Driving Economic Mobility With Infrastructure Jobs

Insights From the Built Environment Collaborative in Ohio

Trent Sharp, Samia Amin, and Gretchen Sullivan

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Opportunity in America is often driven by ZIP code. Where people spend their early years shapes their economic destiny.[1] Making it easier for people to move toward opportunity is one part of the answer. Bringing opportunity to revitalize local economies is another. [2] Finding effective models that work in the specific context of place is essential.

The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) supports community partners in learning, applying, and scaling innovative models that help people move out of poverty toward sustaining prosperity. We are shining a light on which models, core components, and levers of evidence-driven strategies work within and across communities to improve pathways to good jobs for all. **With funding from AIR's Opportunity Fund, we partner with innovators in the field to learn from and support rapid-cycle improvement of promising initiatives designed to increase opportunity for varied populations.**

This brief presents findings from a case study on the Built Environment Collaborative (BEC), which AIR conducted in close partnership with Greater Cleveland Works, the local workforce development board for Cleveland and Cuyahoga County in Ohio. The brief highlights how one community accelerated a critical lever for place-based lever innovation: cross-system partnerships. The findings and recommendations in this brief will provide insight for anyone interested in practical tips to accelerate the use of existing resources to improve economic outcomes within their communities.

1. Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Kline, P., Saez, E., & Turner, N. (2014). Is the United States still a land of opportunity? Recent trends in intergenerational mobility. *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings, 104*(5), 141–147.
2. Klein, E., & Thompson, D. (2025*)*. *Abundance*. Avid Reader Press.

This brief does the following:

- **Describes the core components of Cuyahoga County's innovative partnership strategy**, key services offered to program participants, key elements of the partnership and implementation model, highlighting what is innovative about each.
- **Explores the enabling conditions, design choices, barriers, and opportunities for improvement** that have surfaced for partners, because the program is in mid-implementation and poised for course corrections.
- **Describes the rapid supports that a research–practice partnership enables** to strengthen implementation of the model and highlight areas for longer term changes in policies, programs, and collaboration structures.

Why Learn From BEC?

BEC is unique for several reasons:

- **It seeks to advance news ways of building partnerships and aligning ecosystem partners** in pursuit of shared economic mobility goals. Key features include low barriers to entry for participating organizations, shared goals, and a focus on cross-referral and shared customers.
- **It focuses on robust inclusion** and providing all Clevelanders and minority business enterprises (MBEs) access to the built environment sector.
- **It focuses explicitly on barrier removal for participants** through access to minimally restricted funds and targeted wraparound services.

We learned about BEC by reaching out to state and local partners that had a strong history of piloting innovations and investing in research–practice partnerships. We sought to learn what new models they were testing to improve access to economic mobility. We learned that Greater Cleveland Works, with strong support from the Mayor's Office and the Cleveland City Council, was leading a unique collective effort to enhance access to careers in construction, infrastructure, and clean energy.

We conducted this case study between October 2024 and May 2025. Our work included a rapid scan of available program documentation, need-sensing interviews with Greater Cleveland Works and BEC leadership, 11 interviews and one focus group with BEC partners, and interviews with five BEC participants.

In the following sections we describe the BEC service model, provide an overview of key findings from early-stage implementation, highlight participant experiences, suggest opportunities for accelerating BEC, and discuss policy implications.

BEC Overview

BEC Partners and Goals

BEC is a project of Greater Cleveland Works in collaboration with a diverse ensemble of 13 other core partners from a wide range of organizations, including workforce development programs, youth and reentry programs, community colleges and 4-year universities, community development organizations, and industry support and economic development organizations.

Many BEC partners have had varied collaborations but historically have operated in parallel. With strong support from the City of Cleveland and start-up funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), BEC breaks from the status quo by convening partners to cocreate a program with shared goals, fostering deeper partnerships and aligning diverse expertise and a shared focus to reconnect individuals and businesses traditionally excluded from built environment jobs and contracts.

