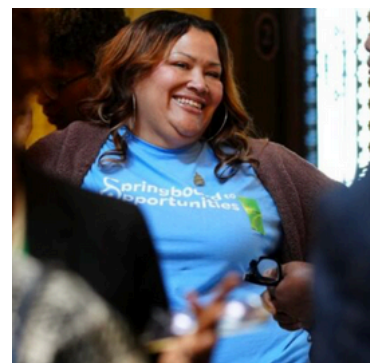


# FELLOWSHIP EVALUATION & THEORY OF CHANGE

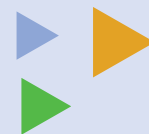
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**“I used to think policies  
were just made far away  
by people in suits,  
but now I understand how  
it affects everything...[the  
fellowship] made me more  
aware, more involved, and  
more determined to speak  
up for families like mine  
who deserve better.”**

**- 2024 Education Advocacy Fellow**

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# INTRODUCTION

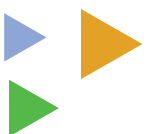
Springboard to Opportunities (STO), founded in 2013 in Jackson, Mississippi, partners with residents of federally subsidized housing to provide programs and holistic wraparound services to support families. **STO centers residents' priorities and aspirations**, helping individuals and families to define and pursue life on their own terms. STO's approach is rooted in direct community engagement, positioning residents as the drivers of change in their communities and beyond.

Through years of community engagement, dialogue, and partnership, STO observed the recurring systemic challenges that residents faced (e.g., unfair labor practices that left them underemployed or abruptly terminated, and under-resourced schools that limited their children's ability to thrive). STO recognized these issues as inextricably linked with Mississippi's legacy of racist and sexist policies that excluded residents of federally subsidized housing-especially Black mothers-from equitable participation in Jackson's political and social processes.

Residents have been navigating barriers without the resources or language to understand their root causes. Many residents perceived these as individual-level challenges, revealing a disconnect between how they understood their lived experiences and the broader structural inequities shaping them.

In response, STO launched three fellowships- the **Policy & Systems Change (PSC)**, **Workforce Systems (WFS)**, and **Education Advocacy (EAF)** Fellowships. These programs aim to affirm the value of lived experience, challenge and shift harmful narratives, and equip residents with training and tools to strategically use their voices. Fellows reconnect with their personal and collective power to influence systems and policies that directly affect their lives and communities.

**This report documents the fellowships' evolution, their impact on participants, and the ways they inform STO's advocacy and policy efforts. It also presents the Fellowship Theory of Change, evaluation findings, and key insights and recommendations for the field.**





# EVALUATION

STO partnered with [Social Insights Research](#) to better understand the evolution of the fellowships and participant outcomes. This evaluation:

- documents how STO designed the fellowships in response to **community needs**
- highlights the **responsive and iterative** nature of STO's process
- presents a **Theory of Change (ToC)** illustrating *how* the fellowship aims to create change in the lives of fellows, their communities, and the policies that shape them
- examines **outcomes** related to learning, skill development, and personal growth across all three fellowships, as well as distinct outcomes unique to each

Ultimately, this evaluation aims to detail the process and structure of the fellowships, identify promising practices, and guide efforts to support individuals and communities who have been historically excluded from equitable engagement with systems and the political process.

## Evaluation Approach & Methods

In alignment with STO, Social Insights is guided by **liberatory praxis** and a commitment to **centering lived experiences**. Prioritizing the voices of participants, we drew on multiple sources of data in this evaluation:

### Conversations with STO Staff

These early conversations provided context about the fellowship's history and evolution and helped shape the evaluation questions and methods.

### In-Depth Interview with Fellowship Director

This conversation informed the development of the Theory of Change (ToC) and surfaced core assumptions and intentions guiding the fellowships.

### Alumni Consultant

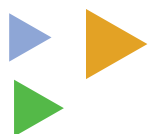
An alumni fellow was hired to support data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Her involvement helped ensure that the evaluation process and findings were grounded in fellow-led perspectives and priorities.

### Survey of Current and Alumni Fellows

A mixed-methods survey captured fellows' experiences, perceived impacts, and suggestions for improvement.

### Meaning-Making Session

Four fellowship alumni participated in a meaning-making session to engage and discuss the evaluation findings, adding context and nuance that deepened the analysis and shaped the interpretation.



