



ADVANCING THE ECONOMIC SECURITY OF WOMEN THROUGH EQUITABLE COMMUNITY

ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

Cynthia Estremera Gauthier, Equity & Engagement Lead, Strategy Arts,

Diane Cornman-Levy, Executive Director, WOMEN'S WAY,

Tashell Stevenson, Women's Economic Security Initiative (WESI)

Elizabeth Guman, Director, Strategy Arts

SUMMARY

In the fall of 2017, WOMEN'S WAY partnered with Strategy Arts, a collective impact and community engagement firm, to launch the Women's Economic Security Initiative (WESI), a long-term, systems-level collective initiative centered around the shared vision that all women in the Philadelphia region will attain financial well-being for themselves and their families. During the planning of the launch, both organizations designed an equitable process for engaging women as lived experience experts. The purpose was to intentionally include those most impacted by the issue and who have the greatest understanding of structural inequities, in the development of the solutions that will effectively advance the vision of the initiative. This article describes the process for setting up the infrastructure for an initiative that prioritizes its work with an intersectional lens and challenges how white supremacy is inherently found in philanthropic and nonprofit culture. The work with WESI became an opportunity to innovate



how a collective impact initiative can apply racial equity as one of its guiding principles and create lasting systems change shaped by the women who the initiative is meant to impact.

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN'S WAY is the leading nonprofit agency in the Greater Philadelphia region dedicated to the advancement of women, girls, and gender equity. Since its founding 43 years ago, WOMEN'S WAY has seeded, supported, and led an array of collaborative efforts to advance opportunities for women and girls. In fall 2017, WOMEN'S WAY launched the Women's Economic Security Initiative (WESI), a long-term, systems-level collective initiative centered around the shared vision that all women in the Philadelphia region attain financial well-being for themselves and their families. WOMEN'S WAY understands that poverty is a determinant of health outcomes, educational attainment, housing opportunities and other outcomes for Philadelphia families, and this is preventing our city from achieving true economic vitality. With the understanding that no one organization or sector alone can solve this deep-rooted issue, WESI brings together government, nonprofits, philanthropy, business, and women with the lived experience of economic insecurity around a common agenda and aligned activities. Using the collective impact framework, the WESI network identifies critical system gaps, enhances the coordination and capacity of organizations doing promising work, and builds a community committed to data-driven learning. As the backbone of this effort, WOMEN'S WAY guides vision and strategy, supports aligned activities, builds public will, and mobilizes funding.

Demonstrated in the theory of change and key to an approach to tackling the issue is the centering of the voices of women with lived experiences of economic insecurity. It is essential to communicate that those most impacted by the issue at hand have the greatest understanding of the root causes and structural inequities, and are critical to designing solutions that will effectively advance the economic status of women and their families. As such, WOMEN’S WAY, with the guidance of Strategy Arts, designed an equitable process for engaging women as lived experience experts¹. Strategy Arts is a planning firm that offers support in collective impact and meeting facilitation. They also specialize in equitable community engagement, where equity is the basis, or framework, used to ensure and actively eliminate barriers found in traditional community engagement efforts. They have supported WOMEN’S WAY in establishing WESI’s infrastructure as a collective impact and have done so for other local and national initiatives working to solve greater societal issues. WOMEN’S WAY and Strategy Arts collaboratively designed the process for WESI that includes four key elements: Backbone Commitment, Building Trust, Sharing Power, and a Rich Learning Environment. Each element reinforces the other and all are essential to implementing equitable community engagement that allowed WESI to realize real impact.