BEC Core Partners

- ACE Mentor Program
- Cleveland Builds
- Cleveland Neighborhood Progress
- Contractors Assistance Association
- Cuyahoga Community College
- Greater Cleveland Partnership
- Greater Cleveland Works
- HHW Ohio
- Rid-All
- Spanish American Committee
- Towards Employment
- United Labor Agency
- Urban League of Greater Cleveland
- Youth Opportunities Unlimited

BEC's Goals to Achieve by 2026

Enrollment

Enroll 3,000 individuals with training providers over 4 years. This will include 65% Black Clevelanders, 13% Hispanic or Latino Clevelanders, and 30% women.

Placement

Place 800 BEC participants into built environment apprenticeships and jobs.

Partnerships

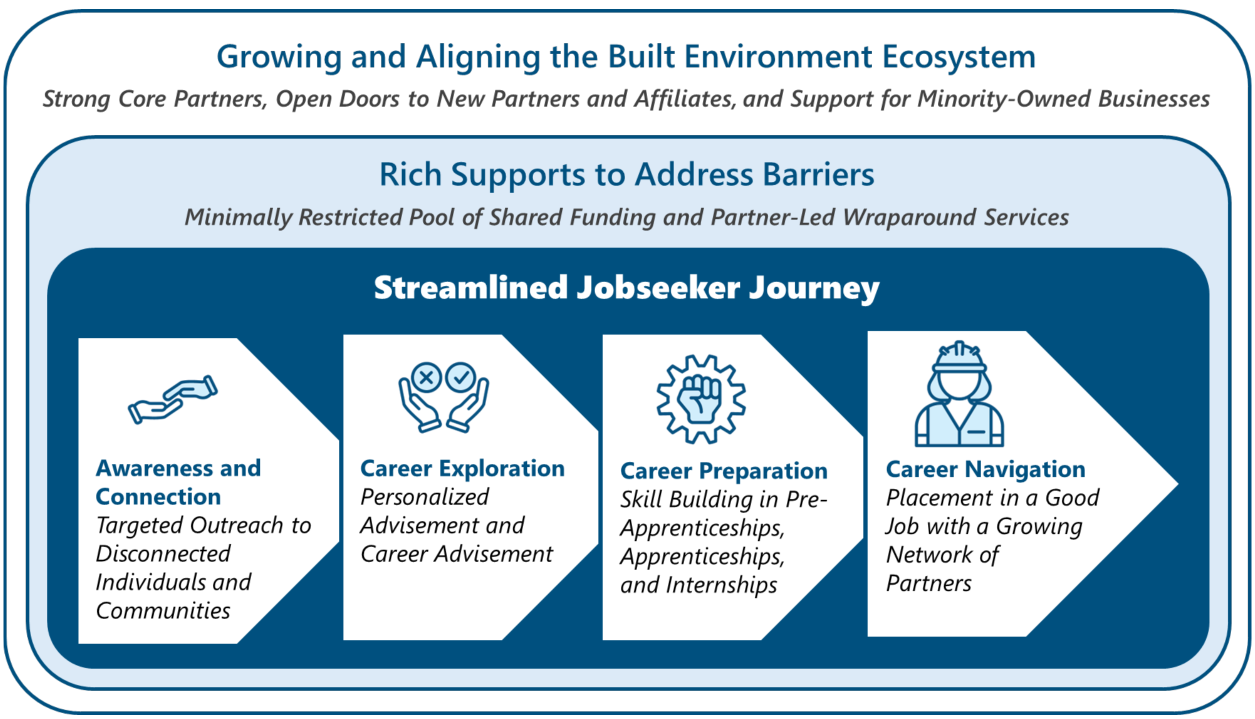
Include 150 minority business enterprises (MBEs) and connect these to Built Environment projects.

