

Evaluation Brief: Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds

Key Findings from the 2025 Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change
Approaches Report and Inventory (PSE-ARI)

**HEALTH
RESOURCES
IN ACTION**



Executive Summary

The Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds (MA CHHAF) represent a statewide investment in community-led approaches to improving population health. Administered through a partnership among the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), the Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence (AGE), and Health Resources in Action (HRiA) as fiscal agent, and in collaboration with an Advisory Committee, the Funds had allocated approximately \$45.9 million to 82 awardees across three cohorts as of April 2026. The Funds pursue an equitable grantmaking model designed to address the root causes of health inequity—including structural and institutional racism, poverty, and entrenched power imbalances—through community-centered policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change.

This evaluation digest presents findings from the 2025 PSE Change Approaches Report and Inventory (PSE-ARI), a mixed-methods assessment tool developed, piloted, and refined by the HRiA Evaluation Team in collaboration with an Evaluation Workgroup comprised of awardees and others. The PSE-ARI adapts FSG's Water of Systems Change framework, which describes six interdependent conditions that hold social and environmental problems in place.

The findings demonstrate that community-led PSE change is actively underway across the Commonwealth and that awardees are advancing work across all six conditions of systems change, with the strongest concentration in relationships and community engagement.

Executive Summary

National, state, and local policies

Funds awardees are engaged in tangible policy work—including strategy and planning, policy research, and bill drafting—yielding concrete wins such as the MBTA's Low-Income Eligible Fare Program, advances in Complete Streets policy in rural communities, passage of the Work and Family Mobility Act, and passage of the 2025 \$5.1 billion Bond Bill which included the Affordable Homes Act. Awardees noted that policy changes can directly impact systemic barriers to health & well-being; but in order for this systems change to occur, it is important that communities with lived experience are shaping these policy changes.

Internal/organizational policies, practices, and processes

Awardees are working to change how their own organizations hire, pay, communicate, and make decisions—embedding equity, language access, and community voice into everyday practice. Advancements include adding a *Language Line* for health departments so that residents can receive important information in multiple languages, amending internal policies so that advisory boards are required to include youth members and members with lived experience, and devoting resources towards engagement at community events to meet people where they already are. These internal changes proved foundational – building the trust and capacity that make bigger external wins possible.

Resource distribution and access to services

Access to services advance broader efforts in population-level advocacy, policy change, and environmental improvements to resolve these issues at their root. The Funds support system transformation to get resources, knowledge, and services to the people who need them most, from culturally appropriate food to benefits enrollment to community health worker support. Awardees emphasized that shifting and expanding the way resources are distributed in a community helps build trust, connection, and the long-term self-reliance of communities.

Executive Summary

Relationships, connections, and community engagement

Awardees described authentic partnership-building across organizations and partners as essential to creating sustainable change, with some noting that it takes significant time to develop these intentional, diverse, trust-based, and mutually beneficial partnerships. Awardees emphasized the importance of developing relationships with communities based on mutual respect and trust as a critical component of equitable policy, systems, and environment change. One of the most notable impacts of the Funds is how they enabled a marked deepening of community engagement across the Commonwealth: awardees reported moving from lower-intensity "inform" and "consult" activities toward "collaborate," "empower," and "community-led" models. Across the portfolio, awardees explicitly frame their efforts around health and racial equity, targeting structural barriers, poverty, ageism, ableism, and language and disability access.

Power shifting

Awardees are actively changing decision-making structures and processes within their own organizations, coalitions, and local governments to center the voices and ideas of the communities most impacted. This has led to changes in policies and processes around not only who is involved in making those decisions but how decisions are made. Awardees also described centering the perspectives of communities with lived experience by providing education, training, and mentorship to build the leadership capacity of local community members. These initiatives provide communities with the skills and confidence to advocate for more equitable policies and practices for years to come.

Mental models, beliefs, and narratives

Awardees emphasized the significance of shifting community beliefs and assumptions as a vital step in developing sustainable and equitable policy, systems, and environment change. Through storytelling and public education, they helped communities see one another differently, recognizing young people and marginalized neighbors as capable leaders and co-creators of change.

Executive Summary

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

- Community-led PSE change is happening across Massachusetts.
- PSE change efforts are explicitly rooted in health and racial equity, targeting structural barriers such as racism, poverty, language access, disability access, and housing instability.
- PSE change is not one type of activity—it is a web of reinforcing strategies that together shift how systems operate and who benefits.
- Relationship-building and community engagement are the foundation of systems change.
- Nearly all awardees prioritize trust-building, lived-experience leadership, and long-term partnerships as essential to achieving policy and systems change.
- *Who* is at the table—and how they are resourced, supported, and listened to—matters as much as which policies change.
- Systems are often resistant to change, and external forces (political climate, funding structures, institutional norms) shape what is possible.
- This evaluation underscores that systems change is neither linear nor uniform. Sustainable PSE change requires long-term investment, flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity—especially when addressing deeper, less visible system conditions.

MOVING FORWARD

- Lessons for funders, policymakers, and the field:
 - **Invest for the long term:** Systems change requires time to build trust, capacity, and momentum.
 - **Fund the “invisible” work:** Relationship-building, community leadership development, and internal organizational change are core PSE strategies—not add-ons.
 - **Support learning and adaptation:** Mixed-method tools like the PSE-ARI help capture progress that traditional metrics miss.
 - **Center equity as a process, not just an outcome:** Advancing racial and health equity means changing both policies and power dynamics.
- The PSE-ARI demonstrates that community-led PSE change is both possible and underway—and that meaningful, equitable systems change depends on sustained commitment to relationships, shared power, and structural transformation.

Contact machhafunds@hria.org for more information



Background

About The Funds

- **Investing resources in** MA communities to improve population health outcomes through **community-led policy, systems, and environmental change approaches.**
- **Statewide distribution of Community Health Initiative funds** from the updated Determination of Need regulation.
- **Partnership between** MA Department of Public Health, Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging & Independence, and Health Resources in Action; in collaboration with the Advisory Committee.
- **\$63 million** allocated to **112 awardees** across three cohorts as of July 2026.



— **Massachusetts** —
**COMMUNITY HEALTH AND
HEALTHY AGING FUNDS**



Three Funding Streams

MA CHHAF is comprised of three funding streams. Awardees across the funding streams share a commitment to racial and health equity, the use of Policy, Systems, and Environmental change approaches, and community-led solutions.



Community Health Improvement Planning (CHIP)

Long-term, collaborative efforts to improve health and advance equity by creating a plan that prioritizes and addresses health.



Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

Work focused on specific social determinants of health, rather than a broader set of issues as might be identified in a CHIP.



Healthy Aging

Creating conditions that allow older adults to remain in their communities and achieve the highest possible quality of life.

Why Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change?

- Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change strategies are a way of making **sustainable, lasting change within a community** to support healthy environments and behaviors across populations.
- These strategies **create or change infrastructure and modify the contexts** in which people live to improve community conditions that promote health. PSE changes are often made in combination with each other.



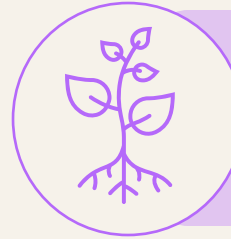
This content was informed in part by resources from the [Rural Health Information Hub](#), [Health Trust](#), Mass in Motion, and The Food Trust.

Example PSE Change Initiatives

PSE change is a broad topic. A few examples of projects supported by the Funds include:



Developing and maintaining a free online housing search tool to promote access to affordable and safe housing.



Establishing an urban agriculture policy and a farm-to-retail model for a community farm.



Empowering multilingual seniors to improve transit justice and public transportation.



Supporting justice-involved youth in achieving financial security through employment and leadership skills development.



Facilitating a network spanning 30 towns to develop and guide the community health improvement plan.



Integrating low vision awareness and resources into age-friendly planning for older adults.

The Funds Overarching Evaluation Guiding Principles

CO-DESIGN



Evaluation (overarching and awardee-specific) will be **co-designed** with awardees, including monitoring and reporting

BUILD



Activities will be aimed at **building capacity** of awardees to conduct their own data-informed evaluations

ACTIONABLE DATA

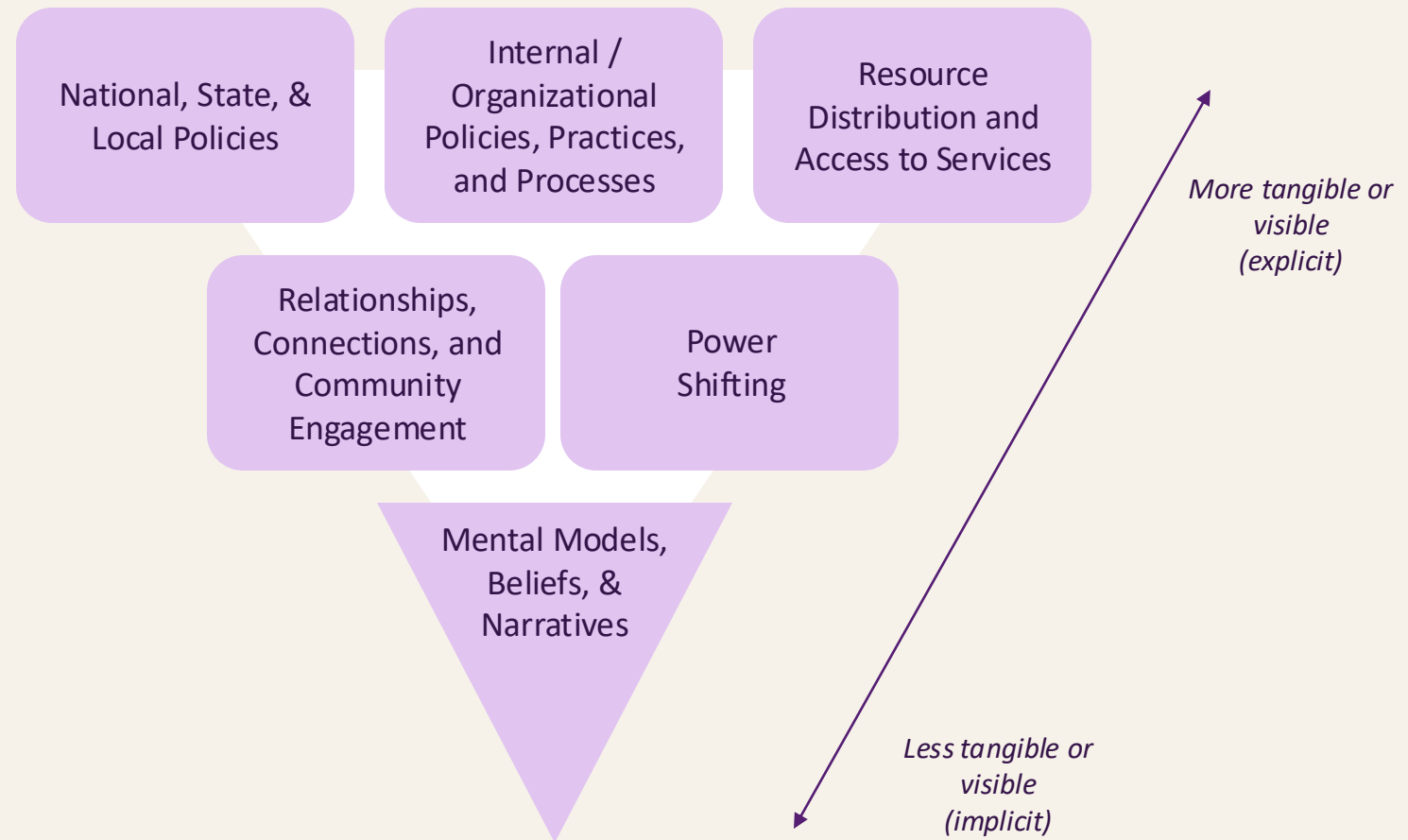


This will create opportunities for **actionable data** for communities in Massachusetts

Framework: Water of Systems Change

Six interdependent conditions that hold a social or environmental problem in place

- They are intertwined, and **can interact to perpetuate inequalities**
- Each have **varying degrees of visibility** to players in the system, largely due to how explicit, or tangible, they are to most people





Methodology

Water of Systems Change → PSE-ARI

- The **Water of Systems Change** (WSC) from FSG is a useful framework for understanding the conditions that impact systems, from more visible (policies) to less visible (mental models) conditions.
- Under the guidance of the **MA CHHAF Evaluation Workgroup**, HRiA adapted the WSC framework into the **PSE Approaches Report & Inventory (PSE-ARI)**. We pilot tested the new tool with MA CHHA Funds awardees to evaluate their collective progress and impact across these conditions of systems change.
- The PSE-ARI includes **qualitative and quantitative measures of systems change** which:
 - Define **common metrics** across a portfolio of initiatives
 - Document **progress and big wins**
 - Promote discussions about the strengths and gaps of PSE change initiatives to **inform future planning**

About the PSE Change Approaches Report and Inventory (PSE-ARI)

- The PSE-ARI tool was developed, piloted, refined, and launched by the HRiA Evaluation Team, with ongoing input from the Evaluation Workgroup. The Workgroup is composed of Funds awardees, Funds Advisory Committee members, DPH staff, and HRiA staff. It meets five times annually.
- All current awardees from Cohorts 1 (awardees from 2020-2025) and 2 (awardees from 2022-2027) were required to complete a PSE-ARI report for their project. Awardees were asked to complete 2-4 sections out of the 6 Water of Systems Change areas. Responses were submitted using *Qualtrics* online survey software.
- Within Water of Systems Change sections, reported percentages are among awardees who responded to that section.
- Reports were completed in Spring 2025.

