

Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis

Bringing Together Leaders for Shared Learning and Support

In March 2021, Lilly Endowment made grants totaling \$93.6 million to 28 Indianapolis organizations through its Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis (EOI) initiative. Directed at addressing poverty and financial insecurity affecting nearly 40 percent of Marion County residents, the EOI grants went to organizations implementing new or expanding existing strategies, programs and services aimed at helping individuals and families meet basic needs, build self-sufficiency and create better lives.



CONVENING IN 2023

Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis

Leaders from 28 nonprofit organizations funded through Lilly Endowment's Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis initiative gathered in December 2022 at The ROCK Community Center for Youth and Children on the city's eastside. The day-long convening was designed to encourage shared learning and to foster mutual support among the organizations.



A little over a year and a half later, in December 2022, the Endowment convened EOI grant recipients at Eastern Star Church’s The ROCK Community Center for Youth and Children on Indianapolis eastside. This was the first time that leaders gathered in person to share stories of their work, celebrate early successes and learn from one another about common challenges and emerging opportunities.

In planning the event, Endowment staff surveyed individuals who were leading the EOI-funded programs to determine what topics would be most helpful to address. Survey results led to sessions focused on collaboration, evaluation, and staff recruitment and retention. Gathering at The ROCK was an intentional choice because the 60,000-square-foot building is the centerpiece of Eastern Star’s own EOI-funded efforts to help residents in its Arlington Woods neighborhood by providing safe, accessible, holistic programs and support services to youth and families that can lead to long term economic stability and self-sufficiency.

“The convening allowed me, and I’m sure all the others, to learn about the good work that all the other people are doing.”



■ ■ ■ Social worker Ashlyn Hopkins leads sessions in the Yes, I Can program at New Beginnings Church (above). New Beginnings participated in a convening of organizations funded through the Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis initiative (right).



Being part of the meeting was a rewarding experience for Evelyn Evans. She directs the child care and afterschool enrichment programs based at New Beginnings Church. In 2021, the church, which is located in the westside Indianapolis neighborhood of Haughville, received a \$1,474,677 EOI grant to implement Yes, I Can. The program helps families with child care and educational support for older kids. It also strives to help parents build economic well-being by providing financial literacy classes, legal services, job training, job placement and career mentoring.

At the gathering, Evans learned how other organizations share New Beginning's commitment to helping individuals and families. Throughout the day, Evans was reminded that she and the others leading EOI-funded efforts are not alone in striving to change lives and improve communities across Indianapolis.

"When you're doing the work," she says, "sometimes you can get so consumed. Even though we work with businesses and schools with our program, we weren't meeting with the other grantees. The convening allowed me, and I'm sure all the others, to learn about the good work that all the other people are doing."

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Enhancing programs

In addition to fostering camaraderie and mutual understanding, Evans says the event led New Beginnings to connect with Early Learning Indiana (ELI), a nonprofit organization that operates early learning centers, helps families find quality child care, partners with other providers to expand and improve their programs, and works to enhance greater access to early educational opportunities for Hoosier families. During the convening, ELI's president and CEO Maureen Weber led a session focused on staff recruitment and retention. As Evans learned more about ELI, she found out about the organization's Early Years Initiative, an Endowment-funded grant opportunity that is helping child care programs across Indiana enhance their offerings. New Beginnings applied for funding through the initiative and in 2023 received a \$500,000 grant to expand facilities to better serve children and their parents.

Also in 2023, New Beginnings laid the groundwork for additional collaborations to benefit parents in the Yes, I Can program. In January 2024, New Beginnings began offering information technology training in cooperation with Wayne Township Adult Education; a home ownership readiness program in partnership with the Central Indiana Realtors Association; and workforce training and job placement services in collaboration with EmployIndy and Dress for Success.

■ ■ ■ Raquel Allen (top) is a client in the Yes, I Can program at New Beginnings Church. Evelyn Evans (above) directs Yes, I Can.