Core Components of the BEC Service Model

Given BEC's early stage and collaborative development process, a clear, unified description of the model was still in development when the project began. BEC leadership and AIR agreed that this case study would help articulate and define the program's service model and how it differs from the status quo. Based on document reviews and interviews with BEC leadership, partners, and frontline staff, we determined that BEC offers:

- **convening and alignment support** for existing partnerships and open doors to new partners, affiliates, and minority-owned businesses to grow the built environment ecosystem;
- **a rich mix of supports for participants**, including a minimally restricted pool of shared funding for ad hoc needs and wraparound supports from different providers that are available before and after job placement;
- **targeted resources and supports for MBEs** to help them grow into the built environment sector and contribute to the local economy; and
- **a streamlined, "no wrong door" jobseeker journey** that includes targeted outreach to populations that have historically been disconnected from built environment careers, personalized career exploration, numerous options for career preparation across BEC partners, and placement in a good job or apprenticeship in the sector.

Exhibit 1 depicts the components of the BEC service model that focus on job seekers.



Source: Developed by authors.

Note. This service model focuses on BEC's jobseeker supports. There are analogous outreach, mentoring, training, and coaching supports for MBEs that are not captured in this model.

Core Design Principles

BEC stands out not only because of the richness of its offerings but also the way that service delivery is made possible. BEC partners highlighted several aspects of the service model design and implementation strategy that are distinct from their prior collaborations.

- **BEC leverages prior partnerships among a diverse range of ecosystem players with complementary strengths** and regularly incorporates new partners to expand the footprint of the built environment. The 13 core partners bring distinct skills and contributions; each received a share of BEC funding and participated in various design and implementation committees. BEC leadership also includes seven affiliate partners, whose participants can benefit from selected BEC supports, such as the Barrier Removal Fund.
- **BEC partner collaborations are reinforced by shared funding, shared proposal and program design, shared outcome goals, and shared data tracking**. These practices have fostered a shift from competitive to collaborative fundraising and increased the sharing of program participants.
- **BEC focuses on enrolling individuals in and reconnecting them with the workforce development system**, providing intentional support along the spectrum of a participant's journey into a career in the built environment, and addressing systemic barriers via centralized access to unrestricted funds.
- **BEC embraces an expansive and flexible definition of the built environment** sector itself, which enables broader outreach and diverse career pathway development.

This case study seeks to provide a snapshot of BEC's current state after approximately 2 years of implementation with the goal of supporting the next phase of implementation and highlighting policy implications for the field. The following sections describe key findings, along with recommendations for the next phase of BEC development and policy implications.

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Findings From Early-Stage Implementation

Enabling Conditions and Strategic Design Choices

Partners and affiliates commonly noted that BEC had transformed long-standing programs and sector partnerships. A frequent observation across interviews was that the departure from business as usual was catalyzed by a couple of key enabling conditions.

A visionary mayor and city council demonstrated a willingness to deploy ARPA funds creatively and unconventionally, providing the initial impetus and resources. City leadership backed a critical strategic design choice to invest in a minimally restricted Barrier Removal Fund, akin to a basic income proxy, which was designed to quickly dismantle simple barriers. Instead of distributing these funds individually, they were centralized and managed collectively by partners. This distributed ownership and strategic decision-making proved key to leveraging the strategic funding opportunity effectively.

> *There were a lot of existing relationships and there were some existing strategies that we've been building on, but the significant injection of those [ARPA] funds into the ecosystem... allowed us to stop competing with each other to raise money and focus on working with each other.*

This top-level commitment was amplified by a forward-thinking Workforce Development Board (Greater Cleveland Works) that proactively restructured from a governmental entity into a nonprofit. This strategic shift granted enhanced flexibility for the board to engage with partners and funding streams and serve as an active convener and organizer for BEC's collective work. We describe early findings from BEC's early-stage implementation next.

Accelerating a Culture of Collaboration

A significant early success of the new workforce development model was the palpable deepening of partnerships and a reinvigorated culture of collaboration among partners. **Although partnerships existed before, the BEC model and shared funding have helped partners overcome traditional competitive dynamics**—particularly around funding—enabling them to work together in a genuine partnership model often focused on common clients. Partners noted that BEC leadership has deliberately focused on taking the time to collaborate effectively from the outset, thoughtfully defining (and redefining) roles and identifying ways to complement one another's strengths.

