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EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION: **THE JOURNEY OF HOW THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP GROUP REDEFINES ANTI-POVERTY POLICY THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCE**

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INTRODUCTION

In the often-exclusive policy landscape of Washington, D.C., the Community Partnership Group (CPG) at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) seeks to change how policy is made and implemented. The CPG, a peer cohort of activists with lived experience navigating or being excluded from benefits programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), embodies the famous quote by Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley:

“The people closest to the pain should be the closest to the power, driving and informing the policymaking.”

In 2019, CLASP sought to shift its work on public benefits to incorporate the perspectives and leadership of activists with lived experience navigating or being excluded from programs. This became the Community Partnership Group or CPG. This decision represented a new direction not just for CLASP, which wanted to change how policy was made and implemented, but an overall policy landscape that too often excludes the voices of those with lived experience. Comprised of individuals who have firsthand knowledge of poverty's challenges, the CPG works closely with CLASP staff to shape policy and advocate for centering people with lived experience in the policy advocacy ecosystem. The group's consistent collaboration rejects a deficit-based approach, which treats people living in poverty as a problem to be solved, and instead embodies an asset-based approach that values the insights and capabilities of those directly affected by poverty.

Traditionally, funding and policy decisions have often been dictated by external funders who, despite their best intentions, may not fully grasp the nuanced realities and strengths of those living in poverty. These approaches tend to focus on the limitations or needs of individuals without recognizing their existing assets and potential. An asset-based approach, however, recognizes and values the inherent strengths, insights, and capabilities of individuals directly affected by poverty. This paradigm shift is critical, as it empowers individuals as co-creators of the policies and practices that affect their lives, rather than viewing them merely as recipients of aid. Guided by a vision for community engagement that centers collaboration, the CPG aims to influence funders and policymakers to rethink how they support communities. Instead of imposing solutions, the asset-based approach involves listening to and learning from those with lived experiences to design interventions that are not only effective but also sustainable and respectful of the community's own goals and visions.

This paper is not just the story of the CPG; it is a celebration of resilience, a testament to unity in diversity, and an ode to the relentless pursuit of equity. It traces the CPG's journey from inception to impact and highlights not just what the group does but why it matters. This paper also examines the inevitable challenges and hard lessons that come with building something new and calls for a future where people experiencing poverty are at the center of the policy decisions that affect their lives. The

CPG believes that meaningful partnerships between allies and impacted people that reject classism, racism, and other harmful systemic injustices serve as the bedrock of all successful efforts to advance economic and racial justice. Through healing-centered relationships with community members, advocates and policymakers can advance policies that are both effective and equitable, sustainable and liberatory.

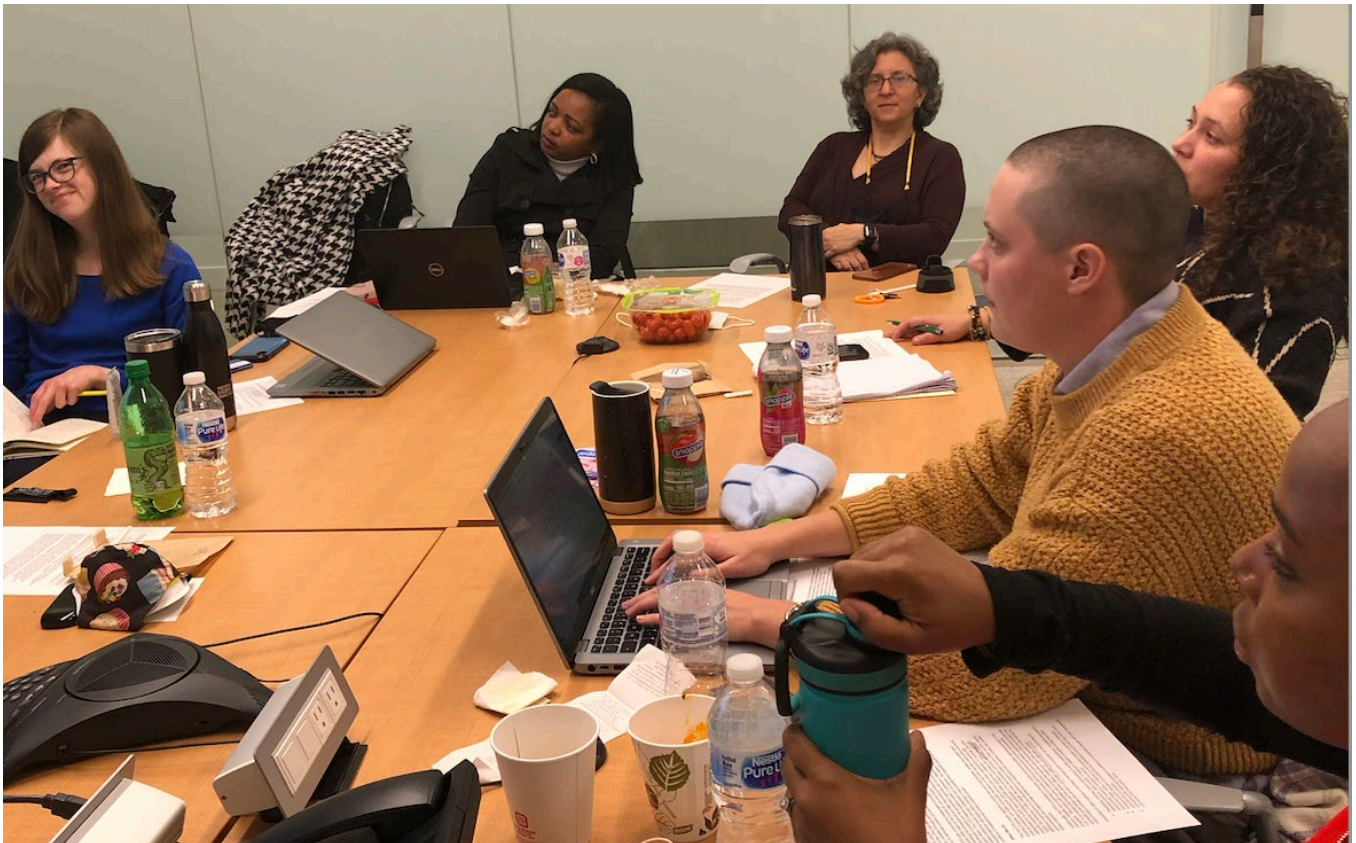
The story begins in 2019, when CLASP’s Income and Work Supports (IWS) team embarked on a journey to meaningfully engage people with lived experience in the team’s advocacy on public benefits programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, and cash assistance. The team’s goal was to weave lived experience into a national organization that wasn't grassroots but was driven by a deep commitment to inclusivity and empowerment. People with lived experience hold insights not only into the problems but also the solutions needed to enhance public benefits effectively.

