How Community-Based Organizations Can Use New York State Employment and Wage Data

Learning from the New York City Demonstration (2016-2018)

Edith Yang
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TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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OVERVIEW

Workforce development organizations often find it challenging to assess how former program participants are faring in the labor market, since they need to rely on participants' willingness to report and verify their job placements after they either leave or complete their programs. The 2013 Unemployment Insurance Data Sharing Bill (S5773A) amended the New York State Labor Law to make it easier for government agencies to obtain state unemployment insurance (UI) wage data for program monitoring, improvement, and evaluation purposes. In 2016, the Change Capital Fund (CCF) and the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) identified the law as a chance to invest in a demonstration with four community development organizations that were already CCF grantees, aiming to expand their ability to collect and use data to improve their programs in coordination with the city government.

This report describes that two-year demonstration and is meant to serve as a guide for other New York municipalities and community organizations that may consider requesting access to state UI wage data. It illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities involved in accessing UI data on program participants and offers some practical lessons for organizations in New York State.

KEY LESSONS

The contract development process with the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) took over a year, during which MDRC served as the data intermediary and provided technical assistance to the community organizations. Once the agreement was executed, MDRC received, processed, and analyzed the data, sharing the findings with each organization. Following are some of the important lessons that emerged from the demonstration:

- **Contract structure is important in securing data access.** Under the 2013 law, NYSDOL can share either identifiable (confidential) data or data in deidentified or aggregate form. In order to qualify for access to identifiable data, community organizations must be in a direct contractual relationship with a federal, state, or city agency; for this reason, NYSDOL did not grant access to identifiable data to the community organizations in the demonstration. Deidentified or aggregate data are easier to obtain, so organizations may qualify for data access without an agency partner.

- **Identifiable data are preferred over deidentified or aggregate data, but aggregate data are still informative and valuable.** All the CCF grantees would have preferred to receive identifiable data so that they could use them to improve services for specific individuals and have the flexibility for additional analyses as other questions arose. While aggregate results could not address analysis questions as completely as identifiable data could, the grantees still found the data useful for understanding employment trends and earnings averages across key subgroups.

- **Preparation is crucial to benefiting from the data access.** Community organizations should make sure that the participant information in their databases is complete and accurate, that staff members have the time and ability to make good use of the data, and that analysis questions are thoughtfully prioritized before investing in a data acquisition effort with NYSDOL, to maximize the value of UI wage data access.

- **Wage data can guide program improvements.** Carefully planned analyses with UI wage data to track employment and earnings for certain groups of participants can inform program improvements. For example, organizations could examine earnings data to assess whether participants without high school diplomas need different kinds of employment services than do more educated participants.

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Introduction

A common challenge for workforce development organizations is tracking employment and earnings outcomes for program participants who have either left or completed their job-related training. If a participant is no longer actively engaged in the program, the organization often has no practical way of knowing whether the person was able to find and maintain a job. To allow organizations to obtain this information and use it to improve their programs, a recent New York State law expands access to identifiable, individual-level employment data for qualifying organizations.

The New York State Labor Law was amended under the 2013 Unemployment Insurance Data Sharing Bill (S5773A) to make it easier for federal, state, and local government agencies, or their agents or contractors, to obtain state unemployment insurance (UI) wage and employment data for program monitoring, improvement, and evaluation purposes.[1] In the past, if an organization wanted to know the UI earnings of a particular individual it served, it could obtain that type of information (called identifiable, or confidential, UI data) only by collecting individual signed and notarized authorizations that met the informed consent requirements of the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL). The 2013 amendment waives the written authorization requirement for "qualified entities for certain authorized purposes." See Box 1 for more details about the law.

In 2016, the Change Capital Fund (CCF),[2] a New York City-based collaborative of foundations, corporations, and intermediaries dedicated to economic mobility, and the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity) identified the law as a chance to build on their investment in four community development corporations and expand those organizations' ability to use data to improve their programs in coordination with the city government.[3] CCF and NYC Opportunity hoped the project, if successful, would provide an opening for similar community organizations to acquire and use state employment and wage data. Together, NYC Opportunity and CCF invested in a two-year effort (2016-2018) to facilitate the four community development corporations' access to state employment and wage data.

Drawing from that effort, this report is intended as a guide for New York municipalities and community organizations that may be considering seeking access to state UI wage data. It illustrates some challenges and opportunities and offers practical lessons. The lessons are specific to New York State, as other states have their own laws and processes for gaining access to state employment and wage data. Yet discussions about data security, data requests and analyses, and the usefulness of UI wage data may be relevant to all community organizations and their potential partners in this work.

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1   For more information, see "Data Sharing Under Labor Law §537" and "Data Sharing FAQs" on the NYSDOL website.

2   To learn more about the New York City Change Capital Fund, read MDRC's final report on its four-year economic mobility initiative (De La Rosa Aceves 2018).

3   Building data capacity included strengthening the organizations' management information systems and hiring or retaining staff members with data and evaluation capabilities. For more information, see De La Rosa Aceves, Greenberg, and Schell (2016).

The New York State Law That Made This Effort Possible

In 2013, the New York State Legislature passed the Unemployment Insurance Data Sharing Bill (S5773A). The bill amended NYS Labor Law §537 to expand access to unemployment insurance (UI) wage data for certain entities for authorized purposes. According to the New York State Department of Labor:

Government agencies, including the State University of New York (SUNY) and the City University of New York (CUNY), or agents or contractors of these agencies, can now receive and use UI data for:

1. evaluating program effectiveness, including longitudinal outcome analysis;

2. financial or other analysis required by federal, state or local law or regulation;

3. preparation of reports required by federal, state or local law or regulation;

4. improving the quality or delivery of program services or to create operational efficiencies;

5. establishment of common case management systems between federal, state or local agencies delivering or supporting workforce services.

SOURCE: New York State Department of Labor, Division of Research and Statistics, "Data Sharing Under Labor Law §537," slide 3.

This report describes the effort of CCF, NYC Opportunity, and MDRC to facilitate community organizations' access to participant wage data and addresses the following questions:

- What is the New York State Labor Law amendment and what opportunities does it provide for expanded data access?