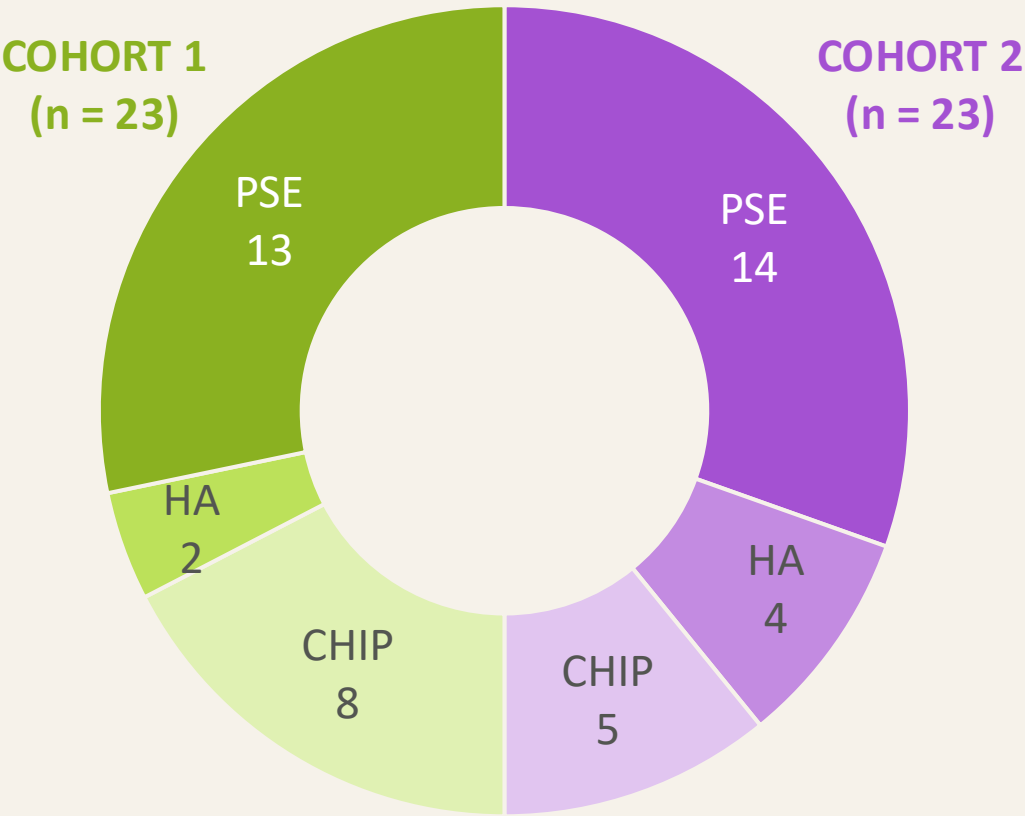
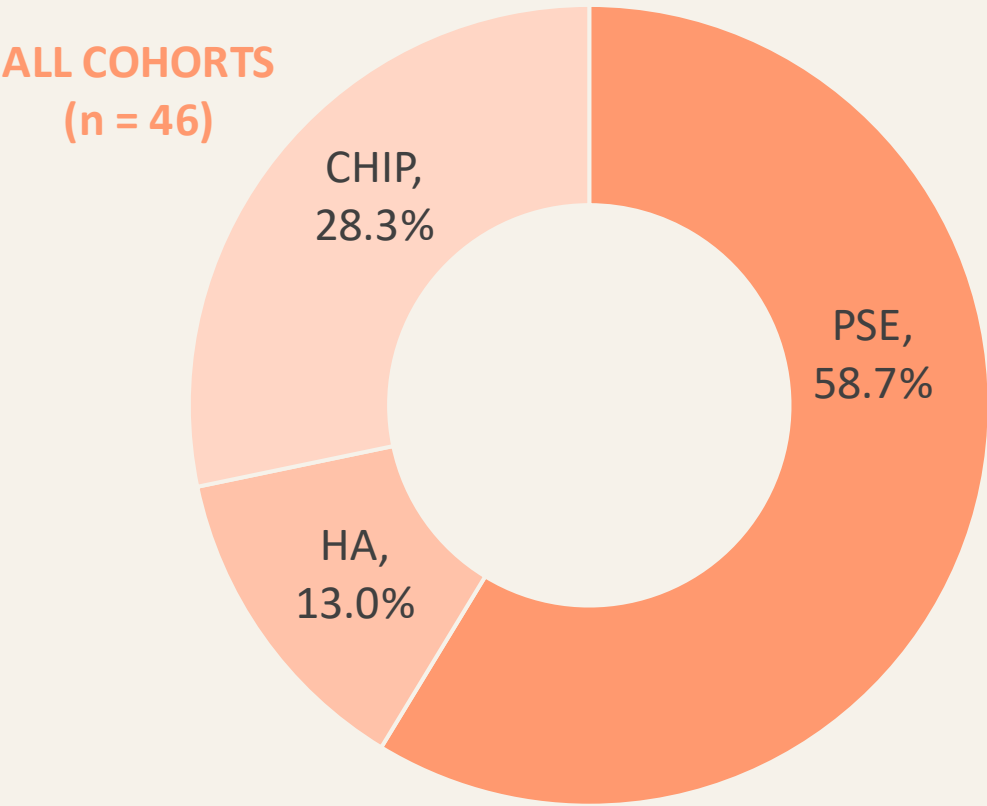
Questions and Themes

- How are you helping change public policy, what strategies are you using, and what difference is it making?
- How are you changing organizational rules, procedures, or culture to create more equitable outcomes?
- How are you making sure resources and services reach the people and communities that need them most?
- Who are you working with, how are you engaging community members most impacted, and how meaningful is their participation?
- How are you helping communities gain more voice, influence, and control over decisions that affect them?
- How are you changing the stories, assumptions, and beliefs that contribute to inequity?



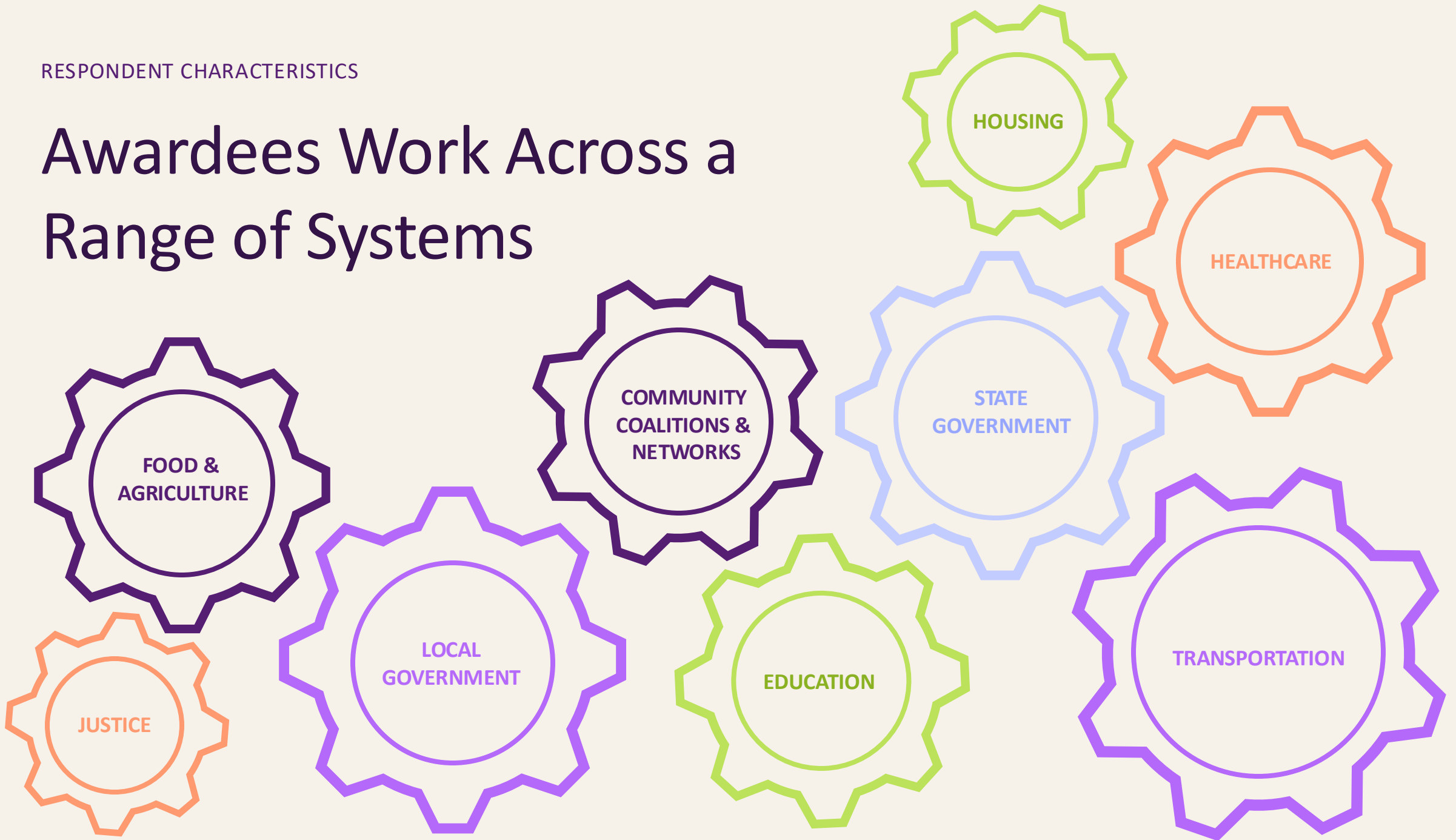
Findings

Grantee Cohort & Funding Stream

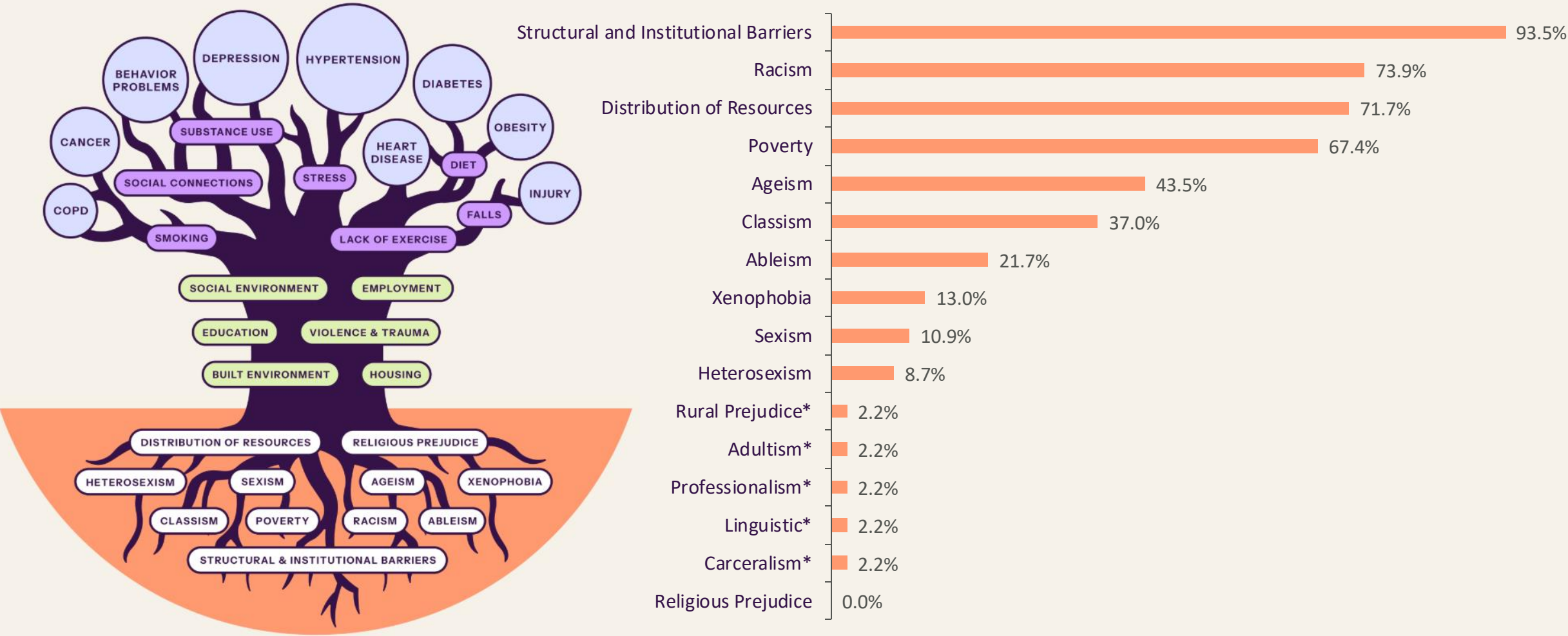


RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Awardees Work Across a Range of Systems



