

Connecting Advocates across the US to Advance More Equitable Public Budgeting

This spotlight is part of a [series](#) summarizing six “build & learn” pilots launched in 2024 to explore how field building could take shape in different settings and impact domains. Developed with trusted field partners, the pilots focused on bringing actors together to spur efforts that would have otherwise not emerged or been slow to develop. They were designed to catalyze meaningful impact while generating insight to inform a broader field-building strategy.

THE CHALLENGE

In cities and counties across the country, organizers from communities experiencing poverty and disinvestment frequently face challenges in their efforts to advance budget equity—where the allocation of government resources fairly address disparities. Public budgeting decisions are particularly difficult to influence, as these processes often lack transparency and limit formal opportunities for external stakeholder engagement. Moreover, community-based organizations often require additional expertise, capacity, and power to effectively influence these decisions despite shared objectives.

Competition for scarce public funding and distrust of government among some communities may prevent community-based organizations from joining forces. And local elected officials may not be incentivized to question assumptions and reform budget processes.

Advocates for more responsive budget processes also lack a robust infrastructure that enables them to share knowledge and strategies across cities and states, leading to duplication of labor and limited awareness of best-

“ This work being deeply process-oriented, wonky, and complicated makes it really hard to explain to communities, funders, and other actors who could help make our work successful. As a result, it's pretty thankless and often overlooked.

—Anonymous survey respondent, municipal or county budget advocate

in-class examples of advocacy. Developing connections across these organizations nationwide can significantly reduce the resources invested in developing key skills or designing strategies; the savings can be reinvested into other efforts that can ensure their advocacy is effective (e.g., relationship building and awareness campaigns).

THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot project aims to facilitate relationship building among budget equity advocates and other key actors across the US to lay the groundwork for more coordinated budget equity efforts. It also seeks to provide skill-building opportunities that allow advocates to be responsive to emerging trends in their cities.

THE FIRST STEP

The steering committee approved an initial investment of \$60,000 to facilitate relationship building. This was used to

- **host a convening**, offering space for public budgeting advocates to build relationships and skills in service of their respective communities;
- **share names, contact information, and areas of expertise** of all attendees so they can pursue relationships further;
- **conduct a post-convening survey** that allows participants to share feedback and suggestions on their level of interest as well as the type of infrastructural support needed for a national network of budget equity advocates;

- **develop a Budget Advocacy Primer**, building on the takeaways from the convening that provides a concise set of best practices, processes, and resources; and
- **develop a thought leadership piece on a high-level framework** for budget advocacy.

PARTNERS

This pilot was facilitated by the incubation hub and steering committee members. Sarah Beth Gehl (Southern Economic Advancement Project) and Darrick Hamilton (The New School) shaped and stewarded this pilot project. Jorge Sanchez Garcia and John Bazley from Dalberg Advisors provided planning, content generation, and logistical support.

“ *Creating this group not only had a tremendous impact on how we can do the work but also showed in so many ways how much Mobility Alliance values the work we're doing. It left me feeling seen, validated, and immensely grateful. Thank you!*

—Anonymous survey respondent, municipal or county budget advocate

LESSONS LEARNED

Through convening and relationship building, this build & learn pilot aims to transform local government budget practices to respond to the priorities of people and communities experiencing poverty and disinvestment. The following lessons emerged:

- Budget advocates welcome opportunities to **build stronger relationships with one another and want to sustain them**, so they can collaborate to develop solutions to shared problems.
- Local advocates face **specific knowledge and skill gaps that undermine their work** and want to engage in collaborative skill-building that can strengthen field infrastructure.

- **Advocates can uplift the work** with under-resourced communities, and providing them with opportunities to hone their skills offers potential for building a more responsive budget equity field.

These insights can inform similar efforts in other states, offering a model for building coalitions that drive economic mobility outcomes at the state level.

“ *Coming into the convening I had familiarity with many grassroots budget advocacy organizations, but this convening was a great opportunity to solidify some of those relationships, identify common themes, and think about concrete positive steps forward with individual campaigns and ways to contribute to some efforts to make shifts toward more equitable budgeting on a structural/systemic level.*

—Anonymous survey respondent, municipal or county budget advocate

LOOKING AHEAD

The Southern Economic Advancement Project and The New School are exploring how they might **host a community of practice** among local public budget equity advocates and other actors. This effort would promote budget equity efforts and provide skills-building opportunities that allow budget equity advocates to respond to emerging trends in their cities. Activities would likely include in-person convenings to build skills and networks and ongoing network matchmaking to connect leaders to resources, peers, and other experts. This effort holds the potential to transform local government budget practices to respond to the priorities of people and communities experiencing poverty and disinvestment.