- Under what conditions can organizations secure access to UI wage data?

- What are some issues and challenges involved in accessing identifiable UI wage data?

- What are some alternative ways of getting useful wage data if identifiable data cannot be obtained?

Background on the Change Capital Fund and Its Investment in the Wage Data Study

Since 2014, CCF, a collaborative of 15 funders, including NYC Opportunity, has been investing in community development corporations to increase economic mobility in persistently low-income neigh-

borhoods.[4] The four organizations participating in the first four-year cycle of CCF's economic mobility initiative were Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC), Fifth Avenue Committee, New Settlement Apartments, and St. Nicks Alliance. These organizations offer a combination of services for local residents, including housing, education, and community-led planning. All four organizations offer workforce development services, and all track job placement and retention data.

Like other workforce programs, these organizations found it challenging to stay in contact with former participants in order to track their employment status, earnings, and professional advancements over time. Access to more sources of administrative records, such as state employment and wage data, could help programs track outcomes more completely.

The 2013 changes in the New York State Labor Law presented a chance for NYC Opportunity and CCF to explore whether the grantees could access and analyze state UI data. They selected MDRC through a competitive process to help the four community development corporations gain access to these data. MDRC was already conducting a formative evaluation of CCF's initiative (2014-2018), providing ongoing advice that included extensive discussions with the organizations about their strategies to build data capacity and improve service delivery.[5]

MDRC served as both the data intermediary and the technical assistance provider for this demonstration because of its deep expertise in working with community organizations and advising on issues of consent and data security, and its extensive experience with NYSDOL employment and wage data requests.[6] As the data intermediary between the community development corporations and NYSDOL, MDRC entered into a three-party agreement with NYC Opportunity and NYSDOL to ensure the secure transfer of data between NYSDOL and the grantees. MDRC also provided technical assistance to the community organizations as they developed analysis questions, prepared data requests, and interpreted the data analyses.

What the New York State Labor Law Amendment Means for Expanded Access to UI Data

It is difficult to assess how former program participants are faring in the labor market, because organizations have to rely on participants' willingness to report and verify their job placements and earnings after they leave. If organizations had access to UI wage data, they could request com-

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4 NYC Opportunity initially worked as an adviser to the donor collaborative and later joined the fund as a donor. The donor collaborative and NYC Opportunity jointly funded the effort to access New York State UI wage data.

5 MDRC published a five-part series of briefs as well as a final report sharing lessons from CCF's economic mobility initiative.

6 MDRC has previously requested employment and wage data for its own research purposes. This effort was the first time that MDRC tried to facilitate community groups' direct access to identifiable, individual-level wage and employment data. Other research organizations with similar qualifications could play the data intermediary role and provide technical assistance to community groups.

prehensive, longitudinal data that would allow them to look at individuals' earnings not only after but before they participated in the program. Understanding the earnings trajectories of program participants may help community-based organizations develop clearer, data-driven insights about the characteristics associated with favorable and less favorable outcomes. This could help the organizations strengthen their programs for current and future participants.

As summarized in Box 1, the 2013 labor law amendment provides an opportunity for certain organizations to gain access to identifiable wage data from NYSDOL without an explicit data release authorization that has been signed by an individual and notarized. Data access is limited to "federal, state and local agencies, and their agents and contractors" for specific purposes, and only if federal and state confidentiality requirements are met. Organizations must apply for access to these data, and if the application is approved, they must pay to receive the data requested.

For organizations operating workforce development programs, collecting authorizations from new or existing participants for release of UI wage data is time consuming. All the CCF grantees involved with this demonstration already had general release-of-information forms for incoming participants, but those releases were not compliant with the NYSDOL's written authorization requirements.[7] The amendment provided an opportunity to see whether the grantees, working in partnership with CCF, NYC Opportunity, and MDRC, could gain access to identifiable wage data in a potentially efficient and cost-saving way, and whether access to these data could facilitate the organizations' efforts to use data to inform and improve their programs.

What UI Wage Data Covers and Options for Data Access

According to NYSDOL:[8]

> Each quarter, employers covered by New York State's Unemployment Insurance Law are required to submit quarterly earnings information for each of their employees to the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance. This information is shared with NYSDOL to administer the state's unemployment insurance program.[9]

Although most nonfarm employment among New York State residents (about 97 percent) is covered by UI data, independent contracting jobs, informal jobs, and out-of-state jobs would not show up in the UI records.[10] This means that while UI data can provide accurate and reliable employment and

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7   These requirements include specifically identifying which information will be disclosed, listing NYSDOL as the data source, and enumerating the purposes of collecting the data. For more information, see New York State Labor Law §537.

8   This guide is not a NYSDOL publication. NYSDOL encourages any entity interested in obtaining data from NYSDOL to thoroughly review NYSDOL's data sharing website (www.labor.ny.gov/data-sharing/).

9   New York State Department of Labor (n.d.), p. 3.

10 New York State Department of Labor (n.d.). For example, individuals employed in the gig economy, such as Uber and Lyft drivers, are considered independent contractors and not covered by the UI law. This has the potential to change based on a recent court ruling in New York that granted three Uber drivers the right to claim unemployment insurance. See Burns (2018). Other categories of employees *not* covered under the law include "some agricultural workers, railroad workers, private household workers, student workers, the self-employed, and unpaid family workers" (New York State Department of Labor, n.d., p. 3).

earnings information for the vast majority of individuals, they can result in some undercounting of those measures; the extent of undercounting can vary by occupation, employer type, and employer size, among other factors.[11] It is important to consider how a lack of UI coverage might affect each group's employment rate to avoid coming to the wrong conclusions when comparing groups.

Wage information is available per quarter, although it does not include information on whether jobs are full time, part time, or seasonal. Information about the industry in which an individual is employed and an employer's specific identification code may also be available.[12] The data are matched with an individual's Social Security number and are available from the year 2000 to the present.[13] There is typically a three- to six-month time lag before the most recent and complete data are available.

