



CARE GRANT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION OVERVIEW: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO INFORM FUTURE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cultivating Access, Rights, and Equity (CARE) Grant Program was established in 2021, following the expansion of New Jersey's Paid Family and Medical Leave program in 2019 and the passing of the state's Earned Sick Leave law in 2018. Legislation directed the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOLE) to fund community-based organizations (CBOs) to conduct outreach and education on paid family and medical leave, and to establish a multilingual outreach program for English language learners.

Through the CARE Grant Program, NJDOLE aims to address awareness gaps among hard-to-reach workers through partnerships with grantees. Since launch, the CARE Grant Program has evolved into a statewide partnership model, leveraging trusted local organizations to reach workers and employers in their preferred languages.

This memo summarizes findings from the first phase of the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development's multi-year evaluation of the CARE Grant Program. The research draws on interviews with NJDOLE staff and community advocates from the New Jersey Time to Care Coalition, a review of CARE Notices of Grant Opportunity, and observations of grantee training sessions and meetings. Several key insights emerged from this first phase of research, including:

- **The CARE Grant Program's design aims to leverage CBOs' trusted relationships** to facilitate outreach to workers who may be unaware of or unable to access worker benefits.
- **NJDOLE demonstrated adaptability** by modifying administrative systems, including its grants management platform, to best support a diverse set of grantees, tailoring the platform within system constraints.
- **The CARE Grant Program's trust-based model provides grantees with discretion** to tailor outreach strategies, supported by robust technical assistance and training from NJDOLE.
- **The CARE Grant Program emphasizes collaboration** through the design of the grant structure and through activities embedded in training and quarterly meetings.

Early findings from interviews and observations suggest that these design and implementation strategies supported grantees in carrying out their outreach and education activities. Future phases of the evaluation will explore program outcomes and stakeholder experiences to inform ongoing improvement and sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Prior research shows awareness of worker benefits is low among low-wage and immigrant workers (Rankin & Lew, 2018). This lack of awareness limits workers' ability to access benefits and exercise their rights, even when protections are legally available.

In February 2019, New Jersey expanded its Paid Family and Medical Leave program through legislation enacted by the state legislature. The New Jersey Time to Care Coalition led advocacy for policies supporting working families, including this legislation, which also required NJDOL to partner with CBOs to educate workers about their rights and benefits.

In response, NJDOL's Office of Strategic Outreach and Partnerships developed the CARE Grant Program, which funds CBOs to provide culturally and linguistically relevant outreach. CARE Grant Program outreach currently covers Paid Family and Medical Leave, Unemployment Insurance, and workers' rights protections, including Earned Sick Leave and the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. The goal of the program is to increase awareness and access to worker benefits and protections among low-wage workers, diverse racial and social groups, parents and caregivers, and employers in targeted industries.

In 2025, NJDOL contracted with the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, to conduct a multi-phase evaluation of the CARE Grant Program. This memo presents findings from the first phase of the evaluation, which focuses on program design and early implementation rather than outcomes. Methods included semi-structured interviews with three NJDOL staff and two community advocate representatives from the New Jersey Time to Care Coalition, a review of Notices of Grant Opportunities (FY 2022–2025), and observations of select training and technical assistance sessions.¹

KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORTED OUTREACH TO UNDERSERVED WORKERS

The CARE Grant Program's design reflects NJDOL's view that CBOs are the most effective messengers about New Jersey's worker benefits and protections. Research suggests that CBOs are effective at delivering information about public benefits and labor standards, leveraging shared identities with community members and trust with the communities they serve (Chau et al., 2023; Hahn et al., 2023; Deutsch & Gerstein, 2023; Ripkey et al., 2024).

CARE Grant Program staff shared that CBOs were successful in reaching priority populations and providing information on worker benefits and protections, especially to individuals previously unaware of their eligibility. Staff noted that participating CBOs strengthened their knowledge of state benefit programs over time, enabling them to better assist workers with applications and claims. Language access was viewed as integral to this work, as CBO representatives can communicate with workers in their primary languages.

During interviews, community advocates emphasized the importance of the state's role in coordinating these partnerships, describing NJDOL and its partners as an essential resource for helping workers access benefits and protections.

¹ For the first phase of the evaluation, Heldrich Center researchers focused on state staff and advocacy group representatives' perspectives; no grantees or workers were interviewed.

2. ADAPTABILITY AND TRUST STRENGTHENED THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CARE GRANT PROGRAM

Implementing the CARE Grant Program required NJDOL to balance administrative structure with flexibility for community-based partners. Staff described achieving this balance by customizing the state's grant management system and entrusting grantees with discretion to tailor activities to local needs.

2A. CUSTOMIZING SYSTEMS SUPPORTED COMMUNITY-BASED GRANTMAKING

At launch, NJDOL adapted its administrative processes to allow organizations of different sizes, structures, and experience levels to participate in state-community partnerships. NJDOL customized its primary grants management platform to handle applications, contracts, and payments electronically through NJSTART. Implementing these changes required coordination across finance, accounting, and legal teams to support multiple funding streams and diverse grant activities. Staff explained that these changes reduced administrative burden and were essential to enabling a broader range of organizations to participate and tailor outreach to local needs. These changes reflect research on best practices for streamlining administrative systems, standardizing data, and preserving institutional knowledge (Fixsen & Blase, 2009; Metz & Bartley, 2012).