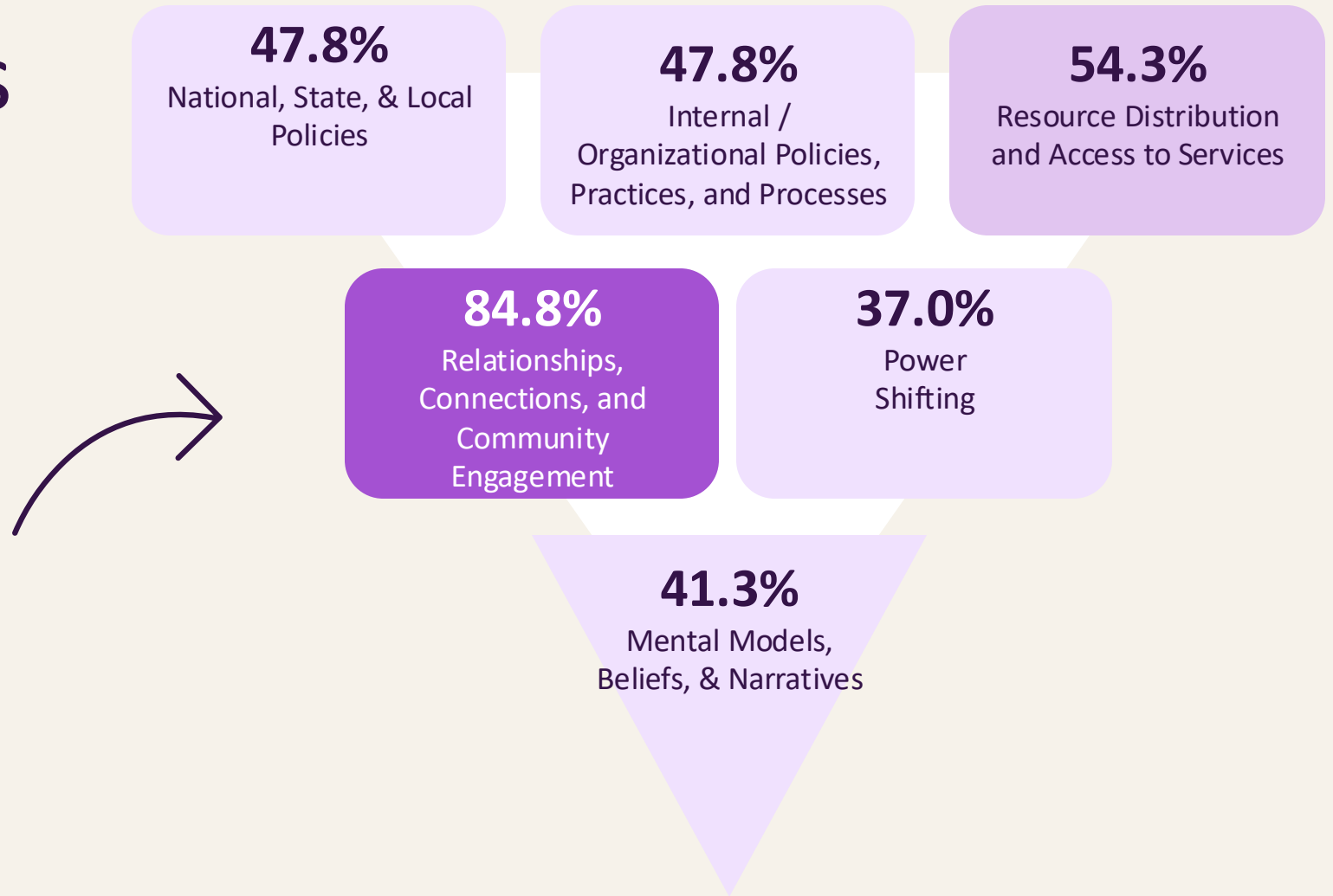
Awardees Address Root Causes of Health



*Indicates an area of work added by a grantee when selecting "other"

Water of Systems Change Focus

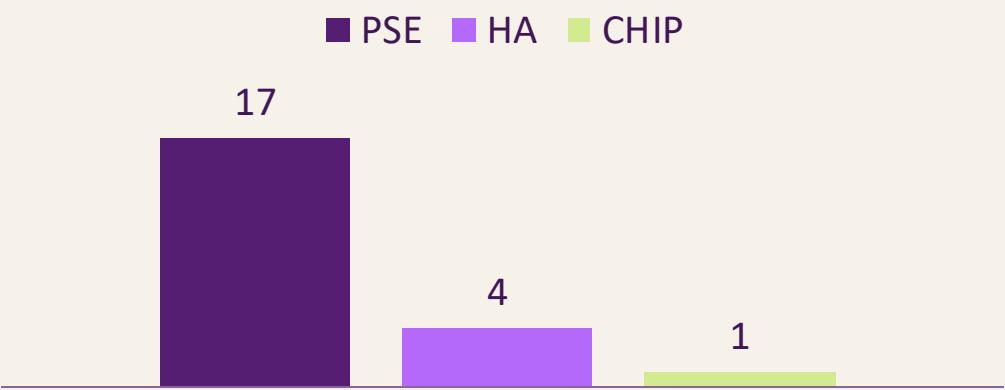
Across the six areas of systems change, a large majority (85%) of awardees reported working on relationships, connections, and community engagement as part of their PSE change initiatives.



Overview

Includes the rules and regulations created at a governmental level or by a legislative body, at the local / municipal, state, or national level.

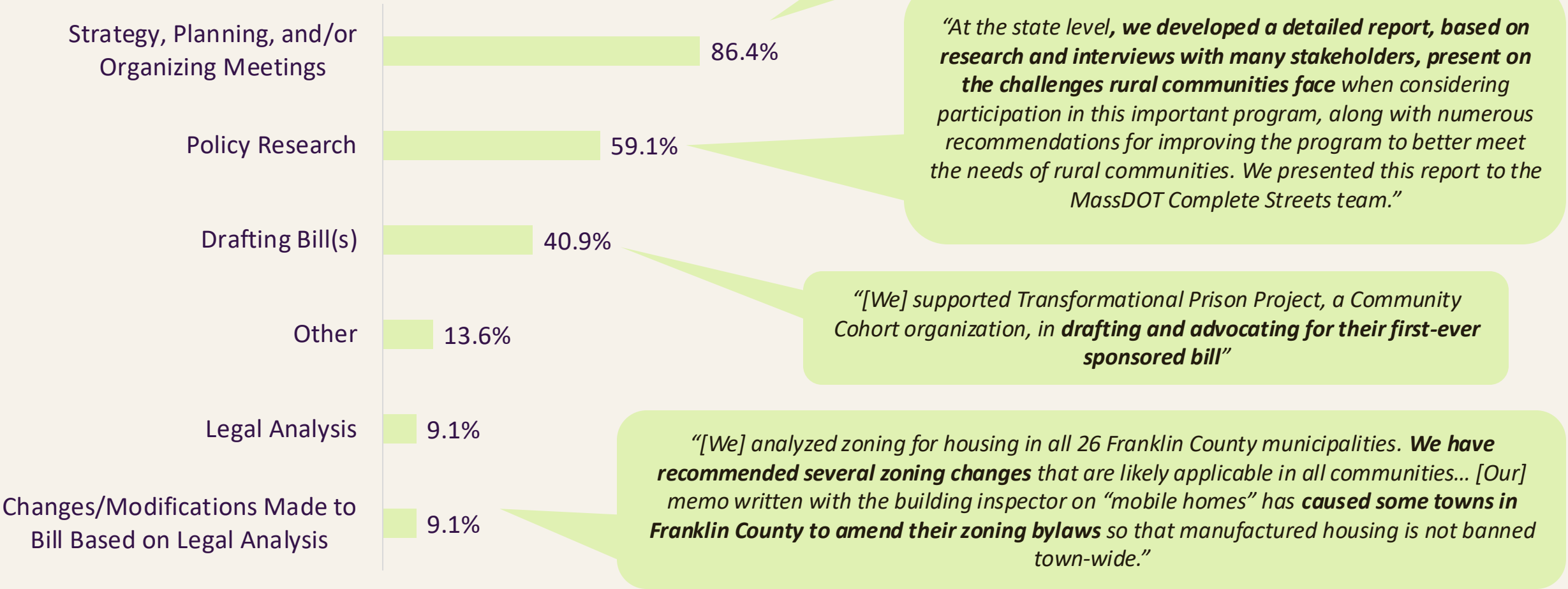
Awardees Working on National, State, Local Policies, by Funding Stream (n=22)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Policy Development



Spotlight: Transportation Policy Wins!

Awardees working in the transportation sector are celebrating multiple policy wins across Massachusetts. These included establishment of discounted transportation fares for low-income residents, training and planning with local communities for Complete Streets policies, and increasing access to driver's licenses for all residents.

*"We advocated strongly for the Work and Family Mobility Act, which **granted the right to all MA residents to apply for their drivers' licenses**. This bill was passed in 2023 and was **a major win around racial and immigration justice**. "*

*"In March 2024, the MBTA board approved the **Low-Income Eligible Fare Program** and it was officially launched in September 2024. This is one of our biggest wins since this program features a **50% discount on MBTA fares from riders ages 26-64.**"*

*"We successfully communicated to MassDOT a rural training should be offered, and they had a sold-out training in one of our rural communities which allowed three of our towns to attend. **These towns are now moving toward adopting Complete Streets policies**, and we hope ultimately able to take advantage of the **planning and construction funding** they will be eligible to receive. "*

Spotlight: Housing Policy Wins!

Awardees working in the housing sector uplifted numerous policy wins, including contributions to the successful passage of the Affordable Homes Act (including funding allocation and multiple significant wins for rental vouchers, housing tax credits, and accessory dwelling units), incorporating housing access into 1115 Waivers, and the Walsh Property Plan to create new affordable housing.

*"We successfully advocated to **allow ADUs by-rights on single family lots across the state**, a pivotal piece of legislation in the Affordable Homes Act."*

*"In partnership with our Housing Stewards, municipal allies, and statewide coalitions... we mobilized community members and local leaders to **elevate the importance of long-term affordable housing investment**... Through these efforts, we ensured local voices were heard in support of key housing policies.*

*This legislative advocacy contributed to the **final passage of the \$5.1 billion Bond Bill**, with the inclusion of the Affordable Homes Act in early 2025, **with historic policy and financial investment in housing production, preservation, and public housing modernization.**"*

*"In 2024, Truro 365 organized around supporting the Walsh Property Plan: "Walsh" is a town-acquired parcel of about 70 acres. **A committee was formed to engage with the community and determine a comprehensive plan, which proposed to keep half the site as open space and to develop the other half as affordable housing and mixed uses that the town currently lacks.** The well-funded and well-organized Part Time Residents Association put out a stream of misinformation to oppose this plan: **the Truro 365 group text-banked, flyerred, had one-on-one conversations, coordinated a Letter to the Editor campaign in support of the plan.** At Annual Town Meeting, they strategically deployed speakers in support of the article and Town Meeting **voters passed the plan with much greater than majority support.**"*

Spotlight: Building Local Leadership

Awardees described centering the perspectives of communities with lived experience by providing education, training, and mentorship to build the leadership capacity of local community members.

These initiatives provide communities with the skills and confidence to advocate for more equitable policies for years to come.

*“We are working towards a model where community members have the knowledge and self-assurance to propose and follow-through on changes to their neighborhoods... Residents of these neighborhoods (the highest proportionally BIPOC communities in the city, as well as those with the lowest health outcomes) have the knowledge and lived experience necessary to inform real equitable change. **By bringing resources and attention to these neighborhoods, and empowering residents to have a hand in design, the racist policies of the past will not be re-enacted.**”*

*“[We] provided legal and strategic guidance, offered policy research support, and **helped prepare directly impacted advocates for legislative engagement through a Legislative 101 Training...** we also center the leadership of formerly incarcerated individuals in all aspects of our work—from legislative to coalition strategy—**ensuring that policies are shaped by those most impacted. This approach strengthens accountability, equity, and long-term systems change.**”*

*“We hosted a regional Housing Institute... that convened 38 attendees representing 15 communities... **These gatherings are not simply educational—they’re catalytic. They build relationships, shift narratives, and create a regional bench of informed champions ready to act locally.** Each program embeds racial and health equity, highlighting how housing policy directly influences community well-being, economic opportunity, and access to basic human needs.”*

Significance of Policy Change

Awardees noted that policy changes can directly impact systemic barriers to health & well-being; but in order for this systems change to occur, it is important that communities with lived experience are shaping these policy changes.