INTERSECTIONAL LENS TO COUNTER WHITE SUPREMACY

To begin, it is important to understand the context and history for why equity in community engagement is essential, but it is even more important to understand why systemic structures make racial equity a necessity in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The term “equity” is a trending topic in current culture, and while the conversations and actions around it

are necessary, many times there is a lack of understanding systemic racism which prevents action and change from having impactful results. A powerful and often “invisible” force maintaining the status quo is white supremacy culture, “the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. It is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system. It is the glue that binds together white-controlled institutions into systems.”²

White supremacy culture has pervasively infiltrated nonprofit culture and is the foundation of philanthropy, which has often unwittingly perpetuated forms of oppression for people of color in society, especially those seeking programs, services, resources, or funding. In Sally Leiderman’s chapter, “Doing Evaluation Differently”, she explains, “white privilege and access to power [...] [influences] the questions we choose to ask, the information we trust, which findings we decide are important or unimportant, how we make meaning out of results[...].” (Leiderman 2005, 91). Looking at information through a white supremacist or white privilege lens reinforces inequities in decision-making and in our society while depriving communities of color from resources that would support their efforts to attain equity and power.

For WESI, or any initiative addressing systems change, to be effective, the partners involved need to be able to identify and interrupt white supremacy culture. Equitable community engagement is an effective means to challenge and shift thinking and behaviors by organizations that are grounded in white supremacy, to ones grounded and guided by racial equity and intersectionality. Intersectionality describes the experiences of identity that cross lines of race

such as gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation, and come together to impact one's experiences of moving through the world. It is important to understand the origin of the term as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who coined it, intended:

Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.³

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is now being utilized to support identity politics for many marginalized groups, and the ways in which several aspects of one's identity can cause them to be oppressed by dominant structures in a multitude of ways (LGBTQIA, disability, socioeconomic/economically disadvantaged status, et. al.). Without a thorough understanding of how white supremacy doubly oppresses women of color, it is difficult to change the "the trickle-down impact of those dynamics [that] results in very little investment and moving of the needle on systemic issues and especially [the] supporting [of people of color]-led efforts in communities"⁴. These concepts are core to how WESI put into practice equitable community engagement to provide support to communities of color in ways that challenge and work to dismantle white supremacy in the initiative.

Further demonstrating alignment with equitable practices, Tashell Stevenson, a lived experience expert, is collaborating on this article and sharing her experiences of being involved with WESI since its inception in 2017. Tashell Stevenson was first introduced to WESI as a participant in the Community Conversations, a meeting with community members intended to provide space for deep dialogue about WESI's proposed goals. Tashell Stevenson recalled,

I remember it clearly, as a group of women sat together on a night in December sharing ideas, having open discussions after the host shared the vision of all women and their families in the city achieving financial well-being. I felt an immediate connection to WESI because on so many occasions I wanted to be a part of 'something' big and WESI became that 'something'."

To realize WESI's vision and become what she and other participants were hopeful for, WOMEN'S WAY needed to be explicit about their commitments as the backbone.

BACKBONE COMMITMENT

WOMEN'S WAY made a strong commitment to an investment of resources needed to establish and sustain backbone work and to take the steps needed to prioritize involvement of lived experience experts from the beginning.

Commitment of Resources

Before launching WESI, the leadership at WOMEN'S WAY had a clear understanding of the challenges of equitable community engagement, as well as their own limitations in designing

and implementing an effective engagement process. There was no road map to do this type of work. As such, WOMEN’S WAY raised additional funds to build their capacity to design, implement and continually improve strategies for engaging lived experience experts. The funds were used for the following purposes:

- **Hire a full-time person** to direct and coordinate all aspects of WESI. A portion of the WESI Director’s time is allocated to support and build the capacity of lived experience experts to effectively engage and co-lead the different work groups.
- **Hire Strategy Arts** to provide services in this area because, as a Certified B Corporation, equity is reflected in their work and values. They support their clients beyond the call of duty by serving as a thought partner who deeply listens and fosters an approach of mutual learning in pursuit of designing processes that lead to the greatest impact.
- **Provide honorariums** for the lived experience experts who help advance WESI’s objectives and efforts by joining WESI work groups, presenting at conferences and attending meetings or convenings outside of the WESI work group meetings. In addition, funds are used to provide meals and on-site childcare at the meetings. The logistical support required to meet people where they are and decrease or fully eliminate barriers to engagement is a core aspect of equitable community engagement.

While some of the investment of resources was phased in over time, starting with staff and consulting support was critical to support the level of community engagement WOMEN'S WAY imagined.