# FROM PROBLEM TO PROGRAM

## A Historical Legacy of Structural Exclusion

[Generations of exclusion](#)- from Jim Crow to ongoing voter suppression- have pushed Black women furthest from systems engagement and political participation nationwide. In Mississippi, [aggressive gerrymandering](#) further diluted Black political representation, diminishing communities' political voice and power. These historical and statewide inequities are deeply reflected in Jackson.

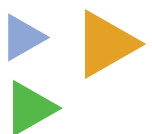
## Systemic Inequities Shaping Life in Jackson

Decades of disinvestment and discriminatory policy have shaped daily life for many Black residents in Jackson. Environmental racism, financial neglect, and political interference continue to undermine the city's infrastructure and residents' access to economic stability. For example, in [2022](#), after decades of warnings from the Environmental Protection Agency, 150,000 Jacksonians (approximately 82% of whom were Black) were left without access to clean water after severe flooding damaged the Curtis Water Treatment Facility.\* This crisis reflected a deeper pattern of racialized neglect. White flight following desegregation reduced the city's taxpayer base, while state policies tying investment in public goods to tax generated revenue [deepened inequities for remaining residents](#).

Mississippi's policy landscape continues to reinforce poverty and community divestment by prioritizing employers' interests over workers' rights. The state has no minimum wage law, defaulting to the federal rate of \$7.25 per hour, and [offers few protections](#) against unjust termination, wage theft, or discrimination. At the same time, [Jackson Public Schools](#) have endured chronic underfunding and declining enrollment amid continued out-migration of White residents to surrounding suburbs and harmful racialized narratives about the city's 80% Black population.

Recently, targeted state actions, such as the [“Take Back Jackson”](#) legislation which shifts local judicial and policing authority away from Jackson's electorate and into state control, further erode Black residents' ability to govern their own communities through fair and free [elections](#).

**Against this backdrop of systemic neglect, residents in Jackson's federally subsidized housing communities experience these inequities most acutely in their everyday lives.**



See next page for a visual of the Theory of change. [Click here](#) for a written version.

## How Residents Experience Inequities Today

STO recognized the connection between this disenfranchisement and the daily struggles residents (mostly Black women) were facing. For example:

- The state's refusal to raise the minimum wage trapped them into low-wage jobs
- Underfunded schools in predominantly Black districts left teachers and administrators stretched thin and children without adequate support to succeed
- Unaffordable childcare, low wages, and reductions in housing subsidies forced them in a constant cycle of trade-offs that undermined both economic mobility and dignity

These and other challenging experiences are directly linked to policy decisions made for these residents without their representation.

## The Response: STO Fellowships as a Pathway to Change

In 2022, STO launched the first fellowship program in response to residents' challenges and their desire for change. The fellowships aim to redistribute power by equipping residents with knowledge, skills, and opportunities for civic engagement. Fellows learn to connect their personal experiences to historical and systemic inequities, reclaim their narratives as tools for advocacy, and use their voices to shape systems that affect them.

**The fellowships offer a pathway for those historically pushed to the margins to move to the forefront as community leaders and change makers.**



# THEORY OF CHANGE

## What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a roadmap that explains how a program creates change. It identifies the problems being addressed, the strategies used, and the outcomes expected over time. The ToC is grounded in assumptions that must hold true for the intended outcomes and impact to be achieved.

## The Process

The Fellowship ToC was developed through a collaborative process that drew on multiple perspectives and sources of knowledge. It reflects:

- Conversations with STO staff about the vision, evolution, and goals of the fellowship
- Insights from an alumni consultant, who helped ensure the ToC remained grounded in fellows' perspectives
- Curriculum review and analysis to capture how the fellowship activities build knowledge and skills
- Surveys with fellows to document outcomes and experiences
- A meaning-making session with alumni fellows to validate and refine the ToC

**This process ensured the ToC was not simply an external evaluation tool, but a co-created framework rooted in fellows' voices and experiences.**



See next page for a visual of the Theory of change. [Click here](#) for a written version.



