

*INCLUSIVE PROSPERITY PARTNERSHIP*  
**Discovery & Design Report for Issue Cycle #1:**  
**Expanding Access to Better-Paying,  
High-Quality Jobs in**  
**ST. LOUIS**



**JULY 2025**

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CONVERGENCE



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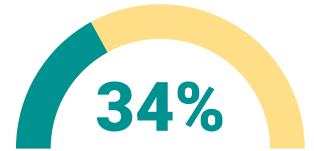
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The Inclusive Prosperity Partnership (IPP) is a new, decade-long initiative to strengthen the St. Louis region’s civic infrastructure and advance inclusive economic growth. It emerged from the 2024 Regional Collaboration Conversation, a process that brought regional stakeholders together to explore how cross-sector collaboration could drive long-term, equitable economic growth. The IPP was launched by the James S. McDonnell Foundation (JSMF) in collaboration with a team of local and national partners, including Emerging Wisdom (EW) and Convergence Center for Policy Resolution (Convergence). The initiative is grounded in an understanding that inclusive growth benefits the entire region and that a robust civic infrastructure is essential for sustained impact at scale. The IPP is committed to ensuring that residents historically excluded from opportunity are able to contribute to and benefit from the region’s growth. To advance this purpose, it is convening diverse stakeholders to co-develop and implement solutions that promote inclusive prosperity.

Over the next 10 years, the IPP will address five major barriers to an inclusive economy, dedicating approximately two years per issue for designing, planning, and launching scalable interventions. Rather than predefining all issues in advance, the IPP’s phased approach is intentionally structured to address one major barrier at a time in a way that is deeply informed by community voice and real-time learning. This deliberate pacing ensures that each focus area emerges from lived experience and stakeholder collaboration. An initial \$30 million in catalytic funding has been secured to help launch work across these areas, with additional fundraising planned to expand impact. The first of the five issue cycles focuses on expanding access to better-paying, high-quality jobs for people with low incomes in St. Louis City and County, recognizing that many high-paying, quality jobs are inaccessible to residents. While that geography is the primary focus, people with low incomes from other parts of the region may also benefit from what is built, if it proves accessible and relevant to them.

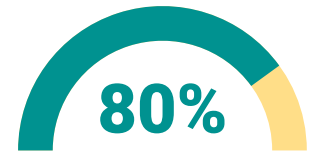
For each issue, a Solution Design Cohort (SDC) – comprised of a diverse set of stakeholders with different connections to the issue – will be convened to co-create scalable solutions and an actionable implementation plan. For the SDC on better-paying, high-quality jobs, Convergence and EW will utilize a structured, four-phase process: Discovery & Design, Convene Diverse Participants, Develop Higher-Ground Solutions, and Implement Solutions. This evidence-based model is designed to align interests, build trust, and develop actionable strategies that cannot be achieved through siloed efforts.

To inform the design of the first SDC, the IPP team conducted 56 in-depth stakeholder interviews and four focus groups with residents most impacted by economic exclusion – including youth, adult householders, and immigrant community members. This early engagement aimed to lay the foundation for an inclusive design process by surfacing key insights in three core areas: how low-income residents experience the regional economy and the barriers they face to quality employment; the current landscape of workforce efforts in the region, including existing momentum, gaps in collaboration, and opportunities for coordination; and what is needed to build trust, accountability, and sustained momentum throughout the process.



**St. Louis City has seen significant income growth (34% between 1980 and 2020); however, this growth is not benefiting lower-wage workers.**

**-2024 REGIONAL COLLABORATION CONVERSATION ACTION PLAN (JSMF)**



**Over 80% of jobs paying more than \$3,333 per month in St. Louis City are filled by non-City residents, while City residents are concentrated in lower-paying jobs.**

**-2024 REGIONAL COLLABORATION CONVERSATION ACTION PLAN (JSMF)**

These conversations surfaced a set of overarching themes that will shape the process design and structure of the IPP’s first issue cycle.

Stakeholders responded positively to the IPP’s long-term, people-centered approach and its pairing of solution design with implementation resources. The goal of building an economy that works for all – particularly by expanding opportunity to those historically locked out – was seen as both timely and essential.

At the same time, many voiced skepticism shaped by prior efforts that lacked follow-through or measurable outcomes. Several stakeholders raised concerns about duplication and fragmentation, along with the absence of a shared “North Star” to guide regional work. Interviewees also raised questions about how the IPP would align with existing initiatives, such as Greater St. Louis’s 2030 Jobs Plan, the Anchor Action Network, and other large-scale economic strategies. While the 2030 Jobs Plan was recognized for offering sector-specific recommendations, some felt it lacked clear metrics and follow-through. In contrast, the IPP’s multi-year investment and its structured process for solution design, implementation, and evaluation were seen as assets that could complement and strengthen existing efforts.

Barriers to sustained collaboration included limited employer and institutional buy-in, leadership churn, and an overemphasis on organizational goals at the expense of regional alignment. Many called for a more coherent workforce pipeline and stronger cross-sector coordination that supports individuals across their career journeys.

Focus group participants echoed many of these themes with lived experience. They described high-paying, quality jobs as those that offer stability, growth, dignity, and flexibility – not just a paycheck. Participants expressed a desire for meaningful work and called on employers to go beyond hiring to invest in retention, advancement, and supportive workplace culture.

Barriers cited included limited access to training and networks, inadequate transportation, systemic discrimination, lack of mentorship and mental health supports, and – for immigrants – visa restrictions, language barriers, and credential transfer issues. Parents and caregivers also noted the scarcity of affordable childcare as a significant barrier to steady employment.

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted the value of workforce programs that meet people where they are – offering transportation support, job readiness skills, mentorship, and access to networks. They stressed the importance of culturally relevant services and expressed a desire to stay engaged in future phases of the IPP. Their insights reinforced the need for solutions that are not only structurally sound but also rooted in real-life experience, relationships, and trust.



**Roughly 10% of the population, or over 290,000 people, in the St. Louis region live below the national poverty line.**

**-2024 REGIONAL COLLABORATION CONVERSATION ACTION PLAN (JSMF)**

**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME:**

**Median household income disparities are particularly pronounced for families with young children, with White households earning over \$100,000 compared to less than \$39,000 for Black households.**

**-2024 REGIONAL COLLABORATION CONVERSATION ACTION PLAN (JSMF)**

Six overarching themes emerged from interviews and focus groups that provide critical context for the work ahead:

- 1 **A need for greater collaboration and reduced silos** across nonprofits, employers, government, and education. While many strong programs exist, individuals emphasized the need for better coordination to improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and better support individuals and employers.
- 2 **The absence of a shared, coherent workforce pipeline** that supports job seekers throughout their career journey. Many pointed to a lack of regional alignment across support services, credentialing, and age groups — from youth to retirement.
- 3 **Barriers to access matter more than job creation alone**, especially for residents with low incomes. Individuals noted that many quality jobs go unfilled due to lack of transportation, childcare, skills training, or navigation supports.
- 4 **The persistence of systemic racism and structural inequities**, particularly affecting Black and immigrant communities. These long-standing disparities continue to shape who has access to opportunity, and at what cost.
- 5 **Urgency around clear outcomes, focused scope, and accountability**. Individuals emphasized the importance of setting expectations, tracking progress, and avoiding overly broad or vague goals.
- 6 **Damaging narratives about workers and communities** that reinforce stigma and limit progress. These include ideas that non-college pathways are “lesser,” that younger generations don’t want to work, and that change happens to communities rather than *with* them.