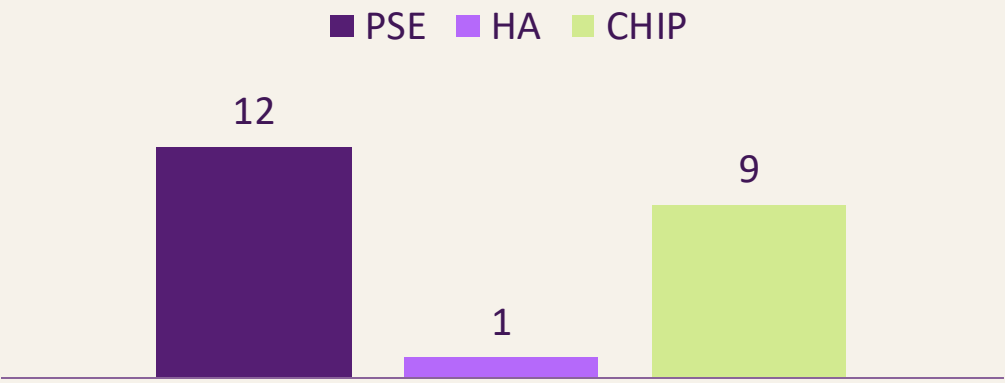
*“We advocate for affordable, safe, and stable housing because housing insecurity is a root cause of poor health outcomes, financial instability, and racial disparities. Seniors on fixed incomes, families struggling with rising rents, and communities of color facing systemic barriers to homeownership all deserve solutions that center equity and justice. **By tackling policy reform and community engagement together, we are dismantling systemic barriers** and reshaping the future of housing in our region. Housing is more than four walls—it’s about dignity, health, and opportunity... We know that housing is the foundation for health, stability, and opportunity.”*

*“Our initiative is not only focused on changing policy content—but also on changing who shapes policy. Through the [Reentry Health Working Group] and Community Cohort, **we’ve created structures where directly impacted individuals are leading advocacy, co-developing strategies, and influencing decisions at the state level.** We believe real systems change means shifting both policy and power.”*

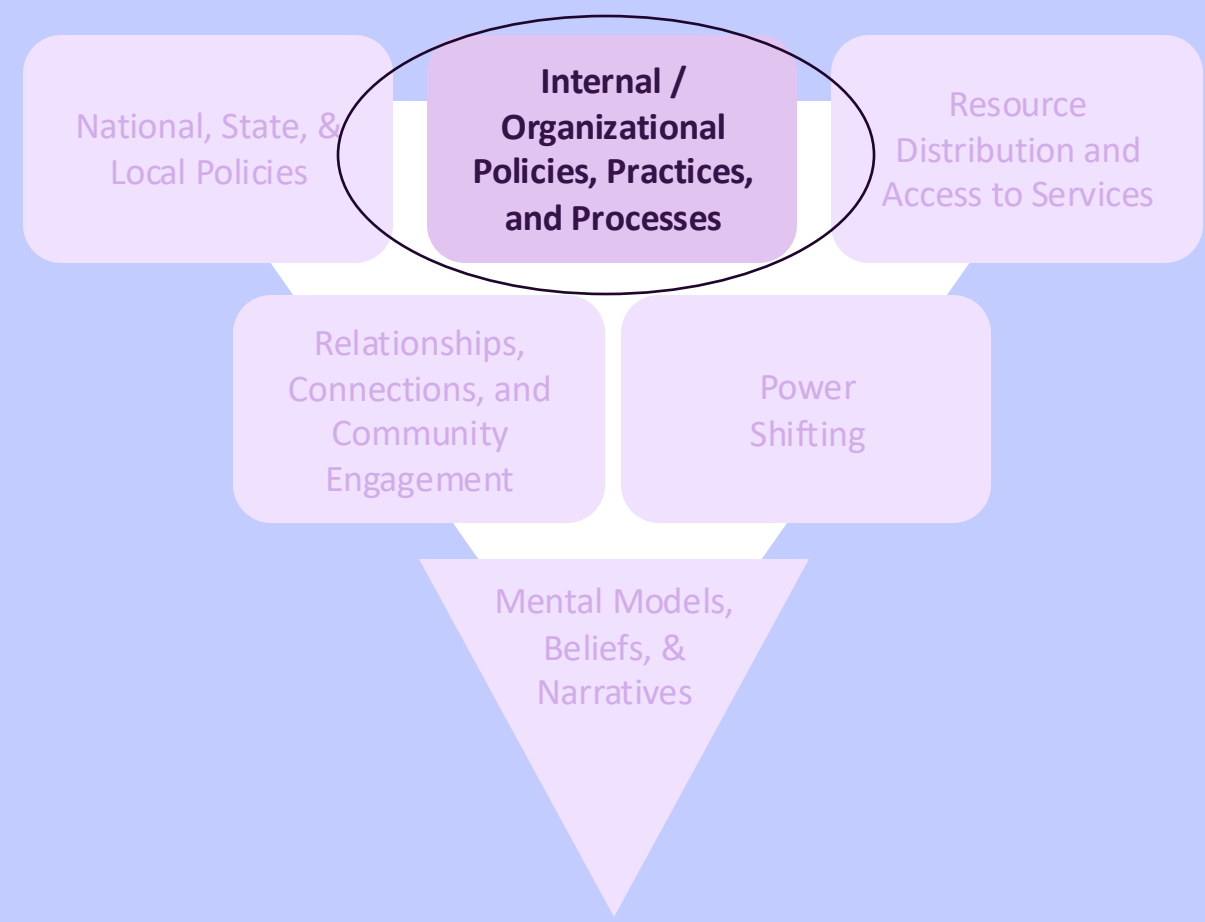
Overview

Includes the activities, rules, processes, or internal policies within an organization or institution.

Awardees Working on Internal Policies & Practices, by Funding Stream (n=22)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Impact on Health & Racial Equity

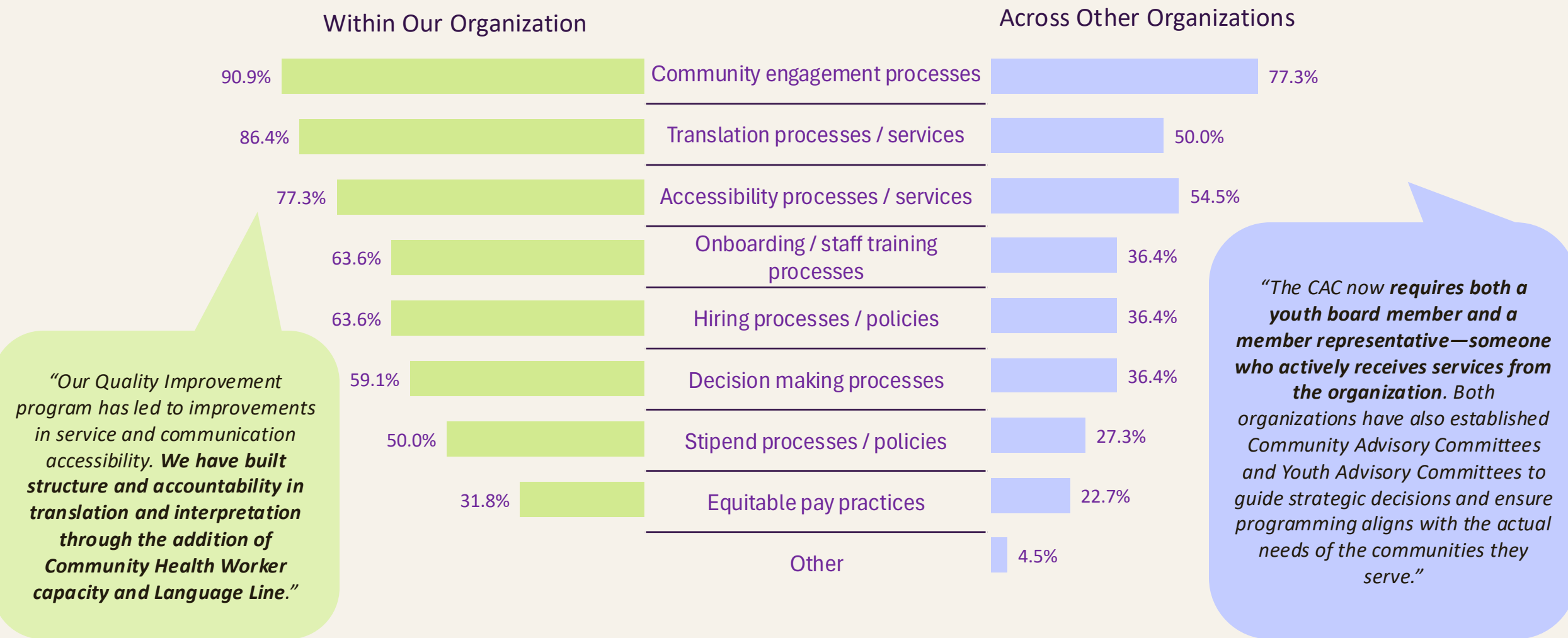
Awardees described developing and implementing a range of policies and practices within their organizations and across partner organizations to address health and racial equity within their communities.

“The internal shifts we’ve made are key to advancing equity. Our compensation policy ensures that people with lived experience are valued for their time, insights, and leadership—not expected to participate without support. Our internal practices also reinforce our commitment to peer-led decision-making, allowing directly impacted individuals to help shape meeting agendas, identify advocacy priorities, and co-create strategy. **These shifts promote a more equitable distribution of resources and power and build the infrastructure for long-term community leadership** in reentry policy.”

“These internal changes directly advance health and racial equity by shifting who holds power and influence within organizations that shape access to food, services, and opportunity. By including youth, clients, and BIPOC residents in formal leadership and advisory roles, organizations... are becoming more culturally responsive and better aligned with the populations they serve. These structures also strengthen accountability and transparency, ensuring that decisions are guided by those most impacted by inequities... Improving internal processes such as translation and DEIB accountability ensures more equitable access to information and services, reinforcing a broader institutional commitment to inclusive, community-driven change.”

“By ensuring that all members of our community can access services and resources in their native language or in formats that meet their needs **while encouraging other organizations to do the same through CHIP strategies, we are contributing to the advancement of health equity.**”

Organizational Change Strategies/Activities



Spotlight: Equitable Engagement Processes

Awardees emphasized the importance of developing organizational processes to intentionally engage with diverse communities in ways that centers their experiences and perspectives, especially in the early stages of an initiative as part of the assessment process.

*“Through our own process, we have been better able to advise partner organizations and members of the Anchor Collaborative. **It was through this process that we became aware of the need to engage more deeply with youth and with Spanish-speaking communities** and have been able to have more authentic and trusting relationships with these populations. **Through addressing these policies internally**, we have also been able to build relationships with community leaders who trust in our commitment to equity and who are then able to work through us to mentor other partner organizations.”*

*“The Coalition... implements the **“the trusted messenger model”** in CHIP community conversations as a means of collecting community voice and using qualitative data to inform public health planning. **“The trusted messenger model” is an effective qualitative method for collecting information, because it is led by individuals who are considered leaders in their sub-communities— cultural, faith-based, ethnic, lived-experiences etc.**”*

*“**Rather than expecting individuals to participate in traditional municipal processes to have their voices heard, we are meeting them where they are at through the coffee chats and tabling events.** Some of the groups we have engaged are churches that serve the Vietnamese, Haitian Creole, and Caribbean communities, an African grocery market, and Before/After School programs. The Coalition is **creating opportunities for people to have their voices uplifted** to and acted upon by the municipal government.”*

Significance of Internal/Organizational Change

Awardees emphasized the positive impact that these organizational changes will have in more effectively and equitably reaching community members.