Under the 2013 law, NYSDOL can provide identifiable, or confidential, data without a program participant's consent if legal and data security requirements are met. Data are considered identifiable if any of the wage records can be tied to a specific individual, either because those records are linked with personally identifiable information (such as Social Security numbers, names, or birth dates), or because a combination of data elements is enough to identify an individual. In most cases, unless the government agency has the internal data capacity to securely transfer and analyze identifiable program and UI data, a data intermediary must be engaged.

As an alternative, organizations may decide to collect signed and notarized data release authorizations from participants. They can access identifiable UI data for anyone from whom they have obtained a written authorization. Organizations that decide to do this should work directly with NYSDOL to make sure their documentation of the authorization meets all the agency's requirements. This process may be time consuming for a variety of reasons. An organization may not have a notary public available and on site to witness participant signatures. And if participants have left the program, the organization faces the same challenge of tracking them down regardless of whether it is trying to obtain an authorization or directly confirm job placement.

The data can also be shared in deidentified and aggregate forms, which are not confidential and are therefore less complicated to obtain. Deidentified data are individual-level UI wage data with no personally identifiable information that are linked to a limited number of demographic or participation variables. In other words, the data are available on a person-by-person basis, but it is not possible to tell who each person is. Aggregate data are data summaries of groups of participants, groups that are large enough that the information cannot be used to identify anyone. Box 2 offers more details about the advantages and disadvantages of requesting identifiable data versus deidentified or aggregate data.

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11 For example, job training programs that prepare workers for primarily UI-covered jobs (such as commercial driver licensing programs) may appear to have graduates with higher employment rates than programs geared toward other sectors in which self-employment is more prevalent (such as child care-related occupations), even though in reality the participants' employment rates may be comparable.

12 An employer identification code could allow community organizations to learn whether relationships with certain employers are particularly fruitful in terms of providing employment. Industry information may help community organizations identify whether their sector-based employment training connects participants with employment in a relevant industry. UI records do not include occupation data.

13 New York State Department of Labor (n.d.).

BOX 2

Factors to Consider When Determining What Level of Data Would Benefit Your Practice

Identifiable data

- Quarterly wage data can be obtained and linked to an individual's Social Security number.

- The data request is processed more quickly at NYSDOL than the request for deidentified and aggregate data, since no data masking is required.

- After data are received, analysis options can be added.

- The administrative process for gaining access to the data can be lengthy.

Deidentified or aggregate data

- The administrative process is much shorter than that for identifiable, or confidential, data requests.

- The data request takes longer for NYSDOL to process than the request for identifiable data and is more expensive.

- No additional analysis, beyond what was prespecified to inform the data request, can be performed without submitting a new data request.

- There is a risk of not receiving data for groups that are unlikely to be employed in UI-covered jobs, because if only a few individuals have employment records the data could be identifiable.

NOTES: A deidentified data file is an individual-level data file that is linked to selected variables of interest but cannot be linked to any specific individual. An aggregate data file is a data file that includes summary data for prespecified groups of individuals.

Community organizations thinking about requesting identifiable, individual-level data may need to work with a data intermediary that has the infrastructure and capacity to meet NYSDOL's data security requirements. Staff members who will have access to individual-level data must complete NYSDOL's Unemployment Insurance Confidentiality Training.

Community organizations can use administrative UI wage records to measure employment outcomes, inform program improvement, and attract additional funding. Since state UI data include data from before and after program enrollment and completion, they can provide additional information about participants' employment trajectories that can facilitate program monitoring and improvement efforts. Identifiable data can be used for diagnostic purposes at the participant or client level (for example, whether "Sandy Jones" might benefit from a specific job training program) as well as for many different analyses, while deidentified or aggregate data are limited to providing insights on how participants are doing as a group — for example, what proportion of graduates of an IT training program are working and how much they are earning, or how many people like "Sandy Jones" are working.

The Demonstration

Besides meeting the minimum requirements to gain access to identifiable, individual-level data, any proposal must be approved by the NYSDOL commissioner. To accomplish this, the demonstration involved a parallel process of discussions with NYSDOL and technical assistance sessions with the community organizations over an 18-month period.

Working with the New York State Department of Labor

MDRC, NYC Opportunity, and CCF, in consultation with the community development corporations, spent over a year developing an agreement with NYSDOL to facilitate the groups' access to state UI wage data.[14] The original proposal called for MDRC to provide technical assistance to program staff members at the four community development corporations as they developed analysis questions, conducted analyses, and interpreted their findings. NYSDOL reviewed and rejected that first proposal as well as two more (see Box 3).[15] Ultimately, the fourth proposal was accepted and an agreement executed.[16] MDRC submitted the program participants' Social Security numbers (provided by the grantees) with a request for UI wage data in mid-February 2018 and received the data later that month.

Ultimately, NYSDOL did not grant the community organizations access to confidential UI data because they determined that the organizations did not have a direct contractual relationship with the municipal government and so did not qualify for access. Consequently, MDRC restructured its work with the organizations and assumed data analysis responsibilities. NYSDOL then required NYC Opportunity to submit documentation detailing MDRC's new data analysis responsibilities before executing an agreement for the UI wage data request.[17]

Lessons Learned from Discussions with NYSDOL
The contract development process offers insights for other municipalities and community organizations that might be considering applying for access to UI wage data. Through this iterative process with NYSDOL, a few important lessons emerged:

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14 Discussions began in January 2017 and were completed in February 2018.

15 All proposals had MDRC acting as the data intermediary supporting the secure transfer of Social Security numbers from the community groups to NYSDOL, rather than the community organizations entering into a direct agreement with the state.

16 Before any proposal can be approved by NYSDOL and an agreement executed, a nondisclosure acknowledgment must be signed by each person who will work with the data and submitted to NYSDOL.

17 NYC Opportunity was quick to revise a preexisting task order, detailing the roles of the community organizations and MDRC, so that NYSDOL could execute a data agreement. The three-party agreement between NYSDOL, NYC Opportunity, and MDRC specified that no one other than the MDRC staff members listed therein would have access to the identifiable data.

Submitted Proposals

REJECTED

Proposal 1: MDRC would transfer program data from the community organizations to NYSDOL. The community organizations would then upload the requested wage data to their respective management information systems (MISs) and conduct analysis through those systems. The MISs already met NYSDOL's encryption standards and could isolate which staff members were able to see the data. Only staff members who received NYSDOL training would have access to the identifiable, individual-level data. MDRC would provide guidance throughout the entire data transfer and analysis process, including the interpretation of the analysis.