These insights affirmed both the urgency and opportunity for coordinated action — and helped shape a clear set of priorities for the work ahead. From this input, six strategic pathways emerged to guide the work of the SDC and the broader initiative:




- 1 **Design for continued engagement and collaboration** by building trust over time and sustaining inclusive participation.
- 2 **Center lived experience** by co-creating with those most impacted and compensating them for their expertise.
- 3 **Communicate strategically** to build trust, amplify stories, manage expectations, and maintain momentum.
- 4 **Commit to the long term** with realistic timelines, sustained funding, and an iterative, patient approach.
- 5 **Partner with employers for culture change** by shifting how businesses support, retain, and grow diverse talent.
- 6 **Guard against common pitfalls** by staying focused, transparent, and accountable to shared goals.

This Discovery & Design Report captures the voices and insights that will guide the first phase of work — laying the foundation for long-term, systems-level change across the St. Louis region.

## WHAT IS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE?

St. Louis is at an inflection point. As a region, we have both momentum and an uphill path ahead. Some communities are thriving, while the region is shrinking. Some sectors are booming, while too many of our neighbors are falling behind. Companies that are ready to grow struggle to recruit talent, while families with roots too often can't convince the next generation to stay. Before us is an opportunity to transform the momentum we see into a sustainable engine for growth and prosperity for all of St. Louis. Our region knows how to turn aspirations into action on a large scale, and we've done so in recent memory: the revamped Arch Grounds, Cortex Innovation District, and Danforth Plant Science Center; the transformation of Washington University, Forest Park, and the neighborhoods around them.

Researchers Manuel Pastor and Chris Benner argue that regions thriving in today's economy are those that have built a civic infrastructure capable of co-designing and implementing inclusive economic strategies. They found that the most effective models are grounded in:

-  **Data:** A shared understanding of challenges and opportunities.
-  **Deliberation:** Structured collaboration across power, roles, and sectors.
-  **Destiny:** A belief that our futures are intertwined, and collective prosperity is possible.

The IPP learned how other regions have collaborated to build more inclusive and growing economies and examined the strengths and weaknesses in our own civic infrastructure to develop a theory of action.






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### CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE:

The network of systems, relationships, and resources that allow communities to work together effectively.

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The IPP describes these through five key capacities: the 5 Rs.

	<b>REASON</b>	A shared narrative and positive vision for how the region sees itself and what it wants to achieve.
	<b>READINESS</b>	The information, will, and capacity of leaders across sectors to co-create and implement new and more effective strategies for collaborative impact.
	<b>RELATIONSHIPS</b>	Quality connectedness across community-based, civic, industry, and philanthropic leaders that fosters an ability to design scaled interventions.
	<b>RESULTS</b>	Implementation of interventions at scale, creating a sustainable engine for growth and prosperity for all of St. Louis.
	<b>RESOURCES</b>	Funding and other contributions that enable the Civic Infrastructure to sustain success.

## WHY FOCUS ON BETTER-PAYING, HIGH-QUALITY JOBS?

The data analysis of our current economy, paired with lived experience, pointed towards quality jobs for individuals with low incomes as an essential first focus area, recognizing that income inequality significantly hinders regional growth. Key statistics from this analysis captured in JSMF's 2024 Regional Collaboration Conversation Action Plan include:



Roughly **10% of the population, or over 290,000 people**, in the St. Louis region live below the national poverty line.



Median household income disparities are particularly pronounced for families with young children, with **White households earning over \$100,000 compared to less than \$39,000 for Black households**.



St. Louis City has seen significant **income growth (34% between 1980 and 2020)**; however, this **growth is not benefiting lower-wage workers**.



Over **80% of jobs** paying more than **\$3,333 per month** in St. Louis City are **filled by non-City residents**, while City residents are concentrated in lower-paying jobs.



This first issue cycle focuses on expanding access to better-paying, high-quality jobs for low-income individuals. The SDC, with the aid of local and national research, will ultimately determine the metrics of “better-paying,” “high-quality,” and “low income.” However, for the purposes of a strawman that could be used as a reference point or to garner reaction, the **metric proposed by JSMF for low income** was **individuals earning less than \$50,000** and **families earning less than \$100,000 annually** in the St. Louis region. Within this broad framework, solutions will be tailored to specific populations.




The IPP is a long-term civic infrastructure investment – not a one-off project. Its goal is to enable the St. Louis region to address multiple complex challenges through collaborative, community-centered solutions. Equity is a driving value, and community voice is central to every phase of the work. This initial issue cycle serves as a proving ground for building a sustainable model of inclusive economic problem-solving.



## PHASE 1: DISCOVERY & DESIGN

The **Discovery & Design** phase lays the foundation for this first issue cycle, expanding access to better-paying, high-quality jobs in St. Louis, by **mapping the diverse perspectives** of stakeholders and community members across the region. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted by Convergence and EW, this phase builds a comprehensive understanding of the barriers, opportunities, and values shaping the region’s economic landscape.

### Key objectives include:

-  Identifying areas of consensus and divergence among key stakeholders.
-  Engaging voices with lived and learned experience in workforce development, economic mobility, and community transformation.
-  Informing the design of the SDC by identifying potential participants and setting the stage for collaborative action.

By centering a diversity of voices, this phase grounds this first IPP cycle in community-driven insights that will shape solutions moving forward.



## PHASE 2: CONVENE DIVERSE PARTICIPANTS

Building on the first phase, this phase assembles the SDC, a group of 32 individuals with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and expertise. Meeting monthly from July 2025 to April 2026, the cohort will **build trust, foster relationships**, and align on **shared values**. The diversity of the SDC is essential to ensure solutions are robust, innovative, and reflective of the issue’s complexity.



## PHASE 3: DEVELOP HIGHER-GROUND SOLUTIONS

Through facilitated dialogue and structured collaboration, the SDC will identify **overlapping interests** and **shared goals**, moving beyond positional differences to develop solutions that address the needs of all stakeholders. This phase emphasizes creative option generation, mutual gains, and consensus-building. The solutions emerging from this process will represent “**higher-ground**” approaches – those that leverage the collective strengths of the group and would be otherwise unattainable through isolated efforts. The focus will be on:

- **Co-creating actionable solutions** to expand high-paying, quality jobs for people from low-income backgrounds.
- **Building trust** and collaborative capacity among stakeholders.
- **Developing a plan** that outlines priorities, strategies, and pathways for implementation.
- **Establishing a model** for ongoing community-centered problem solving that can be replicated across future issue cycles.