Involvement from the Beginning

Equitable community engagement began with Strategy Arts conducting interviews where they explained the message of the collective to assess choices about priorities highlighted and the language used in the Common Agenda. These interviews were accomplished by meeting each woman where they felt would work best; by phone at 7:00 a.m. as they travelled to work, in-person at a night event, or during a lunch break. The goal was to exemplify that their perspectives were essential, and no barrier would exclude them from this process. This would then begin building their trust in WOMEN'S WAY and these efforts. The women's direct suggestions were taken and immediately incorporated through edits of the WESI Common Agenda to reflect their concerns and interests.

BUILDING TRUST

"One of the fastest ways to restore trust is to make and keep commitments – even very small commitments – to ourselves and to others." ~ Stephen M. R. Covey, The Speed of Trust

With the initial infrastructure in place, the next step was to build trusting relationships. To build trust, it is important to consider the value of transparency and the role of allyship, "an

active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group.”⁵

Transparency, especially as it relates to racial equity, works to build trust by creating openness and pathways for honest relationships and conversations with the ability to hold people accountable to their actions. For example, being clear about what an organization can and cannot do, and providing timelines, allows others to choose if they want to engage in a program or initiative. White allyship is about standing alongside people of color and supporting their efforts as they lead, continuously learning about privilege, and using the resources available to them to make changes that benefit people of color. Typical dynamics were at play with Diane Cornman-Levy, a white woman operating as the Executive Director of WOMEN’S WAY, a funding organization, and many of the community impacted by economic insecurity in Philadelphia were women of color. At this level, it was critical for her, and a white-facing organization, to begin to build trust through transparent actions and work to become an ally. It was just as critical for there to be trust between herself and Strategy Arts, as she worked with Cynthia Estremera Gauthier on specific actions for allyship.

Community Conversations

Following the launch, a group of lived experience experts was formed to continue providing input on the formation of WESI’S Common Agenda and its priorities. All the women included in the beginning of the process were included in this group, now called the WESI Community Conversations group. It evolved into a long-term empowerment space with a network of peers and became an entry point for women to discuss their economic security

struggles and successes and consider deepening their engagement by joining a WESI work group in the future.

When Cynthia Estremera Gauthier and Elizabeth Guman of Strategy Arts originally introduced the concept of Community Conversation to WESI and to other clients, it was to challenge the traditional models of community engagement. Most community engagement approaches are limited to what Sherry Arnstein (1969) refers to the informative stage:

Informing [community] of their rights, responsibilities, and options can be the most important first step toward legitimate [community] participation. However, too frequently the emphasis is placed on a one-way flow of information...with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation. Under these conditions, particularly when information is provided at a late stage in planning, people have little opportunity to influence the program designed 'for their benefit.'

Rooted in this approach is the influence of a system that rests on the historical and current accumulation of structural power that privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group. Strategy Arts' Community Conversation methodology challenges that system by establishing meeting guidelines, decision-making tools, and shared language that empower all voices, especially the voices of people of color, to participate and engage in deep, honest, and open dialogue that centers the voices of lived experience experts. The shift in the meeting structure begins before the meeting even happens. Participants are contacted in the method they prefer (phone, in-person, text, or email) prior to the first session to orient them to the

organization, its history and its current projects or initiatives. Quite literally, there are informal conversations to provide information to the participants, understand what they know, identify potential barriers to attending meetings and ways to eliminate those barriers, and learn about how they feel about a given topic or concern. These conversations support them in having background knowledge about the organization and goals, help them to feel productive in the sessions, and make for fruitful meetings that focus more on their expertise rather than long speeches about the organization. This enables Strategy Arts to start building a culture of trust before the meetings even began.

In the sessions, the tables are turned and the meeting flow and structure are designed specifically to empower the community to be the expert voices in the room, while the organization's representatives become the listeners. Not to be confused with voyeurism or to place the burden of educating about the community on the lived experience experts, this process is dignified by ensuring that leadership is present in the room to actively listen. These lived experience experts most often reflect on the fact that the Community Conversation space tends to be "one of the first times [they've] felt heard."