Proposal 2: MDRC would transfer program data from the community organizations to NYSDOL. The community organizations would use MDRC's virtual desktop interface to conduct all wage data analysis — the data would never be uploaded to any community organization's MIS, and only staff members who received NYSDOL training would have access to the identifiable, individual-level data. Organization staff members could share the aggregate data analysis with other staff members. MDRC would provide technical assistance with data aggregation and the interpretation of the data analysis.

Proposal 3: MDRC would submit the data request to NYSDOL on behalf of the community organizations. Staff members from the community organizations would come to MDRC's offices to conduct analysis of the wage data and their own program data and could carry only aggregated data off site. MDRC would provide on-site technical assistance, including assistance with the interpretation of the data analysis.

ACCEPTED

Proposal 4: The community organizations would send MDRC the program data relevant to their analysis questions. MDRC would request identifiable, individual-level employment and wage data from NYSDOL and conduct analysis on behalf of the organizations. MDRC staff members working with the data would complete the NYSDOL training. MDRC could share aggregate-level analysis with the community organizations and provide technical assistance with the interpretation of the data analysis.

• **Engaging in regular communication about the details of a data sharing proposal is crucial to reaching a workable agreement.**

The legal teams at both NYSDOL and MDRC worked hard to understand the demonstration's goals and data needs, recognizing the importance of balancing data access with protection of individuals' identities. Because the law was new, and granting data access to direct service organization staff members under these particular rules had not been attempted in New York, the effort involved an iterative process of developing proposals that took much longer than anticipated.

- **The contract structure is important.**

Since the community organizations, as nongovernmental agencies, would not by themselves qualify to gain access to confidential UI data from NYSDOL, they needed to be in a direct contractual relationship with an agency (in this case, a New York City agency) to qualify to receive the data as "agents or contractors of a government agency." It was not enough for them to be grantees of CCF, which had a contractual relationship with NYC Opportunity. NYSDOL and MDRC discussed the possibility of allowing one staff member from each grantee to access the data, with NYC Opportunity and MDRC taking on full responsibility for the security and confidentiality of the specified individuals in each organization. Ultimately, NYSDOL decided that this arrangement was not compliant with the new law.

- **Data security concerns are paramount.**

Even with the correct contract structure, NYSDOL has strict security requirements for the storage and transfer of confidential UI data, and many organizations do not have the infrastructure to meet these standards. Because some of the CCF grantees did not have this capacity, MDRC provided the secure data infrastructure and handled the data transfers on behalf of the organizations.

Working with Community-Based Organizations

While discussions about the data sharing contract were occurring with NYSDOL, MDRC was also helping the CCF grantees prepare for the expanded wage data access. The demonstration launched in December 2016 when representatives from MDRC, CCF, and NYC Opportunity met separately with each of the four community development corporations to discuss their workforce programs and interest in learning from the wage data. These conversations identified which workforce programs collected the most complete information about current and past participants, including Social Security numbers, demographics, and information on program enrollment, participation, and completion.[18] After these assessments, MDRC helped the organizations develop analysis questions that could be answered by linking their program data with the UI data. This process helped MDRC understand the potential limitations of analyzing UI data.

The four community development corporations were recipients of a four-year (2014-2018) investment to build their data capacity, strengthen management information system (MIS) capabilities, and hire or retain staff members with data and evaluation capabilities. Their staff members were excited by the possibility of gaining access to identifiable UI data that could provide insights about the employment and wages of participants who completed their programs, or that could inform customized outreach plans for individual participants. Additionally, they hoped to use the data to report their program outcomes to current and potential funders. In particular, they were interested in data on postprogram wage outcomes to see whether participants who completed their programs had different employment experiences from those who did not. They wanted to maintain flexibility in their analysis plans, in case other questions occurred to them after they started working with the

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18 MDRC also inquired about how long each program had been operating, whether the program served participants in cohorts or had ongoing enrollment, and the total number of participants served in a given year.

data. They were eventually disappointed that they would not be granted direct access to the identifiable UI data but were still interested in seeing the aggregate results.

Each program designated a point of contact who served as the liaison between MDRC and the organization's program staff, most directly shaped analysis questions, and prepared program data for submission to NYSDOL. MDRC worked with the community development corporations over 12 months to help them refine their analysis questions, review their management information systems, confirm participant consent processes,[19] and prepare data request files to submit to NYSDOL.[20] Box 4 presents some examples of analysis questions proposed by the organizations.

BOX 4

Sample Analysis Questions

Among participants in each program, how do employment and earnings trajectories differ between the following groups?

- Participants who receive services from multiple partners and participants in only one program

- Participants who completed the program and those who did not complete

- Participants who were placed in jobs and those who were not placed

- Participants who were enrolled in a program and those who were not enrolled

- Participants grouped by demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, parent demographics, degree completion)

- Different cohorts of participants (groups of participants who enrolled in the same program at the same time)

Among participants in each skills training program:

- Do they find employment in the expected industries?

- Do they retain employment in the expected industries?

MDRC completed selected analyses of the UI data that had been requested by the community organizations and shared them with each organization's point person during a one-day technical assistance convening in April 2018 at MDRC's offices. The purpose of the convening was to help the data staff at the organizations understand the employment and earnings measures, interpret

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19 Obtaining consent is not a requirement of the law, but MDRC considers this good practice.

20 A data request file contains the Social Security numbers for participants for whom the site would like wage and employment data. Other demographic and program participation indicators were provided to MDRC and linked to each individual. Before data can be transferred, data transfer agreements must be put into place between the data intermediary and the community group.

the analyses, and explore additional queries that, given more time, might be possible to investigate with UI data. Staff members from each organization then developed one or two follow-up analysis questions, and MDRC conducted and shared additional analyses with each organization in June 2018 in a guidance document to help the organizations understand the outcomes. In early 2019, MDRC followed up with each organization to discuss how the demonstration had gone and capture staff perspectives on both the usefulness and the limitations of the UI data.