## PHASE 4: IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS

The final phase translates the SDC's collaborative solutions into a **Blueprint for Action**. While the specific implementation strategies will be shaped by the solutions themselves, it is anticipated that success will require public-private partnerships, cross-sector commitments, and ongoing coordination. This phase will aim to establish the **practical pathways** and **necessary partnerships** to bring the SDC's solutions to life and achieve **measurable impact** for St. Louis residents.



# FINDINGS

Between April 7 and July 3, 2025, Convergence and EW conducted 56 interviews with a wide range of key stakeholders and four in-person focus groups with residents who have direct experience navigating economic barriers. Details regarding the interviews and focus groups can be found in the Appendix. The synthesis of insights gathered to date informs the design of the SDC and future phases of work. A summary of the team’s findings and analysis, covering challenges, strengths, opportunities, and pathway recommendations, is included below.

## CHALLENGES

Through stakeholder interviews and community focus groups, the IPP has surfaced a set of **persistent** and **interconnected challenges** that limit economic mobility and access to quality jobs for people with low incomes in the St. Louis region. These challenges are not new, but these interviews illuminated how they continue to undermine efforts for inclusive prosperity. Stakeholders emphasized that while many initiatives have attempted to address these barriers, the **lack of sustained, coordinated action** has left gaps **unaddressed**.

1

### A FRAGMENTED ECOSYSTEM

Stakeholders consistently pointed to a fragmented workforce and economic development ecosystem as a primary obstacle. Silos across sectors — nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, and businesses — hinder collaboration and collective impact. Competition for limited resources, especially with declining federal funding, further exacerbates these divisions.

As one stakeholder noted, **“Competition for funding is going to get that much harder right now. Funding is going to be a huge gap for a lot of the support services.”**

Nonprofit leaders described how collaboration is often replaced by competition for grants, with organizations duplicating efforts rather than aligning strategies. Some smaller organizations noted that promising community-rooted strategies (e.g., worker ownership models, second-chance employment) struggle for traction due to resource hoarding and a bias toward large institutions.

Business leaders noted a disconnect between economic development plans and workforce initiatives, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities. Concentrated decision-making power among a small group of gatekeepers was also identified as a barrier, limiting who has a seat at the table in shaping solutions.

One stakeholder observed, **“There can be a lot of good guy versus good guy. [...] Like Superman vs. Batman, Captain America vs Iron Man.”**

Another stakeholder reflected, **“I definitely had a bad experience with data collection and collaboration. The big fish wasn’t really offering anything real — it was just an illusion. Collaboration often becomes a numbers grab, not true partnership.”**

“There can be a lot of good guy versus good guy. [...] Like Superman vs. Batman, Captain America vs Iron Man.”

## 2

## PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO ACCESS – BOTH INDIVIDUAL AND SYSTEMIC

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Access barriers remain a significant challenge for individuals seeking to enter and advance in quality jobs. Stakeholders described these barriers as both individual and systemic:

→ **Individual barriers** include transportation challenges, lack of affordable childcare, limited access to education and workforce preparation, financial literacy gaps, unaddressed mental health needs, and for some, fear of crime on public transit.

→ Many of these barriers closely match social determinants of health.

→ **Distinct barriers for immigrant populations** in the region, including visa sponsorship reluctance, credential transfer issues, and cultural and language differences during hiring processes.

→ **Youth** also have distinct needs related to poor educational outcomes, navigating a complex and opaque credentialing landscape, and a lack of exposure to what pathways are available.

→ **Justice-involved residents** struggle to find employers willing to take perceived risks on second-chance hires.

As one stakeholder shared, **“One of our biggest challenges, as an organization, that our clients ask for a lot is childcare assistance. That is huge. Access to either public or private transportation has been a big thing as well.”**



Systemic barriers stem, in part, from employer cultures that often fail to understand or accommodate the lived experiences of potential employees. While employers expect job readiness, there is limited recognition of the supports needed for success – flexibility, wraparound services, and clear pathways for retention and advancement.

One stakeholder explained, **“Employers need to meet people where they are – not lower the bar but understand the extra supports that lead to success.”**

Stakeholders also noted a passive approach to access – describing how some institutions and employers are not actively helping individuals connect to opportunities, instead assuming people will navigate complex systems on their own.

## 3

## TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS UNDERMINE LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

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A recurring theme was the transactional nature of many employer-community relationships. Stakeholders expressed frustration that some employers engage only when facing immediate hiring needs, rather than investing in long-term ecosystem development. This short-term focus limits opportunities for building sustainable pipelines of talent and addressing underlying barriers.

Even when hiring occurs, some participants emphasized that some employers end their engagement there. There is a perception that few invest in onboarding, mentorship, or manager training for inclusive workplaces.

**There is a clear need for deeper, more intentional partnerships between employers, workforce organizations, and community stakeholders.** Building these relationships requires moving beyond transactional interactions to foster shared understanding, trust, and mutual accountability.

## 4

### SYSTEMIC RACISM AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

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Systemic racism was identified by many interviewees as a foundational challenge. Stakeholders emphasized the long history of exclusion and structural barriers that continue to shape economic disparities in St. Louis. These issues have been chronicled in dozens of reports across the last two decades, including *For the Sake of All* and *Forward Through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity*. Studies show **persistent access gaps, concentrated poverty, and limited pathways to economic mobility**. From redlining and disinvestment in Black communities to disparities in education, transportation, financial access and literacy, and wages, historic policy impacts and inequities continue to manifest today in nearly every aspect of life.

**Educational disparities** were named as a theme with a struggling K-12 educational system that is fragmented and segregated due to racist historical policies. This affects recently graduated youth seeking to apply skills in the workplace, as well as contributes to higher rates of adult illiteracy.

Addressing these systemic issues requires more than programs or isolated initiatives—it demands **intentional efforts to dismantle structural barriers, build trust, and center equity** in all aspects of economic development and workforce strategies. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of specific groups, such as Black and Latinx people.

Sustaining equitable policy changes has been difficult. Local and statewide policies, such as paid leave and minimum wage, have faced intense political resistance and retraction of voter-passed ballot initiatives.

## 5

### ATTACKS ON EQUITY AND DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) INITIATIVES

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Several interviewees noted growing backlash against DEI efforts. Some pointed to fatigue around attention to these issues. In the wake of political and cultural polarization, some organizations are retreating from explicit equity commitments, while others face skepticism about the impact of such initiatives.

This climate presents a challenge for the IPP's work, as sustaining momentum for inclusive economic strategies will require navigating resistance, maintaining partner buy-in, and demonstrating tangible results. Stakeholders stressed the importance of clear outcomes, transparent communication, and authentic community engagement to keep equity at the center of the work.

# STRENGTHS & OPPORTUNITIES

## Initiative and Regional Strengths

Several strengths in the workforce development sector were noted by stakeholders that will benefit the initiative and be a foundation for successful implementation across the first issue cycle.

→ **Stakeholders broadly shared a commitment and an openness to collaboration and trying new things.** The IPP's better-paying jobs focus was generally met with enthusiasm and seen as important, with appreciation expressed for the focus on action and implementation.

