

RESEARCH REPORT

Collaborative Approaches to Benefit and Tax Credit Access

Early Implementation of the Family Stability Challenge

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June 2023



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We would also like to thank all the Family Stability Challenge stakeholders, and especially the grantees leading the effort, for taking the time to give input on our research plans and share their perspectives with us to inform this report.

Executive Summary

In March 2020, the City of Philadelphia released the Poverty Action Plan to lift 100,000 city residents out of poverty over five years. As the first major step toward meeting the plan's goals, the city committed \$10 million to United Way of Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPNJ) through its Poverty Action Fund to take the lead in planning and overseeing an effort called The Promise. The Promise launched its first major community initiative in December 2020, called the Family Stability Challenge (FSC). The FSC is focused on connecting underserved populations with public benefits and refundable tax credits for which they are eligible, investing in interagency data sharing and collaboration, and improving service capacity.

A couple of foundational assumptions drove FSC's design and the selection of coalitions of organizations to implement it:

- Community-based direct service organizations with deep community ties would be best placed to engage hard-to-reach populations who are more likely than others to miss out on benefits for which they are eligible.
- FSC was a new frontier, making flexibility essential. That is, because there was little precedent for coalition-based benefits access approaches like FSC—nationally and in Philadelphia where coalition approaches to services were especially novel—flexibility around goals for what the initiative would achieve was necessary. The general hope was that the coalition-based approach would increase access to benefits, which would potentially reduce poverty or at least alleviate its symptoms.

With these considerations in mind, The Promise selected four community coalitions to implement FSC:

- **Collaborative to Advance Stability**, which included the largest free tax preparation provider in the city. The coalition had a relatively broad geographic focus, serving clients across the city, though some of the organizations focused on North Philadelphia.
- **Latino Equitable Development Collective**, an existing Latino-serving nonprofit coalition in North Philadelphia.

- **No One Left Behind Coalition**, which consisted of organizations with strong focuses on multiple target populations, including African, Caribbean, East, and Southeast Asian immigrant groups. They focused services in areas where those communities are heavily concentrated: West and Southwest Philadelphia, Chinatown, and City Center.
- **South Broad Partnership**, which consisted of organizations with a strong focus on a common geography in South Philadelphia.

In 2022, UWGPSNJ's Knowledge Center, the entity overseeing data reporting and evaluation for The Promise, engaged the Urban Institute to conduct an evaluation of FSC's early implementation. This report presents evaluation findings from FSC's start in spring 2021 through October 2022. It is intended to provide evidence and recommendations to help practitioners, funders and other stakeholders learn and improve. FSC is a new approach to grantmaking and service delivery for its stakeholders and the field, so areas for growth are to be expected and offer plentiful opportunities for positive action in the future. Here are key findings:

- **The coalitions served 53,400 households throughout the City of Philadelphia in the effort's first year**, connecting them with a wide variety of benefits and services.
- Unsurprisingly given the stress and strain of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the grant, **emergency assistance ranked as the top type of benefit distributed** through FSC networks.
- **The coalitions all engaged in a range of new activities** that contributed to improved client engagement and service delivery:
 - » working to meet urgent COVID-19-induced needs and working through COVID-19-induced service disruptions
 - » organization-level activities, including new services and increased capacity to meet urgent needs and provide intensive services
 - » coalition-level activities, including coordinated outreach, new cross-organizational tools and technology, formalized referral pathways, and collaboration on client services
- **All coalitions derived value from coalition relationships**, including a better understanding of the city's benefits landscape, a culture of collaboration rather than competition across service organizations, and a platform for peer sharing and capacity building.

Achievements notwithstanding, the newness of the FSC coalition approach within Philadelphia's service ecosystem and inherent challenges with new collaboration, combined with the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of material hardship in Philadelphia, and built-in administrative

hurdles to benefits access, meant challenges were inevitable and understandable. Here were some notable challenges:

- **Collaborative culture.** Some FSC partners reported roadblocks to building and maintaining collaboration, including challenges with the role of the coalition's lead organization, difficult relationships between partners, and lack of clarity about expectations.
- **Administrative barriers.** Coalitions faced several administrative barriers to serving people, which were largely outside their control. These included application designs and administrative practices that were not client-friendly, as well as difficult program requirements.
- **Technology challenges.** Staff in each coalition reported at least some issues with technology. This included lack of staff capacity to use technology and challenges specific to the platforms made available to them.

Gathering data for learning and improvement was also a priority from the outset of the initiative. The coalitions invested significant time and resources into developing data-reporting processes using their existing reporting systems. The Promise took a collaborative approach to designing reporting, engaging each coalition around designing approaches that made sense in their context. It was important to coalitions to show results quickly and to capture the full range of possible benefits and services. However, the intake and other data for each individual benefit and service were often unique, making them difficult to reconcile within organizations and across coalitions. This complexity, coupled with a short, unfunded start-up period to develop reporting infrastructure and evolving reporting requirements throughout the grant period, led to inconsistencies in reporting. The focus on aggregate—rather than individual-level data—also limited what coalitions could learn about the outputs of their work and their clients' experiences.

Based on these findings about early FSC implementation, here are key recommendations:

- **Coalitions should aim for a structure that maximizes impact.** Coalitions would benefit from considering how to develop activities to make sure they build on one another and make the whole partnership stronger than the sum of its parts.
- **Coalition partners should focus on maintaining continuous communication.** Evidence suggests that continuous communication is a core pillar of strong service collaboration.
- **Coalitions should consider the pros and cons of assigning a backbone organization.** FSC coalitions that lack a backbone organization coordinating the initiative and overseeing grant

reporting without a direct service role might consider adding such a role to their coalition. Backbone organizations can take pressure off organizations whose priority is serving clients. That said, the role of the backbone needs to be carefully planned to be effective.

- **Coalitions should consider designing and piloting a common intake process.** The Promise team could work with interested coalitions to design and pilot a common intake form or process that would include all these critical data across participating organizations.
- **The Promise and the coalitions should leverage learning from early implementation to systematize referrals.** Staff in each coalition felt that the potential to refer across organizations to meet client needs for services they did not provide was an important asset of coalition-based work. However, coalitions did not all have referral platforms that would allow for streamlined and systematized referrals, and even when such a platform existed, many staff continued to use informal referral channels.
- **The Promise and coalitions should focus on a smaller set of benefits and investing in enrollment and data systems that can track what happens after application and better capture impact.** Gathering these data is essential to calculate and communicate how receipt of benefits or services lifts people out of poverty.
- **The Promise should produce formal documentation for FSC reporting as it evolves.** Coalition partners need documentation to refer to that clearly defines all the fields for which they are assembling data.
- **Policymakers and administrators should prioritize developing an online application platform that supports easy and streamlined benefit application experiences.** Because many people with low incomes are eligible for multiple refundable tax credits and public benefits, public agencies have opportunities to work together to use technology—like online application platforms—that can help to cross-enroll people in multiple benefits. Improving Pennsylvania’s integrated online benefit application portal, COMPASS, is a good place to start.
- **Funders should consider more comprehensive and longer-term funding commitments.** Adding funding for a planning period, followed by a longer guaranteed funding commitment would allow partners to establish a working relationship, build up service flows and capacity, and troubleshoot areas of friction while still having a grant supporting their work together.

The FSC coalitions did a tremendous amount of work serving clients in need early in implementation, all while juggling developing coalition relationships and processes. They created a

foundation to build from, and lessons learned early on can set them up to continue improving services and coordination moving forward.

Collaborative Approaches to Benefit and Tax Credit Access

Introduction

In March 2020, the City of Philadelphia released the Poverty Action Plan to lift 100,000 city residents out of poverty over five years. Motivated by Philadelphia’s status as the poorest of America’s largest cities, the plan identified three focus areas for poverty-reduction efforts, all centered on increasing residents’ income: strengthening the social safety net, supporting high-quality employment, and subsidizing housing costs.¹ As the first major step toward meeting the plan’s goals, the city committed \$10 million to United Way of Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPNJ) through its Poverty Action Fund to take the lead in planning and overseeing an effort called The Promise. This effort is a public-private partnership to improve residents’ material conditions through strategies to boost their income.²

The Promise planned to release a series of requests for proposals for community-based organizations to partner to engage in “community challenges” to stabilize the income and employment of Philadelphians with low incomes. The Promise circulated the Request for Proposals for its first community challenge, called the Family Stability Challenge (FSC), in December 2020, and work began in spring 2021. The FSC is investing in community-based organizations to connect underserved populations with public benefits and refundable tax credits for which they are eligible, investing in interagency data sharing and collaboration, and improving the service capacity of those organizations (UWGPNJ 2022). FSC funded four community coalitions to engage in that work.

About This Report

In 2022, UWGPNJ’s Knowledge Center, the entity overseeing data reporting and evaluation for The Promise, engaged the Urban Institute to conduct an evaluation of the early implementation of FSC. This report presents findings from that evaluation—from FSC’s start in spring 2021 through October 2022. It is intended to provide evidence and recommendations to help practitioners, funders, and other stakeholders learn and improve. FSC is a new approach to grantmaking and service delivery for its stakeholders and the field, so areas for growth are to be expected and they offer plentiful opportunities for positive action in the future. Here is the structure of the report:

- We begin by providing background on the initiative, including the vision and motivation behind the effort's design and essential context and evidence to ground the reader.
- We describe at a high level what the coalitions accomplished in providing services in year one.
- We summarize the experiences of each of the four coalitions in the early stages of standing up and implementing FSC. We highlight important aspects of early implementation and how the design and circumstances of each coalition appeared to affect implementation.
- We provide an overview of the development and early implementation of the FSC data collection, reporting, and learning approach.
- We discuss key lessons from early implementation of this emergent approach to benefits access work that practitioners, funders, and others concerned with poverty alleviation may consider when planning the future of FSC and similar efforts. These considerations focus on opportunities to improve benefits access work through strengthened collaboration and learning.
- We leave readers with brief reflections on where FSC can fit into meeting the overarching goals of The Promise moving forward, with early implementation experiences in mind.

