 and \$500,000)	7
Large (reported between \$500,001 and \$1,000,000)	6
Very large (reported over \$1,000,000)	6

Respondents identified private foundations, government, nonprofit/partner organizations, and individual/small business donors as primary funding sources:

Private foundations

Respondents identified over 50 private foundations by name, with multiple respondents naming the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation (8), Fund for New Jersey (4), Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (3), Victoria Foundation (2), and Energy Foundation² (2).

Government

Ten respondents named government sources, including national (e.g., Department of Health, Department of Education, and National Institute of Health), state-level (e.g., NJ Department of Labor and Office of the Attorney General), and local sources (such as municipalities and town boards of education).

Nonprofit/partner organizations

Some respondents identified other nonprofits and partner organizations as primary funding sources:

- Members of umbrella organizations received funding from their national affiliates (e.g., four named the National Domestic Worker Alliance and two the National Day Laborer Organization as funders).
- Smaller groups reported getting funding from two other RFI respondents: the Latino Action Network Foundation and Make the Road New Jersey.

Other.

Apart from the above-listed, individual and small business donors were the most commonly mentioned funding sources (10). Respondents also mentioned their fundraising efforts (5), sponsorships for events or programs (3), membership fees (3), and fee-for-service or revenue generation (2) as additional sources of funding.

Respondents did not frequently mention corporate donors as funding sources—those who did mentioned large local corporations.

² Two groups listed “Energy Foundation” as a funding source. It is unclear if they are referring to a specific foundation with that name or referencing a type of funder.

About Their Work

Working together

Through the RFI, NJHI hoped to learn how members of resident-led, community-organizing groups work together to pursue their goals. Unfortunately, the question's wording in the RFI elicited responses describing how groups recruit community members rather than how existing members work and communicate. Respondents often mentioned working together collectively, although they did not consistently differentiate whether community members were leading or just advising their efforts. It was also unclear from responses how the groups arrived at decisions internally. Below, we present what we gleaned from the answers.

While most respondents appear to engage in participatory decision-making, only a few described their work in a way that clearly represented community-driven decision-making. Others described their process in ways that seemed more community-informed than community-driven, although the framing of the responses makes it difficult to determine with certainty.

- Responses that suggested **community-driven decision-making** mentioned:
 - Community members not formally employed by the respondents participating directly in decision-making
 - Community-centered communication to prioritize community needs
 - Feedback mechanisms that allow for timely adaptations to strategies based on changing community needs
 - Community members using their own stories to develop strategies.
- Responses that suggested **community-informed decision-making** mentioned:
 - Community listening sessions
 - Community surveys to identify community concerns and priorities
 - Community needs assessments
 - Informal conversations with community members
 - Community participation in committees
 - Community outreach through workshops and social media.

Areas of focus

Respondents typically described their racial equity and systems-change work as intertwined parts of the same whole.

The most common **areas of focus** mentioned by respondents were: (1) Reducing racial disparities by addressing disparities in education, working with racial minorities, and building awareness of biases; (2) Addressing intersectional issues by supporting undocumented women, addressing internalized views that divide the working class, and promoting cultural resilience; and (3) Supporting immigrants and first-generation communities by removing language barriers.

Primary activities

Respondents commonly described their work as educating, empowering, and organizing community members to act. Whether they intended community members to act collectively or individually was sometimes unclear, as was the level of commitment expected from community members. The table below shows that most respondents engaged in awareness- and will-building activities³.

Awareness	Will	Action
Public education (19) Policymaker education (9) Public awareness campaigns (8) Research (4)	Community organizing (18) Advocacy-capacity building (11) Leadership development (10) Media advocacy (5) Influencer education (1) Narrative change (1) Public-will campaigns (1)	Community mobilization (9) Coalition building (9) Political will campaigns (2) Model legislation (2) Litigation (1) Lobbying (1)

³ Will-building activities refer to activities intended to bridge the gap between awareness-building and action. According to the Advocacy Strategy Framework (2015) by Coffman and Beer, five components of will include: opinion about an issue, intensity of the opinion, salience of the issue, capacity (or sense of agency) to act, and willingness to express an opinion or act in support of it.

What They've Learned

Respondents were asked to reflect on what their organization has learned about mobilizing the community that they could share with other groups doing similar work. The top five lessons shared are described below in order of most mentions.

1) Build trust

The most frequently mentioned lesson was the importance of building trust and authentic connections with community members. RFI respondents have learned to build trust through (1) authentic, consistent engagement with the community (e.g., frequent, timely, and accurate communication that is accessible in language, manner, and setting) grounded in what the community says they need rather than assumptions; (2) taking risks together, beginning with lower-risk actions, then escalating as trust grows; and (3) ensuring the organization's staff and leadership reflect the community (e.g., bilingual, bicultural, similar lived experiences), ideally hiring from within the community.