> *This group is really taking the time to collaborate right... to really think through what are different people's roles and how we can complement each other, which is always a big bugaboo in collaboration.*

While collaboration among partners is strengthening, supporting shared clients effectively by tapping diverse funding streams is complex and inherently difficult. More intentional support is needed to ensure that all partners understand how to contribute equally within this shared model. Addressing this requires developing infrastructure and incentives specifically designed to support shared planning toward collective goals (e.g., participant-centered strategic planning protocols, funding based on contributions).

Concerted Outreach and “No Wrong Door” Approach

BEC has made a deliberate effort to identify and engage a diverse set of partners to reach individuals who have historically been underserved by workforce development efforts. By creating a pathway that integrates crucial systems navigation and support services *alongside* technical training, the model aims to first help people understand whether built environment careers are the right fit for them and then find the right fit for participants exactly where they are in their journey, rather than being placed directly into programs that they may not be equipped for currently.

> *I think that it's unique that we have both social service organizations and training providers... having a pathway for students to go through systems navigation and then into training, versus throwing them into something that's not going to be attainable at their current state... I think that's unique to the collaborative.*

For example, a potential participant could be referred to a career awareness provider if they are early in their journey and/or need support from a community of their peers. If the participant is more advanced, then they could receive sectoral training from a community college or be placed into a pre-apprenticeship to gain hard skills. As noted in the section on participant perspectives, such navigation support is invaluable.

Program implementers shared some early lessons on this critical service:

- **Outreach and recruitment are multistep processes** that take a fair bit of effort. The first step is just piquing interest.
- **To get from interest to enrollment, staff typically need to work concertedly with people** to help them understand the diversity of sectors and occupations that fall under the umbrella, the type of work that is done and skills that are needed, and the types of training and service options they have to begin their career pathway, and then quickly provide the referrals to connect with program providers. Helping people decide whether built environment careers are a good fit is no easy job. Partners appreciate that the BEC model emphasizes this important task.
- **The lack of collateral during the initial implementation phase created a challenge in building awareness** about BEC and connecting participants to the right program. Without uniform branding or clear materials, frontline staff found it difficult to quickly and clearly communicate the complex initiative and its many opportunities to potential participants, leading to confusion. Internally, partners also lacked easy-to-use resources (“desk tools”) to fully understand each other’s specific services. This deficit limited the collaborative’s ability to present a unified offering externally and effectively facilitate cross-referrals internally. Our case study team developed a template and first pass at partner asset mapping for the BEC team as part of this effort.

Serving Shared Customers in Richer Ways

One significant early success was the **development of initial infrastructure and collaborative practices designed to better serve shared customers across the partner network.** This included centralized data tracking that provides a transparent view of enrollment and program participation. In addition, partners have established direct lines of communication to deepen understanding of one another's programs and facilitate warm handoffs and targeted referrals. For example, one partner described quickly connecting clients with specific needs, such as legal assistance, with the partner best equipped to provide that support, demonstrating a tangible shift toward a coordinated service delivery model for shared BEC clientele.

> *That data piece is also something that I didn't mention but is truly innovative and helpful, is helping us track, get really deep, and figure out, 'Are our referrals working? Are people being referred? Are they being successful in the next step of their stage?*

An important lever in promoting collaborative service provision to participants was BEC leadership's decision to allow multiple organizations to count a single customer toward their service targets. This reduced organizations' tendency to "hoard" clients for themselves and increased cross-referral. It is also leading to more partners thinking about how to adapt programming to align with partners' strengths and participants' needs.

Partners' ability to develop data-driven shared services was hampered in the early stages of implementation by the variation in data quality and capacity across participating agencies and a spreadsheet-based reporting system that makes it difficult to compile a clear, comprehensive picture of services that a single participant receives. Tracking individuals who engage with multiple partners becomes challenging, hindering accurate counting and the ability to demonstrate overall impact without double-counting. Establishing meaningful measures for outcomes like network-wide placement and retention is difficult. Moreover, partners' participant outcome measurement practices vary. An area of high need is helping partners define discrete outcomes and track them in consistent ways.