Box 1 summarizes the methods we used to gather and analyze data on FSC to inform this report.

BOX 1

Methods

The Urban Institute's implementation study used a combination of qualitative methods to capture the early implementation of the Family Stability Challenge. Our methodology is outlined below.

- **Key stakeholder interviews.** We conducted semistructured interviews with key stakeholders including The Promise staff and consultants, City of Philadelphia officials, and members of the Family Stability Challenge Advisory Committee. Findings from these interviews provided context on the effort's design and vision and informed our research questions to guide the remainder of the evaluation.
- **Data Advisory Committee.** We included a participatory element in our design that engaged representatives of each coalition in shaping the evaluation to meet their needs. These representatives formed a Data Advisory Committee, to whom we presented our research design and questions for feedback early in the evaluation in a Data Walk.³ We also met with these representatives monthly to receive feedback and plan data collection. Finally, we held a second Data Walk session where we shared an initial draft of this report with Data Advisory

Committee members. We asked for feedback and edited our report to more accurately reflect the intentions, activities, and perspectives of service providers making up the four coalitions

- **Semistructured interviews with staff.** The bulk of our data comes from a site visit to Philadelphia in October 2022, in which we conducted semistructured interviews with staff from each partner organization within the four coalitions. We spoke with direct service, managerial, and executive staff.
- **Virtual and in-person interviews with clients.** We conducted in-person interviews with clients while on-site in Philadelphia to gain a better understanding of what services and service coordination looked like from the perspective of those the partnership was intended to help. After our visit, we conducted additional client interviews virtually.
- **Thematic analysis.** We held internal team discussions to reflect on what we heard during interviews and to develop a coding structure for our interview data based on emergent themes. We then systematically coded all our interviews and conducted a thematic analysis using the qualitative coding software NVivo.
- **Document analysis.** We analyzed various documents related to the planning and implementation of the Family Stability Challenge. These documents included grant applications, grant data-reporting templates, grant budgets, and internal and external reports on FSC's progress that The Promise produced.

We supplemented these methods with an **analysis of quantitative data** from the coalitions' data reported to The Promise.

Background on the Family Stability Challenge

MOTIVATION AND VISION

Key stakeholders—including City of Philadelphia staff and The Promise team members and consultants—provided insights about the motivation and vision for designing and launching the effort:

- **Stakeholders saw benefits access as a way to reduce material hardship.** Though stakeholders noted that not everyone involved in the effort agreed on whether or not benefits reduce poverty or just alleviate its symptoms, they confirmed that the city and UWGPSNJ launched FSC with an understanding of the importance of benefits access in reducing material hardship.⁴ A widely circulated analysis estimating that eligible Philadelphians miss out on \$450 million in federal and state benefits annually underscores that benefits access was an important area of opportunity to provide more resources to people to meet their basic needs.⁵

- **Benefits access through FSC was envisioned as the first of several mutually reinforcing efforts.** FSC leaders agreed that the effort was only intended to be one component of a broader push to lift city residents out of poverty. Several noted that FSC was a logical starting point because it built on existing service infrastructure, addressed gaps in capacity, and sought to strengthen collaborative approaches, rather than creating something entirely new. But these leaders largely also knew that benefits alone are often insufficient for lifting families out of poverty and stabilizing them for the long term given multiple barriers families face and the safety net's significant gaps and limitations.

An assumption of The Promise was that multiple community-based efforts will, together, increase financial security, stabilize families, and grow income with The Promise's overarching poverty-reduction goal in mind. Accordingly, in May 2022, The Promise launched a second community challenge—the Jobs and Opportunities Challenge—to remove additional barriers to economic stability and mobility. This second challenge takes a collaborative approach to legal services for criminal record expungement and pardons, with the goal of removing barriers to quality employment.⁶

- **Community connections were seen as key.** Key FSC stakeholders mentioned that one of the foundational assumptions driving the FSC's design and selection of coalitions was the assumption that community-based direct service organizations with deep community ties would be best positioned to engage hard-to-reach populations who are more likely than others to miss out on benefits for which they are eligible. They saw these organizations as filling gaps in the ability of city agencies and citywide nonprofits like BenePhilly to engage specific populations like immigrants and the elderly in accessing benefits. Therefore, it followed that increasing the service capacity of these organizations would be an effective way to increase benefits access. There was a hope that FSC would allow for scaling and strengthening of community-based services through coalition approaches.
- **FSC was largely seen as a new frontier, and most understood that flexibility around expectations was essential.** There was little precedent for coalition-based benefits access approaches like FSC—nationally, and particularly in Philadelphia where coalition approaches to services were especially novel—and stakeholders largely acknowledged that there was not a consistent or specific set of goals for what FSC coalitions would achieve at the outset, beyond setting initial service targets (Coffey, Payne, and Sonoda 2023). Rather, there was a general hope that the coalition-based approach would increase access to benefits, which, depending on individual views of the relationship between benefits and poverty, would either reduce

poverty or alleviate its symptoms. That said, a few people we spoke with mentioned that other stakeholders in the ecosystem had high and potentially unrealistic expectations for what FSC would achieve around poverty reduction and expected to see positive outcomes quickly.

- **Stakeholders noted that FSC, as a new and flexible effort, offered opportunities for learning.** Several key stakeholders we spoke to noted that leaders behind the FSC's design were eager to learn from this new effort. A few mentioned that there was interest among leaders in the antipoverty ecosystem in testing assumptions about how the community-based coalition approach would drive increased access to benefits. They said there was also interest in learning how public and private funders in the city could come together to scale and sustain funding for the work.

PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Key stakeholders we spoke with emphasized the importance of understanding that FSC launched at a distinctive time—during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—which influenced its design and implementation in important ways:

- **Urgency of need.** The pandemic hit Philadelphia's economy hard, with many Philadelphians experiencing job losses. The city had 7.6 percent fewer jobs in September 2021 than it had two years earlier. Many of these losses were in low-wage sectors, and Black residents were particularly adversely affected (Pew Charitable Trusts 2022). And the city's large share of "working poor"—about 27 percent as of 2018—whose income is below the federal poverty level (FPL) but who work a majority of weeks in the year, were vulnerable to experiencing heightened hardship from job loss because they struggled to meet their needs already.⁷
- **New benefits available.** In response to the spike in need because of COVID-19 and resulting job losses, the federal government made several new or expanded benefits available to people with low incomes. Notable changes included a temporary expansion to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and direct cash assistance through Economic Impact Payments (commonly called stimulus payments) (Acs and Karpman 2020; Cooney and Shaefer 2021). There was also a large, temporary expansion of the child tax credit (CTC) (Acs and Werner 2021).
- **Stretched and disrupted service organizations.** The combination of heightened need and increased benefits availability meant service organizations like those in the FSC partnerships faced a sudden surge in demand for their services. This came alongside an abrupt shift to remote services for some service providers to avoid COVID-19 contagion and make their

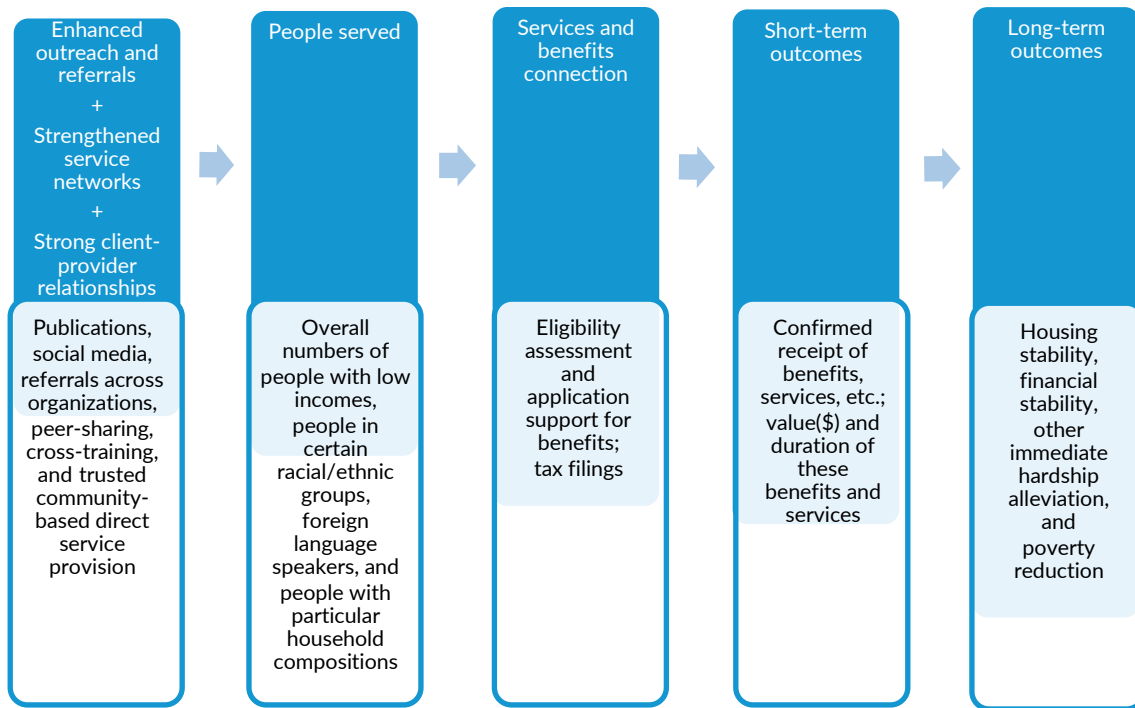
clients comfortable. Service providers within the FSC coalitions experienced these COVID-19-related upheavals differently. In some cases, service providers went remote quickly and saw a drop-off of clients who were not used to receiving remote services or had trouble accessing required technology. Some organizations who shifted to remote work reported an expensive process of ensuring technology and protocols were in place to serve clients securely. In other cases, organizations continued to provide in-person services, which was taxing on staff who worried about their own health and observed the toll the pandemic took on their clients. Many organizations used FSC funding to maintain to pre-COVID-19 service levels, including managing transitions between in-person and remote work. Some used the funding to support surges in client demand for services.