→ **There are already several coalitions and initiatives in the region working towards building sector collaboration.** Notable examples include Greater Saint Louis, Inc., Tech STL, BioSTL, the Construction Forum, and the Regional Youth Employment Coalition (RYEC).

→ **The region has existing job training programs and growing paid apprenticeship models.**

→ St. Louis Community College serves as a convener for a statewide career pathways initiative and is involved in employer-led "growth from within" programs. Other organizations offer free upskilling programs focused on job success skills.

→ Specific models like the Missouri Works Initiative exist for training in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, and pre-apprenticeship models are developing for traditional skilled trades.

→ **There is a growing focus on the trades as a viable pathway to high-wage careers.**

→ **The region's economy is growing, and the civic and business communities have demonstrated investment in specific sectors** such as advanced manufacturing, geospatial technology, biotech, and healthcare.

→ **A significant number of nonprofits are actively engaged in the workforce development space within the region.** These organizations often provide crucial support services, including wraparound services like childcare and transportation, which are recognized as major barriers. Many have a long history in their communities.

→ **JSMF is leveraging its network and resources to invest in this space, representing a shift in its focus.** The initiative aligns with the foundation's strategic realignment and benefits from its existing backing and research. Several interviewees were heartened by the potential role in positive shared accountability for the workforce development, philanthropic, and employer sectors.



## Opportunities to Address Barriers

### 1 Prioritize a more active approach to job access

Creating better access to quality jobs is generally seen as a greater need than simply creating new jobs. This requires actively connecting individuals to existing opportunities and going beyond basic job placement or an “apply and see” approach, which some organizations struggle with. A more active approach involves addressing the multifaceted barriers individuals face, such as transportation, childcare, and other life challenges, which prevent them from accessing and then succeeding while in the job until they can achieve higher incomes. Opportunities exist for employers to become more directly involved, potentially by guaranteeing interviews or jobs after program completion or by helping connect employees to necessary supports for retention.

Employers also have the chance to transform internal conditions within the company that cause greater turnover, which carries costs for the business, and difficulties for low-income workers. This includes inflexible work schedules, lack of childcare or transportation support, and discriminatory screening methods (e.g., drug tests, credential bias).

### 2 Pursue partnership and collaboration opportunities

A significant opportunity lies in addressing the fragmentation and lack of coordination among existing workforce development efforts in the region. There is a clear call for increased collaboration across sectors, including non-profits, unions, businesses, education, and government, to avoid duplicating efforts and create a more centralized approach. Building this civic infrastructure for collaboration is seen as crucial for achieving large-scale change and ensuring organizations amplify each other's efforts rather than operating in silos. Funders and initiatives like the Inclusive Prosperity Partnership can help identify and facilitate these key connections and partnerships.

Another opportunity is that smaller, values-aligned organizations may have proven models but lack access to institutional funding streams.

### 3 Increase career exposure and preparation for youth

There is an opportunity to significantly increase career exposure and preparation for young people, starting at an earlier age. Youth in focus groups noted they’ve “never seen” people in quality jobs who look like them. Some interviewees reflected that these employer-educator K-12 partnerships are often coordinated on an individual school basis and that there are not standards for guidance counseling across St. Louis’s many school districts.

Providing education on available job opportunities and clear career pathways within various industries is vital, as many high-paying, quality jobs are unknown to potential candidates because they may not have known anyone in their community with those opportunities. Developing targeted programs, such as internships, work-learning initiatives, and peer mentors who reflect youth identities and experiences—and linking them directly to skills training and job access can help equip youth for success. Youth and interviewees emphasized the importance of internships being paid. This approach helps students focus on careers and can integrate learning with earning opportunities like apprenticeships.

## 4 Develop stronger training and career pathways to quality jobs

Strengthening pathways involves establishing better linkages that support career growth, not just job placement. Some took it further, naming a lack of access to “individualized career guidance” for low-income workers as a critical infrastructure gap. This guidance through a live person or easy-to-use online tool is often vital to help people navigate options, skills transferability, and long-term advancement. Residents also exist and regularly travel across municipal and county divides, but the program availability and resources often do not. A job pathway system should be developed collaboratively across St. Louis’s many political subdivisions to have a scaled impact.

This can look like: A clear route for growth and advancement within employer organizations, not just entry-level positions. Building robust connections between training programs, academic institutions, and employers is essential to ensure that training is responsive to industry needs and that stackable credentials lead directly to quality jobs. Exploring and implementing models like learn-and-earn initiatives, apprenticeships (even in non-traditional fields), and stackable credentialing can provide valuable on-the-job learning and skill development tied to career progression.

## 5 Establish regional leadership

There is a need to establish strong regional leadership and a central coordinating body to guide workforce development efforts. This leadership could help align the many disparate initiatives, acting as an “umbrella organization” or providing a guiding framework to bring resources together and define clear roles for different groups.

Establishing a shared vision or one “North Star” for the region is crucial to ensuring that efforts are working towards common goals and decreasing the fragmentation and misalignment caused by jurisdictional (city-county and municipal) or organizational boundaries. Creating robust civic infrastructure was identified as a key missing component for driving large-scale, population-level impacts.

## 6 Organize an ecosystem of holistic job supports

A key theme was the need for a more comprehensive system of and approach to holistic supports that address the full range of barriers individuals face beyond just training. This ecosystem must include critical wraparound services such as childcare, transportation, financial assistance, affordable housing, and access to mental health support to enable people to access jobs and maintain stable employment. Many low-income workers face trauma and instability within the current economy. St. Louis needs innovative solutions to mitigate barriers like affordable housing, which can significantly impact job access and retention. Providing support that allows individuals to cover basic needs while participating in training, such as stipends, is also crucial.

The support should also be tailored to ease of access for the user, employing tactics such as co-location of services and information hubs to support navigation of resources.


## 7 Focus on high-opportunity industries

Several interviewees emphasized the need for job training and exposure to be linked to high-quality job industries, focusing efforts on high-potential industries that offer wage growth potential and long-term security. Identifying and concentrating on these sectors allows for targeted training programs and pathway development to be aligned with current and future workforce needs. Better collaboration across the workforce development pipeline – including employers, philanthropy, civic organizations, and training providers – is also needed to create direct pipelines to quality jobs.

Industries named as potential focus areas include:

 **Advanced Manufacturing**

 **Transportation and Logistics**

 **Healthcare and Health Sciences**


 **Agriculture**


 **Construction and the Trades**


 **Financial Services**


 **Aerospace and Aviation**

 **Biosciences and Food Science Technology**

 **Early Childhood and Education**

 **IT and Technology**

 **Hospitality**

 **Entrepreneurship**

*(This deserves further conversation, as interviewees named pros and cons for prioritizing this industry given the IPP's goals)*

## 8 Invest in live-work communities

Several interviewees noted that worker ability to reach job centers as a key barrier to low-income populations accessing better-paying, high-quality jobs. They noted that the areas where these jobs are concentrated often have low rates of affordable housing and are difficult to reach through public transportation. Innovative ideas raised in interviews include models where employers invest in building affordable housing to reduce commute burdens for workers and the costs of understaffing and high turnover. Civic and business leaders could also work with employers to build job sites near public transportation through a model called transit-oriented development.

# FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION FINDINGS

## I. Overview

Between May 14 and May 20, 2025, the IPP team conducted **four focus groups** with people who have **lived experience** seeking high-paying, quality jobs in the St. Louis region. The team partnered with Dream Builders 4 Equity, the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, and the St. Louis Mosaic Project to engage distinct target audiences, including **Black youth, male and female householders, and immigrant community members**. These groups were **intentionally centered** in the **Discovery & Design** phase because they have largely been on the margins of the region's economic development efforts and could gain the most from initiatives that advance economic mobility.

Each focus group was two hours in length, with 12 to 15 participants attending from partner organizations. A total of 48 people engaged in the process, which included completing a demographic survey and taking part in facilitated conversations. Meeting facilitators asked **11 questions** that mainly fell into **five categories of inquiry**:

- **What are high-paying, quality jobs?**
- **What barriers make it difficult to get and keep these jobs?**
- **What programs help people to overcome these barriers?**
- **What role should employers play in advancing opportunity?**
- **What resources and supports are most helpful in securing employment success?**

A synopsis of participants' responses to these questions is provided on the following pages for ease of reference and review.

## II. Key Findings

### 1 DESCRIPTIONS OF HIGH-PAYING, QUALITY JOBS

#### High-Paying Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

At the beginning of each focus group, participants shared their frames of reference for high-paying, quality jobs. Their descriptions provided working definitions or frameworks that anchored the remaining conversations. Across all audience types – youth, householders and immigrants – recurring themes emerged that reflected participants' desires for jobs that enhanced their well-being, satisfaction, and overall life experience.

Participants agreed that high-paying jobs provide stability, sustainability, and some measure of surplus. With regard to stability, they discussed wanting jobs that enable them to consistently pay their bills and live beyond crisis. They also wanted the ability to save money over time so that they could sustain their security and success throughout the course of their lives. They maintained that high-paying jobs help to secure the present and the future, not just for those who possess them, but also for their children and families.

Additionally, jobs that pay well advance career growth. These jobs contain within them opportunities to develop transferrable hard and soft skills that can be employed in multiple work settings. They enable employees to build careers, beyond a single employer, and invest more deeply in their competencies, capacities, and dreams (including self-employment). They also open doors by extending employees' professional networks, which provide access to helpful career information and resources.

The appeal of high-paying jobs does not, however, lie only in their career impacts. They also elevate employees' sense of self, happiness, and general quality of life. Participants discussed jobs that contributed to their well-being and life enjoyment. With high-paying jobs, they could explore their interests, travel, and engage in a wide array of activities (paid and free) with their children. Female householders also mentioned wanting high-paying jobs that make it possible to work less hours so that they could spend more time with their families.

**"You don't live paycheck to paycheck."**

*- Youth*

**"You don't have the chronic stress that comes with having to pick between food, gas, diapers and lights."**

*- Female Householder*

**"Most of the time we are slaving at our jobs, spending more time at the jobs than we do with our families."**

*- Female Householder*

At the end of the discussion, facilitators asked participants to get specific about the earnings and benefits associated with high-paying jobs. Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of perspectives, with "high-paying" being associated with both salaried and hourly work. Desired hourly wages ranged from \$20/hour to \$60/hour, while a high-paying salary was considered \$100K+ per year. No matter the type of pay, these coveted jobs were presumed to come with health and retirement benefits, along with monetary incentives that encouraged high-quality employee performance.

### **Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences**

Descriptions of quality jobs were synonymous with those for high-paying jobs. For focus group participants, high-paying and quality are mutually inclusive. Where they added emphasis, however, was on quality jobs' alignment with passions, non-toxic work environments, extensive benefits, and flexibility.

Participants asserted that quality jobs are not just busy work, but employment opportunities that build on people's interests and passions. They are attractive beyond the paycheck because they engage employees' ambitions, aspirations, and motivations. They contain growth opportunities like professional development resources, promotions, and good management. Participants repeatedly cited good management as an essential component of quality jobs because it includes respect for employees, reduces workplace stress, and fosters effective relationships. Unfortunately, not everyone had experience with quality jobs. One male focus group participant stated, "I was always taught to get a job like McDonald's or to hustle in the streets. I never heard of a quality job."

Whatever participants' frames of reference for quality jobs, all agreed that these jobs advance both personal and community stability. They have long-term staying power and are not likely to disappear

from the labor market in a few years. They offer high earnings, work/life flexibility, and extensive benefits that include, but are not limited to medical, dental and vision insurance, paid time off, parental leave, FMLA (Family Medical and Leave Act) protections, retirement supports (401Ks, pensions, etc.), tuition remission, employee assistance programs (that provide mental health supports), and more. These benefits support the well-being of employees and their families, as well as position those who have them to contribute to society in more resourceful ways.

“It’s not just about the paycheck. You get something of worth for yourself.”

- Male Householder

## 2

## BARRIERS TO GETTING AND KEEPING EMPLOYMENT

### Barriers To Getting High-Paying, Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

For too many people, high-paying, quality jobs are too hard to access. Common barriers to employment include a lack of education and experience, inadequate transportation, discrimination and exclusion from professional networks, and insufficient family supports and childcare, among other issues. **All audiences** shared how a **lack of education, credentials, and extensive employment histories** make it **harder to obtain the jobs they most desire**. One youth focus group participant disclosed, “There are not enough jobs that train you, especially if you are entry level with no skills.” This lack of on-the-job training is compounded by poor primary and secondary school preparation, limited educational options in low-to-moderate income communities, and largely unaffordable colleges and trade schools.

Beyond “**what you know**,” another impediment to obtaining high-paying, quality jobs is “**who you know**.” Coveted jobs are often accessed through relationships that emerge from educational, social, and professional networks. These networks are not universally accessible and often require shared backgrounds, status, and resource parity as conditions of belonging. People who lack these are more likely to be excluded. And in St. Louis, racial and ethnic bias, both inside and outside of work settings, is fairly commonplace.

Education, training, and networks are not the only resources that are out of reach for people seeking economic mobility. **Public transportation has limited availability**, and **private transportation** is often **too expensive**. Impoverished communities have a dearth of employment options, so residents need to be able to reliably and affordably travel to where the jobs are. Unfortunately, buses and Metro Link have limited service areas and times, which further restrict access to opportunities.

Along with transportation barriers, participants with families discussed **inadequate childcare** and family supports as hindrances to employment. Parents and caregivers have to manage both work and home obligations. In St. Louis, there is a **shortage of childcare options**, which makes it difficult to both access and afford safe, quality childcare. Families require, but frequently do not have, the reliable childcare needed to work.

## Noteworthy Audience Distinctions

While all four focus groups described barriers such as inadequate education, transportation challenges, lack of childcare, and the presence of bias, the **youth and immigrant focus groups raised distinct concerns** that are worth exploring. For **youth** (and some male householders), criminal records, drug testing, and the dearth of second chance employment were identified as obstacles that interfere with getting hired. Immigrants had a more exhaustive list of barriers, which are presented below.