Tashell Stevenson distinctly remembered this experience of attending her first session:

As we all do, I had my own set of experiences in life as a woman, a mother, and as an entrepreneur. But for the first time in a long time, I was in a room full of women with very similar lived experiences as my own. Although all those things weren't shared vocally, they were shared emotionally. The atmosphere presented us with a level of comfort which allowed all the women to open up to one another

which later became the ‘norm’ in our conversations. And over time we began to establish and build relationships because of our commonalities.

Her experience is very similar to the experiences communicated by other women who have attended Community Conversation sessions and demonstrates how the methodology strives to create a safe space of empowerment and equity, specifically to discuss issues and solutions for a sensitive topic such as economic insecurity of women.

This deep connection is also indicative of Strategy Arts’ approach to supporting organizations in effectively engaging the communities they seek to serve. Generally, community engagement work is defined by the vast number of community members an organization can engage via conducting community surveys, focus groups and townhall meetings. Strategy Arts’ equitable community engagement seeks to redefine engagement efforts by having deep, intimate, and honest conversations about a topic a community is concerned with. This necessitates that organizations are ready to hold themselves accountable, mainly for assumptions they may have wrongly made about the community or harm they may have caused the community. This reinforces how they must be intentional and put in the hard work of deeply engaging communities, especially those historically marginalized.

In the process of being intentional, organizations must consider developing relationships with people, which sounds simple enough. Cynthia Estremera Gauthier recognizes that systems change happens one relationship at a time. “However, when those relationships have operated in the hierarchical method of service provider-to-consumer for so many years, this can be quite difficult, and it does take time.” Historically, too many organizations have operated as “saving”

communities or White Savior Complex, through the provision of programming and supports, many of which have not been filtered or approved by the community. This type of thinking and approach not only can cause harm but is reinforced by philanthropy that funds strategies to “fix” problems as defined by service providers and without input from those most impacted.

Alternatively, the engagement that happens in WESI begins with the process of relationship-building. In an interview with Colorlines (2019), Decolonizing Wealth author Juan Villanueva speaks of imagining the alternative of altruism where privileged people and foundations believe: “‘I’m going to share these resources because I have enough and in exchange I’m going to learn from someone and be blessed and influenced by what they have to offer.’ Understanding that if I ever needed something, it will come back to me. That circular motion of giving is much more deeply rooted in relationships and sort of accountability with community. And it’s empowering for everyone all the way around.”⁶ It is critical for all organizations to understand the significance of, and build their capacity for, developing relationships with community over time and eliminating barriers to identify and implement the right solutions. This also means that organizations must operate as allies, and not as white saviors.

One immediate way WOMEN’S WAY put equity into action was by inviting the Community Conversation participants to come to their annual fundraising event for free. This event is a major showcase and celebration of WOMEN’S WAY’s work, which traditionally has been centered on donors, funders and providers. Then most importantly WOMEN’S WAY kept their promise, continuing to build trust with people who are part of communities that have promises made and broken on a regular basis. Four months later the participants were all at the

event and included in ways that made them feel valued rather than tokenized. This action was a relatively easy one to do, but other times the actionable work of being equitable as an organization can be complex, as WOMEN’S WAY can attest to.

Culture of Vulnerability and Risk-taking

Vulnerability is core to building trust and being an ally. This begins with leadership of an organization taking risks from their positions of power by challenging white supremacist practices of power hoarding and the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort.⁷ To break out of this culture, Diane Cornman-Levy decided that she would enter into the first WESI Community Conversation as a vulnerable leader, searching for solutions to problems that she and her organization were admitting they didn’t have the answers to. Brené Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure”⁸, all aspects that clearly contradict white supremacist culture. It is also contradictory to leadership, an unstable feeling when one takes steps out of their comfort zone, and Diane Cornman-Levy did so on behalf of WOMEN’S WAY. She admitted, “We need to look deeply at how we’ve been doing things, not only have we not moved the needle on racial equity, but we might’ve done some harm.”