*“By rebuilding our internal capacity to support the unique populations and families that each of our Family Support Networks sites serves, we can better fit the specific needs of these communities as they arise. We know that beyond meeting language accessibility, the cultural and social nuances of parenting education and early childhood education across culture is aided when met with a culturally responsive approach. With **new internal systems, staff, and training for our teams, we can better approach our families, and later train other agencies with these improved practices.**”*

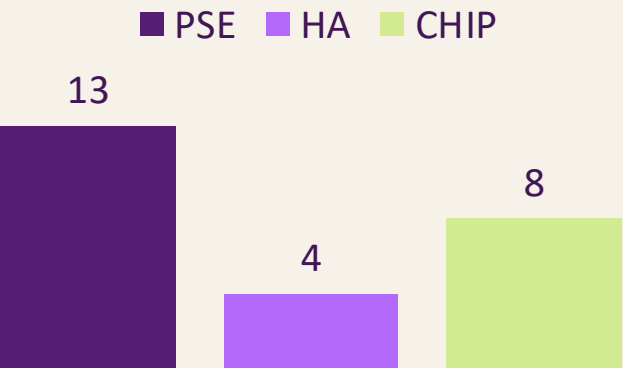
*“We see these internal shifts as foundational—not supplementary—to policy change. By embedding equity into how we work with partners and [people with lived experience] PWLE, **we’re modeling the kind of systems transformation we want to see statewide.**”*

*“Our CHIP Network **is more diverse and its activities are more accessible.** During this cycle our Network grew from 100 to 300 members, clarified its purpose and values, and was able to capitalize on unanticipated opportunities **as a result of work on internal systems.**”*

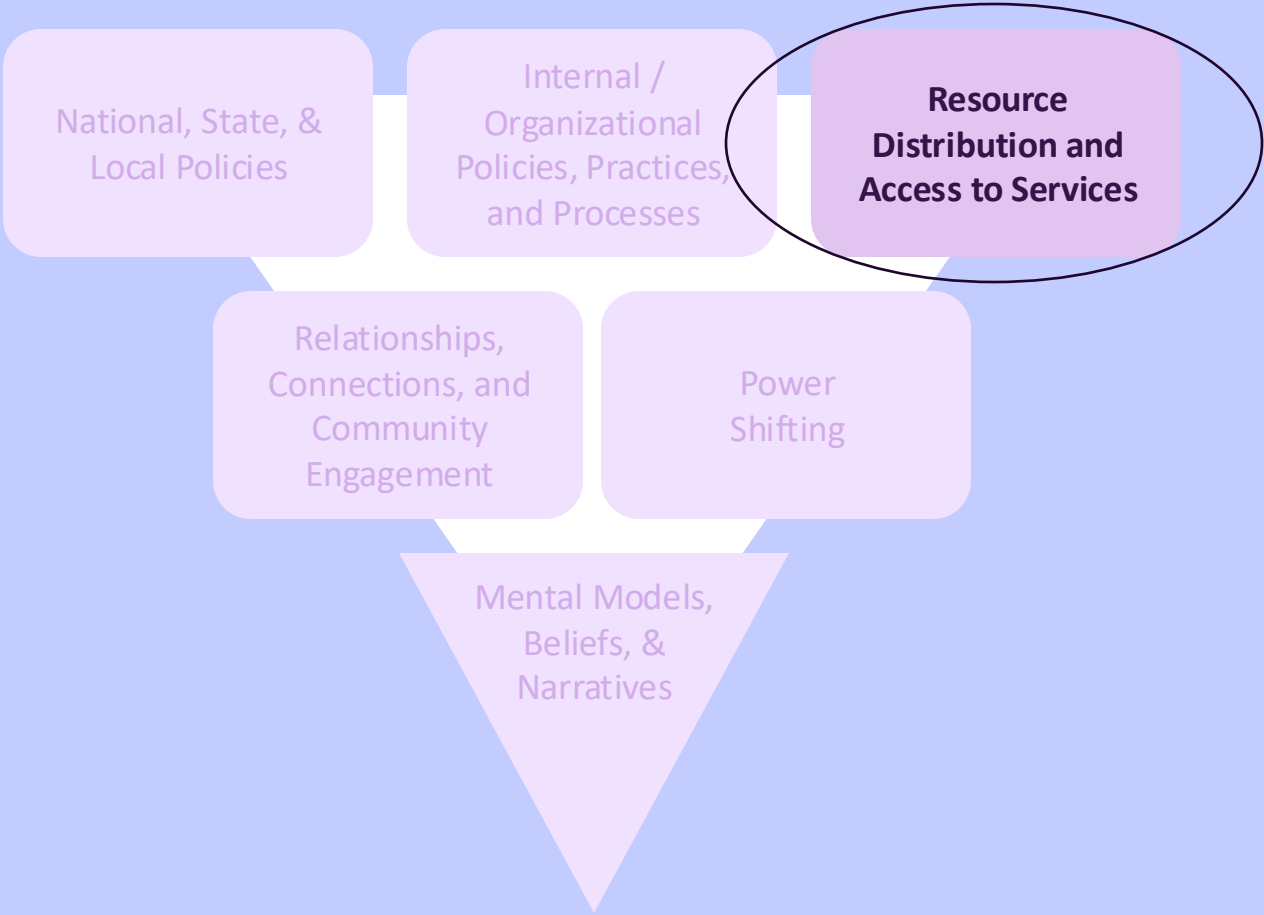
Overview

Includes how money, people, services, resources, and information are allocated, distributed, and accessed.

Awardees Working on Resource Distribution & Access to Services, by Funding Stream (n=25)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Impact on Health & Racial Equity

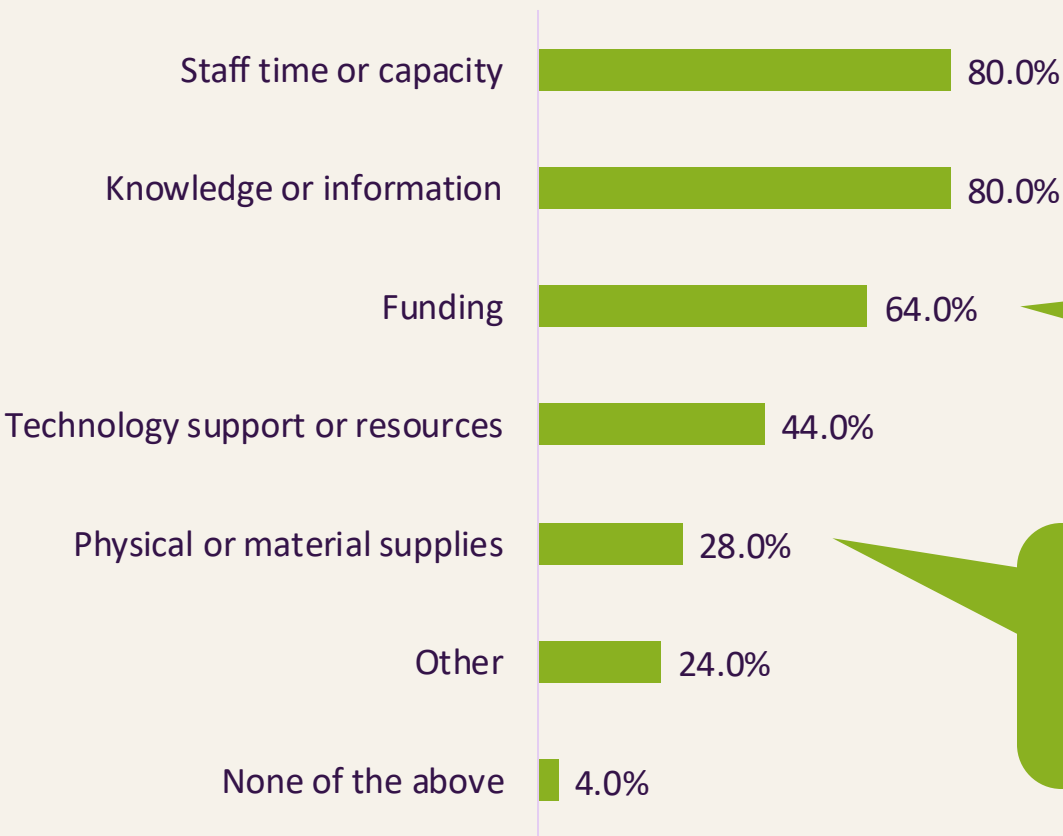
Awardees noted that resources and services have not historically been equitably distributed or accessible within their communities, which has had long term impacts on the health and well-being of community members, especially youth, BIPOC, immigrants, older adults, and those with disabilities.

- To address inequitable distribution of resources, awardees are examining historical and current systems, addressing structural barriers, and collaboratively developing new tools and processes.

“Health and racial equity aren’t about charity — they’re about justice. And that starts by making sure everyone can access what they need to thrive — whether that’s housing, support for a small business, a healthcare provider who listens, or a system that finally sees their full humanity.”

“We’ve come to understand that the way resources and services are distributed hasn’t always been fair — and often hasn’t included the people who need them most. Historically, the language, policies, and systems in place were built to serve some and leave others out. We’re not ignoring that — we’re naming it, and we’re working to change it. Our team, especially our Racial Justice Director, helps lead this shift by supporting staff in identifying how bias — even unintentional — shows up in programs and decisions. We’re pushing ourselves and our partners to ask hard questions: Who is being excluded? Why? And how can we break down those barriers? Because when systems keep repeating the same harms, it’s time to reimagine how those systems work — with equity at the center... It’s one thing to talk about equity — it’s another to look in the mirror and admit how your own systems may be causing harm.”

Redistributing Resources



*“The Primary Care, Wellness and Preventative Care Community Team has also been working on **building capacity among Community Health Workers**. CHWs play a critical role in the health care system, getting patients access to resources beyond the hospital and ensuring that their basic needs are met. We have a goal of establishing a training for CHWs who live in the communities that are most in need of health care resources.”*

*“Our initiative **allocated approximately \$20,000 per year for implementation work ideally led by member organizations** who participate in the Community Teams of the CHIP... We ask how initiatives will impact health and racial equity and prioritize projects that serve priority populations.”*

*“We’ve **delivered fresh, culturally meaningful food straight to families’ doors**. We’ve helped parents sign up for benefits (such as SNAP) they didn’t know they were eligible for, and we’ve worked hard to illuminate the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) which does not require sign up.”*

Stages of Resource and Service Distribution



Reflected on whether resources are allocated and distributed equitably within our initiative and between partners.	4%	12%	80%
Identified how resources and services are allocated within and across our community.	0%	24%	76%
Developed strategies to address how resources and services are utilized and allocated in our community.	0%	24%	76%
Actively engaged in implementing strategies to address access to resources and services in our community.	0%	40%	60%

Most Cohort 1 and 2 awardees reported that, in 2025, they have done and continue to do the core activities that address access to resources in their communities

Significance of Resource / Service Distribution

Awardees noted that supporting the distribution of resources or services in their communities has broader, longer-term impacts past the initial resource or service.

- Supporting communities through resource distribution opens the door for deeper, continued engagement, while providing support in navigating local systems builds the longer term self-agency of communities.

*“[We] started with a simple truth: when families have good food on the table, everything gets better. Kids learn better, parents breathe a little easier, and communities feel stronger. **But it’s not just about food, it’s about trust, care, and showing up for one another when systems fall short.... The doorway is food, but we also support families to sign up for fuel assistance, and others.** We’ve created jobs and leadership roles for residents, trained youth to become policy advocates and storytellers, helped strengthen local, small farms, and supported early learning centers that are doing miracles on tight budgets.”*

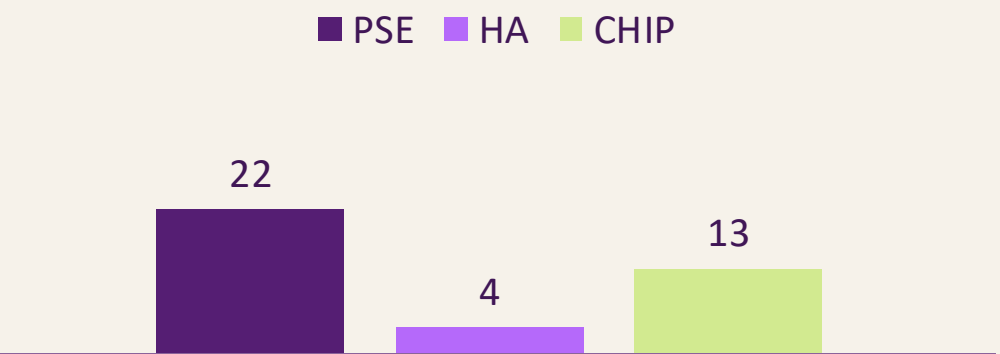
*“In a community like Chelsea with limited access to cars, **public transportation is one of the most viable options for folks to use to move around their communities** and access essential goods and services. For seniors who are at risk of isolation, access to these services are critical whether it's to access healthcare or food or combat social isolation. Barriers to accessing public transportation for seniors include lack of information, inability to access technology or ability to navigate technology, language barriers and more. **By breaking down these barriers we ensure that seniors and our aging population can fully participate in their communities and access whatever essentials they may need thus ensuring the advancement of health and racial equity in Chelsea.**”*



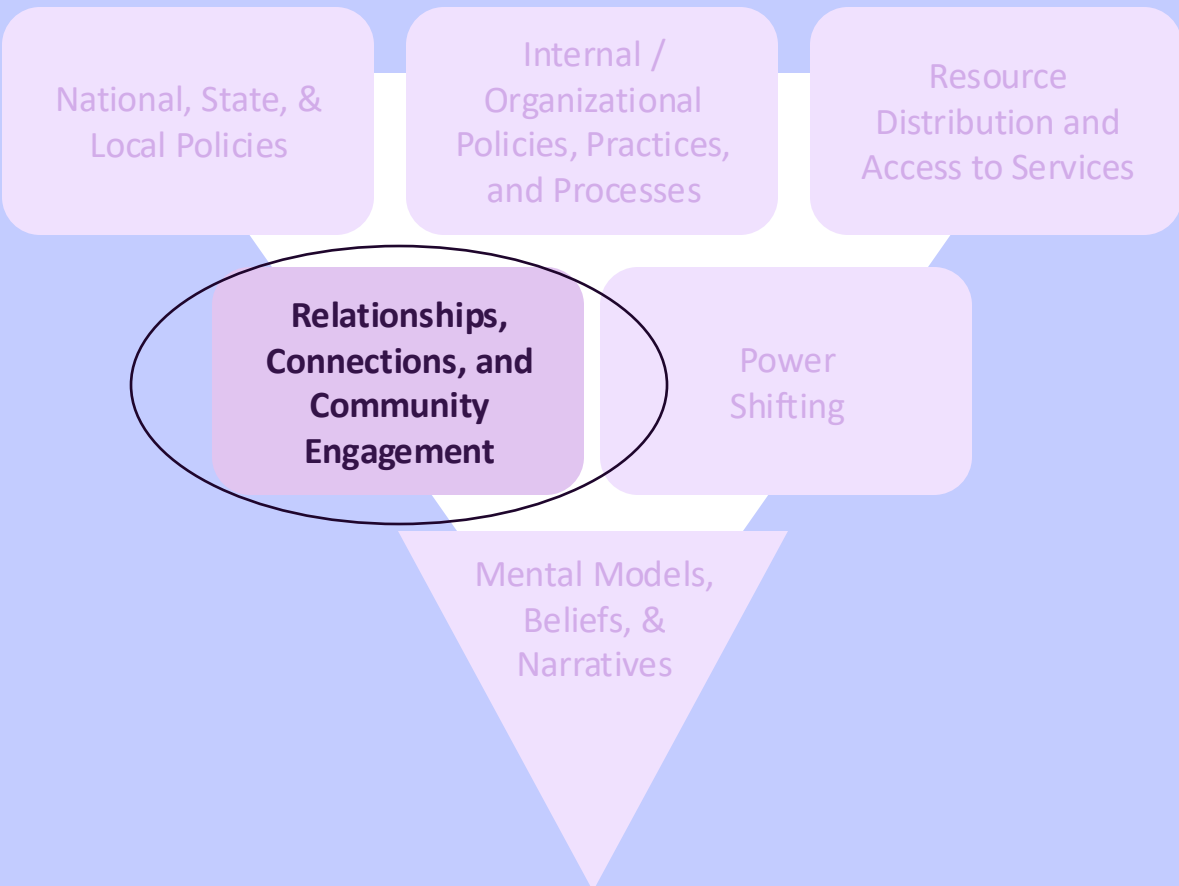
Overview

Includes the quality of connections and communication occurring between organizations, partners, and local community members.