CCF Grantees' Perspectives on the Potential Value of Access to Deidentified Wage Data
MDRC's conversations with the grantees uncovered some lessons learned from the demonstration:

- **The completeness and quality of participant data in the organizations' management information systems determine how useful UI data can be, regardless of whether the data are identifiable.**

Three of the grantees indicated that they are now more conscious and thorough about collecting key identifying and demographic information from new participants during intake. Preparing data requests for MDRC and seeing the results of the data analysis helped staff members see the importance of collecting accurate Social Security numbers, recording enrollment and participation dates accurately, and tracking important indicators (such as educational attainment or completion status) comprehensively, in order to understand employment trends across different groups of participants. (The one grantee that reported no change in data collection or management practices during or after the wage data study already tracked and recorded data for its participants; its staff credited its comprehensive database in part to its participation in a different recent MDRC evaluation.)

- **Efforts to use UI data are more efficient if the data management is more centralized.**

One grantee wanted to use UI data to assess how participants who were engaged with multiple entities in a partnership were faring in the labor market compared with participants who were engaged with only one entity. Because the partners had different systems and collected different types of information on their participants, and because this was a relatively new partnership initiative, it was difficult to compile a sample with complete information on participants who had been engaged with the grantee long enough to have two full years of postenrollment UI data.

Two of the grantees were interested in collecting data from participants whose data were tracked in more than one database across the same organization. This is typical of organizations that have more than one funding source to support their workforce programming, as funders often require their grantees to use proprietary databases. It took some time to extract appropriate data from different databases and make sure the common elements were consistently recorded. One organization had one central database that tracked all participants in their workforce programs, so it was easy for them to extract the data they needed for the demonstration.

- **Identifiable data are preferred over deidentified or aggregate data, but aggregate data are still informative and valuable.**

All the grantees would have preferred to receive identifiable earnings data that they could merge with their existing demographic and participation data so that they could use the combination to

improve services for specific individuals and have the flexibility for additional analyses as other questions arose. Although all grantees gained some insight from the aggregate data, their impressions of the data's usefulness varied quite a bit. One organization found them minimally useful, because staff members primarily wanted to find out whether specific former participants they were no longer able to track were employed. Two organizations found these data moderately useful, indicating that they gained valuable information from the analysis but expressing frustration that the sample size limitations of aggregate data did not allow them to fully answer their analysis questions. The fourth organization acknowledged the advantages of identifiable data but saw many uses for the aggregate results. The staff discussed ideas such as talking to individual participants about average postprogram outcomes, using subgroup analyses for program improvement, and communicating with funders about their participants' employment trends.

- **Organizations would find it more valuable to receive regular updates to the data than a one-time data transfer.**

Since the iterative process with NYSDOL on formalizing a data sharing agreement took more than a year, MDRC had time to make only one data request to NYSDOL for each grantee. All the grantees would have liked an opportunity to request more data from NYSDOL so that they could refine their requests, request data for more people (for whom they now had more complete information), and see changes over time. Two of the grantees expressed an interest in prespecifying aggregate measures that they could request yearly, recognizing limitations in their staff capacity and the need for additional technical assistance to help them analyze or interpret data that would be either identifiable or sent to them more frequently.

- **Short-term technical assistance from a data intermediary can build staff capabilities for using and interpreting data.**

MDRC provided direct, ongoing technical assistance with developing analysis questions, assessing systems used to track participant data, preparing data request files, and interpreting results with the points of contact at each organization from December 2016 through June 2018. Staff members indicated that the assistance with developing questions led to improved data collection and tracking, once they realized the importance of having good intake and participation data. Technical assistance on some aspects of data interpretation may be more long term. While all staff members grasped how to use wage data to follow a group's earnings trajectories from one year to the next, additional assistance was needed to explain that comparing two different groups of participants may not be a good indicator of whether a program was effective. For example, seeing higher employment rates among program completers than among program dropouts may reflect different motivation levels among the participants rather than program effectiveness.

- **Fostering a more data-driven perspective across the organization's program and management staff can make the data more useful.**

Organizations that engaged both the data point of contact and other nontechnical staff members in this project had more robust and realistic plans for UI wage data than organizations that relied primarily on the data point of contact to drive the analysis plans. As an illustration, multiple staff

members at each community organization saw the guidance document that MDRC provided to the grantees in June 2018 and were involved in the final conversations with MDRC. There was a mix of engagement during each conversation; some discussions reflected the perspective of the primary point of contact for the wage data study (that is, the point of contact did most of the sharing), while others reflected a broader mix of perspectives (staff members spent equal time sharing their experiences). The discussions that involved a mix of perspectives demonstrated a broader understanding of the data results and more thoughtful ideas on how they could use these data to talk to participants, improve program pathways, and communicate with potential funders.

Appendix A describes some specific insights that Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) gained through the demonstration. CHLDC, which hired a full-time evaluation director with CCF funds, requested UI data for over 3,000 participants across five of its programs for whom it had the most complete relevant data. Staff members were especially thoughtful about the limitations of aggregate data, and this helped them to articulate and prespecify questions that could be answered within those limitations. When MDRC shared the aggregate findings, CHLDC made sure staff members with different roles across the organization understood the findings and could talk about them accurately.

Recommendations to City Agencies and Community-Based Organizations

The investment in the wage data demonstration was a valuable experience for the CCF grantees, as well as for NYC Opportunity, CCF, and MDRC. Although the effort did not result in the community organizations getting access to identifiable UI data, it did allow them to obtain aggregate UI data on their current and former participants that would not have been possible before 2013, and it offered useful lessons on the processes of working with NYSDOL and the organizations.

Considerations for Organizations Interested in Accessing UI Wage Data

As described earlier, NYSDOL can provide UI data to organizations in different ways. Identifiable UI data are available but call for significant investments in staff and infrastructure to make sure that security and confidentiality requirements are met. Once these standards are in place, identifiable data offer the most flexibility in terms of analysis and can inform service improvement for specific individuals, and follow-up data files are relatively cheap to request. Deidentified or aggregate data are not confidential and therefore do not need to be secured, so gaining access to these files is easier. However, the staff labor required to prepare the requests for aggregate data and for NYSDOL to process these files for delivery makes these requests more time intensive, and therefore more expensive.