As the Executive Director of WOMEN’S WAY, the board expects her to design solutions and “fix” problems, to guide them in making decisions on behalf of others. This vulnerability of admitting that WOMEN’S WAY did not have all the answers left the organization vulnerable to criticism from donors, funders and some board members. She did not know the answers and

sought the expertise of the women experiencing the issue to help solve it, rather than from board members and donors. She also was uncertain whether this engagement would specifically provide those answers and that left the board, staff, and everyone vulnerable as well. But those were risks she was willing to take. “When WOMEN’S WAY launched WESI, I knew that the “old” way of advancing gender and racial equity was not creating the results we wanted. We needed to do something drastically different, yet we did not know what and how. Being in a place of uncertainty and admitting to yourself that you do not have the answers creates a sense of anxiety.” However, by choosing to keep the mission of achieving racial and gender equity at the forefront, rather than protecting the egos of leadership, it allowed WOMEN’S WAY to embrace vulnerability and lead this initiative with an open and empathic mindset.

Working in allyship with lived experience experts deepened the learning among all WESI members including, and especially, the Backbone organization. As a leader, Diane Cornman-Levy learned that to become a more effective leader who is fighting for equity, she needs to spend more time listening and allowing the women who have a deeper understanding of the root and systemic causes of inequities to lead, since they possess the ideas and solutions to achieving racial and gender equity. She learned that to achieve equity for others, she must lead in an equitable way and that means embracing uncertainty and risk and sharing power with those most impacted by the issue at hand. The end result is a culture built on mutual trust and respect, one where WESI members are able to work in solidarity to realize their collective vision that all women will attain financial wellbeing for themselves and their families.

Community Logistics

Following the first Community Conversation meeting, Strategy Arts led WOMEN’S WAY through a process to carefully consider how to prioritize access for lived experience experts to be able to fully engage in the cross-sector collaboration as a next step in building trust. One of the first results was a decision to move all WESI meetings to the nighttime to ensure maximum participation of lived experience experts. Strategy Arts was able to make this recommendation based on in-person interviews that mostly took place in the evening, given each lived experience expert’s availability. Many of them work during the day and evening meetings would support and encourage their participation. Holding the meetings at an accessible time was just the beginning of the kinds of logistics needed to support lived experience experts in WESI ranging from providing meals to childcare. At the same time, this decision introduced barriers for partner organizations engaged in the initiative that desired meeting times to occur during the day, presenting a major risk for WOMEN’S WAY in launching an initiative that desired cross-sector support and inclusion but held the lived experience experts’ access as the priority.

Nonprofit and corporate culture endorses and enforces white supremacist practices⁹ such as meetings that begin on time or meetings that happen during the “traditional” workday. It can be difficult to “unpack white supremacy culture— especially when it shows up in our organizations, in our homes, in our words, and in our thoughts—[and forces organizations to] transcend surface level analysis about equity”¹⁰ This choice and calculated risk needed to be widely communicated to all partners because it was a step toward operationalizing equity that also required partners to make that same commitment. WOMEN’S WAY explained how lived

experience experts could only meet in the evening due to multiple jobs, childcare arrangements and full-time work that would not allow them to participate in the collective during work hours. Gracefully, many partners agreed and followed suit with this logistical arrangement to accommodate lived experience experts at the table in an empowering way. However, some partners dropped once the meetings moved to the evening.

Making the decision to hold meetings during the evenings reinforced the need to compensate the lived experience experts given that so many women were working full-time jobs with organizations and companies that would not be partners in the initiative, therefore their time was unpaid. As such, WOMEN'S WAY in collaboration with Strategy Arts developed an honorarium structure that could equitably compensate women for their time. To ensure that they created an equitable structure, lived experience experts helped to design the key elements of the honorarium including eligibility criteria, process for opting into the program and honorarium levels.

SHARING POWER

"It is so much deeper than diversity. It is about equity, it is about a shift in ownership and a major shift in power." –Juan Villanueva (Author of Decolonizing Wealth)

Once a trusting relationship is established, intentional sharing of power needs to follow to sustain engagement.

Governance

The next step in establishing the initiative was to address governance issues. A cross-sector group, including lived experience experts, was formed to do this work. They came to agreements on how they would work together and documented it in a Governance Agreement. This document covered how work groups are structured and led, the make-up of the steering committee and how decisions are made.