(A note on the terminology used throughout: in 2024, the IWS team changed its name to the Public Benefits Justice team, or PBJ. When referring to work that the team did prior to the name change, we will use IWS. When referring to ongoing work that originated with the IWS team we will use IWS/PBJ.)



WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP GROUP?

The CPG is a diverse collective of activists from across the United States who partner with nonprofits, administering agencies, and policymakers to ensure that their work is grounded in the expertise of people directly impacted by poverty and/or anti-poverty policies. All members of the CPG have developed their expertise through direct experience with public benefits programs—whether through participation or discriminatory exclusion—and their ongoing advocacy to eliminate poverty and barriers to access and inclusion within their communities. The CPG was convened by staff on the IWS team at CLASP and independent consultants with the aim of dismantling the transactional and often traumatizing relationship between people with lived experiences of poverty and the government agencies and nonprofit partners designed to support them. The CPG rejects systems rooted in oppression, classism, and white supremacy and centers equity through collectivism and co-creation. The group’s members believe that achieving transformational, anti-racist policy change is only possible when impacted people occupy positions of leadership and share systemic power.



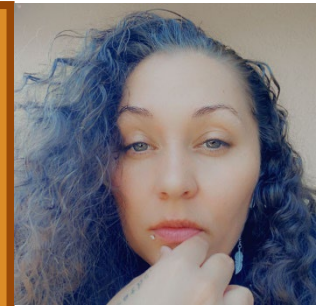


ALICE ALUOCH

is the director of membership and development at Global Health Council, with over 10 years of experience in technology, nonprofit work, health advocacy, and social justice across multiple continents. Before joining GHC, she was a senior associate at RESULTS, where she led grassroots expansion, developed partnerships, and launched new advocacy chapters. She also spearheaded efforts to amplify the voices of people with lived experience of poverty, particularly within the African Diaspora, through the RESULTS African Leadership Cohort. Alice has extensive experience in lobbying Congress on critical domestic and foreign policy issues and is the founder of Mfariji Africa, a nonprofit in Kenya focused on menstrual and reproductive rights for girls.

TAMIKA MOORE,

a New Jersey native, is the founder of VisionWorkz, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering LGBTQ youth. Her mission is to guide, inspire, and help young people realize their potential and worth. She works to provide safe, healthy outlets for teens to express their emotions creatively and constructively. Tamika has traveled the East Coast advocating for youth involvement in legislative changes related to education, teen programs, and poverty. She contributed to New Jersey's LGBT curriculum and is passionate about promoting core values like financial literacy and professional development to help young people feel confident about their future. Tamika also serves on the U.S Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service's SNAP Advocates Access Committee.



BARBIE IZQUIERDO

is an award-winning activist and national spokesperson with lived experience, focused on combating the exploitation of people of color impacted by public policy. She is the director of advocacy, Neighbors Engagement at Feeding America, and the founder of Community Driven Consulting LLC. With 14 years of experience in food insecurity and social justice, she has been featured in the documentary *A Place at the Table* and has used her advocacy to drive policy change. In 2022, she received the Global Citizen Prize: Citizen Award USA. Barbie is also a powerful public speaker, known for her authenticity in motivating action. She was appointed to the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition in March 2023 for a two-year term.

ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

The CPG exemplifies transformative engagement in social policy through a series of impactful activities and strategic partnerships. The group convenes at least monthly and often weekly, fostering a dynamic environment where members share new work opportunities, provide updates on ongoing projects, and strengthen community bonds. This regular interaction enhances collaboration and ensures that all members are aligned and engaged in a collective mission to influence policy and practice in meaningful ways:

- **Facilitation and public engagement:** CPG members actively design, host, and participate in a variety of public forums, including presentations, facilitated discussions, listening sessions, peer groups, and webinars. These activities are centered around crucial topics such as benefits access as well as broader anti-poverty initiatives, and directly impact public understanding and engagement with social policy issues. This is a way for the CPG to ensure that critical information reaches a wide audience, which enables informed discussions and advocacy.
- **Content development:** Members contribute to the discourse on anti-poverty policies by writing blogs, policy briefs, and reports. This work highlights the nuances of poverty and the systemic barriers that perpetuate it and positions the CPG as a thought leader that influences both policy and public perception.
- **Material evaluation:** The CPG plays a critical role in evaluating both internal and public-facing materials to ensure they accurately reflect and honor the lived experiences of poverty. This work is vital in maintaining the integrity and relevance of content produced by CLASP and its partners and ensuring that all materials are empathetic, accurate, and actionable.
- **Consultation and collaboration:** Through consultations with external partners, CPG members introduce their unique perspectives into various policymaking processes and practices. By incorporating people with lived experiences of poverty into these discussions, the CPG enriches the policy dialogue and ensures that it is grounded in reality and informed by those most affected by proposed changes.



HISTORY

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

While CLASP's partnership with the CPG has gained more attention in recent years, this is only possible because of many years of behind-the-scenes work conceptualizing the partnership and building trusted relationships. This section highlights the foundational moments and strategic decisions that have shaped the CPG's approach and amplified its impact.



2019: CONCEPTUALIZING THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP GROUP

STAFF FEATURE:

PARKER GILKESSON DAVIS

Parker Gilkesson Davis joined CLASP as a senior policy analyst with a background as a social services eligibility worker, bringing firsthand knowledge of the complexities within public benefits systems. Her deep understanding of the challenges and solutions in addressing poverty has been pivotal in steering the Income and Work Supports/Public Benefits Justice team's efforts to incorporate lived experiences into its advocacy work. Parker's leadership in forming the CPG has been instrumental in transforming policy discussions to be more inclusive and impactful. Her commitment to creating a space where lived experience is a cornerstone of policymaking continues to inspire and drive meaningful change within CLASP and beyond.