**Immigrants** who seek employment have to go through a visa process or green card sponsorship, which most employers find complicated and off-putting. The U.S. has strict immigration policies that many companies do not understand or want to engage. As a consequence, these companies often automatically reject immigrants who need employment sponsorships. Companies that are less risk averse might consider hiring immigrants, but difficulties evaluating their qualifications, working through language differences, and understanding their cultures still present major impediments to employment. Employers struggle to assess the resumes and competencies of people trained and employed outside of the U.S. Immigrant job seekers might be skilled and even degreed, but dissimilarities in employment and cultural contexts often necessitate additional preparation (and expense) to deliver the same services. It should also be noted that certifications and credentials from other countries are costly to transfer, seldom approved, and usually require that people already have jobs to be recognized.

Beyond the abovementioned factors, focus group participants explained that the hiring process is generally difficult for immigrants to navigate. Application, screening, onboarding, and drug testing protocols vary widely, from company to company. And, human resource professionals lack familiarity with immigrants, which can result in unchecked bias and discriminatory practices. Sadly, many immigrants do not know their rights and are less likely to challenge hiring discrimination if they encounter it, especially if they had worse experiences in their countries of origin.

## Barriers To Keeping High-Paying, Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

Sustaining employment and securing career advancement opportunities require **ongoing professional development** that focus group participants contend is hard to access. Training is costly, and if it is not provided within a workplace setting, people must either pay for it or find free options, which have limited capacity. Participants had little experience with companies that offer extended training through job shadowing or apprenticeships, maintaining that most prefer employees who already possess the hard and soft skills they need to perform well.

For **people of color**, who often enter the labor market with fewer educational and employment supports, a lack of training opportunities contributes to job instability and further warps the employment playing field. Add to this racial bias in the workplace, the recent rollback of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, unfair enforcement of performance standards, sexual harassment, discrimination against young people in hiring and promotions, and a pervasive distrust of difference, and it becomes clearer why so many people have a **hard time keeping high-paying, quality jobs after they get them**. Lots of workers find it difficult to respond to racism and toxic organizational cultures without jeopardizing their employment.

Job security can be elusive, however, without workplace dynamics being extreme. Focus group participants spoke extensively about not understanding organizational expectations and norms, which often conflict with their peer and native cultures. Without mentors or exposure to accomplished people who have worked in their roles, fields and industries, they lack awareness of the unspoken rules of engagement that can make or break their workplace success.

Participants also cited **job inflexibility** and **limited family and community supports** as barriers to staying employed. They spoke repeatedly about rigid work settings that make it difficult to handle life crises and exigencies. Workers with sick children, unexpected caregiving responsibilities, unreliable transportation, mental health issues, and family instability frequently incur penalties that could cost them their jobs, especially if they have demanding schedules.

### 3

## HELPFUL EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

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### Programs That Help People Get High-Paying, Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

All focus group participants are currently engaged in jobs programs like Dream Builders 4 Equity, St. Louis Internship Program, Save Our Sons, Save Our Sisters, Employment Connections, SLATE (the St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment), Youth Build, International Women On The Rise, and Better Family Life's employment fairs. They commented that the **efficacy of these programs** lies primarily in their **willingness to meet participants where they are**. They provide transportation assistance, professional attire supports, hard and soft skill development, exposure to an array of employment opportunities and resources, and in some instances, actual jobs. These programs also help people extend their networks and find mentors, both within their programs and their professions.

### Program Enhancements To Get More People High-Paying, Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

Focus group participants had recommendations for how to strengthen the region's workforce development programs. They suggested that these programs intensify their **community marketing** and **promotions**, offer **mental health** and **well-being supports** (e.g., therapists and social workers), and provide more **stabilizing resources** that help clients meet their basic needs. They also want programs to partner with companies that invest in **on-the-job training** and hire participants for **growth-oriented jobs** rather than seasonal or marginal employment.

### 4

## EMPLOYERS' ROLE

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### Employers' Role in Increasing Access to High-Paying, Quality Jobs: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

Employers have a critical role to play in helping people with low incomes obtain high-paying, quality jobs. Focus group participants insisted that this role begins **before hiring** with **community engagement** and **employee recruitment**. Companies should frequently visit school, university, and community settings to promote their industries and employment opportunities. Without this visibility and engagement, many people will lack an awareness of the quality jobs available to advance their social and economic mobility.

Employers' presence in marginalized communities reduces the barriers to labor market entry, encourages long-term relationship building, and presents opportunities for upstream development of

the talent pipeline. Their presence must, however, be accompanied by clear intentions to hire diverse workers, many of whom may not immediately check all the employment boxes. **Companies need to be willing to employ promising prospects who require some additional preparation and support.**

Extending support to diverse hires and creating the conditions under which they are most likely to succeed involves proactive investment in organizational readiness. Hiring and management teams need training on engaging a diverse workforce, cultivating emotional intelligence, giving and receiving feedback, and recognizing and responding to bias. They should also expand job shadowing and mentoring opportunities, and offer competitive compensation and benefits.

### Noteworthy Audience Distinctions

The immigrant focus group noted that St. Louis is among the fastest growing regions for immigration, though the city proper is losing population. Increasing employment opportunities for immigrants could advance a more inclusive prosperity that helps to staunch the city's population decline. This makes immigrant employment an issue of regional importance instead of a "minor diversity concern" for the International Institute and Mosaic Project to address alone. In this context, employers are crucial allies in lessening the poverty and isolation endemic to the immigrant experience in St. Louis.

Focus group participants stated that employers should expand their recruitment, training, and hiring of immigrants. To do this, they need leaders and human resource staff that are knowledgeable about the visa process, employee sponsorship, and issues immigrants face in the workplace. The most common among these are language barriers, which necessitate employer investments in technology and translation services that foster communication and more inclusive organizations.

## 5

## IMPACTFUL SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

### Most Impactful Supports & Resources: Recurring Themes Across Audiences

At the end of the focus group process, participants were asked to identify the supports or resources that would most help them get and keep high-paying, quality jobs. Their responses did not reveal new information, but elevated **three primary areas of focus**.

These included:

1. **Employment assistance beyond the hiring stage**
2. **Mentorship and modeling**
3. **Help meeting basic needs and wraparound services**

Early in their career development, participants need help not only accessing employment opportunities but also sustaining their longevity on the job. They want the support they receive from their employment programs to be extended at the office, and they recommended that employers have workforce development specialists on staff. These individuals would help with organizational acculturation and career navigation.

"Job seekers don't need to figure out things by themselves, but need to have resources that help them navigate the process."

- Immigrant

They could also connect new hires to mentors who model what it takes to achieve and maintain workplace success. Mentors' insights, feedback, and guidance are invaluable resources for people who are new to the rigors of career building.

Additionally, focus group participants discussed addressing the **barriers to employment that arise from a lack of access to resources**. Much of what gets in the way of their career success is not related to their experiences in the workplace, but rather beyond it. Many lack reliable transportation to get them to and from work and could benefit from improvements in public transit or access to private transportation. Others mentioned unmet mental health challenges and expressed a desire for help from skilled people who could support their mental and emotional well-being.