# THEORY OF CHANGE

“I used to think policies were just made far away by people in suits, but now I understand how it affects everything...[the fellowship] made me more aware, more involved, and more determined to speak up for families like mine who deserve better.”- 2024 Education Advocacy Fellow

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

**What is the issue that needs to be addressed?**

Springboard to Opportunities (STO) serves low-income residents (primarily Black women) who are intentionally and systemically excluded from decision-making roles in education, workforce, and policymaking systems due to racism, sexism, and classism. This exclusion obstructs opportunities and denies them their right to influence the systems that directly affect their lives.

## STRATEGY

**What is STO's approach?**

Shaped by the experiences of Black women residents of Jackson's public housing, **Springboard's Fellowships** are designed to build awareness, cultivate leadership, and expand residents' advocacy in the following areas:



**EDUCATION  
ADVOCACY**



**WORKFORCE  
SYSTEMS**



**POLICY AND  
SYSTEMS CHANGE**

## ASSUMPTIONS

**What must be true for this to work?**

### OPERATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS

- STO engages residents as co-creators in fellowship design and implementation to remain responsive to community needs
- STO provides residents with sufficient resources to meet the desired outcomes
- STO demonstrates impact to attract sustainable funding for the fellowships

### CAUSAL ASSUMPTIONS

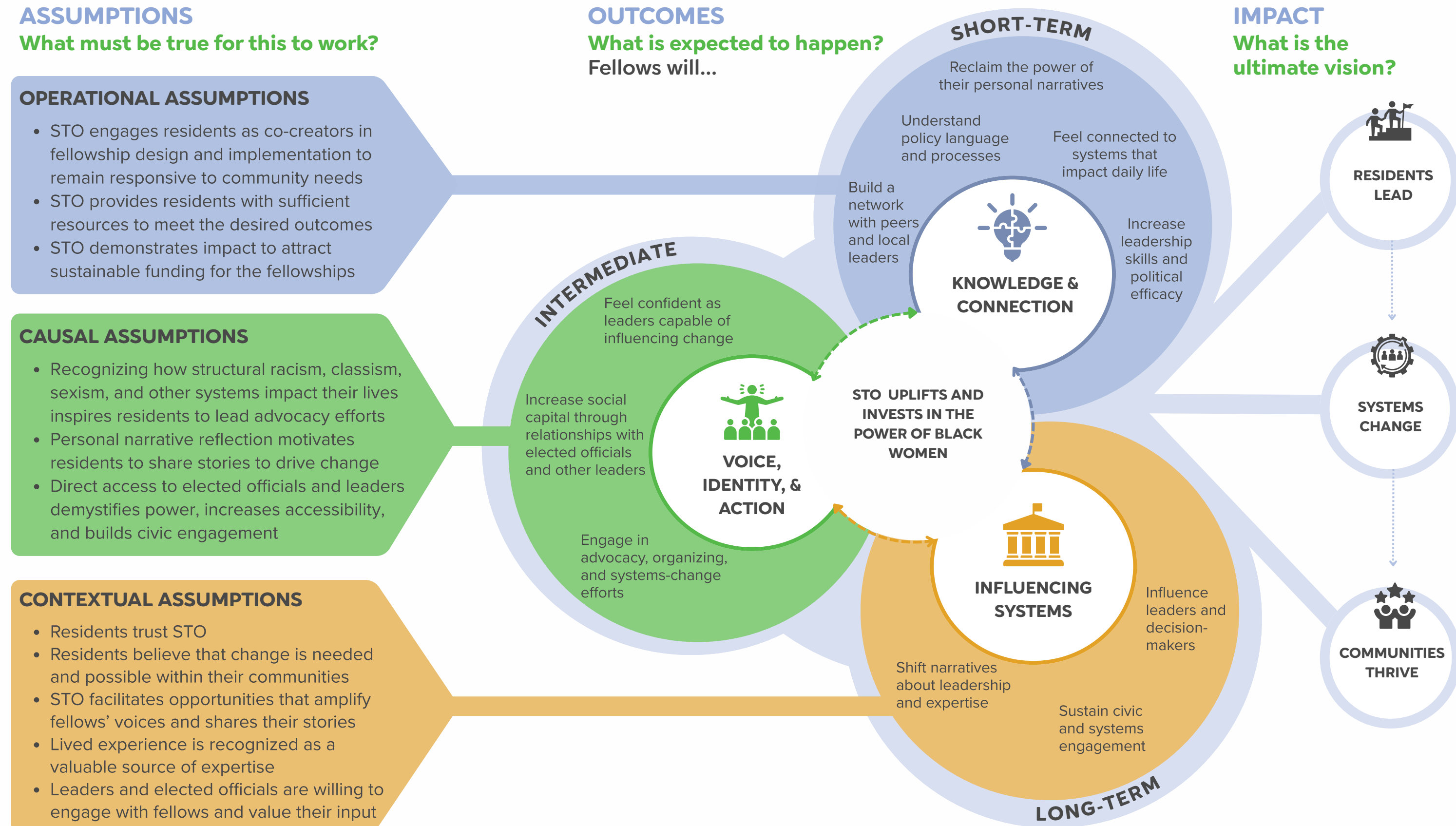
- Recognizing how structural racism, classism, sexism, and other systems impact their lives inspires residents to lead advocacy efforts
- Personal narrative reflection motivates residents to share stories to drive change
- Direct access to elected officials and leaders demystifies power, increases accessibility, and builds civic engagement