START PLANNING EARLY. Figure 1 illustrates a suggested planning process and checklist for community organizations that are interested in accessing UI wage data from NYSDOL. Data sharing agreements can take a long time to develop and formalize, so organizations should start planning for data acquisition at least a year before they hope to gain access to the data. The first step is to

FIGURE 1

Process Checklist for Agencies Considering Seeking Access to New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) Wage Data

**START
MONTH 10**

10 ·············➤ 8 ·············➤ 6 ·············➤ 2 ·············➤ 0

TASK 1	TASK 2	TASK 3	TASK 4	
Decide if and what data would be helpful	Prepare for discussions with NYSDOL	Obtain an executed agreement from NYSDOL	Process and use the data	**ACCESS NYS WAGE AND EMPLOY-MENT DATA**
ESTIMATED TIME: 2 MONTHS ☐	ESTIMATED TIME: 2 MONTHS ☐	ESTIMATED TIME: 4 MONTHS ☐	ESTIMATED TIME: 2 MONTHS ☐	
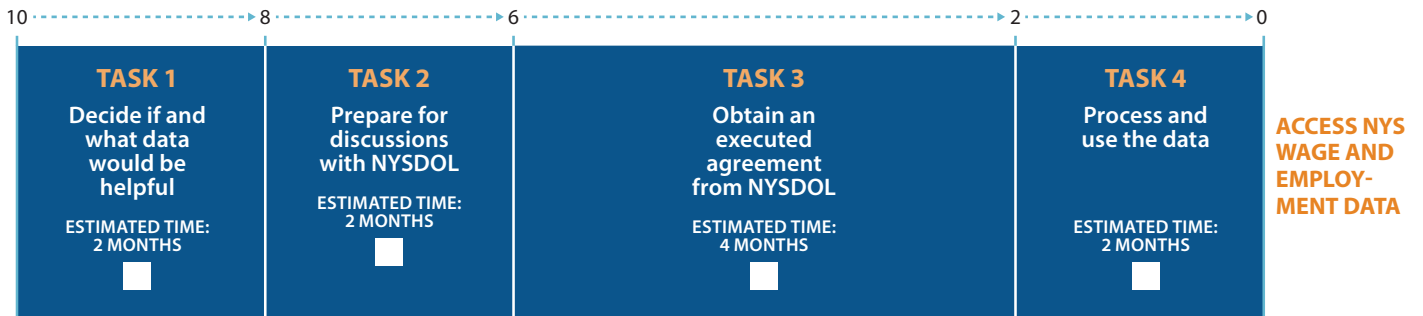
*Note: Begin this process as early as possible, at least 12 months before you need access to the data.
Timing can fluctuate based on the data requested.*

TASK 1

☐ Hold a meeting with the community organization to determine whether access to UI data would be helpful to the organization. Identify specific ways the data would be helpful and ask NYSDOL whether community groups will be able to access and use data for this purpose.

☐ Identify which programs might benefit most from accessing UI wage data, and determine whether these programs collect Social Security numbers from participants. Social Security numbers are necessary for any request for wage data records from NYSDOL.

☐ Decide whether the community organization should access identifiable, individual-level data or deidentified or aggregate data, and ask NYSDOL about special considerations for accessing these types of data.

☐ Determine whether the community organization has the staff capacity to send data securely to NYSDOL, specify data requests, and conduct data analysis. If it does not have the capacity, identify a data intermediary and technical assistance provider to help the organization.

TASK 2

☐ If using a data intermediary to access data on behalf of the organization:

• Establish a task order between a federal, state, or local government agency and the data intermediary.

• Establish a contractual relationship between the agency and the community organization specific to the UI wage data request.

• Establish points of contact at the agency, community organization, and data intermediary to streamline communication throughout the negotiation process with NYSDOL.

(continued)

FIGURE 1 (continued)

TASK 3

☐ Complete the NYSDOL application to request UI data. To do this, you will need the following information:

- Names of the government agency and community organization that are working together

- Type of data to be requested (identifiable vs. deidentified or aggregate)

- Description of how NYSDOL data security requirements will be met

☐ Establish a data sharing agreement between the data intermediary and the community organization if a data intermediary is involved.

☐ The organization receiving the data, as well as individual staff members working with the data, will need to complete nondisclosure acknowledgments and submit them to NYSDOL before a data agreement can be executed. All staff members with access to UI data will also need to complete NYSDOL data security training before the agreement can be finalized.

> **TIP** *If a data intermediary is involved, the intermediary should lead the discussions with NYSDOL.*

☐ After the application is submitted to NYSDOL, anticipate some back and forth to clarify any questions about the application.

☐ Once NYSDOL decides that it has sufficient information about the data request, it will generate a data agreement for signature.

☐ As soon as NYSDOL executes the data agreement, UI data can be requested.

TASK 4

☐ Process, analyze, and interpret the wage data. The community organization may need to engage a technical assistance provider if it does not have internal staff capacity to perform these activities.

> **TIP** *A data intermediary can provide support and technical assistance with checking the data, running the analyses, and interpreting the findings.*

determine whether UI wage data would be useful and, if so, what kind of data. For example, college access programs will probably get more useful information if they request data on former participants after graduation, rather than on current participants who are in school and less likely to be employed. On the other hand, training or certificate programs might find it useful to request UI wage data that cover the periods both before and after participants receive credentials to see whether more participants found jobs, or whether they switched to higher-paying or more stable jobs. The organization then needs to determine whether its information on the groups for whom it seeks wage data is sufficiently complete to take advantage of the administrative data. NYSDOL requires matches on Social Security numbers, so if these are missing or invalid for a large proportion of participants, requesting wage data may not be worth the effort.

PREPARATION IS KEY TO BENEFITING FROM THE DATA ACCESS. Because the wage data demonstration was time limited and the agreement with NYSDOL took much longer to finalize than anticipated, the CCF grantees were not able to benefit from all that the UI wage data requests could have offered. They all agreed that the UI data and selected analyses were informative and valuable, and they had adjusted requests in mind in case another opportunity to request data arose in the future. The general consensus among the grantees was that organizations should make sure their participants' Social Security numbers and key demographic and participation data are complete and accurate, that staff members have the time and capacity to make good use of the data, and that analysis questions are thoughtfully prioritized before investing in the process.