For equity to be embedded in the WESI practices, it needed to be baked into the governance agreements. The governance document begins with a Commitment to Equity statement. Following that, there are several equitable practices included in the agreements:

- A required number of people with lived experience serving on the steering committee.
- A required number of people with lived experience as members of each work group.
- Work groups and the steering committee have co-chairs, with one being a woman with lived experience.

As WOMEN'S WAY continues to raise money for the initiative, a funding decision-making process was designed with a heavy emphasis of inclusion of women with lived experience. In this participatory grantmaking model, lived experience experts and other work groups members collaboratively decide how best to use and distribute available funds to advance the goals of the work groups. Their decisions are then presented to the WESI Steering Committee in the form of recommendations during which the work group and steering committee members engage in a dialogue to facilitate a shared understanding of the recommended use of funds. These

governance agreements provide the foundation to move on to the important work of changing systems.

Changing Systems – Our Own

The goal of WESI is to make systems-level change to address root causes of women's economic insecurity in the Greater Philadelphia region. After engaging in several meetings, both WOMEN'S WAY and WESI members developed an understanding that if they expect other organizations to be more equitable around women's economic insecurity, then the first system that needs to change is their own, specifically the operations, practices and behaviors of both WOMEN'S WAY and the WESI collective. With this collective realization, WOMEN'S WAY leveraged additional funds to hire Strategy Arts to design and implement an Equity Audit of WESI, the purpose of which is to examine their practices and policies, and discover tactics and approaches that will translate into best practices of operationalizing equity within WESI. The customized audit and resulting equity action plan are enabling WOMEN'S WAY and WESI members to change their internal systems and create more transparency and accountability to equity for WESI, the backbone, and for the collective as a whole.

One of the key systemic factors that was identified by the Equity Audit was the need to position and resource those most impacted by the issue as solution-builders and co-creators of strategies by sharing power. Under the leadership of the backbone, WESI members operationalize the sharing of power by committing to the following beliefs, practices and behaviors:

- **Provide leadership opportunities.** Each WESI work group has two co-chairs and one of them is filled by a lived experience expert. WOMEN’S WAY provides additional support to strengthen the co-chairs’ skills in designing meeting agendas, facilitating meetings, and fostering accountability of WESI work group members.
- **Provide opportunities to elevate the women’s voices** beyond WESI meetings through presenting at conferences and meetings, being interviewed for articles, and co-authoring articles/papers. WOMEN’S WAY commits additional financial and human resources to pay for women to attend conferences and help prepare them for the presentations.

“Centering the voices of women with lived experience started to challenge the way we think,” explains Diane Cornman-Levy. “Having our voices elevated helped us become more aware of changing our own mental models and changing our own personal narratives,” Tashell Stevenson agrees. She has her own wisdom about challenging and changing personal narratives to be able to overcome systemic barriers. She shared:

Economic insecurity is an embarrassment. We haven't been exposed to or taught how to be economically secure, so how can we achieve it? I saw my family navigate the system, it didn't work for them and I learned on my own how I needed to change it for me and my children. I knew I didn't want to go through what I saw them going through. Some people think if it happened to their family, it would happen to them. I knew that I wanted better for myself and had to break the generational cycle.

While behaviors are important to change internal narratives, it is even more important to ensure that the system that needs to be navigated is equitable.

Changing Systems – External

Central to implementing systems-level change is creating the theory of change, which is the set of behaviors and drivers that, in theory, will lead from the current state of affairs to the collective vision. WESI created a task force to design their theory of change that included lived experience experts. During the design sessions, task force members were asked to draw out systemic influences that drive economic insecurity of women. Through the actual drawings, the group wrestled with the concepts of “our” system versus “the” system.