### CONTEXTUAL ASSUMPTIONS

- Residents trust STO
- Residents believe that change is needed and possible within their communities
- STO facilitates opportunities that amplify fellows' voices and shares their stories
- Lived experience is recognized as a valuable source of expertise
- Leaders and elected officials are willing to engage with fellows and value their input

## OUTCOMES

**What is expected to happen?**  
Fellows will...





# FELLOWSHIP STRUCTURE

Each fellowship builds knowledge, skills, and confidence for about **10-15 fellows per cohort**. All fellowships include structured sessions, site visits, a culminating group capstone project, and financial support to reduce barriers to participation.



## Education Advocacy Fellowship (EAF)

9 months | 18 sessions | \$5,000 stipend

Fellows develop leadership, knowledge, skills, relationships, and tools to advocate for policies and practices that support students, families, and communities within Jackson Public Schools (JPS). They explore the history of the public school system, learn about school funding, attend board meetings, and analyze key education policy issues. Fellows also visit HBCUs, the Council of Federated Organizations Civil Rights Education Center\*, and the Medgar Evers Home, connecting their learning to the state's rich history of education, advocacy, and community organizing.



## Workforce Systems Fellowship (WFS)

9 months | 18 sessions | \$5,000 stipend

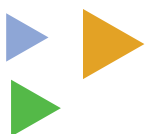
Fellows examine the policies and systems that contribute to inequitable workforce environments and gain tools to advocate for improved working conditions in Jackson. They explore the history of slavery, workforce policies, welfare supports, and the ways sexism and racism underpin workforce systems. Fellows also visit historical landmarks, conferences, and Mississippi's HBCUs. In addition, they receive personalized career development support, including goal setting, career advancement strategies, and mentorship from staff and local professionals.



## Policy and Systems Change Fellowship (PSC)

12 months | 22 sessions | \$10,000 stipend

After completing either the Education Advocacy or Workforce Systems Fellowships, fellows deepen their knowledge and skills in the Policy and Systems Change Fellowship. They explore Mississippi's legislative processes and focus on public storytelling, narrative change, grassroots organizing, power mapping, and civic engagement, with opportunities to practice these skills in collaboration with peers. The PSC capstone is a collaborative project aligned with [STO's policy priorities](#), allowing them to apply their learning in real-world contexts.



\*The [COFO Civil Rights Education Center](#), formerly the statewide headquarters for the COFO, is now a museum and educational center run by Jackson State that tells the story of COFO - and particularly Freedom Summer in Mississippi - while also working to develop future leaders and community builders.

## Becoming a Fellow

Fellows must be adults who currently live in one of STO's partnered subsidized housing communities or be alumni of the [Magnolia Mother's Trust \(MMT\)](#), STO's guaranteed income program. While eligibility is not restricted by race or gender, all fellows to date have been Black women\*, reflecting both the demographics of Jackson's subsidized housing communities and the disproportionate barriers Black women face in Mississippi.