Awardees Working on Relationships, Connections, and Community Engagement, by Funding Stream (n=39)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Spotlight: Authentic Relationship Building

Awardees described authentic partnership building across organizations and partners as essential to creating sustainable change, with some noting that it takes significant time to develop these intentional, diverse, trust-based, and mutually beneficial partnerships.

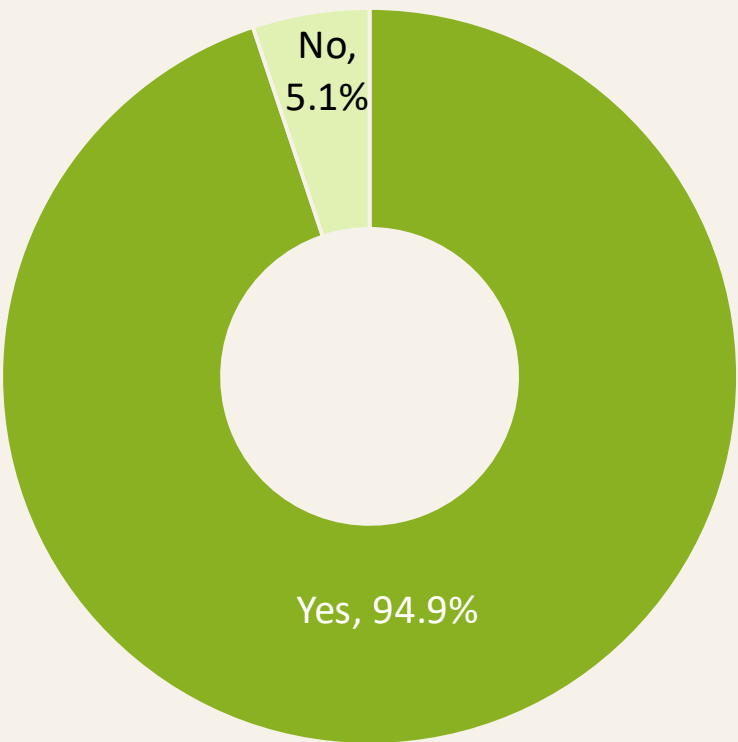
*“Our commitment to authentic relationships extends beyond youth and into our broader coalition of partners, including legislators and advocacy allies. **These connections allow us to bridge youth voices into powerful spaces**—whether that’s during advocacy days, restorative justice healing circles, or coalition meetings—ensuring young people are not just present, but empowered.”*

*“**These relationships are authentic and long-lasting because they do not rely on single person-to-person connections**, so when one member of a coalition is lost, the coalition itself continues and often is able to make new connections to fill the gap. Because the coalitions are diverse and not simply grant-based partnerships between a few organizations, **there is a richer variety of perspectives brought to the table** and many more communities and experiences represented.”*

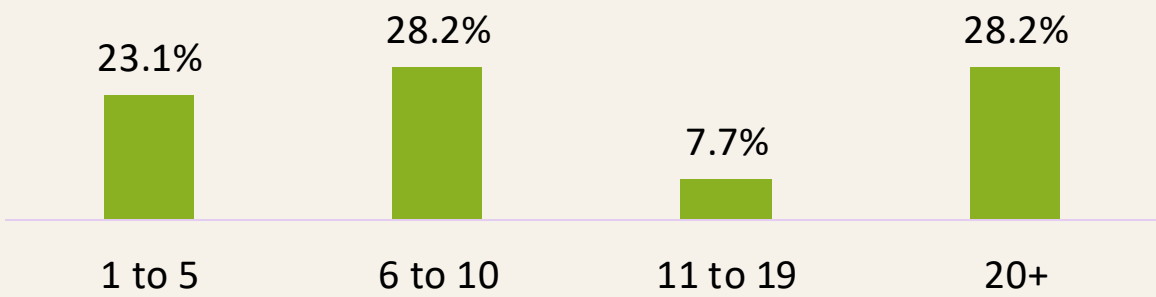
*“We want to highlight that one of the most powerful aspects of [the Coalition’s] initiative is our commitment to **building sustainable, authentic relationships that extend beyond individual projects or funding cycles**. Our work is rooted in decades-long partnerships with school districts, community organizations, and youth themselves, and prioritizes ongoing dialogue, mutual learning, and shared leadership. Over the last 5 years of this grant we have deepened relationships with our communities of focus through our Youth Leadership and PEER Ambassador programs, which were started during this time... These efforts not only strengthen the fabric of local school communities but also foster a regional culture of collective action.”*

New Partnerships Among Grantees

Developed New Partnerships Due to MA CHHAF Funding



Number of New Partnerships Among Awardees



*“The coalition uses a personalized approach to identify new community partners, reach out strategically, and **cultivate connections based on an understanding of mutually beneficial goals...** We expanded our partner **network** to include more houses of worship, local food distribution sites, fitness & wellness centers, fifteen area high schools, and a prominent older adult affordable living housing community.”*

Spotlight: Building Trust-Based Partnerships

Awardees emphasized the importance of trust when building sustainable partnerships across organizations and communities. They noted that trust is a two-way street across all participants, but that building these trusted relationships allows partners to be able to rely on one another and more effectively address systems change in their communities.

*“No matter the space—be it the State House, Department of Corrections, Probation, local law enforcement, or other community institutions—**we are intentional about building strong, values-based relationships. This network of trust means we’re never alone in our advocacy:** when we need to mobilize support or push for systems change, we can lean on these partnerships to move collectively and strategically.”*

*“**At the heart of it, this work is about building trust.** When we connect with people across sectors — from grassroots leaders to institutional partners — **we’re breaking down silos and bringing folks to the same table.** That’s how we build a healthier, more just community.”*

*“One of the key strengths of our CHIP initiative has been the use of working groups as a space to foster stronger relationships and meaningful connections. **These groups provide consistent opportunities for participants from diverse backgrounds to collaborate, share perspectives, and build trust over time.** The working groups have become a foundation for deeper engagement and more inclusive problem-solving. This ongoing collaboration is **helping to bridge gaps between sectors, align efforts, and ensure our work remains grounded** in the lived experiences of community members most impacted by housing and health inequities.”*

Significance of Partnership Building

Awardees emphasized that broad policy, systems, and environment change cannot be accomplished in a silo, noting that intentional and sustained partnerships are necessary for effective and efficient community change.

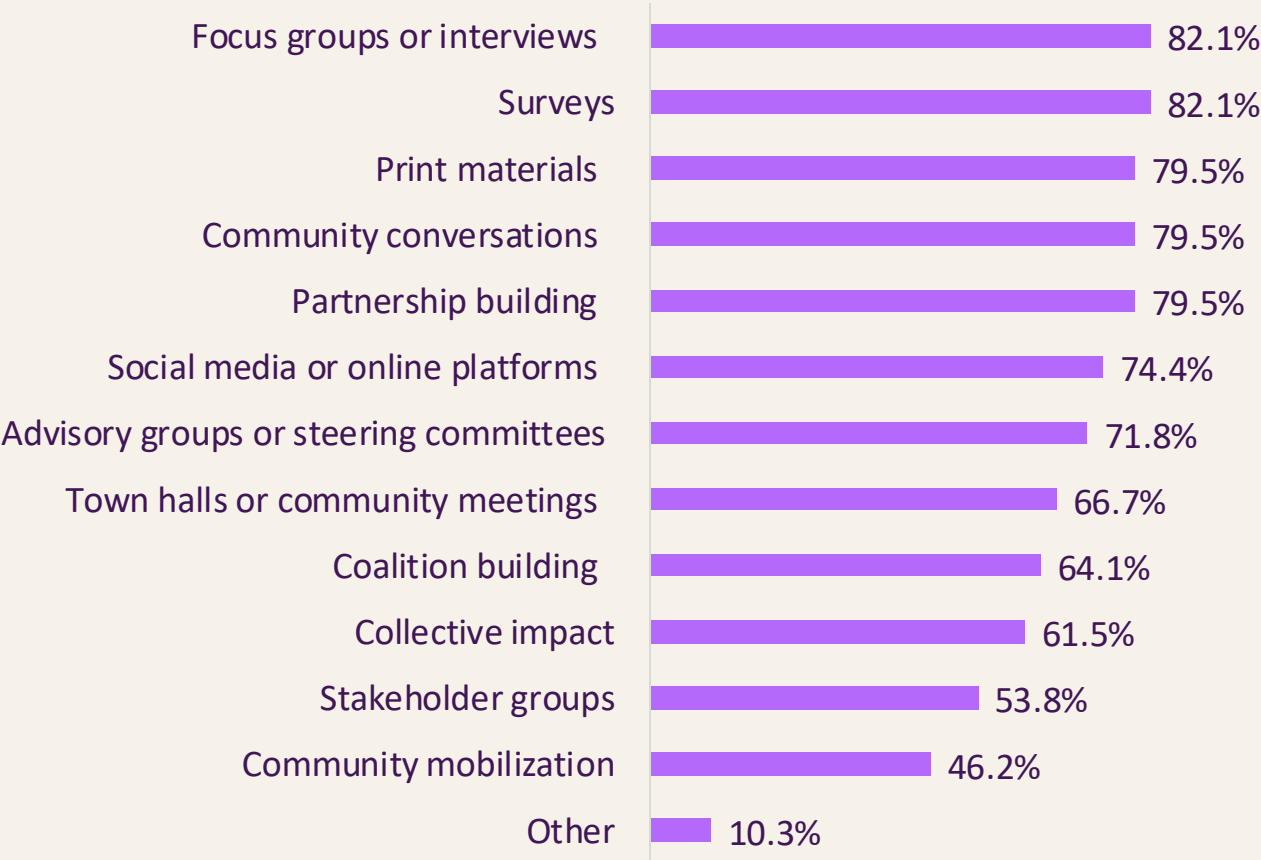
“Regional collaboration also strengthens equity by offering under-resourced districts opportunities to learn from and support one another, helping to shift systems in ways that would be difficult for individual schools to achieve alone.”

“These relationships are the backbone of our initiative. They’ve fostered cross-sector trust and created sustainable pathways for impacted individuals to shape systems change.”

“Our CHIP believes that many of the tools and resources to create transformative social change already exist, but need to be coordinated in the right way. We refrain from 'reinventing the wheel' and, instead, proactively build strong partnerships with other key stakeholders to more efficiently end young adult homelessness. Rather than acting as a group of individuals, we work collectively as a team and elevate the unique perspectives of everyone in order to achieve our goals.”

“The region’s rural nature increases the challenge of providing equitable access, not just to health care and mental health support, but also to education, elder services, childcare, broadband internet, and even food. The relationships and connections we are building make it possible for us to collaborate and advocate more effectively.”