Understanding the Underlying Assumptions

The Family Stability Challenge's design was based on several assumptions. Figure 1 provides a visualization of how these assumptions fit together, describing how grantees go from engaging with coalition service providers to achieving long-term outcomes.

We follow this with a brief discussion of each key area of assumptions.

FIGURE 1
FSC Assumptions



- **Enhanced outreach and referrals.** It was assumed that FSC coalitions would plan outreach efforts to reach clients directly, whether through expanded outreach worker roles, the circulation of their promotional materials, or their social media presence. And referrals among the organizations were envisioned as an important mechanism driving new clients coming through the door and the maximization of benefits.
- **Strengthened service networks.** It was assumed that FSC partners would be able to access resources like peer sharing and cross-training through coalition networks, which would help strengthen services that would in turn drive expected outputs and outcomes.
- **Strong client-provider relationships.** Having FSC coalitions composed of community-based organizations with strong community ties and cultural competencies was assumed to be a critical input driving desired outputs around benefit receipt and outcomes around family financial stability and well-being.
- **People served.** FSC was thought of as a way to increase the number of benefits Philadelphians received. This could be through expanding the reach of benefits and services to people who they did not traditionally serve or maximizing the package of benefits and

services received. Serving hard-to-reach populations, including immigrants and the elderly, was an important goal.

- **Services and benefits connections.** Connecting people to benefits for which they are eligible was a primary goal of the FSC effort. It was assumed that organizations would accomplish this by providing application support, tax filing assistance, and other help navigating access to benefits and tax credits.
- **Short-term outcomes.** An underlying assumption of FSC was that matching clients with the benefits and services that they were eligible for would increase the likelihood that they would successfully receive those benefits.
- **Long-term outcomes.** There was less clarity about the long-term outcomes of FSC. Key stakeholders and grantees generally said the overarching long-term goal of The Promise as a whole is to reduce poverty in the City of Philadelphia, but there was also widespread acknowledgement that the FSC effort alone would not result in long-term poverty reduction. And many also emphasized long-term outcomes related to more specific needs, such as reducing housing instability and increasing financial stability and well-being.

EXISTING EVIDENCE AROUND KEY ASPECTS OF THE FSC APPROACH

Many of the assumptions underlying the initial vision and goals and the related, implicit conceptual framework for FSC align with evidence provided in the first publication from our evaluation—a field scan and contextual analysis of Family Stability Challenge.⁸ That said, it is important to consider some **limitations to focusing on collaborative approaches to benefits access to reduce poverty.**

- **Philadelphia’s poverty rate is high,** with more than 22 percent of residents living below FPL in 2021. And the distribution of poverty and the inability to meet basic needs is highly unequal, with racial and ethnic minority groups experiencing poverty and material hardship at disproportionate rates compared with white residents. Further, poverty is concentrated in certain neighborhoods.
- **There are large-scale and structural drivers of poverty in Philadelphia.** The city was hit hard by deindustrialization, which reduced the number of high-quality jobs available to many city dwellers without higher education. Further, structural racism has left racial and ethnic minority groups experiencing poverty at disproportionate rates and poverty concentrated in certain neighborhoods.

- **Structural factors limit the ability of benefits and tax credits to alleviate poverty.** People who qualify for tax credits and benefits often only qualify for unstable jobs that pay too little to meet a family's needs. This means people cycle between work and public benefits receipt or supplement their income with benefits.
- **Benefits and tax credits alone are not designed to be a long-term solution to poverty.** Limited eligibility and low benefit levels for many programs mean they do not raise people out of poverty on their own.
- **Many of the people eligible for benefits and tax credits have incomes above the FPL.** This is true of many people who receive food and medical assistance, as well as refundable tax credits. While connecting these people with supports is critical to alleviating hardships that many people with low incomes who are not in poverty according to official criteria face, doing so does not reduce the number of people experiencing poverty according to such criteria (CRS 2023).⁹
- **Eligible people often face challenges receiving benefits and credits.** These challenges include administrative burdens—many of the time-consuming processes involved in applying for, enrolling in, and eventually receiving benefits. This includes burdens like obtaining transportation to benefit offices, long wait times at those offices that conflict with work and child care, disrespectful treatment by office staff, and extensive paperwork and long approval timelines. Families are often required to fill out additional paperwork and produce updated documentation periodically to redetermine eligibility and renew their benefits, which reduces the number of people who continue receiving benefits. Additionally, many programs have work requirements that participants struggle to meet to continue receiving benefits.
- **Despite limitations, evidence suggests benefits and tax credits are one piece of a puzzle that can help alleviate poverty.** These benefits and credits provide vital resources to reduce material hardship for people with low or no wages. They are also linked to positive well-being outcomes for recipients.
- **And evidence also suggests that personalized approaches to barrier removal can be critical in connecting people with benefits.** Taking measures to reduce client wait times, like hiring new intake staff and developing streamlined intake processes, can make accessing benefits less burdensome. And tailoring case management services to help clients navigate challenging public benefits systems can also increase access to benefits.

- **Evidence, albeit limited and largely not specific to benefits access initiatives, suggests that collaborative approaches can improve access to services, though developing strong collaboration is challenging and takes time.** Research shows that intentionally partnering in ways that complement in-house capacities can lead to more useful collaboration. Developing strong communication practices and data sharing can also contribute to strong collaboration, as can identifying a backbone organization to coordinate collaborative activities (Turner et al. 2012; Walker, Torres Rodriguez, and O'Brien 2021). However, collaborative partnerships may not realize their potential if they do not have the right factors working in their favor. Some important factors are setting realistic goals about the time needed for set up—some research has suggested systemic change takes five years at a minimum—and establishing a sustained culture of collaboration and shared decision-making.¹⁰

The following sections provide detail on the four coalitions that received FSC funding and how they implemented the initiative early on.

Overview of the Coalitions

Grantee Selection

Through a competitive request for proposals process, The Promise selected four coalitions of community-based service-providing nonprofits to receive grants to support FSC activities. The Promise team, its consultants, and an advisory committee consisting of senior antipoverty ecosystem actors in the city provided input on the process. Coalitions were selected based on their grant proposals. Top-level selection criteria included applicants' descriptions of their ability to

- serve communities with low incomes;
- offer free tax preparation and screen for, assess, and confirm receipt of a range of benefits;
- convene partners and bundle resources; and
- track and report outcomes, including resources accessed.

Additional considerations included

- geographic diversity;
- capacity to reach a high volume of participants;

- plans to maximize family resources;
- diversity of expertise among proposed partnerships;
- diverse leadership among partners;
- articulation of how grant would help with scale and innovation;
- perceptions of partners in their communities;
- collaborative histories of partners;
- potential to deepen involvement with smaller community organizations; and
- ability to adapt to pandemic-induced service landscape changes.¹¹

Coalition Descriptions

The coalitions were composed of service organizations and other nonprofit partners supporting the service providers. They served different geographies within the city, and some had stronger geographic focuses than others. Some focused on serving particular immigrant communities. All of the organizations offered tax preparation and benefits counseling and offered additional services and supports according to what individual organizations had the capacity to provide. All the coalitions served Philadelphians with low incomes. And though each organization had an official lead organization, that organization played a somewhat different role in each coalition. Some factors that made each coalition distinct included the following:

- **The Collaborative to Advance Stability** had the Campaign for Working Families serving as lead organization. In addition to distributing funding to partners and managing the partnership, the CWF is the largest free tax preparation provider in the city, offering services on a wider scale than its partners, though only during tax season. The coalition had a relatively broad geographic focus, serving low-income clients across the city, though some of the organizations used funds to specifically serve clients in North Philadelphia or had a general focus on that area.
- **The Latino Equitable Development Collective** was distinct among the coalitions in that it existed before FSC, with many Latino-serving nonprofits with deep community ties in North Philadelphia and ties to one another establishing a formal coalition in 2019. The coalition is also the only one with a purely administrative lead organization—the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)—that provides support for the coalition and oversees data reporting to The

Promise. It also was the only coalition with an organization—Ceiba—that had served as a leader and convener among coalition members before FSC.

- **The No One Left Behind Coalition** is distinct among the coalitions for including organizations with strong focuses on multiple geographies and immigrant groups. Organizations within the coalition focus services on African, Caribbean, and East and Southeast Asian immigrant groups. And they focus services in different neighborhoods where those communities are heavily concentrated—in West and Southwest Philadelphia, Chinatown, and City Center. The lead organization, African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA), is the smallest of the lead organizations and was unique in leading a coalition of partners with little experience working together while standing up new in-house benefits access services.
- **The South Broad Partnership's** lead organization, Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance, offers a diverse set of services and provides a large share of benefits access services among coalition partners. Other partners serve more specific populations or offer narrower sets of supports and services. This coalition has a strong focus on a common geography in South Philadelphia.