*"These programs have built a powerful pipeline of member to staff:
A majority of our frontline staff come from the membership."*

2) Seek collaborators

The most frequently mentioned lesson after building trust was the importance of collaboration, networking, and leveraging community resources. Collaboration allows advocates to broaden their reach and achieve greater impact through shared knowledge and pooled resources. Strategies groups shared include (1) leveraging trusted community resources (e.g., schools, churches, organizers, community health workers); (2) creating opportunities for networking and collaboration with other community stakeholders; (3) forging alliances/coalitions with like-minded groups; and (4) looking for allies across the political divide.

*"One of the most impactful strategies is aligning with organizations
with similar missions, which fosters a sense of belonging to
a larger movement crucial for sustaining motivation."*

3) Give it time

Building trust and credibility with the community can't be rushed. The only way to prove your commitment to a community is through a history of service and advocacy on their

behalf. At the same time, many community members may be reluctant to take action, and preparing them to feel comfortable confronting authority requires time and patience. Groups remind us to remain responsive and adaptive as the community changes.

"Communities evolve. Being responsive and willing to adapt strategies is essential for maintaining relevance and momentum."

4) Share decision-making

Community members will only be empowered and feel ownership over advocacy efforts when they participate fully in decision-making and are active in the organization's leadership. To do this, groups highlight the importance of valuing the community's knowledge and expertise. Sharing decision-making can look like (1) providing training and empowering community members to lead the work, (2) building a leadership pipeline by providing leadership development opportunities for community members, and (3) respecting community decisions and following their lead even when they decide not to act on an issue you think is important.

"The people directly affected by the issues are at the center of the decision-making process."

5) Facilitate participation

RFI respondents shared several lessons about encouraging, facilitating, and sustaining community involvement. First, respondents elevate the importance of telling stories and celebrating successes. To do this, teach community members how to share their stories and encourage them to do so. Hearing stories from fellow community members inspires others to join. It also attracts the media and policymakers' attention. Respondents also noted the importance of providing clear calls to action and creating opportunities for participation. Lastly, groups point out that acknowledging and accommodating community members' family and work commitments and needs facilitates sustained engagement. Groups do this by connecting community members with services that meet immediate needs and by lowering barriers to participation through providing transportation, childcare, good food at meetings, identifying convenient meeting times, and paying community members for their time and contributions.

"We drafted a campaign narrative from people directly intending to create a language that would empower them to come out to the streets, feel seen, and overcome their fears."

What They Need

RFI respondents had much to say when asked about their challenges and what would make it easier for them to do their work. They discussed many ways funders could support them, from streamlined grant applications and reporting requirements to funding and technical support in several areas related to organizational capacity and strategy implementation.

From funders, specifically:

1) Multi-year, unrestricted funding

The overarching need expressed by RFI respondents was for multi-year, unrestricted funding to allow them to allocate resources where they are most needed. The constantly changing policy environment necessitates rapid adjustments in advocacy strategies that are difficult to make with heavily restricted grants. Given the constant pressure of fundraising and the inability to allocate resources freely, respondents find it difficult to pursue long-term strategies and plan for sustainability.

2) Sufficient funding to do their work well

Some respondents described cashflow problems that make it difficult to meet payroll and keep up with day-to-day work. Some noted how easily chasing money can lead to mission creep. Others emphasized how resource-intensive it is to ensure inclusivity in their work (e.g., language translation and culturally sensitive outreach) and secure access to high-cost services such as legal advice and policy expertise. Above all, respondents need financial stability to do their work well.

3) Reasonable application and reporting requirements

Respondents described how tedious grant applications and irrelevant reporting requirements consume their organization's limited staff resources.

“Tedious grant applications, questionably relevant grant reports, and exhaustive grant maintenance actually diminish our capacity to focus on meeting our community’s needs.”

Organizational capacity needs:

Many respondents highlighted challenges related to organizational capacity. The most frequently mentioned needs were around staffing, physical and technology infrastructure, and evaluation:

1) Staff recruitment and retention

The most-mentioned organizational capacity need was for stable funding to allow for proper staffing, including the ability to pay competitive salaries, offer benefits packages, and provide opportunities for training and development. Without the ability to offer competitive compensation packages (on par with larger policy organizations), RFI respondents have difficulty attracting and retaining staff. Other staffing challenges include:

- Recruiting and training bi-lingual, multicultural staff.
- Staff development and mentorship require dedicated time and resources.
- Working on social justice can be emotionally taxing and lead to burnout.
- Ability to staff essential functions like grant writing, bookkeeping, policy analysis, and IT.

“We really need funding that allows for proper staffing and benefits for the staff because there’s so much burnout in this field.”

2) Physical infrastructure

A few respondents reported using inadequate, sometimes unsafe, office and/or community meeting spaces. For these, having access to appropriate spaces for their staff and community members is a critical need.