Growing Partner Capacity and Adapting Programming

A key early success involved the **intentional addition of partner capacity and the proactive adaptation of programming to better meet participant needs.** Using BEC funding, partners have added new resources, such as dedicated personnel like administrative staff and career coaches, or new subgrantees. These additions to capacity enable deeper and wider engagement with program participants than was previously possible. Furthermore, partners described instances in which increased staff capacity helped the organization identify bottlenecks early and make necessary adaptations. These updates included adapting the program length, credit structure, and learning format to remove barriers and better suit participants' needs.

> *We recognized early on that the eight-week program that we were offering that was credit and required, the credit enrollment process was a limiting factor for students. So, we adapted the program, changed it to a four-week non-credit program, increased the hands-on learning aspect, and reduced the classroom-based aspect.*

Although increases in BEC partner capacity and adaptability are evident, several partners noted that more support is needed. Specifically, program staff need targeted support and processes for revising their individual programming to better complement the offerings of others within the collaborative, ensuring a more seamless experience for participants, aligned service delivery, and shared responsibility.

Realizing the Potential of the Barrier Removal Fund

A significant early success was the expanding realization of the potential inherent in the Barrier Removal Fund. For many partners and frontline staff accustomed to navigating complex, compliance-heavy support systems, **the fund represents a truly transformative approach—offering help directly based on stated needs with minimal hoops.**

> *We aren't just putting them in a box and saying, 'We're mitigating transportation challenges by giving you an RTA pass … but really honing in on what the deeper challenges are and being more people centered.*

From the beginning, BEC leaders *"wanted to make [the Barrier Removal Fund] different than other funds"* and did not want *to "traumatize people by making them tell their stories…or go through a lot of the bureaucracy"* associated with other basic-needs funding streams. BEC partners and front-line staff shared that the availability of funding, the lack of restriction, and ease of access represented a powerful and much needed shift.

Initially, the flexible Barrier Removal Fund faced underutilization. AIR's analysis of the fund's uses suggests that it has been used for a less expansive range of supports and tapped by a more restricted share of partners than originally planned. Our interviews focused on surfacing reasons for this:

- **Partners did not mention the Barrier Removal Fund early on to program participants**. This stemmed from coaches' discomfort discussing personal barriers with participants, participants' hesitance to disclose needs due to past negative experiences with compliance-heavy systems, and a desire to determine who the committed participants with genuine needs were.
- **Many partners encountered a structural limitation with the fund** because non-Cleveland residents were unable to access resources from the Barrier Removal Fund.
- **Youth-serving partners did not realize the relevance or applicability** of the Barrier Removal Fund to their populations.
- **Internal funds were easier to access for one of the partners** that had pre-existing, in-house access to philanthropic funding for barrier removal.

Following our interviews, Barrier Removal Fund use increased exponentially. BEC is discovering new ways to leverage the fund beyond initial intentions, recognizing its potential to address unforeseen barriers faced by various partners, such as providing essential resources like internet access to help MBE partners operate their businesses. **In hindsight, partners recognized the need for standardizing onboarding, clarifying acceptable uses through shared processes, ensuring that staff consistently promote the fund's purpose, and tackling the geographic eligibility barrier.**

Program Enrollment to Job Placement

BEC has taken a bold stance focusing on enrollment and effectively connecting individuals to the built environment workforce system. It is also successfully innovating around apprenticeship placement by exploring how training organizations might replace the FBI (Father, Brother, In-law) referral norms for union jobs and serve the vetting/vouching function that helps reassure prospective employers about applicant readiness and fit.

> *The biggest challenge we have found in implementation is, despite the narrative that there's a lot of jobs out there, we had some young people complete training and then there weren't as many—it wasn't that easy to place them.*

While BEC is meeting its enrollment targets and having some success with apprenticeship entry, a significant challenge remains achieving the ultimate goal of job placement for the broader populations it serves. Despite a general perception among the BEC leadership of job availability, placing participants after training has proven more difficult than anticipated, and highlights the importance of BEC's ongoing efforts to strengthen employer connection.