Comprehensive support services

In 2021, La Plaza received a \$1,033,700 EOI grant to create the Latino Opportunity Center (LOC). Housed at Fort Benjamin Harrison, the LOC provides a variety of services aimed at helping Latino residents and families throughout Indianapolis improve their lives and build economic self-sufficiency.

For several years before launching the LOC, La Plaza had offered many services independent of each other, such as job readiness training, health services and youth programs. With the LOC, the organization now provides comprehensive, multi-faceted support to individuals and families. “What this initiative has allowed us to do is to provide one-on-one coaching, to really be able to help with income support, to help with financial literacy, and to help with education and (skill) certifications,” says Miriam Acevedo Davis, president and CEO of La Plaza.



LOC director Soren Chamorro Gonzalez is watching clients become a new community. “I see people working together,” she says. “I see them excited about learning new skills, about having access to different resources.”

According to Acevedo Davis, not only did the gathering at The ROCK put grantees in touch with one another and open doors to new collaborations, it also helped them strengthen existing partnerships. That includes La Plaza’s work with Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing Partnership (INHP).

“We’ve worked with the Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing Partnership for many years,” says Acevedo Davis. “But through this initiative we were able to strengthen that (relationship) from a programmatic perspective. It allowed us to go a little deeper to form stronger relationships and play to each other’s strengths.”

Through La Plaza’s work with INHP, clients can receive several types of support from INHP’s own EOI-funded program. The support includes housing stipends that help cover a portion of clients’ rent payments so they can stay focused on increasing their earning potential; special savings accounts to give clients a boost and help them overcome common cost barriers to homeownership, such as a down payment; and a program that offers La Plaza clients the opportunity to reserve some of their monthly rental payments toward a future down payment on a home.

“I see people working together ... I see them excited about learning new skills, about having access to different resources.”

The LOC is connecting clients with other local organizations that provide them with valuable supportive services. Volunteer tutors from literacy organization Indy Reads provide English classes. Indiana Construction Roundtable offers job skills training through its BY Construction program; and LISC Indianapolis helps residents improve quality of life in their neighborhoods. EOI grants are supporting efforts at Indiana Construction Roundtable, in partnership with the Central Indiana Community Foundation, and LISC Indianapolis.

■ ■ ■ Soren Chamorro Gonzalez (top, center) is director of the Latino Opportunity Center (LOC) at La Plaza. (Above, left to right) Martha Rodriguez Lopez, Cindy Larraga and Zulema Rosado are graduates of LOC certification programs.



AT A GLANCE



Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis

Enhancing Opportunity in Indianapolis is a Lilly Endowment initiative designed to help individuals and families facing complex and varied challenges associated with poverty make progress toward lasting economic self-sufficiency.

In 2021, the Endowment awarded grants ranging from \$180,000 to \$8,086,950 totaling \$93.6 million to help 28 organizations implement their projects. The initiative is focused on supporting organizations as they help create more good and promising jobs and help more residents prepare for and attain those jobs. With the initiative, the Endowment expressed a special interest in proposals that would help increase economic opportunity for Black and Latino residents, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, and enhance the prosperity of individuals facing added challenges, including individuals with disabilities, youth aging out of foster care, individuals experiencing homelessness, and immigrants facing language and other barriers.

Although the Endowment acknowledges that the efforts funded through this initiative will not come close to ending poverty in Indianapolis, it does hope that they will help put thousands of Indianapolis residents on the path to self-sufficiency.

■ ■ ■ Maiyelin Bastida (left) and Olga Castillo completed an English language program at La Plaza.

Gonzalez meets monthly with business owners, educators, industry experts and individuals who provide job training and participate in LISC's Bridges to Career Opportunities program. Like the LOC, the Bridges program is helping job seekers ramp up literacy and math skills and strengthen technical skills that are highly valued by employers. The monthly gatherings are important, Gonzalez says.

"We talk about what we're doing, what kinds of challenges we are having. We also have training on things like how to improve the entry of data with the Salesforce software that LISC uses for its database."