In 2019, IWS team members Parker Gilkesson Davis and Darrel Thompson recognized a void in how the team meaningfully engaged with people who had the lived experience of poverty. Drawing from Parker's firsthand experience as a benefits eligibility worker, they sought to lead their policy work with the expertise of those deeply impacted by poverty. This initiative was part of the team's broader goal to go beyond one-time engagement strategies like surveys and focus groups and instead aim for humanizing, transformative, and community-driven approaches that valued individuals' time and expertise.

Parker met Diane Sullivan, an activist and consultant with lived experience of poverty, at an anti-hunger conference. Diane's invaluable guidance helped solidify why CLASP needed to partner with people who have lived experience. Through interviews with key staff members across CLASP, including the executive director,

Human Resources team, and Youth team, Diane helped the IWS team envision how CLASP could actively engage people with lived experience. Diane outlined crucial considerations for meaningful engagement, emphasizing resource dedication, transparent partnerships, trauma-informed approaches, community authenticity, and power dynamics navigation.

Equally important was the Youth team's Youth Engagement Strategy, a three-pronged advocacy approach that incorporated policy partners, technical assistance, and an advisory network of youth-led community-based organizations. This helped guide the IWS team's approach, provided invaluable insights for Parker and Darrel, and offered a blueprint for authentic engagement with individuals directly affected by poverty and public benefit programs. The IWS team decided to create a national advisory council of people with lived experience navigating or being excluded from benefits programs. The structure, framework, and mission of the group would be co-created with its members, centering equitable engagement practices.

STAFF FEATURE: DARREL THOMPSON

As an Income and Work Support research assistant at CLASP, Darrel Thompson played a crucial role in the foundational discussions that led to the establishment of the CPG. His analytical skills and keen insights were invaluable in exploring new strategies to engage with community members authentically and effectively. Darrel's journey at CLASP set the stage for his future career as a lawyer working in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, where he continues to advocate for justice and meaningful change. His work now focuses on leveraging his legal expertise to impact public policy and ensure that the voices of those most affected by the system are heard and respected.





2020: BRINGING THE GROUP TOGETHER

FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP GROUP

Alice Aluoch, Delaware

Maryann Broxton, Massachusetts

Yolanda Gordon, South Carolina

Barbie Izquierdo, Pennsylvania

Jimmieka Mills, Texas

Tamika Moore, New Jersey

Diane Sullivan, Massachusetts

After thorough research and discussions, it became evident that establishing an advisory council (now referred to as a peer cohort) was the most effective approach. This council would allow members of the IWS team to collaborate with people who share their goals and have first-hand experience with poverty. The founding members of the CPG come from all over the country and were identified at speaking engagements and through recommendations. In interviews with potential members, CLASP staff assessed their commitment to anti-poverty advocacy; views on compensation; policy interests; and any potential challenges to participation, such as payment issues impacting their benefits or technological barriers, given the virtual nature of interactions during the pandemic. All potential members were compensated for these interviews. Throughout

this process, the team aimed to build a dedicated and engaged group that could effectively guide the IWS team's policy work. After initially reaching out to ten potential members, the team solidified partnerships with seven who made a consistent commitment.





2020: SETTING FOUNDATIONAL GROUP NORMS

In the first CPG group meeting, members recognized the critical importance of establishing strong foundational norms to guide interactions. Group norms set expectations for how members interact and ensure that everyone is on the same page and committed to fostering a respectful and supportive environment. The group designed norms to prioritize safety, confidentiality, and mutual respect. These guidelines were not merely procedural; they were essential in fostering a space where trust could flourish and all members felt secure in sharing their perspectives and experiences. These norms were not perfect, nor did they prevent all conflict; however, they were foundational to fostering meaningful connections.

Recognizing that the group's collective understanding and environment are ever evolving, these group norms are dynamic and can be revised and updated, as necessary. This keeps them relevant and responsive to new insights and changing conditions. Indeed, while these norms were first established in 2020, they were updated as recently as October 2022.

The CPG norms and shared values include confidentiality, cultural competency, and support.

THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP GROUP NORMS

- Confidentiality
 - Ensures that members do not share each other's stories or ideas without permission, fostering a secure environment for personal and sensitive discussions.
- Speaking in "I" statements ("What I heard you say was...").
- Cultural competency
 - Requires members to understand and respect diverse cultural backgrounds, actively learning from each other to ensure inclusive and effective collaboration.
- Respectful of views and differences.
- Don't challenge people with a question (ask questions to be clarified).
- Be able to express ourselves without judgment.
- Take space, give space (if you're speaking a lot, take a break, if you're quiet, speak up).
- Give space for people to digest - Time for breaks (our conversations may be triggering).
- Open to hearing different views.
- Avoid ALL acronyms (no alphabet soup).
- Be mindful of language, use asset-based language.
- Remember to support one another.
- Remember this is a place of support and love - even if we have differing opinions.
- Transparency within the group and with CLASP.
- We understand that life happens, so we'll do our best to loop people in.
- Shared contact information

- Promotes the building of individual relationships among members by ensuring everyone has access to each other's contact details, strengthening the network of support and collaboration.
- Professionalism and feedback
 - Entails maintaining respectful interactions and openness to providing and receiving constructive feedback to foster personal and group development.
- Fairly compensated for work
- Accountability
 - If we mess up, hold each other accountable with love.
 - "Calling in and calling out" - When someone is being oppressive, feeling comfortable enough to call them in privately (e.g., in a private chat message), and if the behavior continues, calling them out in the group (with empathy and love).
- To avoid tokenism and pressure to speak for all impacted individuals, at least two CPG members should be on any panel that we're invited to present on.

SHARED VALUES

- No power struggles, we must all see each other as equals.
- It's important to take time to build relationships.
- We will keep confidential information within the group.
- We will treat each other with dignity and respect.
- Be open-minded and transparent.
- Give each other the benefit of the doubt and extend grace towards one another—and be open to feedback.
- Understand your impact vs. your intent.
- Use asset-based language (living expertise vs. subject matter expertise).





2020: CREATING A SHARED COMMITMENT TO ASSET-BASED LANGUAGE

The words we use explicitly or implicitly shape and enforce narratives because they can devalue self-identity, dehumanize, and demonstrate power over people. Harmful labels like “the poor” or “the homeless” promote inferiority, present people experiencing poverty or homelessness as a separate class of people, strip them of their humanity, and make them easier to marginalize.