Table 1 summarizes each coalition's partners, key populations served, and services provided in the first year of FSC.

TABLE 1
Overview of Family Stability Challenge Coalitions in Year One

Coalition	Key partners	Populations and geographies served	Key services
Collaborative to Advance Stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Campaign for Working Families (lead) ▪ Beech Community Services ▪ Benefits Data Trust ▪ Clarifi ▪ Community Legal Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ North Philadelphia ▪ Philadelphians with low incomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tax preparation ▪ Benefits counseling ▪ Financial counseling ▪ Legal services ▪ Community outreach
Latino Equitable Development Collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) (lead/administrator) ▪ Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha ▪ Ceiba ▪ Congreso de Latinos Unidos ▪ Esperanza ▪ HACE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eastern North Philadelphia ▪ Immigrant populations, largely Latino and Spanish-speaking ▪ Many people in deep poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benefits counseling ▪ Housing assistance ▪ Tax preparation ▪ Meal distribution ▪ Community outreach

Coalition	Key partners	Populations and geographies served	Key services
No One Left Behind Coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Norris Square Community Alliance 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA) (lead) Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation Southwest Community Development Corporation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> African and Caribbean immigrant populations in West and Southwest Philadelphia Chinese immigrants in Chinatown and City Center Southeast Asian in Southwest Philadelphia Philadelphians with low incomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits counseling Community outreach Rental assistance Tax preparation
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater Philadelphia Community Alliance (lead) Benefits Data Trust Campaign for Working Families Community Legal Services Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association (SEAMAAC) Coalition Unity in the Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Philadelphia Philadelphians with low incomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Benefits counseling Housing counseling Community outreach Meal distribution Legal counseling Tax preparation

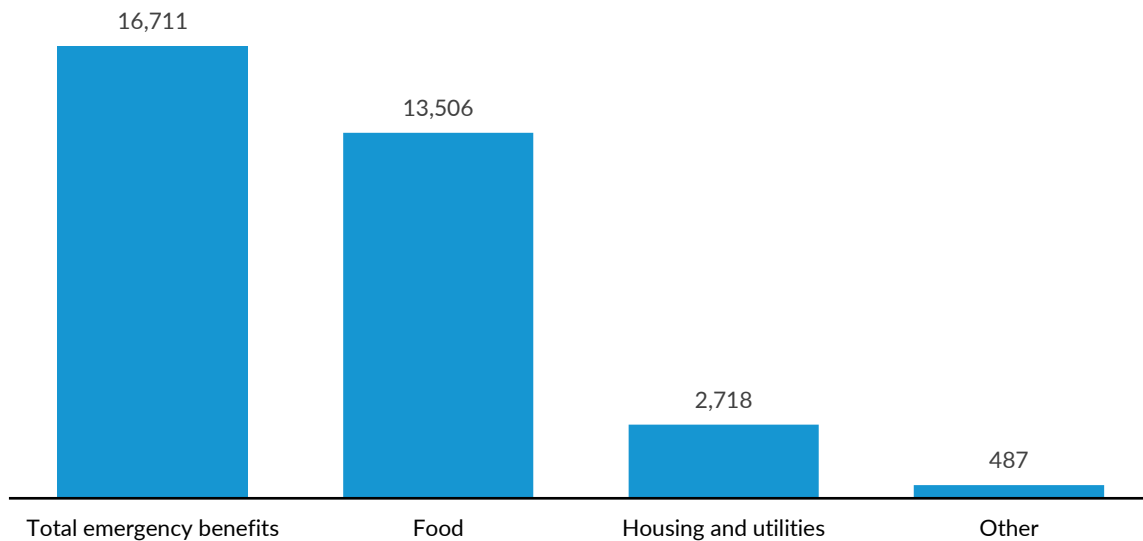
Source: Authors' review of program documents.

Overview of Year One Accomplishments

This section provides a high-level overview of the benefits and supports the coalitions provided in the first year of FSC. In total, FSC coalitions served 53,400 households throughout the city of Philadelphia in the effort's first year, connecting people with a wide variety of different benefits and services: emergency services, tax filings, income supports, and economic mobility services.¹²

Given the stress and strain of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the grant, it is no surprise that emergency assistance ranked as the top type of benefit distributed through FSC networks. Coalitions distributed nearly 17,000 emergency assistance benefits in the first year. About 80 percent of these benefits consisted of meals served or pantry visits for emergency food assistance. A more modest share included emergency help with housing, utilities, or other one-time support.

FIGURE 2
Emergency Assistance in Year One^a

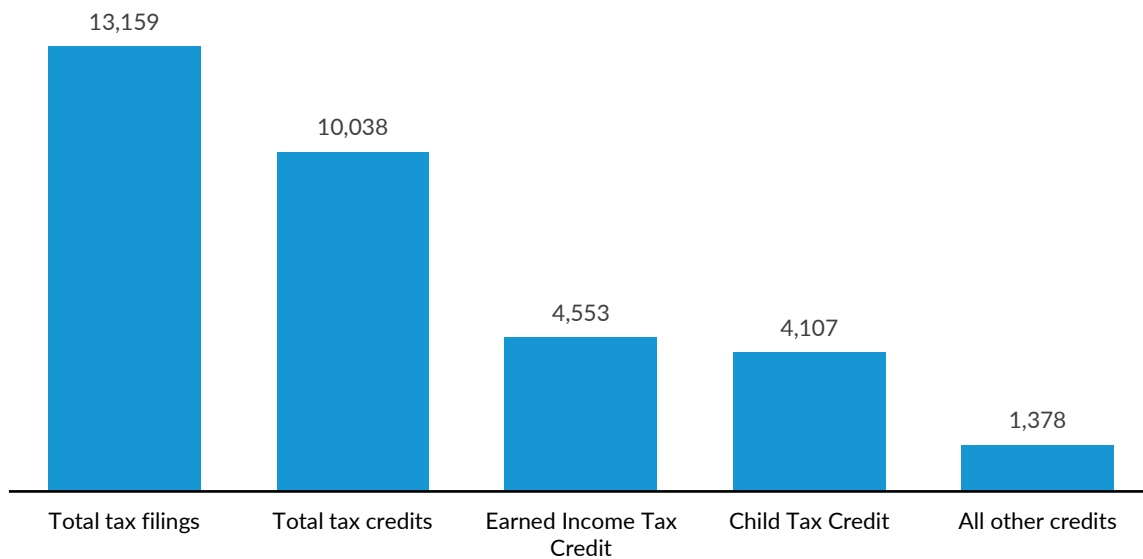


Source: Urban Institute’s analysis of FSC grant-reporting data, courtesy of UWGPSNJ.

^a Housing and utilities assistance refers to short-term emergency benefits and supports (figure 2); utility or home repair assistance refers to benefits and supports available on a longer-term basis (figure 4).

Because of its ability to put cash directly into the hands of people who need it, our tax system is a particularly important way to assist people experiencing poverty. Coalition partners made tax preparation an important part of their antipoverty strategy, assisting more than 13,000 low-income households to file their taxes and access more than 10,000 tax credits. The earned income tax credit and the child tax credit were the most common types, together making up more than 80 percent of all credits.

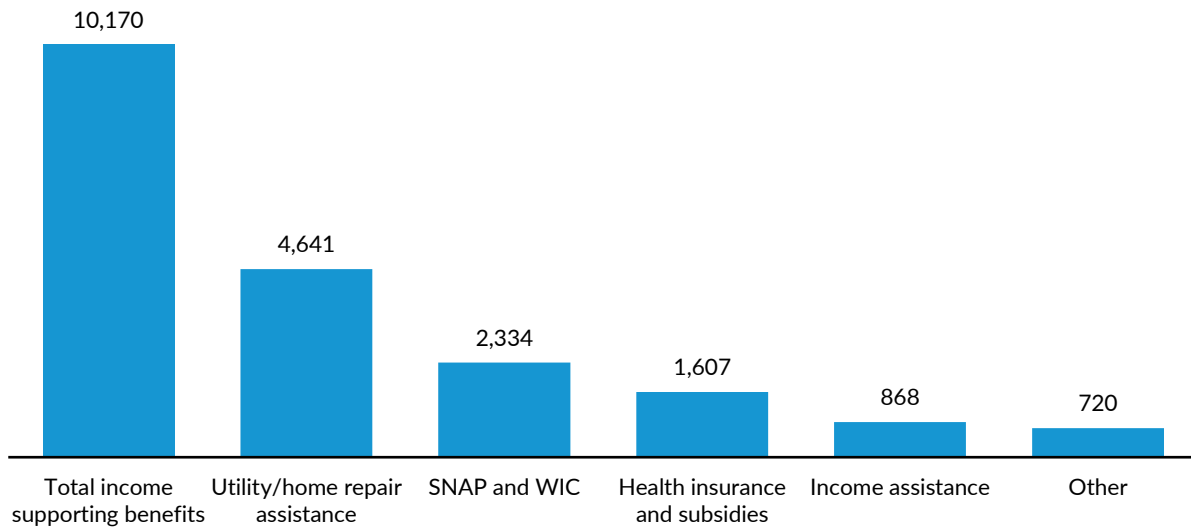
FIGURE 3
Tax Filing Assistance in Year One



Source: Urban Institute’s analysis of FSC grant-reporting data, courtesy of UWGPSNJ.

Both emergency assistance and tax filing assistance offer one-time support to struggling families. However, many families also need ongoing support to sustain them. Overall, FSC coalitions helped Philadelphia families apply to more than 10,000 ongoing income-supporting benefits, ranging from utility assistance to nutritional assistance to health insurance to income assistance like unemployment benefits and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance.