One challenge may be that while job placement is an explicit and shared goal for partners, there aren't explicit career navigation and job placement activities that partners are required to do that are explicitly described as part of the service model.

Additionally, some partners noted that BEC's current system for tracking placement does not always produce data that are actionable. Partners currently vary in how they define job attainment and retention and in their approach to tracking those data. **Demonstrating the program's true impact is crucial for validating the model's success and is vital for developing compelling impact statements** necessary to secure future funding and ensure the sustainability of this work.

Snapshot of Selected Participant Experiences

As part of its work, AIR interviewed a limited number of study participants. Between April and May 2025, we spoke with five individuals who participated in BEC partner programs—including Cleveland Builds, Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), HHW Ohio, and Towards Employment. These interviews provided partial insight into participants' overall experiences with the program, as well as the discrete steps of their customer journey toward economic opportunity: recruitment, training, employment readiness, job or apprenticeship placement, and postplacement support. Given the limited sample, we recognize this feedback is not representative, but the themes surfaced are nonetheless illuminating.

Creating Access and Opportunity

Overall, participants saw programs as powerful vehicles for upward mobility, especially those from underserved Cleveland communities. Many emphasized that BEC and its partners opened doors they otherwise could not have accessed—particularly into skilled trades unions, which participants viewed as difficult to penetrate. Participants frequently described the programs as more than just job training—they offered holistic and transformative support. *"I love my job. I love everything about it. It changed my life in a month,"* one participant said. Another added, *"I prayed for this moment. I'm living the moment I prayed for."*

Recruitment and Entry Into Programs

Most participants learned about BEC opportunities through existing relationships with BEC partners, like Towards Employment, or community partners, like Reach Success and Center for Employment Opportunities. A few others found programs via social media or referrals from friends. Participants called the programs "hidden gems" and suggested increased outreach, particularly in halfway houses, shelters, and schools and with reentry and neighborhood organizations.

Training goals ranged from building a long-term career to providing for family, with many seeking to enhance their existing skilled trades skills, access stable union employment with benefits, or further their personal growth. *"I wanted to change for myself,"* said one participant. *"I don't want to sit in one spot for the rest of my life. Learning something new and soaking something new up is always better."*

Enrollment processes were described as easy and quick, typically leading to training within a month. Participants appreciated how responsive program staff were, especially staff playing "navigator" roles that helped guide participants through every step.

Training and Employment Readiness

BEC paid existing organizations to expand their training and employment readiness offerings and/or serve additional participants. **Participants praised the hands-on nature of training** from Cleveland Builds and Tri-C, often describing it as intensive, hands-on, and confidence-building. *"The best program and a great experience,"* said one participant. Another shared: *"They packed 10 years of what I learned on the job into 2 months."*

Women's training cohorts and advice and mentorship from tradeswomen were especially meaningful for female participants. The programs also generally included classroom-based work and homework, including in skills such as basic math. The mix of exposure to various trades helped participants discover the best career fit, balancing their personal interests with practical concerns like union access and job stability. For example, some chose specific career paths because of their year-round demand and union accessibility. Towards Employment was cited as especially effective in providing employment readiness training that built confidence and prepared individuals for long-term success, particularly for those with conviction or incarceration histories.

Holistic Support and the Barrier Removal Fund

Participants received or had access to wide-ranging support from BEC and community partners—including help with transportation, childcare, substance use recovery, and GED preparation. Some described creative coordination across providers. One participant recalled how a success coach drove them and a classmate to training sessions to avoid delays in public transit.

The BEC Barrier Removal Fund played a crucial role in participants' transitions into—and retention in—the workforce. Participants used fund resources for work gear, car repairs, union fees, books, and even resolving court issues to reinstate driver's licenses. The fund's streamlined, judgment-free access was especially appreciated. In several cases, access to fund resources was the critical element that made it possible for participants to start jobs or keep them.