### III. Conclusion

Focus group participants were excited to be involved in the **Discovery & Design** process and expressed a **desire to stay active in the project's planning and implementation** phases. Six individuals were invited to join the IPP's 32-member SDC, which will spend the next 18 months figuring out **how to ensure that more people with low incomes get and keep high-paying, quality jobs at scale**. The remaining participants, or their peers, will be reconvened at major project milestones to integrate lived experience into project decision-making.



# PATHWAY FORWARD

This **Discovery & Design** phase was designed not only to surface barriers and opportunities, but also to **lay the groundwork for a collaborative, community-centered process** to expand access to better-paying, high-quality jobs in the St. Louis region. Stakeholders shared clear recommendations for how the IPP can successfully navigate the challenges identified and build an enduring civic infrastructure for inclusive economic growth. Many of the themes surfaced through this process apply to the IPP's long-term, cross-issue approach, including the importance of sustained engagement, centering lived experience, and fostering collaboration across sectors and communities. However, stakeholders also emphasized specific recommendations and priorities directly relevant to the first issue cycle – focused on expanding access to better-paying, high-quality jobs – and to the design and function of the initial SDC.

Where applicable, this section differentiates IPP-wide recommendations from those specific to the current SDC process.

The following themes reflect what is needed to move from insight to action.

1

## Designing for continued engagement & collaboration: Building trust over time

Stakeholders stressed that sustained, meaningful engagement is fundamental to the IPP's long-term success. Beyond initial participation, there must be an intentional strategy to maintain momentum, nurture relationships, and ensure stakeholders remain connected to the work.

First SDC-specific considerations include:

- Embedding regular, intentional communication with employers and other stakeholders outside of the SDC, which is critical to implementing solutions.
- Using the SDC as a platform to model trust-building practices that can carry into future IPP issue cycles.

Key strategies include:

- Providing regular, substantive communications to keep stakeholders and community members informed, engaged, and invested.
- Sharing progress in clear, digestible formats that highlight key milestones without overwhelming detail.
- Offering multiple avenues for participation, allowing stakeholders to engage at varying levels over time.

To sustain momentum, the IPP must foster transparency, provide regular touchpoints, and create opportunities for stakeholders and community members to see their contributions reflected in the work.

## 2

### Centering lived experience: “Nothing for us without us” in practice

A consistent theme from interviews was the critical importance of elevating and integrating the voices of those most directly impacted by economic exclusion. For the IPP, this means moving beyond token engagement toward authentic co-creation.

For the first SDC, this means:

- Actively recruiting and empowering community members with lived experience to participate in the SDC itself, not only as informants but as co-creators.
- Compensating community participants for their time and expertise, recognizing their contributions as essential, not ancillary.
- Creating culturally relevant spaces and processes that meet people where they are, reducing barriers to participation.
- Ensuring that community insights directly shape the solutions developed by including public input and design checkpoints throughout the SDC process, ensuring transparency and co-creation at key moments.

By embedding these practices, the IPP can model what true inclusive problem-solving looks like — ensuring that solutions are not only technically sound but deeply responsive to community needs.

## 3

### Strategic communications & amplifying impact

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that strong, strategic communications will be essential for the IPP’s success — not only to share progress but to build trust, sustain engagement, and shift public narratives about inclusive economic growth.

Specific to this SDC and the first issue cycle, communication priorities include:

- Prioritizing clear, targeted communication with employers who need to become champions and implementers.
- Showcasing early wins or pilots that demonstrate the feasibility of better-paying, high-quality job pathways.
- Using the SDC process to tell authentic, community-driven stories that resonate with both employers and workers.

Other priorities include:

- Managing expectations and framing the long game, helping partners and the broader public understand that systemic change requires time, persistence, and collaborative effort.
- Developing a practice and protocol for relationship management with key stakeholders. For example, one stakeholder noted the power of a simple 10–15-minute individual call with institutional stakeholders to dispel confusion and maintain buy-in.

To lead these efforts, the IPP has partnered with Cannonball, a strategic communications firm. Cannonball's role is critical in ensuring that the IPP's work is communicated effectively to diverse audiences, bridging gaps in understanding, and reinforcing the initiative's commitment to transparency and impact.

By leveraging Cannonball's expertise, the IPP will create a cohesive communications strategy that:

- Develops compelling narratives and success stories.
- Designs clear, accessible materials for various audiences.
- Supports ongoing stakeholder engagement and relationship management.
- Maintains consistent feedback loops and responsive communications.

In a region where skepticism of large-scale initiatives is common, a strong, coordinated communications strategy rooted in authenticity will be a vital pillar of the IPP's pathway forward.

#### **4 Long-term commitment & patience**

Stakeholders were unequivocal: the challenges the IPP seeks to address are the result of decades of disinvestment, systemic inequities, and fragmented efforts. Meaningful solutions will not emerge overnight.

For this SDC, this translates to:

- Setting realistic expectations that the work will need iteration, piloting, and validation before scaling.
- Framing the SDC's role as a launchpad for actionable, early interventions within a longer-term journey.

The IPP's approach must also embrace a long-term horizon by:

- Adopting a 10-year+ investment mindset, recognizing that civic infrastructure and systemic change require time, iteration, and resilience.
- Setting and managing expectations early and often, helping stakeholders understand the pace of long-term work and celebrating incremental wins along the way.
- Building a strong foundation before scaling solutions, ensuring that early pilots are rooted in genuine community needs and validated by those most impacted.
- Securing multi-year commitments from funders, employers, and institutions, providing the stability necessary for sustained impact.

By positioning itself as a long-term steward – not a short-term fixer – the IPP can build the credibility and staying power essential for transformative change.

## 5 Employer partnership & culture change

While workforce development efforts often focus on preparing individuals for employment, stakeholders were clear that employer-side culture and practices are equally critical. Addressing this requires a shift in how employers view their role – not just as job providers, but as partners in building inclusive economic ecosystems.

For the SDC, priorities include:

- Facilitating spaces for employers to listen and learn directly from workforce participants and community leaders.
- Shaping expectations and standards for how employers support and retain talent from underrepresented communities.
- Promoting shared standards and accountability measures, signaling to the market that inclusive practices are not optional add-ons, but integral to business success.
- Leveraging employer partnerships for wraparound supports, such as transportation solutions, childcare partnerships, and mentorship programs that directly address barriers to employee success

## 6 Guarding against common pitfalls: Staying focused, collaborative, & accountable

Finally, stakeholders cautioned against several pitfalls that could derail the IPP's efforts if not intentionally addressed. Many referenced the region's history of ambitious initiatives that struggled to deliver lasting impact – often due to fragmentation, shifting priorities, or loss of momentum.

For this SDC, this means:





- Ensuring clarity of purpose, scope, and expected outcomes.
- Proactively managing dynamics within the SDC to avoid re-creating silos or allowing the process to become disconnected from implementation realities.
- Maintaining disciplined relationship-building and transparent communication throughout the SDC process.