At La Plaza's LOC, collaboration with fellow EOI grantees and other partners is part of a community-building process. "In America we talk about the Horatio Alger lift-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps story," says Acevedo Davis, "and certainly that's a great story. In (the Latino) community, it's 'How do we do that together?' It's the nuclear family, it's being part of the larger community. When we bring together a cohort of some of our clients, they end up forming a little community of their own and helping each other."

Both Evans and Acevedo Davis credit the convening of EOI grantees with helping them enhance and expand their programs. "There were people there that are focused on housing, that focus on homelessness, that focus on job readiness," says Evans. "I met with so many folks that were doing different work, that we were able to say, 'Let's reach out to this person or let's reach out to that person.'"

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Gathering with other EOI grantees has enabled the participating organizations to amplify what they're doing, says Acevedo Davis. "It has been a great sharing experience among the different organizations in the community who are involved in the initiative."

Strengthening Community Networks

Connecting Early Learning Providers with Valuable Resources



Deandra Thompson founded A Learning Bee Academy preschool in Indianapolis.

In late 2017, Deandra Thompson embarked on an unpredictable journey—opening an early learning center in her predominantly Black neighborhood on the Near Westside of Indianapolis.

At the time, she was pregnant with her first child and unable to find adequate daycare options. “There were no seats in my area. Literally, none of the centers were taking infants at the time,” recalled Thompson, who also faced sticker shock from child care costs. “I knew I wasn’t the only parent experiencing this challenge.”

With previous experience supporting the opening of Phalen Leadership Academy and Providence Cristo Rey High School—two charter schools in Indianapolis—Thompson set out to start a child care center based at the church she attended. The center, A Learning Bee Academy, quickly grew from five children in November 2017 to more than 50 children within a few months.

Although the center had a promising start, A Learning Bee Academy, like other grassroots early child care operations, faced challenges with staffing, outfitting classrooms, and the lengthy, rigorous process to become licensed. “Resources were scarce,” recalls Thompson, who found it difficult to attract qualified teachers. “I had to convince people to work for free for a very long time.”

“I was hopeful about getting support because someone was actually investing in our communities.”

Thompson managed the first two years of the operation by primarily relying on retired church members, including an educator and chef, who volunteered to help.

Thompson received a significant boost in 2022 after attending a community meeting where she learned about the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative (IAAQLI). Funded with a \$100 million Lilly Endowment grant in 2020 to the National Urban League, the initiative is a collaboration among the National Urban League, the Indianapolis Urban League, and the African American Coalition of Indianapolis. Its focus: providing financial resources and technical assistance to address critical issues facing Indianapolis’ African American community. (See sidebar for overview of IAAQLI.)

The gathering where Thompson learned about grant opportunities that could help her improve A Learning Bee Academy was one of many that have been foundational to IAAQLI since it began. In 2020 and in 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, initiative leaders conducted interviews and held meetings on Zoom and Facebook Live. Those sessions brought together a broad cross section of Indianapolis’ African American residents to talk about their most pressing challenges as well as the most promising opportunities to improve their quality of life. The community conversations helped initiative leaders determine the five priority areas for IAAQLI grantmaking, which are education, business and entrepreneurship, employment, health and wellness, and housing and homeownership.

Subsequent meetings and convenings have helped grant-seeking organizations learn how to apply for funding and have provided technical assistance to those who are new to seeking and receiving philanthropic support. And once grants have been announced, IAAQLI has gathered leaders from the funded organizations for sessions focused on managing grants, reporting about grant-funded activities and evaluating their programs and projects.

“I was hopeful about getting support because someone was actually investing in our communities,” says Thompson. “I was impressed that the investment was specifically focused on helping Black families.”

Enabling access

Thompson applied for an IAAQLI grant through the first round of funding and received \$200,000 in 2022 to support the expansion of A Learning Bee Academy at its current location at Promise Land Christian Community Church. The grant has enabled the preschool also to open a second location

■ ■ ■ Deandra Thompson attended a convening sponsored by the IAAQLI that helped her find resources for A Learning Bee Academy (below, opposite).



on the eastside of Indianapolis and serve an additional 40 children, infant to age five. In addition, funds have enabled Thompson to provide professional development opportunities for teachers.