Poverty is a situation created by systems and institutions, not an inextricable identity. People-centered language should always be used— “people experiencing homelessness” instead of “homeless,” “people experiencing poverty” instead of “the poor.” Phrases like “vulnerable populations” or “vulnerable communities” ignore the roles that institutions, systemic racism, sexism, and ableism play in creating said vulnerability. Terms like “historically underrepresented” or “marginalized” recognize the power dynamics that push some people into poverty and economic instability.

Using class signifiers (taxpayer, urban/suburban, safe neighborhoods) or qualifiers (“no one who works 40 hours a week should live in poverty”) masks what is being said and who it is being said about, demonstrating who is the priority and who is not. Everyone working directly with people with the lived or living experience of poverty must be conscious of how the language used carries over into the work environment and practices.





2020 – 2021: ESTABLISHING A PAYMENT SYSTEM AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

BETWEEN IWS AND CPG

From the beginning, it was important to fairly compensate CPG members. While the IWS team did not want to hand out the occasional \$25 gift card, it also had very real financial challenges to support work that hadn't previously been budgeted for and with which funders were unfamiliar. During this process, Elizabeth Lower-Basch, IWS's director at the time, played a pivotal role in advocating for resources and support to explore this work. Her leadership and support were also instrumental in securing funding for Diane's consultation.

Through these efforts CLASP was able to compensate CPG members at \$50/hour. This was a deliberate decision made to acknowledge the expertise and insights that individuals brought to the table, ensuring that their time and contributions were appropriately compensated. Once members were onboarded, the group asked for a higher rate to match what other consultants in the field averaged. The CPG's current rate is \$100/hour.

Soon after the CPG began to meet, CLASP staff developed a streamlined payment system in collaboration with CPG members. This system aimed to prioritize timeliness and consistency. Founding CPG members were clear that payments needed to be processed promptly and reliably. By setting deadlines, CLASP aimed to have funds disbursed into members' accounts promptly. Additionally, CLASP staff explored innovative payment structures, such as advances upon signing contracts, to better meet the needs and preferences of CPG members.

STAFF FEATURE:

ELIZABETH LOWER-BASCH

During her tenure as the director of the Income and Work Supports team at CLASP, Elizabeth Lower-Basch was instrumental in fostering an environment where deep engagement with lived experiences was possible. Her leadership in advocating for the necessary resources and support led to significant advancements, including securing funding for critical consultations that enriched the organization's advocacy efforts. While serving as CLASP's deputy executive director of policy, Elizabeth guided the organization's policy agenda with a focus on enhancing federal and state assistance programs to increase racial equity and justice. Her expertise has significantly influenced national policy development and implementation, ensuring that programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and refundable tax credits more effectively serve and empower individuals with low incomes. Elizabeth's dedication to improving systems for all, especially immigrants and their families, showcases her deep commitment to advancing equity and justice through thoughtful and inclusive policy reform.



I saw it as a great opportunity to start something, a movement to start something new, you know, to bring light to individuals that should have equitable pay and should be recognized out here as professionals in the space and so on."

- Tamika Moore



2021: BUILDING WORKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN IWS AND CPG

After approximately six months of independent meetings, CPG members sought deeper integration between the group and policy teams at CLASP. Thus, the CPG and the IWS team began convening monthly. These meetings served to share life updates, discuss policy developments, and offer mutual support on ongoing projects, helping to foster relationships rooted in mutual respect, shared goals, and a commitment to transformative change. CLASP staff hoped to co-create all its research and advocacy efforts with CPG members.

During one of their first meetings, members of the CPG and IWS team shared expectations for their working relationship. Both teams expressed a strong desire to co-create products and co-lead initiatives that reflect their shared commitment to policy reform and advocacy.

CPG'S EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS

The CPG members emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships that respect and integrate their individual interests and areas of expertise. They expect:

- **Meaningful engagement:** Building deep, understanding connections that support their areas of interest.
- **Leadership and equality:** Being trusted and valued as leaders and equal partners, with a clear place and voice in the partnership.
- **Autonomy in thought leadership:** Leading the thought process and being integral to the development of frameworks and design.
- **Openness to correction:** Accepting feedback from an anti-oppression perspective, even if it might be uncomfortable.
- **Trauma-informed interaction:** Ensuring sensitive communication and protecting their stories and intellectual property.

IWS/PBJ'S EXPECTATIONS AND GOALS

The IWS/PBJ team approached the partnership with openness, ready to integrate the CPG into both existing and new projects, despite initial uncertainties about the time commitments involved. They were interested in:

- **Co-creation of visionary documents:** Working together to consult and collaborate on documents that set out shared visions and priorities.
- **Development of analytical tools:** Co-creating resources like scorecards to assess policy alignment with the jointly developed vision.
- **Joint publications and presentations:** Collaborating on blogs, briefs, reports, and webinars on shared interests and partnership dynamics.
- **Support for CPG goals:** Assisting in the CPG's individual and collective goals, including support for grant applications.
- **Media and advocacy campaigns:** Co-creating media campaigns to amplify their messages and impacts.

MILESTONES

In recent years, the CPG's work has become increasingly visible and influential. This section highlights the triumphant breakthroughs that have defined that path, illustrating how each has contributed to a collective mission and the broader anti-poverty movement.

SEPTEMBER 2022: AUTHORIZING OUR FIRST REPORT

The CPG and IWS team co-authored "**A Community-Driven, Anti-Racist Vision for SNAP**," an influential report aimed at transforming SNAP. The idea for this report came from a year-long discussion about nutritional priorities in anticipation of the upcoming Farm Bill renewal, underscoring a need to articulate bold, authentic, and community-driven policy recommendations.

The process of creating this in-depth report began with weekly discussions to focus on overarching goals; analyzing a vision for SNAP; exploring how the program could be reformed to embody anti-racist principles; assessing existing policies to identify what should be amended or eliminated; and examining how state agencies could implement training to improve the culture and treatment of recipients. Like the discussion phase, the drafting stage involved members of both the CPG and IWS teams who undertook rigorous and iterative reviews to ensure cohesion and authentically reflect the collective voice in a way that met everyone's approval. After that, CLASP's communications team edited and formatted the paper and published it on CLASP's website.

The finished paper has become a vital tool in advocacy efforts; is frequently used in discussions with legislators and other stakeholders to push for substantial changes within the SNAP program; and won a **Bronze Anthem Award** in the Research Projects or Publications category. This award highlights "a project and/or publications that distributes informed research to educate, raise interest, knowledge, and or change perception or behavior around a Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion cause."