FIGURE 4
Income Supporting Benefits in Year One

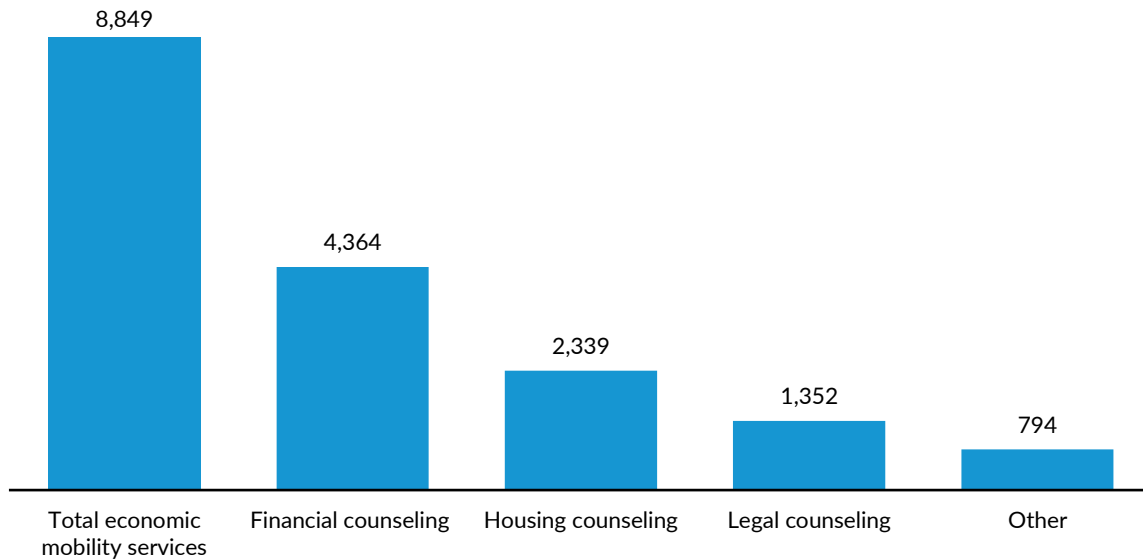


Source: Urban Institute’s analysis of FSC grant-reporting data, courtesy of UWGPSNJ.

Lastly, coalition partners provided a large amount of more intensive, long-term supports to families to help them navigate complex processes over an extended period and plan proactively for their futures. These economic mobility services accounted for nearly 9,000 of the benefits and services FSC coalitions provided during the first year. Financial counseling was the most common of these services, followed by housing and legal counseling.

FIGURE 5

Economic Mobility Services in Year One



Source: Urban Institute’s analysis of FSC grant-reporting data, courtesy of UWGPSNJ.

Early Implementation Experiences

This section provides an overview of key aspects of early implementation. The four coalitions that received FSC funding had commonalities as well as notable differences in their experiences with early implementation of the effort. Notable commonalities included the long-term goal of lifting people out of poverty—though, by necessity, they typically reported being more focused on short-term activities and outputs to meet immediate needs.

New Activities

The coalitions all engaged in a range of new activities, both collaboratively and as individual organizations, that contributed to improved client engagement and service delivery. Table 1 provides a snapshot of new activities coalition partners engaged in.

ACTIVITIES WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

- **Outreach.** In all coalitions, at least some partners used FSC funds to engage in outreach around their own organization’s services. This included funding dedicated staff for door-to-

door canvassing or community engagement specialists, mailers to previous clients, social media outreach, and in-person events.

- **Increased direct service capacity to fill urgent needs.** All four coalitions used Promise funding to expand direct service capacity, which was particularly crucial given immediate service capacity needs because of COVID-19. This included hiring additional intake staff and case managers. Staff at organizations across multiple coalitions stressed the importance of accommodating the significant spike in services needed in the communities they served during the pandemic. And coalitions used the grant to meet the needs of specific populations during the pandemic. For instance, one coalition used FSC funds to ramp up in-person services targeting older adults, people with disabilities, and people who do not speak English, who all faced additional barriers to accessing services. Another example of filling in COVID-19-induced gaps was that, with fewer volunteer tax preparers working at free tax sites, Promise funding allowed organizations to hire extra staff to fill this gap.
- **Increased capacity for intensive service delivery.** Staff in multiple coalitions described using the funding to provide intensive support clients needed to get access to benefits. They emphasized that many of the services they offer are not one-off and require ongoing and intensive support. For instance, staff within one organization described how having additional capacity allowed them to spend more time on each client, which was especially important when working with non-English speakers because often additional follow-up and translation with these clients is necessary to locate documentation for benefit applications. And some staff described allocating funding for staff hours to provide intensive legal assistance for clients, including multiple contacts over several months, to connect them with benefits. In many cases, these intensive supports provide clients with great long-term value—for example when legal assistance leads to a client getting long-term disability benefits or housing assistance.
- **New services.** FSC grants funded new services at several organizations across the coalitions. One organization mentioned that they started offering gift cards to help clients meet their needs during the many emergencies clients experienced in the pandemic. Similarly, several organizations created direct client assistance funds to help families with urgent needs who may not qualify for benefits. Organizations in two coalitions added Volunteer Income Tax Preparation (VITA) sites, increasing the coalitions' reach. And one coalition added entirely new benefits access services.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

- **New tools and technology.** All coalitions developed new tools and technologies, though these tools varied in how they were used to support collaboration. One coalition developed a new data system designed for shared referrals among partners. The platform provides a comprehensive menu of services that all coalition organizations offer. Another coalition created a common referral system housed on the lead organization's existing database. This system reduced concerns about data privacy and improved the partnership's ability to track referrals. Some partners at the other two coalitions developed or acquired software platforms, though their collaborative use was limited.
- **Formal referral pathways.** Coalitions had varying degrees of success in establishing and using formal (i.e., established and consistent) referral pathways. One coalition that developed a common referral database successfully used it collaboratively, though access to the platform was limited to staff with licenses to use the software. In the second coalition that had a common platform, some coalition partners continued to do referrals over email or through online forms because they found those pathways easier or more comfortable. A third coalition developed formalized, direct referral pathways across organizations through email, though these tended to rely on individual relationships between staff at each organization as opposed to established procedures for the coalition. And across the fourth coalition referrals remained informal, with case managers sharing information about partners' services when needs arose that they could not meet.

None of the coalitions had standardized protocols in place to universally assess client need for referrals at intake and capture these data for sharing. In addition, coalitions did not have a common intake process for documenting referral sources. As a result, it was difficult to gain a complete understanding of how referrals across organizations worked.

- **Service collaboration.** The coalitions and organizations within them differed in how and to what extent they collaborated closely on service delivery. They all implemented new modes of communication to support collaboration. All of them reported using grant funds for collaborative meetings. Some did client service coordination during these meetings, while others met to check in generally about their services and the grant. Meeting frequency and staff attendance varied. In one coalition in which tax preparation was the largest service, meetings occurred more frequently for that coalition during tax season. However, some staff in that coalition said they wished they could meet more frequently throughout the year to work on developing service synergies across partners.

- **Coordinated outreach.** All coalitions undertook some form of coordinated outreach. Two coalitions included partners whose role in the coalition was to organize outreach around the coalition's services. Some organizations added information about partners' services and contact information to their own outreach efforts. One coalition structured much of their collaboration around combined outreach. And one partner in that coalition had a widely circulated community newspaper that included information about events and resources in the area. They advertised another coalition member's services in their paper.

And crucially, all four coalitions derived value from collaboration. Box 2 describes some important ways in which developing formal relationships helped service providers in the FSC coalitions.

BOX 2

Value of Collaboration

The four FSC coalitions found that formal coalition relationships strengthened their organizations in significant ways:

- **Networking.** Staff from all the coalitions said that developing formal relationships with other service providers helped them understand Philadelphia's service landscape better, which gave them a detailed understanding of where to send clients to meet a need their organization could not. For example, one staff member said that, thanks to their collaborative relationship with FSC partners, "when we're speaking to our clients, we can really explain better what it is that [partner organization] does or what another agency does and how that would be of value to that particular person."
- **Developing a culture of collaboration.** Staff from all the coalitions said that their organizations benefited from the collegial atmosphere among coalition partners that working together through the FSC coalition had created. They explained that often service organizations are in competition for funding and are therefore less likely to share resources or refer clients. In some cases, this was a stark, fundamental change. For instance, one staff member said, "We no longer look at each other as enem[ies]...when [partner] see[s] us out there—they embrace us...But that was not what it was before the [FSC] came in. We were livin' and working against each other...so I'm saying that it has created a bridge that even if this grant go away, it will sustain."
- **Relationships with trusted community organizations.** Staff from several coalitions explained that it was a significant value add to have formal referral partnerships with organizations that had deep ties to communities in need of their services. Staff at one coalition emphasized that cultural and language similarities across this coalition made partners more comfortable referring across organizations, knowing that partner organizations would be equipped to assist their clients. Similarly, a staff member at a different coalition said, "I mean, there's folks that

may have gone to [partner] previously, but they kind of stopped at [partner]...they developed that rapport with that agency. And [FSC] kind of helped that transition to say, ‘You know what, like, we can trust them. Therefore, you can trust them.’” And staff at multiple organizations described having the ability to accompany clients to partner organizations, making clients more comfortable seeking services from other coalition organizations.

- **Capacity building.** Several staff members from different coalitions described learning and sharing resources with coalition partners in ways that led to enhanced service capacity. One organization described the FSC as having created a platform for learning from partners about how to brand their services around cultural competency with a specific population in a similar way as a partner had done. Several staff members described attending cross-training events with FSC partners on data capacity building, client-screening approaches, and details about coalition partner services. In several cases, smaller organizations and organizations with less collaborative history with their partners found capacity-building opportunities particularly beneficial.
- **COVID-19 recovery.** A few staff members mentioned that having a coalition to lean on as they worked to return to regular service delivery after the COVID-19 disruption was valuable. For instance, one person noted how being in a coalition helped staff understand the post-COVID-19 service landscape, including services that had started and ended since the onset of the pandemic.