Deciding Between Identifiable UI Data and Deidentified or Aggregate Data

CONSIDER THE FEASIBILITY OF OBTAINING AUTHORIZATIONS. An organization can try to access identifiable UI data by demonstrating that it has obtained written data-release authorizations from all participants for whom it is interested in collecting the data. This effort could represent a huge undertaking that may not be practical, especially with past participants who are no longer engaged with the organization. It might make sense, however, for the organization to begin collecting authorizations that have been cleared by NYSDOL for current and incoming participants, particularly if it is starting a new program for which UI data would be useful in the future.

CONSIDER WHETHER THE ORGANIZATION CAN MEET THE REQUIREMENTS FOR IDENTIFIABLE DATA. Lacking state-approved authorizations, an organization can try to access data under the new labor law. The organization should discuss conditions under which it might qualify for these data with its federal, state, or local agency partners and NYSDOL, particularly when it is necessary to engage a data intermediary to assist with data security requirements. Although this effort did not result in access to identifiable data for the community organizations, it did confirm that a direct contractual relationship needs to exist between the organization and a government partner. An organization with a qualified contractual relationship should plan for a three-month response time after the partner agency first submits an application for access to NYSDOL data[21] and be prepared

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21 The three-month period accounts for a 20-business-day NYSDOL review that may result in a request for more information; 20 business days for the qualified agency to provide additional information; and 30 calendar days for NYSDOL to provide an approval or denial of application. See the FAQs on NYSDOL's data sharing website.

with a backup plan to request deidentified or aggregate data if NYSDOL does not approve the proposal. It should also weigh the opportunity costs of pursuing this option before investing the effort up front: Staff members at community organizations are often already stretched to capacity, and the organization should think about what current work they might have to delay or give up in order to spend time with the data. Even if NYSDOL ultimately approves the request for confidential UI data, the organization will need internal staff capacity to process the data and perform the analysis. This option may make more sense for organizations that have staff members dedicated to research and data analysis, or that can work with a data intermediary or technical assistance provider, than for an organization whose data staff also has substantial direct service responsibilities.

PLAN CAREFULLY TO MAXIMIZE THE VALUE OF DEIDENTIFIED OR AGGREGATE DATA. Requesting deidentified or aggregate data is much easier from a legal perspective, since these data are not subject to the same data security requirements as confidential UI data. Organizations will still need to dedicate considerable staff time to formulating the data requests. For deidentified data files, the staff will need to decide which groupings of participants are the highest priority. If staff members request data on too many overlapping groups, the data become identifiable and therefore confidential, and organizations will need to cut down the number of requests.[22] For aggregate data files, the staff will also need to decide the level of aggregation. A highly skilled technical staff member or a data intermediary could help the organization figure out the minimum level of aggregation needed to maximize the potential of the analysis without requesting identifiable UI data. It is important to note, though, that more complicated aggregate data queries might require more time for NYSDOL to extract the data, which would result in more expensive data files. Requesting deidentified or aggregate data may defray some of the up-front setup costs that a request for identifiable UI data would require, but each request made to NYSDOL may be more costly to obtain.[23]

CONSIDER THE DEMANDS OF DATA INTERPRETATION. For organizations that cannot afford to have staff members spend a lot of time on data processing and analysis, it may make sense to invest some up-front planning time on prespecifying deidentified or aggregate requests that are easy to read and interpret.

Potential Uses and Limitations of UI Wage Data for Community Organizations

LONGITUDINAL DATA CAN HELP ORGANIZATIONS TRACK, COMPARE, TARGET, AND IMPROVE. Community-based organizations, specifically those that provide workforce development programs, have routinely reported program activity and participant job placement to their funders. Increasingly, funders are requesting that organizations move beyond this type of reporting and perform data analysis to assess program outcomes. Both funders and providers are interested in tracking the longer-term employment and earnings results of program participants. Longer-term results could show

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22 As an example, an organization might be interested in looking at employment trajectories by gender, age, educational attainment, and enrollment cohort. Each group by itself would probably yield enough employment records to preserve confidentiality, but if there were, say, very few females under 24 with high school degrees in a particular cohort, the organization would have to decide which group indicator to drop from the file so that the participants could not be identified.

23 Organizations should talk with NYSDOL about cost estimates for specific aggregate requests, since they can vary widely.

earnings trajectories for training program participants and allow for comparison across programs; identify the participant cohorts (that is, groups of people who participated in the same program at the same time) that had better earnings trajectories; or show which cohorts may need additional help or which programs may require a new strategy. Organizations could see whether participants who attended sector-based training courses ended up in the expected or different industries. And employment data on formerly incarcerated participants could help an organization identify and partner with employers who regularly hire them. In these ways, state employment and earnings data provide a promising resource for understanding program outcomes and the longer-term experiences of program participants.

IDENTIFIABLE DATA HELP PROGRAMS TARGET ASSISTANCE. Community organizations can certainly make their most informed decisions about enhancing program activities using identifiable data, assuming that they have the staff capacity to analyze them. Staff members who are able to access the identifiable data can take a "whole-person" view of the data to make informed judgments of what might be beneficial for a specific participant. For example, staff members might recommend different programs to participants without high school diplomas who are stably employed and those who are not employed. They could target their outreach to specific participants according to what they see in the data.

IDENTIFIABLE DATA OFFER FLEXIBILITY IN ANALYSIS. Depending on the quality of their enrollment and participation data, organizations could also use individual-level data to look at how different subgroups of interest are doing. The advantage of having identifiable data for these purposes is that this analysis could be done as the need arises and does not need to be prespecified. For example, if the organization is deciding whether to target a particular subgroup (such as young adults who have been involved with the justice system) with a specific type of employment service, staff members could look at that subgroup's historical employment data to assess the extent of the need without submitting an additional customized data request to NYSDOL.