2022: LEADING OUR FIRST POWER-BUILDING PROJECT

In 2022, the CPG launched **Community Driven Policies and Practices (CDPP)**, a place-based project inspired by community organizing, with CLASP staff and a group of youth activists. Our goal was to create a safe, inspiring space for people experiencing poverty to dream up policies with the potential to deliver economic justice and strategies to advance them. Through CDPP, the CPG facilitated a series of power-building sessions in Baltimore, Las Vegas, and Tribal Nations in the Pacific Northwest. Each location included a youth group (ages 13 to 21) and an intergenerational group. Over six meetings, the groups discussed community and belonging; defined economic justice; learned about different advocacy strategies such as lobbying and community organizing; and came up with advocacy plans to implement a policy goal that each group believed would advance their vision for economic justice.

STAFF FEATURE: JESSE FAIRBANKS

Jesse Fairbanks's inclusion in our work marked a significant milestone for the CPG. Their extensive experience as an organizer and writer, coupled with their lived experience of homelessness, brought a wealth of invaluable insights and organizational skills to our team. Leveraging their background as a contract manager, Jesse played a pivotal role in developing a streamlined payment system in collaboration with CPG members. As the CPG evolved, Jesse's leadership and expertise facilitated deeper integration between the group and the Income and Work Supports/Public Benefits Justice team. Jesse's leadership extended beyond their operational support for the CPG to include significant contributions to the CDPP project, which is featured in this report.



2022: LAUNCHING A WEBINAR SERIES TO GROW THE CPG'S VISIBILITY IN ADVOCACY AND

POLICYMAKING

Since 2020, the CPG has actively engaged policymakers and advocates through numerous presentations. After policy analyst Teon Hayes joined the IWS team in 2021, the CPG strategically shifted its focus toward more public-facing events to amplify its visibility and influence in the policy arena. This shift was marked by the launch of a dedicated webinar series centered on nutrition policy, which aimed to directly impact legislative decisions regarding the Farm Bill and align more closely with the needs and demands of community members.

STAFF FEATURE: TEON HAYES

Teon Hayes joined CLASP in 2021, significantly enhancing the efforts of the CPG. With a rich background as an educator and administrator, Teon brings a deep commitment to dismantling systemic barriers through policies that incorporate lived experience and center racial equity. Her work proved invaluable as it expanded the CPG's capacity and enabled it to pursue additional public-facing, innovative projects. Her expertise has been instrumental in elevating the CPG's outreach, particularly through her leadership in coordinating and moderating the group's influential webinar series.

Distinguished by their foundation in the lived experiences of CPG members, each webinar offered a deep dive into how systemic issues and racism shape the current state of poverty and nutrition policy and advocated for radical, anti-racist reforms that promise real change and policies that truly reflect the insights and realities of those most affected. The series increased the CPG's visibility and importance as a leader in shaping advocacy and policymaking that prioritizes equity and justice, while also positioning it as a critical voice in the anti-poverty sphere that influenced the discourse around poverty and nutrition policy.



2022: CPG'S ATTENDANCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON HUNGER, NUTRITION, AND HEALTH

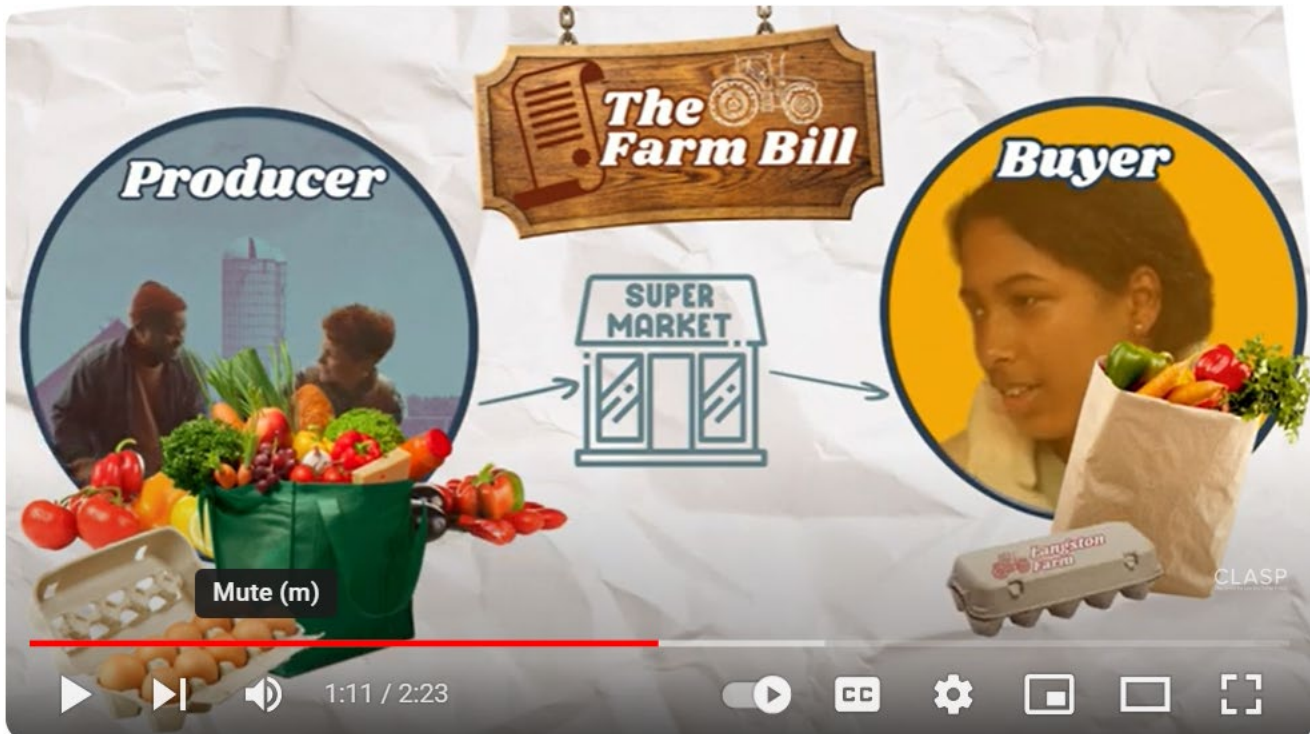
In a significant recognition of their impactful work, all members of the CPG were invited to the prestigious White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and

Health, an event that brought together key stakeholders to shape the nation's agenda on these critical issues. This invitation came shortly after the group released "**A Community-Driven, Anti-Racist Vision for SNAP**," marking a pivotal moment in their advocacy efforts.