Placement and Long-Term Support

Placement assistance—especially from Cleveland Builds—was among the most praised elements of the program. For example, Cleveland Builds' placement coordinator:

- took participants to job sites,
- made direct introductions to unions and employers,
- facilitated communication and helped expedite apprenticeship placements, and
- "greased the skids" for participants' interviews with employers.

This level of personal support helped participants gain access to opportunities they felt were otherwise out of reach. One participant noted that the coordinator "vouched for" them with unions and employers. However, not all feedback was uniformly positive. A few participants found mass job emails from BEC partners unhelpful, desired more individualized follow-up post-training, or experienced delays waiting for openings with unions.

Nonetheless, **most participants remained connected to their programs after graduation.** Some received continued assistance (e.g., with obtaining driver's licenses), whereas others stayed engaged through events, formal or informal check-ins, or alumni opportunities. Participants overwhelmingly expressed that they felt welcome to reach out for help and that their success mattered to their providers long after completing the training program.

Opportunities to Accelerate BEC's Impact

To accelerate the positive momentum and deepen the impact of the BEC model, several key areas warrant focused attention and continued development.

Incentivizing Accountability

BEC has an opportunity to formalize and incentivize accountability for outcomes. Although collaboration has been a strength, structuring incentives that provide partners with more "skin in the game" for collective success will be crucial for driving deeper commitment and shared responsibility toward achieving common goals. Mechanisms for enhancing accountability could include:

- Specifying accountability expectations/ collective action contributions in partner agreements and/ or MOUs
- Developing a master charter for the Collaborative that provides more detailed expectations on roles and responsibilities (for the convener and partners), formalizes a shared vision and mission all partners must sign on to, states shared goals/targets, and details expected resource contributions (financial and otherwise) from each partner.

Building in opportunities to revise these agreements after a planning and initial implementation phase could also be helpful.

Thoughtful Standardization

The right balance between necessary flexibility and helpful standardization is vital. The model's initial flexibility allowed broad partner engagement, but establishing a certain standardization is now necessary for innovations—particularly around tracking impact—to truly take hold. For instance, ensuring that mechanisms exist to measure the transformative impact of flexible resources like the Barrier Removal Fund, and standardization of placement assistance across BEC partners are essential.

Greater Model Development Around Employer Connection and Placement

BEC participants indicated that some training partners' industry sector knowledge, deep relationships with employers and unions, and willingness to network and navigate on participants' behalf were fundamental to their ability to obtain job/apprenticeship placements. However, it does not appear that all BEC training partners had this level of industry engagement and knowledge, or that all partners provided this intensive level of placement support to participants.

Establishing a formal Built Environment Industry Council (or something similar) to enhance partners' understanding of the industry landscape and employers' talent needs and practices could be very valuable. In addition, BEC leaders may wish to raise and standardize expectations for the level and quality of job/apprenticeship placement assistance that all BEC partners must provide. Establishing more rigor around this aspect of BEC participants' journeys would mitigate barriers to entry into built environment careers and likely improve participant placement and retention outcomes.

Staff Capacity for Integrated Work

Sustained investment in staff training is paramount. Accelerating the effort necessitates not just technical capacity building but also ongoing development focused on fostering a collaborative culture, thereby equipping staff across all partner organizations with the skills and mindset needed to work effectively within this complex, integrated model. These combined efforts will help solidify the model's foundation and expand its reach and impact. Formalizing processes for warm hand-offs between organizational, case coordination, and team-based case management or navigation for individuals served by multiple BEC partners could be interesting options to explore in future iterations of this model.

Braided Funding Across the Collaborative

Numerous BEC partners noted innovative braided funding streams within their specific programs. It will be important for BEC to continue to demonstrate creativity in braiding and leveraging funding streams across the growing partner network. This would involve dedicating resources to deeply understand the nuances of available funding sources across BEC partners and exploring innovative ways to combine them to maximize support for participants and program activities. Building in expectations right from the start that partners will offer in-kind contributions and look for ways to bring in additional funding for the model may enhance sustainability over the long term.