Source: Interviews with FSC coalition partners.

Early Implementation Challenges

Coalitions faced some notable challenges during early implementation of the FSC. These challenges were largely to be expected in a new initiative that involved many new activities and ways of working together. The coalitions faced the task of meeting entrenched, widespread unmet need in the city while forming the partnership. They also faced the service upheaval and spike in need that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. And they contended with ongoing access barriers embedded in public benefit program designs.

We want to underscore that these challenges represent experiences up until October 2022, and coalitions have recognized many of them and may have taken steps to address them since then. This section should be interpreted considering this context and in the spirit of continuous improvement.

Collaborative culture

Some FSC partners noted roadblocks to building and maintaining collaboration, which is important because it may prevent partners from realizing the benefits of collaboration, like mutual capacity building, client service coordination, and reduced competitiveness.

- **Role of the lead organization.** Staff at some organizations felt that the role that the lead organization played in the coalition made collaboration more challenging. In one example of many, a staff member from a coalition with a smaller lead organization felt it would help if that organization had more capacity to provide coalition partners with cross-training about ongoing changes in programming at their partners. In another example, a staff member at a coalition where one partner played an outsized role in providing benefits access within the coalition noted that they wished that partner would engage more consistently with their partners to encourage tighter collaboration.
- **Relationships between partners.** Some partners reported challenging relationships with other coalition members. In a few cases, staff mentioned that certain partners were not as responsive to their contact or did not provide the resources or supports that they would have ideally wanted. And in one coalition, there was a sense among some partners that one of the partners had joined their coalition for political reasons and not because they offered sought-after capacities or had good working relationships with the rest of the coalition. This led to a strained relationship among some coalition members with that partner.
- **Clarity about expectations.** Staff from several coalitions said that they were not always clear about what The Promise's broader goals for the coalitions were, which made it harder to know how to collaborate with their partners. For instance, some would have liked to have received more communication about whether they were being held to a specific standard around poverty alleviation or if providing access to certain benefits or tax credits was more of a priority than others.

Administrative barriers

The coalitions faced several administrative barriers to connecting people with benefits. These factors are significant in that they can reduce the ability of organizations, no matter how smooth their internal operations, to connect people with benefits.

- **Application design and administration.** We heard from multiple staff members at an organization serving primarily immigrant clients that it sometimes took clients weeks to get information related to benefit applications translated via the city's translation contractor and

that clients required their translation support in the intervening time. One suggestion was that it would make services more efficient if the city would work directly with nonprofits like them to translate applications into foreign languages at the time that materials are produced. We also heard from people across multiple organizations that people often have trouble connecting to the city's interpreters for benefits access over the phone, which leads to heightened need for nonprofits' services.

- **Application and program requirements.** Staff across many organizations noted that clients often struggled with application requirements that seemed unnecessary. For instance, one program requires an unexpired driver's license, which some clients cannot access. And clients often must prove eligibility for multiple benefits repeatedly to different agencies, which reduces trust in government. For example, a staff member said, "We're still fighting against these barriers, every single day, for our clients. These barriers that, honestly, seem really silly, when you say it out loud, but it's a very real rule that exists. And so policymakers need to be thinking about policies that make it easier for people to access programs." Another staff member said that clients should be given more flexibility in how they can use benefits like food assistance to meet immediate needs.

Technology challenges

Staff members in each coalition reported at least some issues with technology. In some cases, this was a significant barrier to establishing and implementing processes for referrals and consistent client data collection.

- **Lack of capacity.** Some organizations had limited capacity to use new technologies. Staff from some organizations in one coalition mentioned that some of their staff members were unaccustomed to new technology. This coalition also lacked staff members dedicated to data and reporting, limiting their ability to train others. Ultimately, these limitations contributed to this coalition's choice not to adopt a common data platform.
- **Difficulties with data platforms.** Several of the coalitions experienced challenges using technology that limited their coordination and referral capacity. Members of one coalition mentioned that while their platform offers an organized, streamlined referral mechanism, it also requires training and licenses. Because each license costs a fee, licenses were limited. This has meant that only a few people at each coalition partner have access. Staff suggested that increasing funding to buy more licenses would increase the utility of the platform by allowing more staff to refer clients across the coalition. Another coalition experienced frustration with

a platform one of their partners developed that could identify eligibility for benefits using tax data and support benefit applications. Several staff members said that the platform did not record information accurately. This challenge limited the extent to which that coalition was able to automate the process of referring clients across partners.

Collaborative Histories

The FSC coalitions varied in the extent to which they had existing collaborative relationships before the FSC effort. All of them sought to formalize relationships further or develop relationships through forming coalitions. These histories affected the activities they engaged in and challenges they encountered early in their time working together as FSC partners.

- Only one coalition had existed before the FSC grant. For that coalition, the funding offered an opportunity to further formalize the coalition and identify complementary services across partners. This strong foundation allowed for faster adoption of a common referral platform, and existing trusting relationships meant service providers were comfortable referring to partners early in implementation.
- Another coalition had some history of formal collaboration, though not as a coalition. Some of the organizations worked together, and others were aware of each other but had no formal relationship. Organizations that had a previous relationship had collaborated on previous grants and outreach. The lead organization aimed to bring the coalition together to offer a core set of benefits access services to meet the needs of a broad population. The existing, though uneven, relationships across the coalition may have contributed to inconsistent uptake of the common referral platform.
- A third coalition had some history of collaboration, though it was largely informal. Many, but not all, of the coalition's organizations had informal working relationships before forming the coalition. A major motivation for forming the coalition was to expand these existing relationships. The relative newness of relationships likely contributed to the lack of a common referral platform and multiple referral processes across different coalition partners.
- And the fourth coalition members had no history collaborating on services but were aware of one another. The motivation for these groups to come together was to combine efforts of organizations with similar populations and geographies. This lack of existing relationships was reflected in the fact that they focused many of their coordinated activities on coordinated outreach and peer sharing—activities centered around learning about and from partners—and

did not develop a common referral platform. This makes sense given that developing trusting relationships and understanding of partners takes time but is important to do before committing to common processes.

Structures Creating Opportunities for Referrals and Collaboration

Coalition structure matters for collaboration. To maximize referrals, organizations within coalitions would serve the same target population, within a similar geographic area, and provide many complementary—rather than duplicative—services. These conditions could facilitate many referrals and mutually beneficial interdependence. In contrast, when organizations provide essentially the same services, or when they provide different ones but in different languages or in different parts of the city that are inaccessible to clients of other organizations, the members of coalitions may have little incentive to refer to each other.

The organizations within each coalition had a unique set of service complementarities. By this we mean how key factors like types of services each organization provided, capacity to provide those services, and the geography and client demographics to which they targeted services added value for organizations and clients to refer clients across partners.

Early in implementation, even in cases where organizations served similar populations, they often offered duplicative services, which meant they did not necessarily need to refer across organizations. This was especially the case for organizations that expanded internal service capacity with Promise funds, diminishing their need to refer out. However, at times service providers found the coalition model useful when a particular organization's services were oversubscribed because they were able to more easily identify where to refer clients.

That said, a few staff members noted that the usefulness of referrals depended on the receiving organization's ability to accommodate them. This was a concern when a larger organization attempted to refer to a smaller one. Organizations typically did not know whether their partners had capacity to serve their clients. This was a significant concern to service providers considering making referrals because making a referral to an organization that was not able to provide the intended service could adversely affect the referring provider's relationship with their client.

And there were examples in each coalition where a partner offered a unique service, which created an opportunity to leverage referrals across the partnership to those services. These services were generally most useful to the coalitions that shared a strong geographic focus and had shared

cultural competencies among partners to serve a client community. However, partners mentioned that in some cases a unique program that a partner in a different area of the city offered would be important enough to clients to motivate them to travel.

Learning and Impact

The Family Stability Challenge was designed and rolled out quickly to respond to acute emergency conditions in the City of Philadelphia that exacerbated existing poverty and hardship in local communities. The Promise mobilized the four coalitions on a short timeline to serve their communities and simultaneously pulled together a framework for beginning to document and learn from this unprecedented local effort. This section describes how The Knowledge Center, in partnership with a team of consultants and with the grantees, set up a common approach to reporting and factors shaping data quality and use in the first 18 months of the initiative.

Designing a Common Approach to Reporting

The Promise needed to move quickly to put reporting mechanisms in place to capture the work of the grantees. It went through an iterative process in collaboration with grantees to design and implement strategies for telling the story of the Promise:

- **First, The Promise's consultants reached out to all organizations across the coalitions and fielded a data-capacity assessment survey**, asking how many staff were working on data collection, what systems they used, and how they gathered data. Consultants also engaged in follow-up conversations with coalition partners to understand the survey results. The goal of the capacity assessment was to design reporting that could fit into existing processes to the extent possible. The capacity assessment highlighted the diverse array of data systems used by the grantees—in fact, several organizations were already using more than one funder-mandated system. This fact, coupled with a desire to reduce grantee burden, the nascent status of the initiative, the nature of year-by-year funding, and a desire to be a partner to its grantees, the Promise chose not to impose an additional tailored data system on the organizations. The Promise determined that the simplest way to structure reporting would be for all organizations to export a set of common indicators into an Excel file.
- **In parallel, The Promise met weekly with grantees**, while many of them were still working on putting their contracts in place. At the outset of FSC, The Promise explored the possibility of

having grantees share individual-level data. However, they decided to opt for aggregate reporting because many of the smaller organizations did not have the systems in place to properly protect and share these sensitive data. The process of establishing the first reporting template took about three months, in parallel to grantees setting up their contracts with The Promise. In June, a consultant offered two training sessions open to all grantee organizations to kick off quarterly reporting.