The CPG members' inclusion at the conference was a testament to the relevance and urgency of their work and also provided a platform to further amplify their voices, allowing them to directly engage with a wide array of policymakers, experts, and activists and advocate for substantial policy changes informed by their lived experiences and the insights presented in their paper. Following the conference, the CPG hosted a webinar that drew the attention of representatives from 13 congressional offices, underscoring the resonance of their anti-racist agenda within legislative circles and cementing the CPG's role as a critical voice in national discussions on hunger and health policy.

The CPG's involvement in such a high-profile conference illustrates its growing influence and the increasing recognition of the importance of incorporating lived experience into policymaking. It also highlights the power of strategic partnerships and advocacy in driving forward a comprehensive, community-focused, and equity-driven approach to tackling systemic issues related to hunger and nutrition in America.

2023: THE FARM BILL VIDEO



The Farm Bill, formally known as the Agricultural Act, is a comprehensive piece of legislation passed approximately every five years by Congress that reauthorizes a wide range of agricultural and food programs, including crop insurance, farming subsidies, and conservation efforts. It plays a crucial role in food security in the United States, particularly through its SNAP funding. Seventy percent of the Farm Bill's budget is dedicated to SNAP, which is the nation's largest anti-hunger program.

“ We've had so many opportunities to get in front of so many different audiences, both in person and also online. And I think that has really driven different organizations in this space, larger organizations than CLASP to actually, you know, start building cohorts similar to CPG.”

- Alice Aluoch

The current Farm Bill was initially set to expire in September 2023, but it is now anticipated that a full reauthorization may not occur until 2025. This delay means Congress will continue to deliberate on policy changes that could significantly impact the program and the millions of individuals and families who depend on it. In the interim, it is crucial that advocacy and public discussion remain focused on SNAP to ensure that any proposed changes support and enhance its effectiveness.

As negotiations for the renewal of the Farm Bill began, the CPG recognized an opportunity to expand its advocacy efforts into new forms of media, particularly through **a video** aimed at demystifying the complexities of the Farm Bill and amplifying the group's innovative policy recommendations.

Designed to break down the intricate legislative process and its implications for food security in an engaging and straightforward manner, the video also integrated the lived experiences of individuals directly impacted by SNAP. This allowed the CPG to discuss the Farm Bill's significance, highlight the critical connection between agricultural policies and nutrition assistance programs, and include bold policy recommendations aimed at strengthening SNAP and making it more equitable. Viewers were encouraged to advocate for positive changes in their communities and beyond.

The video has been viewed over two thousand times and shared by influential figures like Rep. Alma Adams (D-N.C.). It is a crucial tool in the CPG's efforts to influence public opinion and legislative action regarding the Farm Bill. This project not only highlighted the group's capacity to utilize media effectively but also reinforced its commitment to creating accessible, informative content that empowers and informs stakeholders across the spectrum of food policy.



LESSONS LEARNED

Engaging with people who have lived experience was a learning journey for the IWS team and CLASP as a whole. The organization's efforts were not flawless, and there were mistakes along the way. It's important to address and repair any harm caused and to openly share experiences so that others can benefit from what we've learned. By reflecting on our process, we aim to contribute to a more thoughtful and respectful approach in the future.

PRIORITIZE INTERNAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION TRAINING EARLY

Interviews with both CLASP employees and current CPG members highlight conflict management and resolution training as an important area of improvement for future CPG cohorts. The initial cohort faced numerous challenges with conflict resolution, underscoring the complexity of managing disagreements within a diverse collective. These experiences have generated valuable lessons about the nuances of conflict resolution, from the need for direct communication between members to the engagement of external consultants.

Conflict resolution was a recurring challenge and often stemmed from structural issues within the group's dynamics or personal disagreements between members. Some conflicts were navigated through direct conversations. However, there were instances where the involvement of an external restorative justice consultant did not align well with the group's needs, highlighting the importance of carefully selecting facilitators who are a good fit for the group's specific context.

There were also conflicts around structural elements of the program or misunderstandings that could have been mitigated with better initial training on conflict management. Overall, we learned that conflict resolution training early in the onboarding process is crucial, as it can provide members with the tools to address conflicts constructively before they escalate. This proactive approach to conflict management is essential for maintaining the integrity and cohesion of the group, enabling everyone to continue engaging in impactful work without disruption. Therefore, our approach to conflict management going forward includes:

- **Early training:** We plan to introduce conflict resolution training as part of the onboarding process for new CPG members. This training will include discussions on individual conflict management styles and communication techniques to foster a culture of open dialogue.
- **External expertise:** We will prioritize engaging with external experts who specialize in restorative justice practices. These conflict resolution experts will be carefully selected to ensure their methods and approaches resonate with and are effective for our group's unique dynamics.
- **Structural reassessments:** We will continuously evaluate the structural aspects of the CPG that may contribute to conflicts so that we can make adjustments for a more harmonious working environment.

- **Promoting direct engagement:** We will encourage members to engage directly in resolving conflicts, supported by trained facilitators, to ensure that issues are addressed promptly and empathetically.

A CULTURE OF FRIENDSHIP, HONESTY, AND COMPASSION MUST BE PRIORITIZED

The CPG not only serves as a platform for advocacy but also nurtures friendship, honesty, and compassion. Its strength comes from its tight-knit network and the familial bonds members form through shared experiences and mutual support. The group's dynamic is profoundly influenced by the personal journeys of its members, who often bring experiences of poverty-based trauma that can affect their ability to forge and maintain healthy relationships. Witnessing the beautiful relationships between current members like Alice Aluoch, Tamika Moore, and Barbie Izquierdo, who describe the CPG as a true family, highlights the importance of these connections.

“ These people are like family to me now and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to even know them and to be able to be close with them and to be able to operate in the anti-hunger space... and still be able to also operate personally and intimately as family. It's incredible to have like-minded people that you love that operate in these spaces with you.”
- Tamika Moore

To nurture such a supportive environment, it is crucial that future cohorts have ample opportunities to bond organically through both work and social interactions. This helps establish empathy and understanding within the group. It is also vital to maintain transparency and remember that members may carry trauma and diverse perspectives on issues such as white supremacy and professionalism. Given this, communication and conflict management are essential components of group dynamics.