The grant to A Learning Bee Academy was one of five made primarily to help organizations increase academic rigor and quality in early childhood education programs, expand service options for children and families, and increase access to training for current early childhood teachers.

“The intention of this grant opportunity was to grow and expand highly rigorous and accessible quality early childhood programs in the city,” says Karlin Tichenor, who serves IAAQLI as operations director.

However, when the second round of grant applications came in late 2022, it was clear that some organizations seeking support for their child care and preschool programs were not aware of existing funding opportunities for needs related to facilities improvement, meeting state licensing requirements, curricula development, teacher training and other staff development, Tichenor says. In addition, some of the grant-seeking organizations were not on the Paths to



QUALITY, Indiana’s statewide four-level quality rating and improvement system for child care providers. Joining Paths to QUALITY is voluntary but is tied to financial incentives from the state. As programs reach higher levels of quality, they become eligible for additional funding.

“The grantseekers lacked the resources to even get to a point where they could apply to become Level 1 on the Paths to QUALITY,” Tichenor says. “We were expecting them to be further along in that process. If we continue to fund them but don’t move them through the process, whereby they have access to other resources, then we’re not really helping them long term.”

A new opportunity to convene, build connection

Instead of continuing to make grants for early learning programs, the IAAQLI team decided to pause the grantmaking process to ensure that grant-seeking organizations knew how to connect with valuable resources. After all, according to Tichenor, a key goal of IAAQLI funding is to strengthen organizations so that they can thrive well beyond the funding cycle of the initiative.

During that self-imposed pause, the IAAQLI team convened a meeting of early childhood education providers and representatives of Early Learning Indiana (ELI), a statewide nonprofit intermediary organization that helps early learning providers improve their capacity and quality; the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA), which manages Paths to QUALITY, distributes federal and state child care funds to families and child care providers and

■ ■ ■ The IAAQLI is working to strengthen the “ecosystem” of early learning providers in Indianapolis, says Karlin Tichenor (above).



regulates child care statewide; and SPARK Learning Lab, a charitable organization that works with FSSA to provide coaching and other assistance to child care providers. All three entities support early learning providers with resources to help them offer high-quality care.

The meeting became a learning session of sorts, Tichenor says, because it connected a pool of child care providers and preschools that had received funding through IAAQLI in the first round, additional early learning providers, and representatives of FSSA, ELI and SPARK to foster greater understanding of the challenges and the resources available to address them.

“We ultimately wanted our grantees to know how to access the resources that are already available,” Tichenor says. “Then, on the other side, we wanted these organizations to clearly hear from the Black-led organizations.”

Maureen Weber, president and CEO of ELI, says being part of the IAAQLI gathering helped strengthen her organization’s efforts to support child care providers, especially providers who are new to the work. During the meeting, ELI shared with providers information about resources they could access right away, according to Weber. Those included ELI’s fast-track workforce development program to help teachers earn early childhood education training and credentials.



“Convenings have afforded us the opportunity to bring into the same room some organizations and community partners who may not have ordinarily worked together.”

“Our partnership with IAAQLI introduced new child care providers to our current efforts and is helping us make sure that our programming will be better informed by their needs going forward,” Weber says. “Collaborating with IAAQLI has broadened the ELI network while helping us achieve our aim of providing solutions that respond to the evolving challenges facing early learning providers, especially those serving families that need greater access to child care options.”

Opportunity abounds

Leaders with IAAQLI anticipate approving new grants in all areas of the initiative, including early childhood education, in late 2024.

Willis Bright, co-director of IAAQLI and chairman of the Indianapolis African American Coalition, says organizations still need to build trust with each other. IAAQLI has been able to make progress by building upon its community gatherings, information sessions for grant seekers, and convenings for grant-funded organizations.



“We are actively working to create opportunities by uniting people through initiatives we’ve launched or funded, inviting them to break down barriers,” Bright says. “The initiative is empowering Black-led organizations to better serve their communities and, eventually, build the relationships and infrastructure needed to compete effectively in the larger ecosystem once the initiative sunsets.”