- **During the first year, The Promise staff compiled feedback on the reporting template after each quarterly reporting period and made changes to the template to accommodate needs as they arose.** Most of these template changes were communicated to the lead organization of each coalition. The Promise maintained contact with grantees through regular meetings and talked through emerging issues as they came up. Before kicking off year two, the consultants made formal recommendations for a final set of revisions and held another set of formal training sessions for the data point people at all organizations. The consultants also put together frequently asked questions for the grantees.
- **The revised reporting template included measures aligned with the first three domains in the conceptual framework (figure 1)—enhanced outreach and referrals, people served, and benefits and service connection.**
- **The Promise aimed to support a culture of ongoing learning among grantees and structured engagements to facilitate this process.** Toward that end, they planned a series of events and meetings for engagement around data. In October 2021, they held a webinar to capture grantee feedback on and interpretation of trends. Starting in January 2022, the Promise began quarterly reflections on the data with each coalition, as part of regular check-ins. Toward the end of 2022, The Promise also held a small convening to look at data with coalition leads and then a Data Walk open to all of the grantee organizations to reflect on the data. Attendees generally found these sessions helpful. One example of this sentiment was a comment from one grantee who stated, “I think the convening was huge—probably just for the morale. I think there was a lot of excitement but also getting them excited about the city-wide effort.”

Factors Shaping the Quality and Use of FSC Reporting

Assembling the data to tell the story of FSC was no small task. In their reflections on the experience, interviews with staff at The Promise as well as coalition partners revealed a number of factors that

shaped the quality of the data assembled, the incentives that coalitions had in place, and the ways that partners and the initiative as a whole could use and learn from the data in the first 18 months.

- **The seriousness of pandemic conditions and the size of the investment drove a high level of public interest in The Promise, and funders wanted to see its results as soon as possible—an acute challenge for a brand new initiative.**
- **Concerns about being able to show results prompted The Promise to embed target service numbers that were linked to payments in all grantees contracts.** For the organizations that were largely doing the same work under the grant as before, these targets were easier to set and were based on past data on benefits enrollment and service delivery. Target setting was harder for organizations embarking on new benefits enrollment efforts. In year two, grantees were asked to exceed the number of people served and services provided in year one.
- **The Promise initially defined a set of benefits and services, but this list evolved in response to grantees.**
- **Worried about hitting their service targets, coalitions wanted to report data on as many benefits and services as possible.** Many grantees discussed wanting to “get credit” for services or make sure that they could “count” all their services provided and wanting to “hit their targets.” This caused the number of benefits and services—and the scope and burden of FSC reporting to grow over time.
- **The incentive to maximize the scope of possible benefits and services to hit targets made the task of setting up a uniform reporting system complex.** Because this broad set of benefits and services had different intake processes that required different data to assess eligibility and report back to the original funders, it was difficult to report in a unified way for the FSC.
- **Grantees had a quick, often unfunded start-up period to put reporting infrastructure in place.** FSC funded many small organizations that did not all have existing data and analysis capacity. Many needed to hire staff or build systems to support reporting. However, the funding opportunity was not structured with a planning period for this setup work.¹³
- **Even after start-up, grantees had difficulty responding to evolving reporting requirements.** The Promise worked to respond to grantee feedback and adapt reporting to reflect what coalitions were learning and doing in the field. Evolving reporting requirements and templates meant organizations had to continuously update their systems for reporting. Not all of them had the staff capacity or data systems to do this easily. Moreover, reporting updates and

support provided to lead agencies did not always reach other coalition partners in a timely manner.

- **As a result, the quality of reporting data in year one was inconsistent within organizations and across coalitions.** Organizations had difficulty using the same unit of analysis. For example, some programs required reporting on persons and others in households. In addition, the intake processes of existing programs did not always capture the standard demographic data defined for the FSC or did not define elements in the same way. As a result, these data were often incomplete.
- **Basic reporting on a large set of benefits and services left little capacity to develop ways of understanding outcomes.** The FSC experimented early on with different ways to capture actual benefit receipt, value, or duration. However, grantees were already struggling with more basic reporting, and trying to follow-up with clients individually for the wide array of benefits and services was burdensome. Moreover, coalitions did not have the bandwidth to set up relationships with vendors and data systems to automate data collection on benefit receipt after application or experiment with how they could use existing tax data to tell the story of poverty alleviation. And yet grantees and other stakeholders were hungry to understand the difference that their work made. For example, one service provider explained, “We’re asking, like...How many people did you serve? How many referrals? But none of that tells you...who’s better off.”
- **Worries about hitting service targets may have driven organizations to focus on more one-time services.** Grantees pointed out that the need to maximize service numbers incentivized them to provide and count more one-time, low-intensity benefits and services (e.g., distributing food boxes or meals at pantries, preparing taxes) over more long-term, intensive case management relationships (e.g., legal aid, housing counseling, financial counseling). Some organizations offering more of these intensive services also worried about their work not being as valued as other organizations that could show higher numbers.
- **Having a backbone organization may help facilitate and support quality data collection and reporting.** Coalitions all had lead agencies that put together collective data for their member organizations. In most coalitions, this lead partner was one of the core service organizations, while one coalition had a designated administrative backbone organization playing this role that was not involved in service delivery. This intermediary had the capacity to manage data reporting for service organizations in the coalition and hired an independent technical

consultant and facilitated the setup of a common data platform to share of individual-level data across all member organizations.

Future Forecasts

Staff across FSC coalitions shared common aspirations for the future. Most staff we spoke with expressed an expectation and desire to continue working with their coalition partners in some capacity in the years to come, regardless of how long a formal grant partnership continues.

Predictions for what this future collaboration would look like varied. Where staff had been able to form personal relationships with people in similar roles at partner organizations, they felt that those relationships would sustain a culture of collaboration. Confidence that active collaboration would continue tended to be higher among staff at organizations that had more collaborative history, served more similar populations, and had more complimentary services. Even in cases where these factors were less present, staff felt that, at a minimum, they would sustain an improved relationship and more familiarity with partners' services that would allow them to refer out to their coalition partners more effectively moving forward than they could have without the FSC experience.

With that said, **everyone's top priority was providing quality services to as many clients as possible—through individual organizations or collaboration—and some expressed concerns that sustaining current levels of staffing and services would be hard without Promise funding.** Maintaining current service capacity was a particular concern of smaller organizations for whom the grant was a larger share of funding and for organizations that funded new services with the grant. Staff noted that **relatively short funding guarantees like that of FSC pose challenges for nonprofit service providers** because they must invest time and resources in finding, hiring, and training staff they may be unable to retain if funding lapses. This aligns with significant existing research evidence on how stable funding can support effective nonprofit operations (Hung and Berrett 2021; Jaramillo et al. 2019).¹⁴ Some staff also shared concerns about the organization's ability to maintain new services funded with the grant and explained that **it is hard on organizations when they are forced to stop offering services that community members have come to rely on** them for because of insufficient funds. Staff emphasized that client relationships are built in part on the ability to offer those services.

Some staff also thought that maintaining and strengthening service collaboration would be difficult without funds from the grant. Coalition partners who reported less confidence in active collaboration continuing tended to express more concern about their ability to sustain collaboration without the support of the current grant. Some staff members noted that collaboration involves staff

time for meetings, training, and coordination and that when staff turnover, new staff need to be trained on collaborative practices. All of this costs organizations money, and it is hard for organizations without dedicated funding for collaboration to justify allocating it away from service provision to meet clients' immediate needs.

Continuous Improvement Opportunities

Given the desire of FSC stakeholders to see the effort endure and improve, we focus this section on highlighting opportunities The Promise, the coalitions, and funders might consider to strengthen collaboration moving forward. We identified these recommendations through our evaluation activities and existing research evidence:

- **Coalitions should aim for a structure that maximizes impact.** Part of this is aiming to enter partnerships with organizations that share a common target population in terms of geography, demographics, and organizational capacity. Another key part is ensuring that activities of partners are mutually reinforcing. Coalitions would benefit from considering how to develop activities to make sure they build on one another and make the whole partnership stronger than the sum of its parts. Research shows that organizations with duplicate services may not refer to one another or otherwise collaborate as closely. It would be helpful for partnerships to clearly define roles for each organization and ensure that the services are complementary. This would then allow the four coalitions to map their services and develop referral infrastructure to support complementary services (Kania and Kramer 2011).
- **Coalition partners should focus on maintaining continuous communication.** Maintaining communication with external partners can be difficult for organizations facing limited capacity and a focus on direct services. However, evidence suggests that continuous communication is a core pillar of strong service collaboration. Grantees should maintain this focus moving forward, communicating about shared goals, roles, services, and reporting (Kania and Kramer 2011).
- **Coalitions should consider the pros and cons of assigning a backbone organization.** FSC coalitions that lack a backbone organization that does not have a direct service role might consider adding such an organization to their coalition. Backbone organizations can take pressure off of organizations whose priority is directing their limited capacity toward serving clients. Backbone organizations can relieve a substantial portion of grant administration responsibilities by taking the lead on data reporting and capacity building. They can also

coordinate cross-organizational collaboration by planning meetings and ensuring ongoing and smooth communication (Turner et al. 2012; Walker, Torres Rodriguez, and O'Brien 2021). The Promise could work with backbone organizations to meet all grantees' training and technical assistance needs. That said, it is worth thinking carefully about the role of the backbone organization to ensure it adds value and does not take a top-down approach to decisionmaking.¹⁵