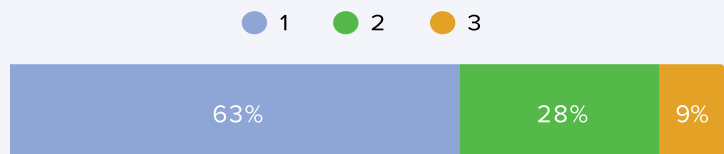
Residents are invited to apply through STO communications (emails, flyers, word of mouth, alumni outreach). Applications ask about motivation, desired skills, and plans to apply the knowledge gained. Selected applicants are interviewed virtually, and the fellowship director and project associate make final decisions. Alumni generally viewed the application process positively, noting that while it initially felt intimidating, they came to appreciate STO's approach. One alum reflected, *"They wanna know if you real. If you're sincere...[STO] wants you to be able to take what you are learning and use it in your community...and grow from it".*

**The majority of fellows are also MMT alumni.** Their experiences in a guaranteed income program rooted in trust and dignity provide a strong foundation for civic engagement and policy awareness. [Prior evaluations](#) show that MMT participation often increases civic awareness and opportunities to reflect on the failures of the existing social support systems. The fellowships build on this foundation by deepening awareness and advocacy skills. Having experienced what trust-based economic policy can look like, MMT alumni are uniquely positioned to serve as powerful advocates for broader policy and systems change.

## Participation to Date

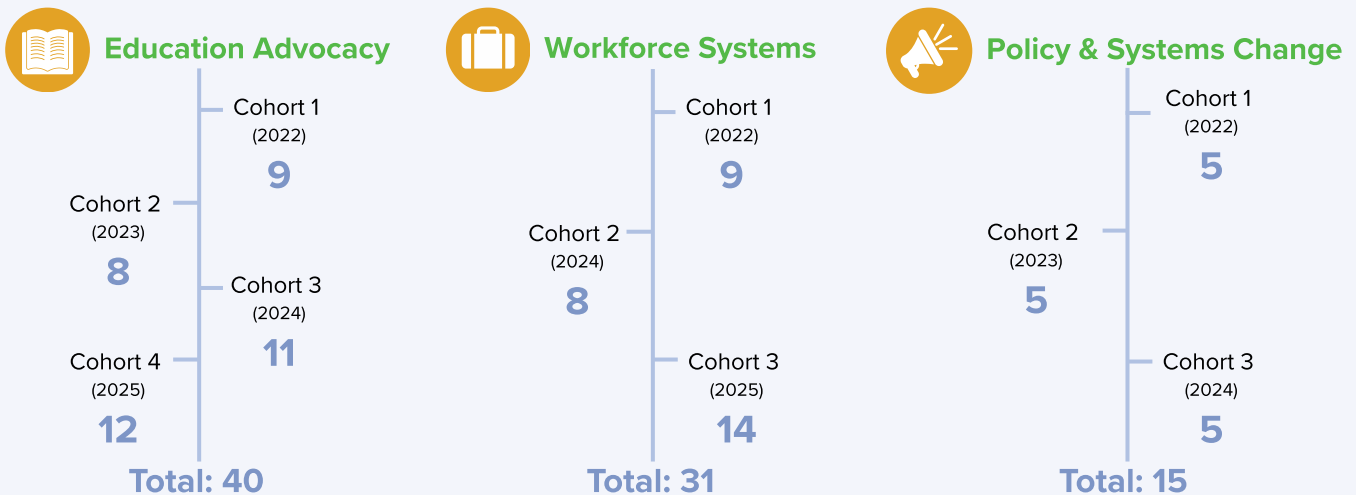
As of August 2025, **65** individuals participated in STO's fellowship program. Of those, **37%** completed more than one fellowship.

### Number of Fellowships Completed



### Number of Fellows in Each Cohort

*Numbers overlap due to multiple fellowship participation*



\*As of this report (Fall 2025), one male is enrolled in one of the programs and, upon completion, will be the first male graduate of STO's fellowships.

## Fellows Shape STO's Advocacy and Policy Priorities

In addition to equipping residents with knowledge and tools, the fellowships also serve as a platform for innovation, informing STO's advocacy agenda on childcare assistance, guaranteed income, child and earned income tax credits, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). By centering resident voices, the fellowships ensure STO's advocacy agenda is grounded in the realities of those most affected by systemic inequities. Fellows' contributions strengthen strategies and initiatives that respond directly to community needs.