To succeed where others have stumbled, the IPP must remain vigilant in navigating several key challenges, such as:

- Pessimism and skepticism from communities fatigued by previous initiatives, requiring transparency, humility, and early demonstration of tangible progress.
- Maintaining partner buy-in and preventing confusion about the IPP's role, especially as the initiative evolves and interacts with other regional efforts.
- Avoiding the re-creation of silos, which can easily resurface without proactive cultivation of collaboration and shared ownership.
- Ensuring clarity of purpose and focus, particularly in managing the complexity of workforce systems and multi-stakeholder initiatives.

Addressing these challenges will require disciplined relationship-building, transparent communication, and a consistently reinforced shared vision for impact. By staying focused, collaborative, and accountable, the IPP can navigate these common pitfalls and, through the SDC, model inclusive, community-centered problem-solving that delivers both near-term wins and long-term systems change.

# SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOCUS AREA	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
 <p><b>Continued Engagement &amp; Collaboration</b></p>	<p>Maintain momentum through clear, consistent communications, flexible engagement opportunities, and visible reflection of stakeholder contributions.</p>
 <p><b>Centering Lived Experience</b></p>	<p>Embed community voices in decision-making, compensate lived experience experts, and ensure solutions are shaped by those most impacted.</p>
 <p><b>Strategic Communications &amp; Amplifying Impact</b></p>	<p>Leverage Cannonball’s expertise to develop compelling narratives, share early wins, manage expectations, and ensure authentic, community-centered communications.</p>
 <p><b>Long-Term Commitment &amp; Patience</b></p>	<p>Adopt a 10-year+ investment mindset, manage expectations, build strong foundations, and secure multi-year commitments from partners for sustained impact.</p>
 <p><b>Employer Partnership &amp; Culture Change</b></p>	<p>Facilitate employer learning, shape inclusive hiring and retention standards, promote accountability, and leverage partnerships for wraparound supports.</p>
 <p><b>Guarding Against Common Pitfalls</b></p>	<p>Maintain clarity of purpose, foster collaboration, proactively address skepticism, and align efforts around a shared vision to avoid common pitfalls.</p>



# ABOUT US

## **CONVERGENCE CENTER FOR POLICY RESOLUTION (CONVERGENCE)**

Convergence is a national non-profit founded in 2009 that brings together leaders and communities across divides to solve complex public challenges. Through our time-tested collaborative problem-solving methodology, we convene people across ideological, political, and identity lines to improve the lives of Americans and strengthen democracy. For more information, visit [convergencepolicy.org](http://convergencepolicy.org).

## **EMERGING WISDOM (EW)**

EW is a St. Louis-based community and organizational development consulting firm that helps leaders build impactful organizations and communities advance brighter futures. Founded in 2006 by Rebeccah Bennett, the company designs and facilitates policy and systems change initiatives, multi-stakeholder transformation projects, community development and planning efforts, and organizational improvement engagements. To support its clients, EW offers consulting, facilitation, planning, and training services. For more information, visit [emergingwisdomllc.com](http://emergingwisdomllc.com).

## **JAMES S. MCDONNELL FOUNDATION (JSMF)**

The James S. McDonnell Foundation (JSMF) envisions a thriving St. Louis region where inclusive economic growth drives shared prosperity and enhances the quality of life for all. Guided by its mission to advance economic mobility for St. Louisans facing the starkest disparities, JSMF invests in four areas essential to the region's long-term success: workforce, small and mid-sized businesses, wealth building, and the civic infrastructure needed to design and implement lasting economic solutions. Founded in St. Louis in 1950 by aerospace pioneer James S. McDonnell, JSMF has awarded more than \$600 million in grants to date. For more information, visit [jsmf.org](http://jsmf.org).

## GLOSSARY

**IPP** = Inclusive Prosperity Partnership

**SDC** = Solution Design Cohort

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

56 in-depth virtual stakeholder interviews with leaders in business, education, workforce development, philanthropy, government, and community-based organizations were conducted.

The following individuals participated in 45-minute interviews with EW and Convergence from April 7 – July 3, 2025.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
<b>Allie McFadden</b>	Edward Jones
<b>Andrew Martin</b>	Washington University in St. Louis
<b>Andwele Jolly &amp; Bill Winfrey</b>	Integrated Health Network
<b>Ben Kesler</b>	NPower Missouri
<b>Blake Hamilton</b>	International Institute of St. Louis
<b>Brandi Jahnke &amp; Rachael Meuser</b>	Connections to Success
<b>Brandon Williams</b>	St. Louis Internship Program – Boys and Girls Club
<b>Brittany Whitley &amp; Ben Johnson</b>	BioSTL
<b>Carolyn Seward</b>	Family and Workforce Centers of America
<b>Charli Cooksey</b>	WEPOWER
<b>Connie Johnson</b>	St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment
<b>David Winton</b>	Winton Policy Group
<b>Dawn Price</b>	Sophia Project
<b>Dr. Eric Clark</b>	Loyola Academy
<b>Dr. LJ Punch</b>	Power4STL
<b>Dr. Terry Harris</b>	Legacy Center
<b>Dustin Allison</b>	Greater St. Louis, Inc.
<b>Emily Hemingway</b>	TechSTL
<b>Greg Laposa</b>	Workforce Development – St. Louis County
<b>Hillary Frey</b>	STL Youth Jobs
<b>Jeff Pittman &amp; Pyllis Ellison</b>	St. Louis Community College
<b>Jeremy Al-Haj</b>	Missouri Workers Center
<b>Juanita Logan &amp; Bob Olwig</b>	World Wide Technology
<b>Karen Branding</b>	Regional Business Council
<b>Kathy Reeves</b>	Enterprise
<b>Kristin Sobolik</b>	University of Missouri – St. Louis
<b>Krystal Barnett</b>	Bridge 2 Hope
<b>Lara Granich</b>	Missouri Wins Investor Network
<b>Leslie Gill</b>	Rung for Women

# APPENDIX

**Lus Haberberger**  
**Megan Price & Maggie Farrell**  
**Michael Holmes**  
**Michael Woods**  
**Michael England**  
**Montague Simmons**  
**Pastor Brent Roam**  
**Pastor Michael Jones**  
**Rich Liekweg**  
**Richard von Glahn**  
**Sal Martinez**  
**Sandra Moore**  
**Sen. Brian Williams**  
**Shannon Koenig**  
**Steven Stone**  
**Susan Stith**  
**Suzanne Sierra**  
**Tamiko Armstead**  
**Tom Finan**  
**Tony Fuhrmann**  
**Vianey Beltran**

Luzco Technologies  
Missouri Works Initiative  
Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis  
DreamBuilders4Equity  
St. Mary's South Side Catholic High School  
The Movement for Black Lives  
One Family Church  
Friendly Temple Church  
BJC HealthCare  
Missouri Jobs with Justice  
Employment Connection  
Advantage Capital  
Missouri State Legislature  
St. Louis County Housing Authority  
ArchKey Solutions  
Concordance  
St. Louis Mosaic Project  
Cardinal Ritter College Prep High School  
Construction Forum  
Gateway Registered Apprenticeship Hub  
Wells Fargo