It was telling that during the meeting a lived experience expert who has gone on to become deeply involved in WESI, Staci Moore, objected to the idea that it could ever be “her” system. She cautioned that this is a system that has consistently denied her access and she shouldn’t have to feel like she needs to take responsibility for a system that will neither support her nor embrace her as a woman of color. She distinctly feels like the system does not belong to her and that she is disenfranchised. Other participants liked “our system” as it encouraged them to own their responsibility in the system, especially as white people or as financial institutions, and take an active role as change agents. However, when this language was positioned at a Community Conversations session, there was a clear desire to not claim the system as “ours.” There were discussions about how the system is not one that women of color casually have the privilege of accessing. Gaining access comes with demanding work, heavy connections, and dealing with loads of assumptions about traumas and culture. It is extremely problematic that

many women work a several jobs or gigs and contribute taxes that allow the system to work, yet do not make enough to live sufficiently and provide for their families. Through listening to the lived experience experts during the theory of change development process, task force members developed a greater understanding that to change the external system they must change how they think and talk about “the system.” Changing both the personal and public narrative about women and economic insecurity became a critical component of WESI’s theory of change.

WESI has embarked on several initiatives based on their theory of change. All these initiatives are deeply informed by the lived experience experts who have become part of each work group. These initiatives are designed to make systems-level changes. Other systems changes have happened informally, as a result of stories told during work group meetings. For example, Year Up Greater Philadelphia, one of WESI ‘s members, offers an intensive, one-year program for college students ages 18-24, combining professional coaching, hands-on skill development and internships at some of America’s top companies. Being an active member of one of the work groups, they learned that they needed to use an intersectional lens to design educational programs tailored to the needs of students who are predominantly women of color. Their learnings led them to create a series of education seminars for these students to address issues that pertain to women, particularly women of color, in relation to securing jobs and career advancement. This separate group created a safe space for those students to talk about the racial and gender biases they face in the workplace and balancing work-life responsibilities.

RICH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." –

Margaret J. Wheatley

The final element is learning, which happens both formally and informally as described in the previous section. Collective impact is an evolving process, where participants take action, learn, and then take more action. For the power dynamics to change, all participants must engage in a learning process.

“At the Table”

Much of that learning happens at the table. A rather well-known allusion to the imagery about equity, diversity and inclusion, the table is still a literal aspect of meeting together and connecting, especially at a Community Conversation. The beginning of the meeting is intended to cultivate a safe space so that dialogue is uninterrupted as much as possible, and people feel respected and heard. “The power of safe spaces was this: Marginalized [people] could express, interpret and connect over shared experiences of marginalization and struggle as a community without fear of repercussion.”¹¹ There is a current wave of research distinguishing safe space from brave space for the fear of attempting to guarantee safety, and that brave space welcomes inclusion of all perspectives. Cynthia Estremera Gauthier explains, “While this is honorable, there are groups of marginalized people who have been systemically silenced and ignored who deserve a safe space without conformity, while people who uphold white supremacy have been given the space and ability to speak with ease and without discomfort.” She facilitates this safe

space as someone who has lived experience which prevents the group from having the responsibility or role of educator, about their culture, their beliefs, their strengths, etc. The inclusion of people who are present from an organization as a representative is drastically minimized so the Community Conversation is uplifted as a space where marginalized people, the community members of WESI, can speak without discomfort, without fear, and without the guise of repercussion. A set of meeting norms, or guidelines for the conversation, are presented and agreed upon by participants to support that safe space.

Generally, organizations have made assumptions about the communities they serve, sometimes to the community's benefit but many times to their detriment. Engaging in dialogue with lightly guided facilitation that is heavily informed by the participants' perspectives is a way to begin challenging assumptions that organizations have made about, or society has placed onto, communities. This works because lived experience experts' personal experiences are deeply heard, felt and valued. Understanding personal experiences is important because they are nuanced and more complex than generalized opinions of a full group. In one instance, the group directly engaged in an activity to look at the system around a woman experiencing economic insecurity, and then challenged the assumptions, structures and supports that were around that individual. This highlighted the problematic nature of long-held beliefs by financial systems, the media, and direct service organizations which helped perpetuate issues of economic insecurity for Black and Brown women in Philadelphia. The most vital piece of the conversation is the peer empowerment that manifests from connecting with other like-minded people in ways that are not traditionally nurtured or cultivated. Tashell Stevenson shared how "peer empowerment is

important to understanding what you're deserving of and a component of challenging internal narratives”, and this emphasizes the power of those conversations to positively transform or reinforce behaviors.