2B. TRUST AND DESIGN EMPOWERED GRANTEE FLEXIBILITY

The CARE Grant Program centers on trust in CBOs' expertise. Organizations are given flexibility to select partners and participate through an open proposal process. NJDOL noted that since CBOs are experts in engaging their communities, they are offered a degree of autonomy. As one NJDOL staff member said, "We leave it up to them, because we trust their expertise and the work that they do in their communities."

Staff noted that they tried to demonstrate trust by allowing grantees to modify work plans and contract deliverables, and to adapt outreach strategies in real time based on community needs. NJDOL staff described growing trust between grantees and NJDOL, which has enabled feedback loops that have supported adaptive implementation.

3. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE SUPPORTED GRANTEE CAPACITY

The CARE Grant Program was designed to include technical assistance throughout the grant life cycle. Program staff emphasized that offering this support requires significant time and resources, but it is essential for first-time grantees and smaller CBOs. As one program staff member noted, "We're very hands-on with technical assistance."

Research shows that ongoing technical assistance is critical for grantees to deliver effective and sustainable services (Scott et al., 2022). Staff provided pre- and post-award technical assistance tailored to grantees' experience and needs. This support was intended to strengthen grantees' ability to help workers navigate benefits claims processes, which research has shown can increase participation in public benefits (Finkelstein & Notowidigdo, 2018). Over time, CARE Grant Program staff have assumed a more active support role, serving as a first point of contact for guidance, troubleshooting, and referrals to subject-matter experts as needed.

The Heldrich Center observed that the program offered structured training with simultaneous Spanish interpretation, ongoing guidance on program operations and reporting, and direct support to help grantees navigate challenges and stay informed about CARE Grant Program-covered programs.

4. COLLABORATION STRENGTHENED CARE GRANT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The CARE Grant Program was designed to foster collaboration in two distinct ways: through the grant structure itself, and through program activities and convenings.

4A. COLLABORATION THROUGH DEFINED GRANT STRUCTURE

The program included a formal grant structure called **collaboratives** in which multiple CBOs operate as a unit. Within each collaborative, a lead agency manages reporting, funds, and administrative tasks while supporting subgrantees. This approach was intended to support smaller CBOs with deep local reach but limited administrative capacity. Staff described structuring the grant to include collaboratives to expand the program's reach and engage diverse worker populations. Prior research shows that larger CBOs can strengthen smaller partners by sharing administrative and technical resources (Motes & Hess, 2007; Patel & Fisk, 2018).

4B. COLLABORATION THROUGH PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AND CONVENINGS

The program fostered a spirit of collaboration through trainings and quarterly meetings of grantees. Heldrich Center researchers observed that NJDOL designed these sessions to gather feedback, promote peer learning, and strengthen relationships among grantees. One community advocate noted, "The grant structure really brings grantees together."

The CARE Grant Program also encouraged two-way communication between NJDOL and its partners to ensure that the program reflected the experiences and linguistic diversity of New Jersey's workforce. For example, researchers observed grantees providing feedback on updates to the online benefits portal, including question phrasing, usability, and translations. These contributions helped the program better meet worker needs.

IMPLICATIONS

New Jersey's CARE Grant Program offers a model for community-state partnerships that leverage CBOs' knowledge and expertise to deliver outreach on workers' benefits and rights. Key elements of this approach include flexibility that allows grantees to tailor outreach strategies and gathering feedback from grantees. Early evidence suggests that flexible grant design, tailored administrative systems, and ongoing technical support may lower participation barriers for smaller, grassroots organizations.

Together, these elements illustrate a partnership-based implementation model that other states could adapt to their specific context. Embedding continuous learning into routine grant activities may support more effective program delivery while improving access to worker benefits.

NEXT STEPS

Building on Phase 1, the Heldrich Center will next engage grantees, employers, workers, and CARE Grant Program beneficiaries to examine program implementation and outcomes. Subsequent phases of the evaluation include the following:

- **Conduct an organizational capacity assessment** to examine CARE grantees' experiences partnering with the state, the support received from CARE Grant Program staff, experiences operating as part of a collaborative, and perceptions of flexibility within the grant.

- **Conduct an employer engagement assessment** to explore employers' roles in promoting CARE Grant Program-covered programs, the technical assistance they require, and how employer participation influences program accessibility for workers.
- **Conduct an impact assessment** to evaluate the effects of the CARE Grant Program on beneficiaries and to collect recommendations for increasing awareness, understanding, and use of worker rights and benefits.
- **Compare administrative data** on paid leave benefits with CARE Grant Program activities to assess potential relationships between outreach activities and benefit participation.
- **Review other NJDOL initiatives** aimed at increasing awareness of worker benefits and protections to understand how they impact the CARE Grant Program's outcomes, including the New Jersey Paid Leave Navigator Pilot in Mercer County.

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