- **Coalitions should consider designing and piloting a common intake process.** The Promise team could work with interested coalitions to design and pilot a common intake form or process that would include all these critical data across participating organizations. The process could also explicitly ask clients about whether they were referred from a partner organization, as well as incorporate screening for interest or need for unique services provided by a partner to more clearly identify opportunities for collaboration.
- **The Promise and the coalitions should leverage learning from early implementation to systematize referrals.** Staff at all the coalitions felt that the potential to refer across organizations to meet client needs for services they did not provide was an important resource gained from participating in coalitions. However, coalitions did not all have referral platforms that would allow for streamlined and systematized referrals, and even when such a platform existed, many staff continued to use informal referral channels. This made it difficult to capture the full scope of referrals—a collaborative output all coalitions reported wanting to expand and track. It would be useful for coalitions lacking such a platform to consider investing in one. And it would be useful for all coalitions to consider consistently using a formal, agreed-upon referral pathway.
- **The Promise and coalitions should focus on a smaller set of benefits and investing in enrollment and data systems that can track what happens after application and better capture impact.** FSC might start with tax preparation services, where it is clear what the size of clients' federal and state refunds will be and that this will be a one-time disbursement. Gathering these data—in conjunction with systematic intake data on household size and income—allows grantees to calculate and communicate how receipt of benefits or services lifts people out of poverty.
- **The Promise should produce formal documentation for FSC reporting as it evolves.** Grantees need documentation to refer to that clearly defines all the fields for which they are assembling data. Having written documentation ensures a minimum degree of consistency in the messaging about what fields mean and what data go into them. In addition, The Knowledge

Center could maintain an ongoing list of frequently asked questions to respond to common questions from the grantees.

- **Policymakers and administrators should prioritize developing an online application platform that supports easy and streamlined benefit application experiences.** Because many people with low incomes are eligible for multiple refundable tax credits and public benefits, public agencies have opportunities to work together to use technology—like online application platforms and shared data systems—that can help to cross-enroll people in multiple benefits. (Ambegaokar, Neuberger, and Rosendbaum 2017). Because the benefits application process and guidelines may confuse or deter some applicants, cross-enrollment can help reduce this administrative burden. Though nonprofit service providers like the FSC coalition partners can play important roles in facilitating access to benefits and credits, they are typically dependent on government at the federal, state, and local levels to set policies around how enrollment processes work.

To get the most out of an integrated online application, a well-designed web platform is essential. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania’s existing integrated online benefit application portal for major benefits (Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and child care assistance), COMPASS, has significant room for improvement in multiple areas that evidence suggests are important to drive benefits access. **Code for America’s Benefits Enrollment Field Guide assigned COMPASS the lowest accessibility score of all online enrollment platforms it assessed.** They noted that the platform has several design elements that detract from user experience, including low mobile responsiveness, onerous registration requirements, and long completion time. Using Code for America’s evidence-based best practices to guide improvements to COMPASS is among the most important steps to take to support benefits access for Pennsylvanians.¹⁶

- **Funders should consider more comprehensive and longer-term funding commitments.** The early experience of FSC suggest that funders, grantees, and clients alike may derive value from offering more comprehensive and longer-term funding commitments in future grants. The short time window that The Promise and the grantees had to establish service targets for performance monitoring and grant-reporting templates and procedures meant grantees were unable to develop their partnership and activities before establishing data and reporting requirements, which limited the utility of much of the data reported early on and necessitated midstream changes. Further, much of this intensive early work was unfunded, as it took place before grantees had contracts in place. A planning grant could have helped relieve the burden

of working without a funding guarantee and without having to simultaneously begin implementing coordinated services and activities.

A longer funding time horizon would allow partners to establish a working relationship and troubleshoot areas of friction while still having a grant supporting their work together. It would allow them to set long-term shared goals. It would also allow coalitions and organizations within them to make hiring, training, and programming decisions and to invest in solidifying and refining new activities secure in the knowledge that they will continue to be funded. It would reduce the burden on funders and grantees alike of learning new reporting requirements. It would provide more opportunity for continuous improvement and evaluation that could further strengthen grantee performance and drive sustainability. And perhaps most importantly, long-term funding would allow direct service providers to provide dependable supports to clients (Hung and Berrett 2021; Jaramillo et al. 2019).

Meeting the Goals of The Promise

As a future focus, a few staff members noted a desire to move toward more intentionally supporting mobility and other positive long-term economic outcomes for families. However, because many of their clients face immediate crises, they by necessity are compelled to focus their limited resources on meeting these crises instead of the bigger picture of changing a families' economic situations in a durable way. This points to the limitations of public benefits in reducing poverty that we noted in our contextual analysis report of the initiative (Coffey, Payne, and Sonoda 2023). Namely, benefits alone are not a solution to poverty. They often are designed to meet acute short-term needs and offer low levels of support and limited eligibility. Further, people often cycle onto and off of benefits as they attain low-quality, low-wage jobs. Given the depth and complexity of the challenge of poverty in Philadelphia, stakeholders we spoke to largely understood that durably reducing poverty for individual families requires comprehensive supports. As noted earlier in this report, The Promise's overarching vision accounts for these limitations by acknowledging the need for other efforts running in parallel to the FSC. That said, moving forward it will be important for The Promise, its partners, and funders to think critically about how to set achievable and concrete goals for what outcomes coalitions and individual service organizations are expected to achieve, establish data collection procedures, and make plans for measuring outcomes so that everyone involved can know if they are on track.

FSC organizations have realized substantial achievements in early implementation of the FSC—above all in increasing their internal and collaborative capacities to meet clients in immediate need.

Continuing to work on strengthening collaboration and engaging in continuous learning to improve processes will help them to serve clients even better in the future.

Notes

- ¹ Darell L. Clarke and Maria D. Quiñones-Sánchez. “City Council, United Way set Poverty Action Plan in Motion with Announcement of \$10 Million in Funding for Partnerships with Key Neighborhood Service Providers,” *City Council of Philadelphia: Council News*, February 22, 2021, <https://phlcouncil.com/city-council-united-way-set-poverty-action-plan-in-motion/>; “Philadelphia Poverty Action Plan: People Not Programs,” City Council of Philadelphia, accessed February 19, 2023, http://phlcouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PhilaPAPInstaPhoto_2.png.
- ² Clarke and Quiñones-Sánchez. “City Council, United Way set Poverty Action Plan in Motion with Announcement of \$10 Million in Funding for Partnerships with Key Neighborhood Service Providers”; “Frequently Asked Questions,” *The Promise*, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://thepromisephl.org/faq/>.
- ³ A Data Walk is an interactive way for community stakeholders to engage in dialogue around research findings about their community or program. For more information, see Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena (2015).
- ⁴ Material hardship is widely understood as the inability to meet basic needs, such as for food and shelter and resulting challenging living conditions. See “Measures of Material Hardship,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, March 31, 2004, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/reports/measures-material-hardship>.
- ⁵ “Media Coverage: Philadelphians Leave \$450 Million on the Table in Federal and State Benefits Annually” (press release), Benefits Data Trust, March 25, 2021, <https://bdtrust.org/philadelphians-leave-450-million-on-the-table-in-benefits-annually/>.
- ⁶ “Plan of Action,” *The Promise*, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://thepromisephl.org/planofaction/>.
- ⁷ Michael Shields, “The Economic Impact of COVID-19: Philadelphia’s Working Poor and ‘On-The-Edge’ Populations,” *Economy League: Greater Philadelphia*, March 25, 2020, <https://economyleague.org/providing-insight/leadingindicators/2020/03/25/covid-poor>.
- ⁸ For more detail on the evidence around key tenants of the FSC approach, see Coffey, Payne and Sonoda (2023).
- ⁹ “Policy Basics: The Earned Income Tax Credit,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), updated April 28, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/the-earned-income-tax-credit>; “Policy Basics: The Child Tax Credit,” CBPP, updated December 7, 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/the-child-tax-credit>; “SNAP Eligibility,” US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, October 1, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility/>.
- ¹⁰ Paul Schmitz, “10 Dangers to Collective Impact. A Look at the Worst Practices in Using the Collective Impact Approach for Social Change and Lessons on How to Avoid Them,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, December 6, 2021, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/10_dangers_to_collective_impact.
- ¹¹ Based on authors' analysis of internal grantmaking documentation.
- ¹² All the data in this section come from *The Family Stability Challenge Year 1 Accomplishments* published by UWGPSNJ (2022).
- ¹³ The Promise offered some supplementary funding for data in summer 2021, up to \$30,000 per coalition.
- ¹⁴ Susan Olivo and Brad Turner, “Building Long-Term Partnerships with Nonprofits to Scale Impact: Lessons from Sustained Funding Relationships,” *Philanthropy News Digest*, October 25, 2021, <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/commentary-and-opinion/building-long-term-partnerships-with-nonprofits-to-scale-impact-lessons-from-sustained-funding-relationships>.

- ¹⁵ Danielle M. Varda, 2018. "Are Backbone Organizations Eroding the Norms that Make Networks Succeed?," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, February 6, 2018, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/backbone-organizations-eroding-norms-make-networks-succeed/>.
- ¹⁶ "The Benefits Enrollment Field Guide: What the Online Enrollment Experience for Safety Net Benefits Looks Like across America," Code for America, accessed June 5, 2023, <https://codeforamerica.org/programs/social-safety-net/benefits-enrollment-field-guide/?att=a11y&j=PA&app=81&dev=m&scrn=12#explore-states>.

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