## STO Responsively Adapts the Fellowships Through Continuous Feedback

The fellowships are intentionally designed to evolve in response to participant input. Continuous feedback loops- including surveys, focus groups, and open communication- **ensure fellows' perspectives remain central to program design and delivery.**

When the Policy & Systems Change Fellowship was first launched in 2022, fellows' feedback revealed that many participants - most of whom were new to systems change - would benefit from more focused, foundational learning. In response, STO introduced the Education Advocacy and Workforce Systems Fellowships that same year. For the next two years, all three programs ran simultaneously. From alumni feedback, STO recognized that fellows had a stronger experience when they completed the Education or Workforce Fellowship *first* and then advanced to the more intensive Policy & Systems Change Fellowship. By 2024, STO formally adopted this "stepping-stones" structure.

Other adaptations further reflect residents' needs and interests. For example:

- STO began offering morning and evening sessions to **accommodate work and childcare needs.**
- **Capstone guidelines were adjusted** to better reflect cohort interests while staying aligned with STO's policy priorities. Some of the **fellows' projects have seeded new programming ideas**, such as STO connecting 40 mothers to a workforce training program researched and vetted by the Workforce fellows' capstone project.
- In response to both residents' interests in intergenerational civic engagement, **STO launched a youth summer fellowship** in 2025 for high school students.

**"I am surprised by [fellows'] perspective compared to what we [STO staff] think. For example, when we were having a discussion about what are those critical issues they want to focus on...they say things we haven't thought about... And so we of course as Springboard we want to support those efforts..and we set aside resources for that."**  
- STO Fellowship Director

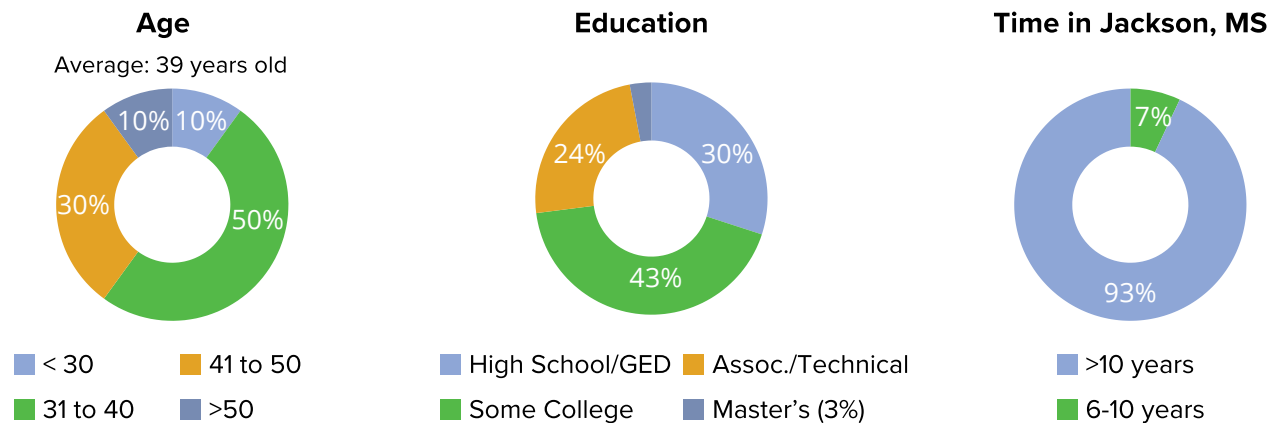
**This participatory approach ensures the fellowships remain responsive to resident realities while strategically aligned with STO's mission, offering a model of how narrative change, liberation, and intentional inclusion can shift power back into the hands of historically excluded communities.**

# FELLOWSHIP OUTCOMES

In Summer of 2025, current and former fellowship participants completed a mixed-methods survey about their perceptions of their fellowship experience. In this section, we share demographics, general outcomes, and fellowship-specific outcomes.