Community Engagement: Strategies & Activities



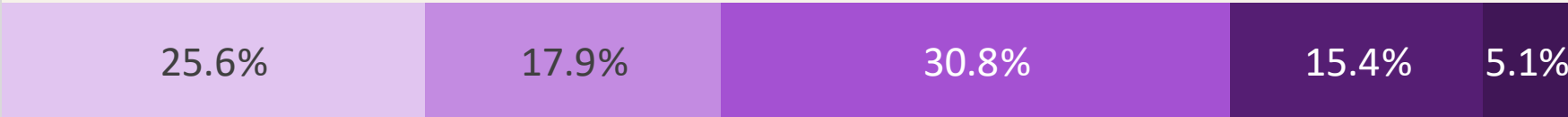
*“[We] defined priorities through 97 interviews and 35 community conversations led by trusted cohort leaders, the data **reflected the real-world concerns and values of diverse community members**. These insights included the need for early intervention in youth development, distrust in institutions, and recognition of intersecting identities —like race, gender identity, and immigration status—that shape access to care.”*

*“We also regularly hold **Hispanic Community Forums**, where community members can come and share their needs in a space where community and institutional leaders are present to hear directly from the community and provide potential solutions”*

Level of Community Engagement



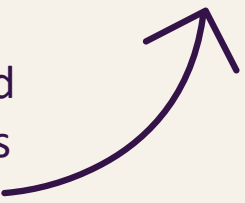
Prior to MA CHHAF Funding



With MA CHHAF Funding



With MA CHAAF funding, a larger proportion of awardees reported deeper levels of community engagement compared to prior to this additional funding



Significance of Community Engagement

Awardees emphasized the importance of developing relationships with communities based on mutual respect and trust as a critical component of equitable policy, systems, and environment change.

*“We believe change starts with people. The MA CHHAF funding has helped us deepen our reach and build relationships **rooted in honesty, equity, and mutual respect**. We don't show up with all the answers — we show up ready to listen, learn, and build with others. **Through this work, we're not just "engaging" the community — we are the community**. We're creating a space where every voice matters and every story counts. That's how we move from conversation to transformation — together.”*

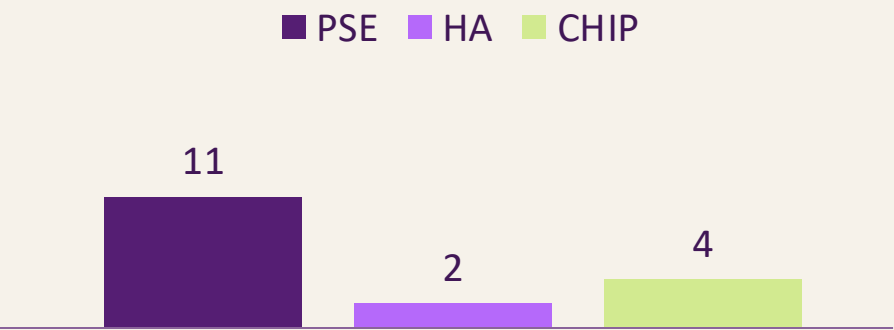
*“Developing intentional, trust-based relationships directly advances health and racial equity by centering the voices and lived experiences of young people most impacted by systemic injustice. **When youth are meaningfully engaged and empowered to share their narratives, they help to reshape the systems that have historically marginalized them.**”*

*“[We are] committed to fostering sustainable, community-driven partnerships that amplify the voices of justice-impacted individuals in health policy reform. **By investing in long-term coalition building and centering lived experience, we're building relationships AND we're building power.**”*

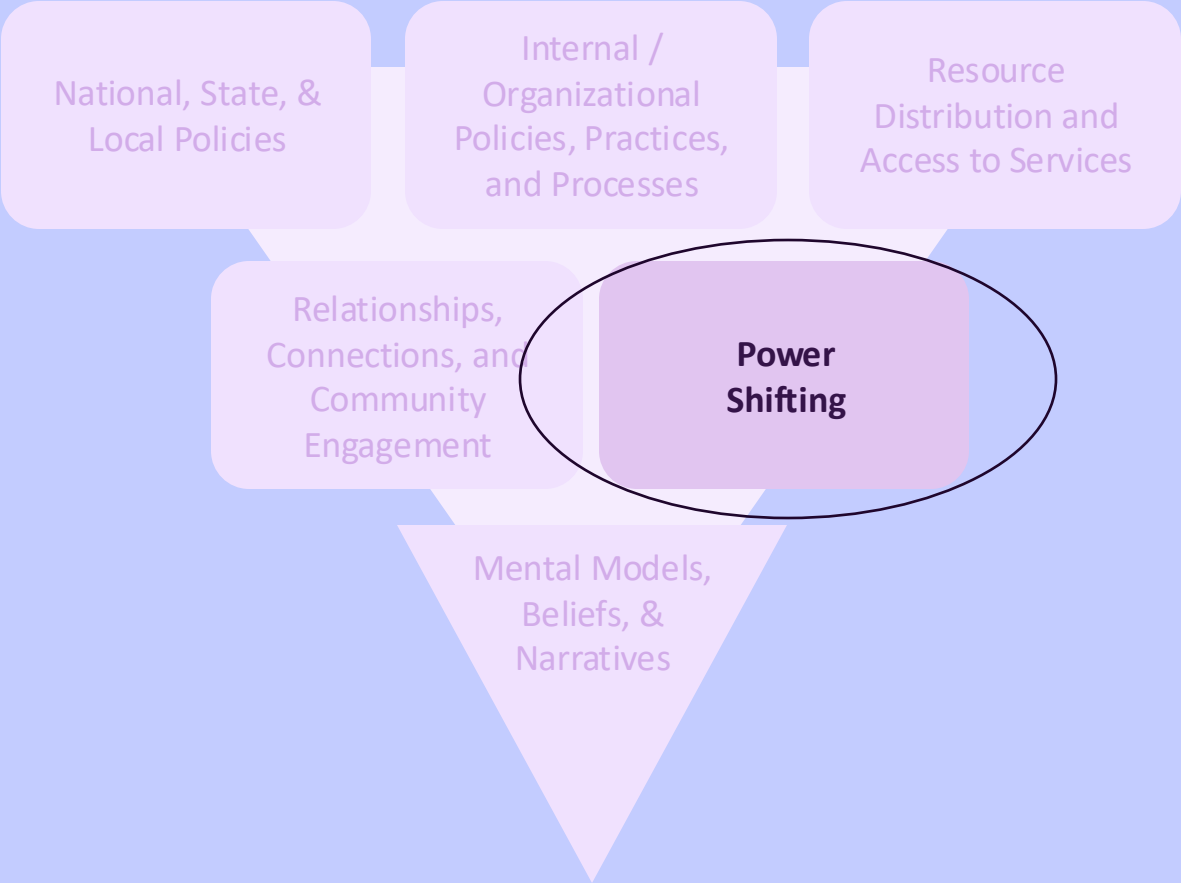
Overview

Includes which individuals & organizations hold decision-making power, authority, and influence (either formally or informally)

Awardees Working on Power Shifting, by Funding Stream (n=17)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Awardees were asked how far along they were in activities related to shifting power to their communities – whether they were still planning the work, actively engaged in the work, or had completed a particular step in the process.

POWER SHIFTING

Stages of Power Shifting



PLANNING
(We have not done this but plan to)



IMPLEMENTING
(We have started doing this)



COMPLETING
(We have done this)

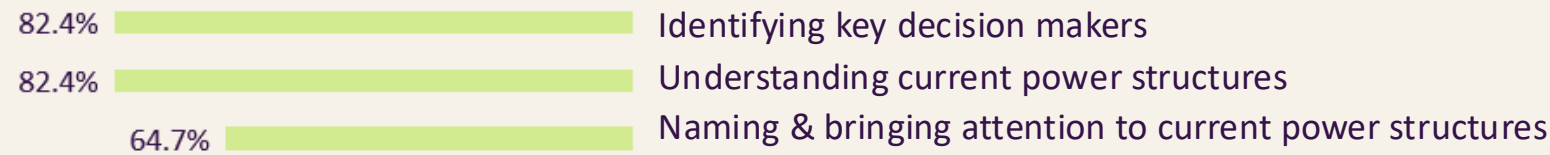
Reflected on whether resources are allocated and distributed equitably within our initiative and between partners.	0%	18%	82%
Identified who holds formal authority and informal authority within our community.	12%	24%	65%
Developed a strong understanding of how power and decision-making structures are impacting community members and operating within our community.	18%	12%	71%
Identified and developed strategies to shift power in our community.	18%	24%	59%
Actively engaged in implementing strategies to shift power in our community.	12%	18%	71%

Most Cohort 1 and 2 awardees reported that, in 2025, they have done and continue to do the core activities that shift power in their communities

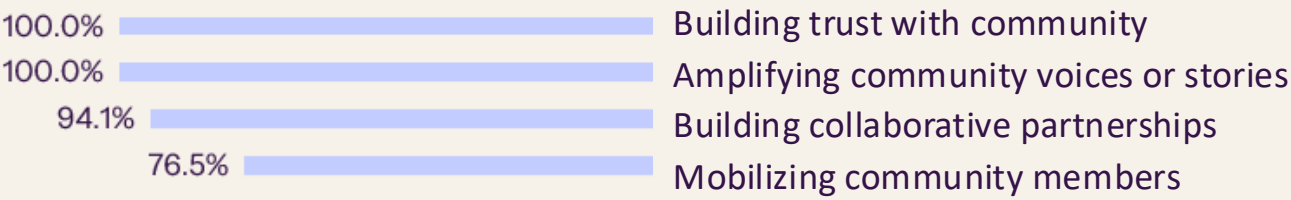


Strategies & Activities Utilized by Awardees

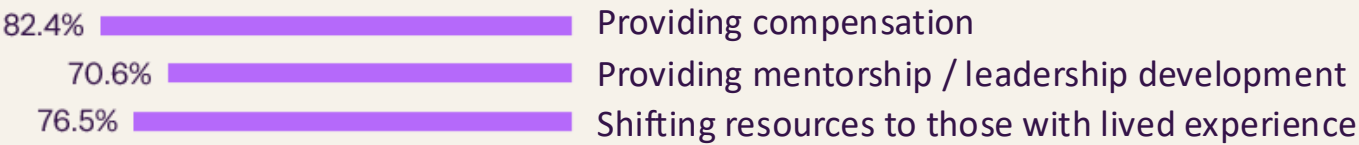
The Funds’ support for engaging communities in PSE change approaches was used by awardees for a variety of activities that promote shifting power to community members.



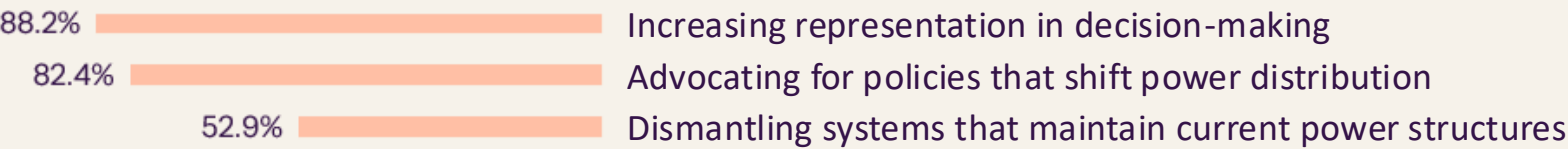
Assessing current power structures



Developing trusted relationships with underrepresented communities



Building infrastructure for shifting power



Changing power structures

Spotlight: Representation in Decision-Making

Awardees are actively changing decision-making structures and processes within their own organizations, coalitions, and local governments to center the voices and ideas of the communities most impacted.

- This has led to changes in policies and processes around not only who is involved in making those decisions but how decisions are made.

*“These circles are attempting to redesign power within [our organization] by creating a consent-based governance body that has formal power within the hierarchy to apply a social justice and equity lens to internal policy. While we have yet to see an actual policy change, **the structure itself has redistributed power by elevating all participants to an equal level, regardless of the level of institutional power they hold as a result of their roles. Each member has consenting authority, and the group determines who the leaders of the circles are – not the traditional hierarchy.**”*

*“Our initiative shifts power by embedding lived experience at every level of advocacy, policy design, and coalition leadership. Through the Community Cohort and Reentry Health Working Group, **formerly incarcerated individuals are not just participating—they are leading:** identifying advocacy priorities, shaping Know Your Rights materials, and influencing state-level decisions”*

*“By shifting power toward students and ensuring all students have a voice, we are creating more collaborative and inclusive school systems, and our project helps dismantle the traditional hierarchies that have long contributed to inequitable outcomes in education and well-being... these practices allow students to engage in community-building as well as harm repair in ways that feel safe, supportive, and meaningful. **Students have a voice in the process, rather than being passive recipients of strategies and punishment, and adults are required to share decision-making power while maintaining developmentally appropriate boundaries.**”*

Significance of Power Shifting

Awardees noted that shifting power can have both immediate and long-term impacts on the health and well-being of communities.

- These long-term impacts can include the lasting changes in a community after the implementation of local or organizational policies and processes that were shaped by the involvement of the communities most impacted.
- Additionally, this power shifting can also have a direct impact on the lives of these individuals who gain a sense of agency and empowerment, which can have positive “ripple effects” to other parts of their lives.

“We have heard it said that the best thing to aim for is organizing yourself out of a job. We hope that some day we will not need to be intermediaries between institutional powers and everyday residents, but that residents will have all the tools they need to work directly with those larger power-holders.”