As we continue to build this community, we must create a space that encourages members to control their narratives and share their experiences to the extent they feel comfortable. This not only respects individual boundaries but also empowers members to contribute authentically without the pressure of revisiting past traumas unnecessarily. Through intentional relationship-building, the CPG can strengthen its foundation of solidarity and enhance its effectiveness in driving change, thereby reinforcing its role as a powerful collective voice for those with lived experiences of poverty.

SAFEGUARDING THE CPG'S WORK AND OUTPUT

The unique and captivating style of speaking and writing developed by CPG members has unfortunately made their work a target for plagiarism, often by individuals with more prominent social, political, or financial influence. Such actions not only undermine the original creators but also detract from their efforts to establish themselves as recognized experts in their fields.

To combat this, the CPG has implemented stringent protections to prevent both external and internal misuse of its work and proactive steps to maintain control over how its content is shared and used:

- **Restricting recording and distribution:** Many of the CPG's webinars and presentations are not recorded and slides are not distributed externally. This helps prevent the unauthorized use of material and ensures that the CPG's intellectual property remains within the controlled environments where it was intended to be presented.
- **Controlled sharing:** The CPG operates under the principle of "Nothing about us, without us," reflecting a commitment to ensuring that any dissemination of its work involves the group directly and respects its contributions. This approach prevents well-meaning advocates and organizations from using the CPG's materials to independently recreate or leverage their strategies without proper collaboration or acknowledgment.
- **Information regarding intellectual property rights:** The CPG regularly engages in discussions about intellectual property rights, informing its members and external collaborators on the importance of crediting original ideas and contributions. These efforts reinforce the value of the group's work and the ethical considerations necessary when citing or building upon its ideas.

These measures are vital to both protect the integrity of the CPG's work and create an environment where members can freely share their ideas without fear of appropriation. By establishing these boundaries, the CPG ensures that its contributions are recognized, respected, and correctly attributed, which is essential for continuing its impactful advocacy and maintaining trust and cohesion within the group.

ESTABLISHING TRUST BETWEEN THE CPG AND CLASP EARLY IS ESSENTIAL

Partnering with the CPG required the IWS team to equitably integrate people with lived experience of poverty into CLASP's advocacy and coalitions. As described in the History section, this took a lot of time and effort from both IWS team members, CLASP staff, and CPG members. One lesson learned during this process was the importance of staff demonstrating vulnerability, which helped establish a foundation of trust and mutual respect that was crucial for the sensitive and impactful work ahead. As the partnership progressed, it became increasingly important to integrate these personal interactions into regular meetings, ensuring that every member, new or old, of the CLASP team was aligned with this approach.

As a result, CPG members were able to smoothly integrate into CLASP's broader advocacy efforts. This approach also minimized potential tensions by fostering an environment of mutual understanding and respect, which is a significant reason that the teams have been able to work together effectively, leveraging their combined experiences and perspectives to drive more nuanced and powerful advocacy campaigns.

THE EVENTUAL CREATION OF A TEAM AT CLASP TO SUPPORT THE CPG'S WORK IS NECESSARY

When CLASP began partnering with the CPG, we did not accurately assess how much staff time supporting the cohort would take. Core staff spent many hours engaging with CPG members and potential members, often outside of standard working hours. This was often challenging for staff. Parker, Teon, and Jesse, who manage significant portfolios within CLASP's core areas—SNAP, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and housing—found their capacities stretched thin. This significant allocation of responsibilities often limited their capacity to fully engage with and expand CPG's initiatives and underscored the critical need for dedicated staffing to adequately support CPG's operations and growth.

Integrating additional CLASP staff to support the CPG could also help distribute the workload more evenly and bring in new perspectives to the group's efforts, ultimately enhancing the overall capacity and impact of the CPG.

By investing in dedicated resources for the CPG, CLASP would not only improve the group's operational effectiveness but also significantly enhance its ability to effect change on a larger scale. This strategic move would ensure that the voices of those with lived experiences continue to drive and inform impactful policy advocacy, anchored by well-supported and focused leadership.

CPG MEMBERS MUST BE EMPOWERED TO MANAGE THEIR OWN WELL-BEING AND NARRATIVE CONTROL

The first cohort of CPG members has been exceptionally talented at expressing their experiences and opinions at conferences, on panels, and during other speaking engagements. Current members have all seen their confidence grow through these opportunities to share their stories. However, it is essential that CLASP continue to prioritize helping CPG advocates learn how to control their own narratives as consultants or storytellers. Current member Barbie Izquierdo shared that while participating in CPG, she realized that she is fully in control of what parts of her background she has to share, and that her perspective as someone with lived experience with poverty is still just as valuable without having to repeatedly divulge past trauma. Future cohorts should continue to have opportunities for public speaking while also being mindful of overexertion, prioritizing self-care, and being encouraged to set and maintain boundaries with CLASP and any external partners or engagements.



NEXT STEPS

Our vision for the future is ambitious and deeply rooted in the belief that leadership from people with lived experience is essential to achieving economic justice. Meaningful partnerships between national organizations and people with lived experience can help us advance bold policy change.

We will continue building on our successes with the founding CPG members and expanding our impact through a cohort-based model. Peer cohorts enable members to learn from each other and develop leadership skills at a paced rate. Our future CPG cohort will include three distinct groups: active members, mentors, and alumni.

Active members: A new, diverse cohort of 8-12 activists, recruited directly from our networks and recommendations, will dedicate up to 15 hours per month to advocacy over three years. These members will have experience with poverty, demonstrated leadership potential, and a commitment to driving change.

Mentors: Current CPG members will transition to mentor roles, providing guidance and support to the new cohort. This mentorship is crucial for continuity and the transfer of knowledge and experience.

Alumni: After serving as mentors, members will join the alumni group, maintaining a connection to the CPG and continuing to contribute to its mission through advisory roles and ongoing advocacy work.

We are also excited about the potential to expand the work we did on our 2022 SNAP report into a series of reports covering other critical areas like WIC, housing choice vouchers, cash assistance, and tax programs.

FUTURE CPG GOALS:

Develop movement leaders: Equip individuals with the skills needed to bring about policy change at the federal level and become leaders in the economic justice movement.

- **Create transformational change:** Uplift lived experience across the anti-poverty space, dispel harmful stereotypes, shift damaging narratives, and advocate for policy changes that reflect the needs of those directly impacted.
- **Sustainable cohort:** Operationalize our learnings to create a cohesive and self-sustaining cohort model that evolves over time.
- **Diverse voices:** Intentionally build a diverse space that uplifts new voices every few years, recognizing that those experiencing poverty are not a monolith.
- **Supportive alumni network:** Establish a welcoming and supportive alumni space that allows for the continuation of momentum, ideas, resources, and opportunities.