3) Technology infrastructure

Respondents described having limited or outdated technology infrastructure. Apart from expanding and updating computer hardware and software, other technology needs include:

- Upgrading databases (member outreach, voter registration platforms)
- Database management
- IT support
- Digital literacy training for staff and community members

4) Evaluation capacity

Needs around evaluation capacity included:

- Developing evaluation frameworks
- Collecting/managing/analyzing data
- Measuring impact

"It's important to monitor and measure the impact of your efforts to gauge your effectiveness and identify areas for improvement."

5) Other organizational capacity needs mentioned included:

- Planning (e.g., strategic, program development, sustainability)
- Governance (e.g., board development, leadership capacity)
- Fundraising/development (e.g., hiring/training staff or volunteers to help with fundraising and grant writing)
- Communications (e.g., website development, branding & social media strategies, messaging)

Strategy implementation needs:

RFI respondents most frequently mentioned (1) partnership development, (2) community engagement, (3) research and analysis, and (4) scaling as the most critical needs related to implementing their advocacy strategies. The lists below provide more details about needs within each category.

1) Partnership development and management

- Ensuring alignment of goals and balancing competing priorities
- Managing differing viewpoints among partners
- Communication among diverse stakeholders
- Building alliances with like-minded stakeholders
- Opportunities for networking and resource-sharing (online forums, peer-to-peer learning groups, networking events)

2) Community engagement

- Planning engagement campaigns and outreach strategies
- Event planning
- Developing marketing and outreach materials
- Media Relations

- Training organizers
- Overcoming barriers to participation (e.g., language, transportation, childcare, stipends)

3) Research and analysis

- Assistance with policy research, analysis, and planning advocacy strategies
- Access to policy experts, legal advisors, and advocacy organizations
- Support in navigating the political landscape
- Assistance in developing research-based policy recommendations

“Assistance with policy analysis, research, and advocacy strategies would help us advance our policy agenda and influence decision-makers at the local, state, and national levels.”

4) Scaling

- Training and mentorship opportunities for members (e.g., community organizing, policy advocacy, leadership development, civic engagement, digital literacy)
- Educational materials (e.g., civic responsibility, voting rights)
- Public relations (increase visibility, attracting support from other funders)
- Promoting and providing resources/space for self-care among staff and members
- Amplifying members’ voices at state, county, and city levels

Considerations for NJHI

The following are considerations and recommendations for NJHI as the program designs its grantmaking strategy, establishes its strategy, and decides how to allocate its resources. These come from the consulting team's analysis and the sensemaking discussion with the NJHI team that followed the sharing of this brief.

Grantmaking strategy and process

- Develop a simple application process that reduces the burden on respondents. Make clear the criteria you will use to choose among applicants, the funding amount available, and the timeline for selection. If possible, compensate groups for the time spent on your application.
- When you develop your fall 2024 RFP, ask at least three community groups to complete it during the design phase to ensure the questions capture the information you hope to get.
- Make multi-year, unrestricted grants to the groups you plan to fund. As part of that, allow for generous pass-throughs to community members to facilitate participation (e.g., transportation, childcare, food for meetings, participation stipends).
- Develop a simple, clear reporting template and share it with grantees at the onset of their grant. If possible, engage them in co-developing the reporting criteria to ensure that what they are tracking is as valuable to their group as it is to NJHI.

Grantee engagement

- Consider a cohort model where grantees build a learning and collaboration network with one another as part of support from NJHI. Bring the network together regularly and connect it to key stakeholders beyond the NJHI team and one another (e.g., technical assistance providers, other funders, complementary organizations not funded by NJHI).
- In a cohort model, create space for grantees to prepare workshops/presentations for their peers on areas of strength (e.g., storytelling, coalition building) and compensate them for their time.
- Provide skill-building opportunities as grantees want and need them. For example, offer ad-hoc time with technical assistance providers and fund external professional development opportunities.
- Facilitate direct access to high-cost services (e.g., legal advice, policy expertise, research, IT support, evaluation).

Field-level considerations

- Share the specifics of what community groups need with other funders as a way to advocate on their behalf. Make individual connections to funders for groups as appropriate.
- Share learnings with the ecosystem as promising practices in community mobilizing. With their permission, include the names of RFI respondents to promote their expertise in the field.
- Continue to encourage incorporating the voice of community-led groups in ecosystem discussions of which you are a part.
- Connect with potentially untapped corporate funders and build bridges between them and smaller community groups that may not have direct access. This can help them build diversified funding streams that include corporate dollars, a funding source not often reported in the RFI.
- Consider which (and to what degree) TA and support provided to grantees might be accessible to the broader advocacy field.

Conclusion

NJHI's Request for Information highlighted the communities these groups focus on, the areas in which they work, the activities they undertake to achieve their goals, the lessons they have learned, and their ongoing needs. These findings reinforce that important and deep work is happening in and with NJ communities and that the groups at the center of these efforts need flexible and long-term philanthropic partners. These findings begin to carve a roadmap for thoughtful and responsive grantmaking for these groups.



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