DEIDENTIFIED OR AGGREGATE DATA CAN GUIDE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS. If organizations request deidentified or aggregate data rather than identifiable UI data, they cannot assess needs or target interventions for specific people, nor can they conduct analysis on groups that were not prespecified. However, deidentified or aggregate data can be useful for tracking participant employment or earnings changes for key subgroups or programs. Organizations that run sectoral training programs, for example, could request aggregate UI data by program cohort to see whether their sectoral training participants are finding or keeping employment in related industries. Or organizations could examine earnings data to assess whether participants without high school diplomas need different kinds of employment services than do more educated participants.

AGGREGATE WAGE DATA CAN ALSO BE USEFUL FOR TRACKING PERFORMANCE METRICS. The organization would have to specify the aggregation for NYSDOL, grouping participants by program or demographic indicator. Because of the three- to six-month lag in UI data collection, the metrics may not be current, but they would reflect more accurate and complete information for program participants than self-reported information. Organizations could arrange for periodic requests and control costs by keeping the groups and metrics constant.

Conclusion

The investment in the wage data demonstration was a tremendous opportunity for CCF grantees to obtain additional earnings information on their participants, use the information to address some questions they had about their programs, and think about how these data might contribute to future program improvement, performance monitoring, and fundraising activities. For the partners in the project — MDRC, CCF, and NYC Opportunity — this initial effort to help community organizations benefit from the 2013 New York State Labor Law amendment has provided a base of knowledge on which future efforts can build.

Accessing and Using UI Wage Data at Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation

Staff members at Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) were enthusiastic participants in the wage data demonstration. At the outset, they had realistic expectations, recognizing that while identifiable, individual-level data were preferable to aggregate data, using identifiable data would require the greatest time commitment from their staff. To maximize the usefulness of the state unemployment insurance (UI) data, staff members calculated participant counts for programs and subgroups to prioritize the groups that were most likely to yield enough employment records to draw certain conclusions. For example, they prioritized programs for which they had the most complete Social Security number information and invested substantial time in making sure those numbers were accurately entered in their data systems. They also identified sufficiently populous subgroups within their larger programs, including subgroups determined by preenrollment characteristics such as high school equivalency attainment and postenrollment outcomes such as credential receipt.

Appendix Table A.1 presents selected employment and earnings outcomes for participants in three of CHLDC's workforce programs. The Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP) is a 14-week paid internship for disconnected young adults between ages 17 and 24; CHAMPION Network is a 2-week

APPENDIX TABLE A.1

Average Employment and Earnings of Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation Participants, by Workforce Program

OUTCOME	YAIP	CHAMPION NETWORK	BUILDING WORKS
Year before enrollment			
Ever employed (%)	36.2	53.6	64.8
Average earnings ($)	2,375	4,197	7,494
Average earnings, of those employed ($)	*6,568*	*7,834*	*11,566*
Year 1			
Ever employed (%)	95.0	93.5	95.8
Average earnings ($)	6,015	10,689	15,700
Average earnings, of those employed ($)	*6,332*	*11,438*	*16,392*
Year 2			
Ever employed (%)	77.3	82.1	91.5
Average earnings ($)	7,282	12,104	28,303
Average earnings, of those employed ($)	*9,420*	*14,735*	*30,915*
Sample size	260	168	71

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using wage records from the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) and program records from Change Capital Fund grantees.

NOTE: The table reflects data on participants who enrolled in the Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP), CHAMPION Network, or Building Works between August 2011 and September 2015.

training course for adults up to age 30 that ends with a commercial driving credential and immediate job placement upon completion; and Building Works is a 14-week preapprenticeship training program that prepares adults (mostly younger than 30) for careers in construction.

MDRC's guidance document provided some limited insights:

- About half the CHAMPION participants came with previous employment experience in the year before enrollment, compared with a third of YAIP participants and two-thirds of Building Works participants.

- Almost all the participants in these three programs were placed in a job in Year 1. Of the three programs, Building Works participants had the highest earnings levels. (The smaller number of participants in Building Works means that participants with unusually high or low earnings can affect the average earnings more so than in larger programs.)

- Employment levels for participants across all three programs dropped in Year 2, but average earnings rose. Building Works participants were more likely than participants in the other programs to remain employed. They also averaged the highest earnings in the second year — almost doubling their earnings from Year 1.

Follow-up conversations with CHLDC staff members uncovered more insights. Before seeing the UI data, CHLDC had been able to verify employment for about two-thirds of its participants, so the UI employment outcomes were encouraging. Staff members indicated that it took an average of three to four months after program enrollment for a participant to be placed in a job, which explains why a higher employment rate with lower earnings in Year 1 than in Year 2 would make sense. They also noted that the UI annual earnings for their CHAMPION participants seemed low, since the current average wage for CHAMPION job placements was around $16 per hour. But they recalled that in earlier years, CHAMPION had placed participants in much lower-paying jobs (with hourly wages ranging from $8 to $12) when the minimum wage in New York was still $7.25. Because the table reflects earnings for all participants with two full years of follow-up data, and not just the most recent participants, the lower average reflects those past wages, accounting for the apparent mismatch with their initial expectations.

CHLDC and MDRC took away a few key points about their programs:

- Participants across all three programs had substantially higher employment rates and earnings two years after enrolling in their respective programs at CHLDC. Participants were on average earning more than three times what they were earning before they came to CHLDC. For example, individuals earned about $4,000 in the year before they enrolled in CHAMPION and were earning about $12,000 in Year 2.

- Participants in Building Works seemed to do particularly well; two years after enrolling in the program, they were maintaining nearly full employment. Additional findings shared with CHLDC indicate that most of them were still working in construction-type jobs.

CHLDC intends to use these findings for a few purposes:

- **Internal planning.** Staff members wanted to see a higher percentage of their CHAMPION participants end up in the industries for which they received training. They can use these numbers for internal goal-setting purposes. (Industry outcomes were shared with CHLDC but are not shown in this document.)

- **Motivating current and incoming participants.** Staff members thought these data would be useful as a way to discuss expected outcomes with participants. Less engaged participants might be more likely to persist in earning certain credentials if they know that on average, past participants have seen higher earnings and better employment prospects.

- **Generating excitement among funders.** Staff members hope to use these highlights in future conversations with funders and funding proposals.

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MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDU-CATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

• Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development

• Improving Public Education

• Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College

• Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities

• Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.