Building power within communities is key to delivering economic justice. The CPG has already demonstrated its potential to drive significant change, and with the help of dedicated, unrestricted funding, it can continue to expand this work. CLASP has served as a launching pad for many activists and aims to sustain this trajectory with continued support, creating a lasting impact and empowering future leaders to carry the torch of economic justice.

Each of the CPG's future reports will build on our foundation of community-driven, anti-racist policy advocacy, furthering our impact and extending our reach in the fight against poverty.



“If there's anything that I would tell people that are hesitant to join this field or to tell their stories, [is that] it's painful, it's scary, and nothing is going to take that away. But if you want change, not just for yourself, but for the generations that are coming after you, then somebody has to stand up and say enough is enough. And when you're willing to be that somebody, and you really don't let anything get in the way of that. If you look to the side, you'll see that there's going to be other people ready to interlock their arms with you. And you're not really as alone as you think you are.”

- Barbie Izquierdo

FUNDER SUPPORT

Sustaining and expanding the CPG’s work requires a robust and multi-level approach to funding that embraces an asset-based mindset. Philanthropy must support not only community-based organizations and individual activists but also national nonprofits that act as bridges, connecting people with lived experience to decision-making power and policy influence. This shift is not merely theoretical but practical, requiring ongoing dialogue, a re-evaluation of funding structures, and a commitment to equity and inclusivity. By advocating for and implementing an asset-based approach, CLASP and the CPG are pioneering a more inclusive and empowering model of engagement that promises to transform the landscape of social policy and enhance the impact of programs designed to alleviate poverty. We invite funders to partner with us on this journey as we advocate for a holistic funding structure that includes:

- **Community-based organizations:** Direct support to grassroots initiatives that operate at the local level, where immediate and impactful change can often be most profoundly felt.
- **Individual activists:** Provide resources and financial support to individuals who bring invaluable firsthand perspectives to the anti-poverty movement.
- **National nonprofits:** Invest in larger organizations that can amplify the voices of those with lived experience and bridge the gap between grassroots movements and policy-making spheres.

This approach ensures that all levels of the movement are, and that national nonprofits and community-based organizations can work in harmony, each bringing their strengths to the table. This symbiotic relationship is essential for driving systemic change and ensuring that the work is informed by those most affected by poverty.

Priorities in the anti-poverty sector are often shaped by funders' interests and focus on specific outcomes. While many funders have attempted to take a more flexible approach with fewer restrictions, the reality is that many in the funding world remain driven by the specific outcomes they wish to see, rather than allowing for exploration and innovative engagement. When foundations do provide unrestricted funding to organizations working with individuals with direct experience of poverty, there are often still unrealistic limitations on indirect expenses allowed. Consequently, the administrative effort required by finance, development, and human resources teams is undervalued, despite their importance in managing equitable payment systems for partners, managing grants and budgets, and reporting out to funders on the work. There have been a few notable changes from major foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in recent years to allow more spending on overhead expenses, and other foundations should follow their lead.

Working deeply with people with lived experience requires a long-term commitment involving relationship-building, trust-building, and often the dismantling of existing structures. A one- to two-year grant can only scratch the surface of this work, which requires sustained, long-term support. Funders must not measure impact by assessing immediate policy outcomes but include the process of engaging community members as integral to building long-term transformative impact designed by those with lived experience. We encourage funders not to withdraw support from national nonprofits but to collaborate with them and community organizations to create a multi-level, symbiotic system. This approach uplifts lived experience and fosters connection, community, and best practices while, over time, engaging in meaningful policy change. Funders must recognize their blind spots and understand how they might inadvertently overshadow impactful work in favor of more standard outcomes.



“That’s one thing that I’m really proud of and is the highlight for me...seeing our previous CPG members doing their own thing, whether they’re consultants on their own or whether they are still with us, they are really leading in the space and they had everyone’s ear, which is powerful.”

- Parker Gilkesson Davis

CONCLUSION

CLASP's collaboration with the CPG has been transformative for our organization and national anti-poverty advocacy. It redefined lived experience as a highly regarded and legitimate form of expertise in the anti-poverty space, ensuring that individuals with lived experience are recognized as crucial contributors whose insights are essential for effective policymaking. While CLASP is among the leaders of national nonprofits that integrate meaningful community engagement, we acknowledge that the ultimate pioneers in this work are community-based organizations; community activists and leaders; and community organizers, all of whom have been championing the value of lived experience long before our involvement.

Through engaging presentations, dynamic webinars, and heartfelt community conversations, CPG members have inspired and affirmed countless others from similar backgrounds, encouraging them to fight for their voices to be heard and to advocate for their place at the decision-making table. Their candid, critical, and loving feedback has challenged the complacency surrounding existing policies and motivated leaders to reimagine their approaches to advocacy. Their powerful stories have underscored the need for specific policy changes, and their leadership has driven home the critical importance of including voices from lived experiences in all facets of policy development.

When we began, skeptics doubted our ability to integrate lived experience into our organizational framework, given that CLASP was not inherently a grassroots entity. However, the success we have witnessed and the lessons we have learned have demonstrated that embracing lived experience is not only possible but beneficial to an organization. This journey has demanded time, patience, transparency, and an unwavering commitment to trauma-informed practices and teamwork. We started with the simple yet powerful idea of engaging people with lived experience beyond traditional methods like focus groups and surveys. Over time, we made deliberate choices to ascend the **spectrum of community engagement**, moving from mere consultation to active collaboration and shared leadership.

Today, the CPG's reach extends to the White House, Congress, and beyond, proving that dedicated advocacy can indeed influence high-level policy decisions. This work has taught us that while the process can be challenging, it is vital for creating lasting change. As we reflect on our journey, it is clear that incorporating lived experience enriches our understanding and approach to combating poverty, leading to more nuanced and effective policies and, ultimately, a more inclusive and equitable society.

As we move forward, the CPG remains committed to leveraging lived experience as a powerful tool for advocacy, ensuring that every policy conversation and decision is informed by those who know poverty not just as a concept but as a personal reality. Our work underscores a powerful truth: real change comes not only from new ideas but from new voices, especially those who have lived the realities we seek to change.