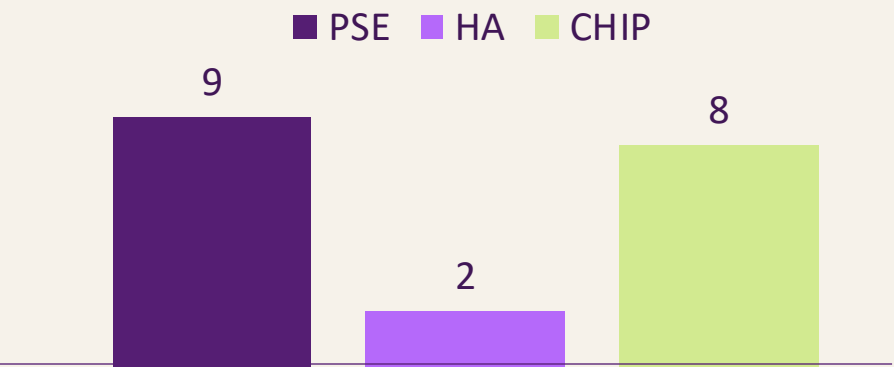
*“[Our programs] have demonstrated how this model creates ripple effects: BIPOC residents who once felt excluded are now leading public events, advising institutions, and launching initiatives that challenge structural barriers. **This redistribution of influence builds lasting community capacity, challenges entrenched power dynamics, and helps create systems that are more just, responsive, and sustainable.**”*

*“**This redistribution of power helps foster stronger school connectedness, which is one of the most powerful protective factors for youth mental health and substance use prevention.** When students feel seen, heard, and valued - and when they have influence over their environment - they are more likely to thrive emotionally, academically, and socially. Students who achieve a high school education and see themselves as meaningful contributors to their communities are more likely to have increased academic success, increased access to employment with living wages, and increased opportunities for generational wealth, home ownership, access to preventative healthcare, and access to positive social connections...”*

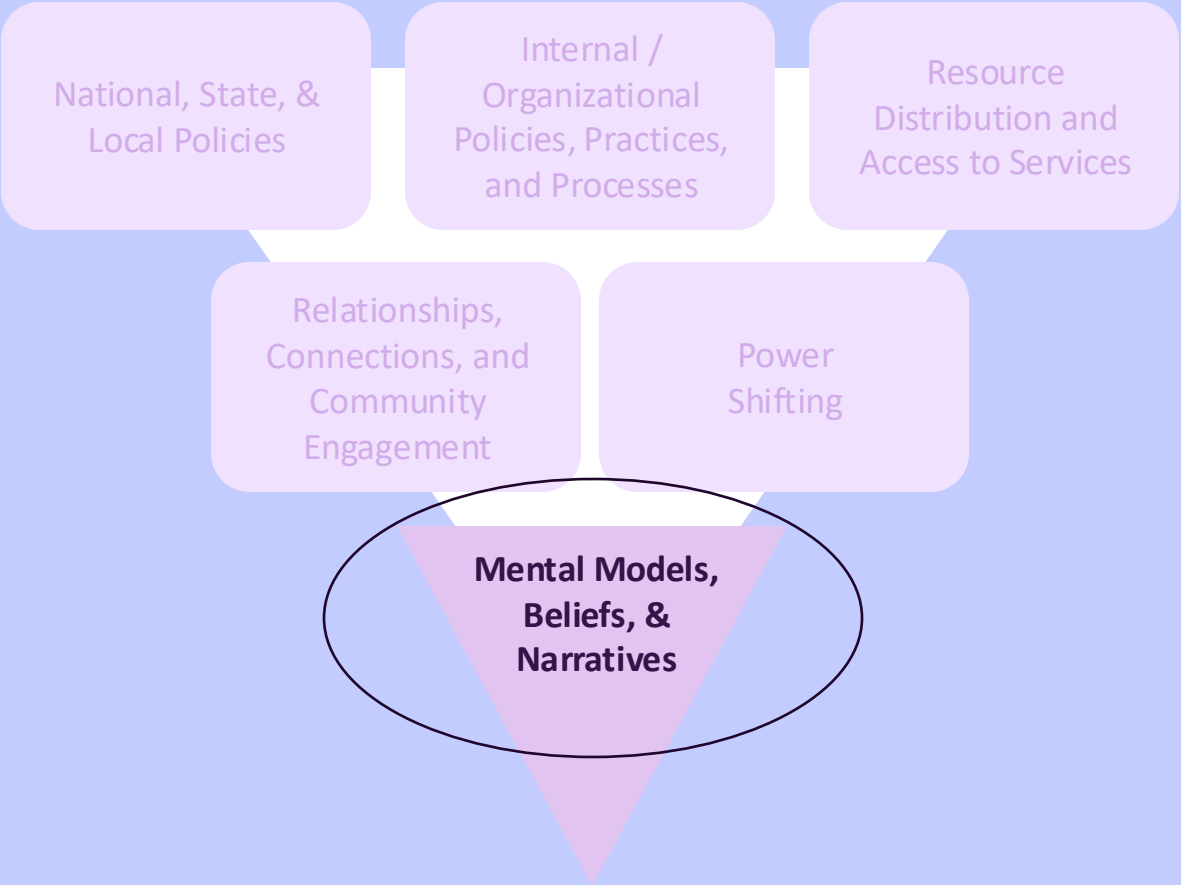
Overview

Includes the deeply held beliefs, stories, and assumptions that influence the actions of individuals, institutions, and systems.

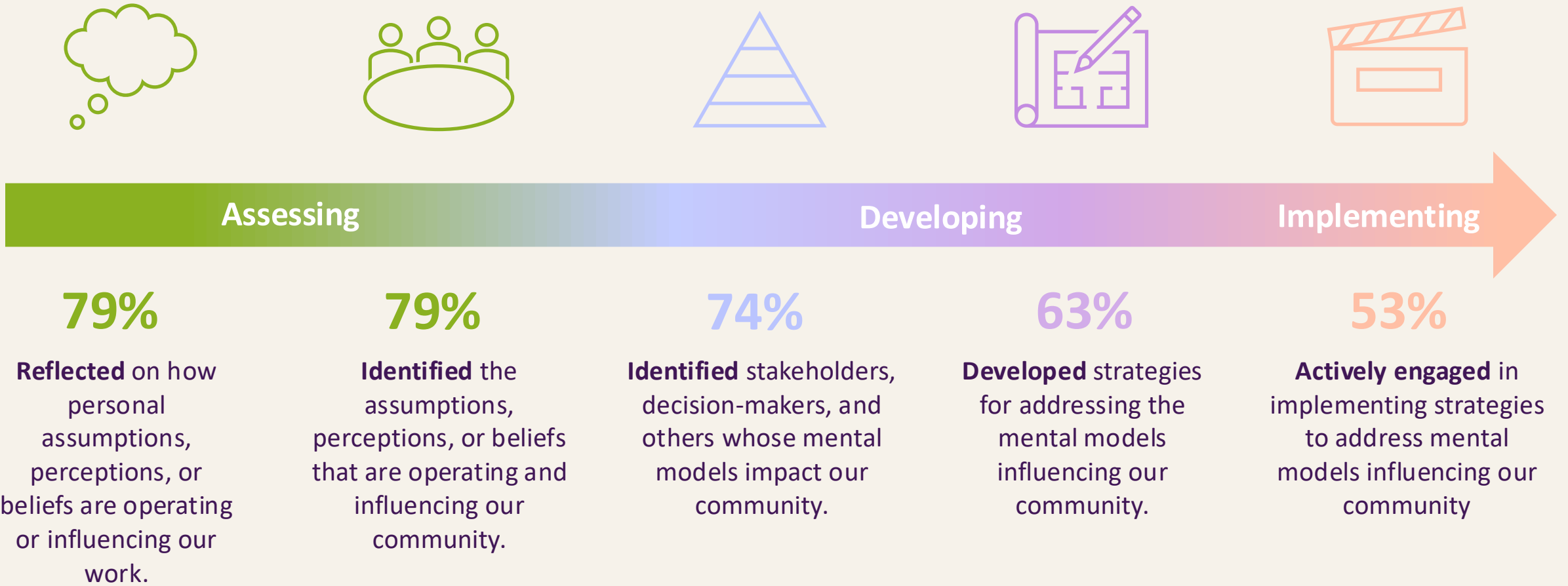
Awardees Working on Mental Models, by Funding Stream (n=17)



Adapted Water of Systems Change Framework



Stages of Mental Model Change



Strategies for Addressing Assumptions & Beliefs



*“Public education is one of the most critical pieces of our work - if residents don't understand the issues at hand, it is almost impossible to have a productive conversation about the potential solutions. **By bringing accessible information directly to constituents, we empower them to be more confident and effective advocates** for the change they want to see in their communities.”*

*“Storytelling has proven to be an essential tool in transforming beliefs and assumptions. **By amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience, we humanize complex issues like homelessness and housing instability, creating empathy and understanding.** These personal narratives challenge the stigma and stereotypes often associated with marginalized groups. Together, these strategies are shifting the way we approach systemic issues.”*

Spotlight: Storytelling

Some awardees reported using storytelling as a tool to “humanize” complex issues and shift perceptions and beliefs.

- Awardees noted that sharing personal narratives also helped develop deeper understanding and empathy for communities facing challenges in housing, healthcare, transportation, etc.
- Those utilizing storytelling noted that it was an effective way to challenge stereotypes, give a “face” to the data, and ultimately transform beliefs and assumptions that change community narratives.

*“By elevating the voices of individuals with lived experience, particularly those impacted by housing instability, related to age and class, we provide a humanizing platform that challenges stereotypes. **These personal stories help the broader community understand that these issues are deeply rooted in social structures, not individual behavior,** and can change the narrative surrounding older adults and low income populations.”*

*“[We work] to share and uplift personal stories to accompany housing data when working with community members. **Those personal stories give faces to the data and in our experience, that resonates more than numbers.** Many folks have assumptions about what affordable housing is and who lives there, we work to show them the reality. The reality is that many people qualify for affordable housing, including their friends and neighbors.”*

Significance of Mental Models

Awardees emphasized the significance of shifting community beliefs and assumptions as a vital step in developing sustainable and equitable policy, systems, and environment change.

*“When communities unlearn deficit-based narratives about students who may be exhibiting behaviors that conflict with school expectations and begin to see young people as capable leaders and co-creators of change, the entire approach to education, behavior response, and student support shifts... **Confronting and transforming these narratives is foundational to creating the conditions where health and racial equity can take root and thrive.**”*

*“This deep work around mental models is what makes structural change possible. **Policies and practices alone cannot bring about equity unless the beliefs and assumptions that drive them are also transformed.** Our project’s focus on shifting hearts and minds alongside systems and structures is key to building schools and communities where all people - students, staff and the wider community - can thrive.”*

*“These personal narratives challenge the stigma and stereotypes often associated with marginalized groups. **Together, these strategies are shifting the way we approach systemic issues.**”*



Conclusions

Summary of Findings

- Awardees are advancing policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change across all six conditions of systems change, with the strongest concentration in:
 - Relationships, connections, and community engagement
 - Resource distribution and access to services
- Community-led PSE change is happening across Massachusetts.
- PSE change efforts are explicitly rooted in health and racial equity, **targeting structural barriers** such as racism, poverty, language access, disability access, and housing instability.
- **Change is not linear**: awardees are often working simultaneously across stages, reflecting the reality of systems change.
- PSE change is not one type of activity—it is **a web of reinforcing strategies** that together shift how systems operate and who benefits.

Relationship-building & Community Engagement

- Relationship-building and community engagement are the foundation of systems change.
- Nearly all awardees prioritize trust-building, **lived-experience leadership**, and long-term partnerships as essential to achieving policy and systems change.
- Community engagement strategies frequently move beyond “inform” or “consult” toward “collaboration” and “shared leadership,” though **power shifting remains challenging**.
- Internal organizational changes (e.g., equitable hiring, compensation, language access, governance) often precede or enable external policy wins.
- **Who is at the table**—and how they are resourced, supported, and listened to—matters as much as which policies change.

Power, Equity, and Sustainability

- Progress is strongest where power is intentionally redistributed—but gaps remain.
- Awardees are actively:
 - **Elevating resident leadership**
 - Compensating lived experience
 - Building alternative decision-making structures (youth commissions, advisory councils, community-led coalitions)
- However, power shifting and mental model change are less visible, slower-moving, and more difficult to measure.
- **Systems are often resistant to change**, and external forces (political climate, funding structures, institutional norms) shape what is possible.
- **Sustainable PSE change requires long-term investment**, flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity—especially when addressing deeper, less visible system conditions.

Moving Forward

- Lessons for funders, policymakers, and the field:
 - **Invest for the long term:** Systems change requires time to build trust, capacity, and momentum.
 - **Fund the “invisible” work:** Relationship-building, community leadership development, and internal organizational change are core PSE strategies—not add-ons.
 - **Support learning and adaptation:** Mixed-method tools like the PSE-ARI help capture progress that traditional metrics miss.
 - **Center equity as a process, not just an outcome:** Advancing racial and health equity means changing both policies and power dynamics.
- The PSE-ARI demonstrates that community-led PSE change is both possible and underway—and that meaningful, equitable systems change depends on sustained commitment to relationships, shared power, and structural transformation.
- Contact machhafunds@hria.org for more information.