Tony Mason, president and CEO of the Indianapolis Urban League and co-director of IAAQLI, agrees that the convenings are critically important to IAAQLI because of its mission to be transformational in improving the quality of life for Black residents throughout Indianapolis and Marion County.

“Convenings have afforded us the opportunity to bring into the same room some organizations and community partners who may not have ordinarily worked together,” Mason says. “We have an understanding that if we leverage organizations’ individual and collective strengths, we can do a much better job at meeting the goals and outcomes for a project.”

■ ■ ■ Convenings, including one at Martin University (left), help grantseekers in IAAQLI, which is directed by Willis Bright (above left) and Tony Mason.

Though she was pleased to receive a grant, Thompson says involvement in IAAQLI has also inspired her to seek additional engagement with organizations that support early learning providers. For example, she wants her school to achieve the highest level in Paths to QUALITY, which could help A Learning Bee Academy become a model for other providers in the city and state.

Ultimately, Thompson believes that fostering partnerships can lead to a more resilient network of child care providers and thereby improve the quality of early learning experiences for children in the African American community.

“A lot of third graders are getting remediation and, in some cases, get retained because they’re not meeting the standards,” she says.

“These types of collaboration at the early childhood learning level can be key to addressing poor standardized test outcomes among Black elementary students in Indianapolis’ public schools.”

In the long run, the students who are part of high-quality early childhood education programs will gain lifelong benefits, Thompson says.

“Being involved in a preschool experience like ours encourages them to be critical thinkers and learn how to manage their emotions at an early age,” she says. “Our very first students who were infants and toddlers when we opened are now first, second and third graders and are thriving in school socially, emotionally and academically. They will be leveraging these skills for many, many years. It’s a huge advantage.”

AT A GLANCE



National Urban League and the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative

In August 2020, the National Urban League announced the creation of the Indianapolis African American Quality of Life Initiative (IAAQLI), a place-based effort to address longstanding disparities in education, employment, housing, health outcomes and economic well-being that negatively affect the quality of life of African Americans in Indianapolis.

Funded by a \$100 million Lilly Endowment grant to the National Urban League in 2020, the initiative is a collaboration among the National Urban League, the Indianapolis Urban League and the African American Coalition of Indianapolis. To determine focus areas for IAAQLI, initiative leaders brought together people from all walks of life to talk about the most pressing challenges facing Black residents in Indianapolis. Those discussions led to five focus areas, which were announced in 2021: education, business and entrepreneurship, employment, health and wellness, and housing and homeownership.

Through two rounds of grantmaking in 2022 and 2023 the National Urban League has made 113 IAAQLI grants to Indianapolis organizations. The grants, which range from \$83,100 to \$1 million, total nearly \$55 million. Additional grants are expected to be made in 2024 and 2025.

“The IAAQLI and Lilly Endowment’s support for the Urban League stands as one of the most significant and successful responses to economic and social inequity in our history,” National Urban League President and CEO Marc H. Morial said. “It is a model for advancing the Urban League’s mission of

empowering communities and changing lives. Few initiatives have gone further in confronting Indianapolis’ racial gaps and addressing the quality of life in marginalized communities. We’re proud to be a part of this initiative.”

Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York, the National Urban League is a civil rights organization whose mission is to help African Americans and others in underserved communities achieve social parity, economic self-reliance and civil rights. It promotes economic empowerment through education, improving access to housing, community development, workforce development, entrepreneurship, health and quality of life.

Established in 1965 as an affiliate of the National Urban League, the Indianapolis Urban League is a non-partisan, community-based social services and civil rights organization with a mission to help African Americans and other disadvantaged people achieve social and economic equality.

The Endowment’s grant for IAAQLI builds on its past support for Urban League programs through grants to the National Urban League and the Indianapolis Urban League whose various education, workforce development and youth programs the Endowment began supporting in 1967. Founded in 2000, the African American Coalition of Indianapolis is a non-partisan collaboration of civic, social, professional, service and community organizations working to strengthen the engagement of African Americans in civic life and in the local, state and national political process.