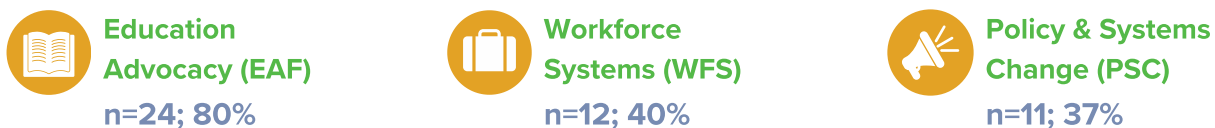
## Demographics

**30** fellows completed the survey, representing about 46% of all participants at the time.

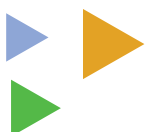
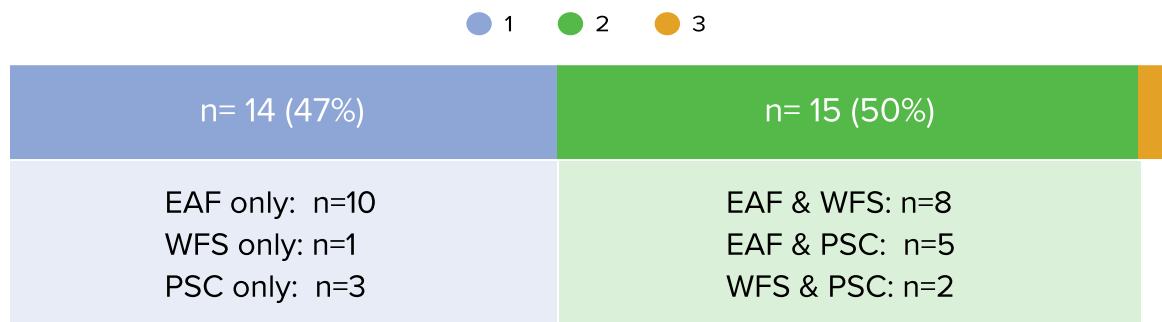


## Fellowship Participation

Most survey participants (80%) completed the Education Advocacy Fellowship (EAF). One person (3%) completed all 3 fellowships. Fifteen people (50%) completed 2 fellowships. Among those who completed 2 fellowships, the most common combination was Education Advocacy and Workforce Systems.



## Number of Fellowships Completed



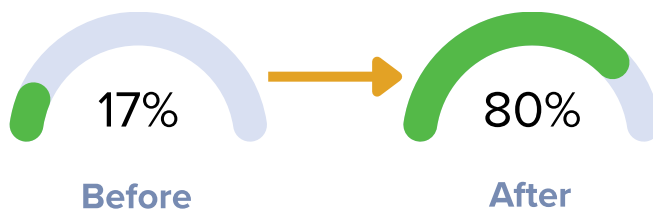
# GENERAL OUTCOMES: ALL FELLOWSHIPS

## POLICY AWARENESS

Participants reported a **statistically significant increase in their understanding of how policies affect their lives**. When asked about how the fellowships shifted their understanding, fellows shared that it increased their awareness, sense of agency and voice, recognition of systemic barriers, knowledge of processes, and motivation to continue staying informed and involved.

### How well do you understand how public policies affect your daily life?

% who selected *Well* or *Very Well*

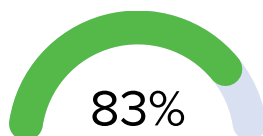


**“The fellowship opened my eyes to how deeply public policy shapes almost every part of my daily life as a single mom in a low-income community”**

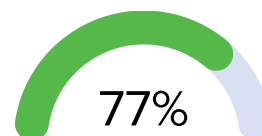
## STORYTELLING, AGENCY, & VOICE

Participants described **transformative growth** in how they understand and use their **stories as tools for change**. They emphasized that the fellowship meetings were a **supportive space** where they could share vulnerably without judgment, **connect deeply with other fellows**, and recognize their collective strength. Through opportunities to speak with legislators, participate in advocacy events, and engage with their communities, fellows reported an expanded sense of agency and confidence, **grounded in a shared purpose to advocate for their children, families, and neighborhoods**.

The fellowship(s) helped me understand how my personal story can be a tool for change.



As a result of the fellowship, I've grown more confident sharing my story with others



**“The fellowship has been a safe place for me to express my thoughts and concerns, where I’m not judged on what I lack knowledge of...not judged on my mishaps and struggles. I also encourage my fellow classmates when they’re sharing their stories. Our instructors are always attentive, empathetic and open to anything we have to say.”**

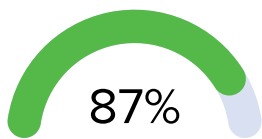


## LEADERSHIP & POLITICAL EFFICACY

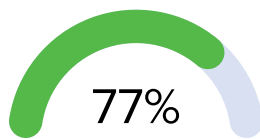
**Political efficacy**- the belief that one's voice and actions can influence change- **is a critical foundation for civic engagement.** Fellows described gaining this sense of confidence and motivation through the fellowship's combination of **knowledge-building, encouragement, and real-world advocacy experiences.** Opportunities to share their stories publicly, connect with peers, and witness policy change firsthand helped fellows **see themselves as leaders** within their communities. Equipped with practical tools and strengthened by collective support, most reported feeling **prepared to take action on issues that matter.**