Part of the time is given to allow individuals to share their struggles. They may vent about systemic issues or failures to navigate the system, like low wage work, high unemployment rates, credit card debt, and the Cliff Effect—where one financially makes too much to receive benefits, and too little to provide for a family. Without the opportunity to share the barriers in one’s life, it is extremely difficult to expect people to jump to solutions. Then there is a shift from discussing barriers to being solutions oriented. This allows the solutions to be informed by what the lived experience experts directly encounter themselves. Bringing those issues to light are critical in an engagement effort that intends to be equitable.

CONCLUSION

“If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” – African Proverb

The process for equitable community engagement for WESI required Backbone Commitment, Building Trust, Sharing Power and a Rich Learning Environment. It is still a work in progress, but with a majority of the women who were at the first Community Conversation still active in WESI, it is one that has realized significant success.

Many nonprofits and initiatives know that deep community engagement is necessary to bring about the changes needed to have meaningful impact in their organization and in the system. The philanthropic sector needs to step up and invest enough money to build the capacity

of nonprofits to effectively and equitably engage lived experience experts. They should also directly fund the organizations that are led by people of color that have direct connections to the community, which can strengthen strategic partnerships. Diane Cornman-Levy calls her colleagues to action: “When [we] don’t do that, [we] perpetuate white supremacy culture by not inviting, not listening to, and not valuing the voices of the people who have a perspective that is critical to making real change. Philanthropy needs to partner with nonprofits to build their capacity to operationalize equity. The effort, contributions, and leadership of people of color need to be valued and compensated.”

When the lived experience experts are given space, opportunity and investments to lead, their stories are truly valued and validated. Then funders and practitioners need to listen and do their own personal work in order to deeply hear and learn from the stories of people with lived experience. Telling stories changes mindsets and ultimately the behaviors and practices of people who do not have lived experience. When the work is shaped by the connection between the person who has the microphone or the pen and the person who has a story to tell, it leads to lasting systems change.

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¹ Alison Homer, "10 Engaging People with Lived/Living Experience: A Guide for Including People in Poverty Reduction "(Tamarack Institute, 2019), <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Publications/10-Engaging-People-With-LivedLiving-Experience-of-Poverty.pdf>) Lived experience expert is a term that is being increasingly used to define the role of a community member or person who has lived experience that understands the problem and can create and implement solutions. "Governments, businesses, and non-profits are learning about how they can build on the grassroots social movements to end a [societal issue] that have traditionally been led by and for people with lived/living experience. Leaders across these sectors are coming together in a way that acknowledges the unique value and wisdom that people with lived/living experience bring to the table." 4)

² Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Practices," Dismantling Racism (dRworks), accessed March 3, 2020, <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>)

³ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* 1989 (n.d.), <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>)

⁴ Catherine Lizette Gonzalez, "'Decolonizing Wealth' Addresses Philanthropy's White Supremacy Problem, Offers Solutions," Colorlines, October 23, 2018, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/decolonizing-wealth-addresses->

philanthropys-white-supremacy-problem-offers-solutions) This is an interview quote from Juan Villanueva, the author of *Decolonizing Wealth* transcribed in this article written by Gonzalez.

⁵ <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/>

⁶ Ibid Villanueva

⁷ Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Practices,” *Dismantling Racism* (dRworks), accessed March 3, 2020, <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>) The following white supremacy culture references were sourced from Tema Okun’s article “White Supremacy Culture” and she gives credit to the work of others before her.

⁸ Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. UK: Penguin Books, 2012.

⁹ Heather Laine Talley, “White Women Doing White Supremacy in Nonprofit Culture” (Tzedek Social Justice Fellowship, August 12, 2019), <http://tzedekfellowship.org/white-women-doing-white-supremacy-in-nonprofit-culture/e-supremacy-in-nonprofit-culture/>). This article “[lists] characteristics of white supremacy culture [...] to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lily Zheng, “Why Your Brave Space Sucks” (*The Stanford Daily*, May 15, 2016), <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/05/15/why-your-brave-space-sucks/>)