Measuring and Managing Participant Placement

Finally, accelerating progress requires deepening the sophistication and actionability of both programming design and performance management systems. This means moving beyond enrollment metrics to focusing intensely on participant placement and building robust systems to track and manage performance specifically toward these critical employment outcomes. Also, accelerating placement requires greater alignment between industry and employers and collaboration among BEC partners to ensure that training and other services are as relevant as possible to assessed talent needs, and that placement assistance for participants is made a more explicit focus and expectation for all partners.

Policy Implications

This case study afforded several key policy implications and recommendations to foster and sustain innovative workforce development models like BEC.

Create Conditions for Fast Barrier Removal

BEC's implementation to date highlights how policy and funding structures can play a critical role in enabling innovation in workforce development. Jurisdictions across the country had to make decisions about how to expend ARPA money, and the Mayor's Office and Cleveland City Council designed a process for awarding the funds that created the opportunity for creative responses, fostered a collaborative environment, and encouraged creative program responses. Policies should aim for low restrictions on minimally restricted funding streams to directly address immediate, practical barriers—like equipment, transportation, or childcare—that frequently derail program participants' success.

Sustain Industry and Employer Engagement

BEC training partners with strong and ongoing relationships with the built environment industry and employer partners are best positioned to deliver relevant training, valuable participant navigation support, and participant placement assistance.

BEC's implementation to date highlights the importance of ensuring that similar models assess industry and employer talent and training needs at the front end; codesign strategies in collaboration with industry partners; and put robust supports in place to facilitate participants' career access, entry, and retention. Establishing structured, employer-led industry sector partnerships or advisory councils can help programs like BEC better understand workforce development needs and gaps, implement relevant program and service approaches, and have a nimble response to evolving industry and/or regional labor market needs.

Build the Capacity for Integrated Work

BEC leveraged long-standing collaborations, yet partners recognized that designing and implementing integrated service models requires new knowledge and skills. Policy should support continued investment in staff training, peer learning networks, and guidance resources across the collaborative, acknowledging that building the capacity and fostering the necessary culture change within partner organizations are essential for implementing and sustaining effective integrated service delivery.

Allot Time for Planning and Messaging Up Front

BEC partners noted a variety of needs for up-front planning and coordination specific to integrated approaches. Future funding opportunities and Requests for Proposals should explicitly encourage up-front planning and iterative design among partners, allowing for adaptive program development. Furthermore, policy makers and funders should recognize the necessity of frontloading robust outreach and messaging for complex, braided service models. The success of innovative programs depends on communicating their value effectively to potential participants and referral partners.

Enable Systemic Data Collection and Use

The BEC case study presented a microcosm of the challenges of creating and using data across integrated service partnerships in which data quality and capacity are variable. On a larger scale, the current landscape of varied data definitions and reporting requirements across agencies creates confusion and hinders a full understanding of participants' journeys. Policy must push for greater data standardization and support the development of interoperable data systems, moving beyond siloed compliance reporting toward shared data analytics that can measure cross-program impact and track long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

Moving individuals out of poverty requires a comprehensive approach that integrates strategic initiatives with supportive policy reforms. Such synergies are challenging to implement, especially in policy contexts that encourage silos and competition. It is crucial to learn from innovative models that seek to overcome these challenges. Quicker dissemination of learnings from these innovations can help inform and inspire other locales, increase impact, and promote systemic change.

By examining BEC's unique model, we gained important insights into the possibilities and challenges of mobilizing sector-specific collective impact, codesigning systems to support shared funding and goals, integrating partner strengths and adapting programs to create coherent pathways, uniting diverse partners around robust wraparound supports, reengaging underserved populations and minority-owned businesses, and addressing the persistent challenges of participant placement and long-term retention.

BEC's journey also illustrates that innovative policy and leadership matter. Policy must play a critical role in creating conditions for quick barrier removal through flexible funding, encouraging continuous engagement with industry stakeholders, supporting capacity building for integrated service models, allowing ample time for initial planning and communication, and promoting systemic data collection and utilization. These combined efforts are vital for creating pathways to economic mobility and ensuring equitable opportunities for all, ultimately fostering more prosperous economic futures for individuals regardless of their background.

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