### As a result of the my fellowship experience....

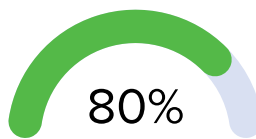
% who selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*



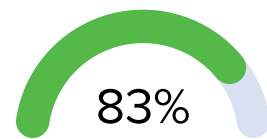
I believe people like me can influence the policies that affect our lives



I know how to take steps to influence policies or decision-makers



I see myself as a leader in my community

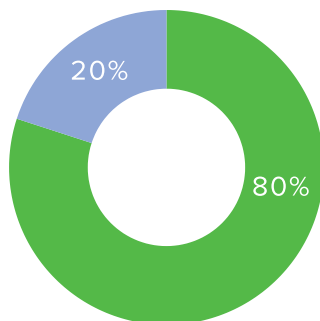


I feel like I belong in spaces where policy decisions are made

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & ACTION

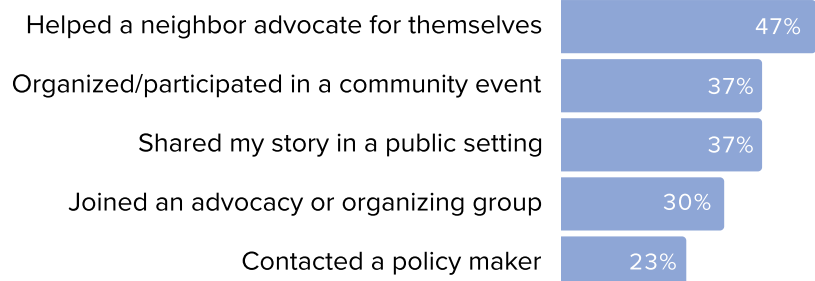
### Have you taken action on an issue you care about?

● Yes ● No/Not yet



On average, participants reported participating in about 2 civic actions (range: 1 to 5 actions).

### TOP 5 most common civic actions reported



**“Getting to tell my story in different spaces made me feel more comfortable about opening up... I learned that speaking out can actually help.”**

**“Visiting the capital for advocacy day allowed me to be aware of the importance of standing on business for issues that concern us.”**



## RELATIONSHIPS & NETWORKING

Throughout the evaluation, it was clear that **relationships** were a driving force behind many positive outcomes. Fellows described the program as a **sisterhood or a community** rooted in mutual support, trust, and shared purpose. **Connections with cohort peers and STO staff** created a strong foundation for growth and learning. Fellows offer emotional encouragement, share resources and opportunities, and collaborate on civic actions. Several alumni (70%) reported that they continue to stay in touch, sustaining the sense of belonging and support that began within their cohorts.

### As a result of the my fellowship experience.....

% who selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*



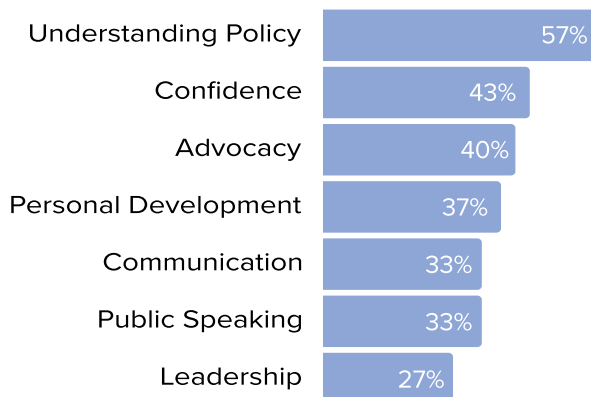
**“These relationships have kept me encouraged and motivated. They keep me informed of what’s going on in our community, helpful resources and opportunities that could help.”**

## GROWTH & OVERALL IMPACT

Fellows experienced growth in their confidence, communication and advocacy skills, and knowledge. Connections with staff, peers, and guest speakers were impactful. They reflected that learning to advocate for themselves, their children, and their communities was life-changing and strengthened their sense of purpose, leadership, and overall well-being.

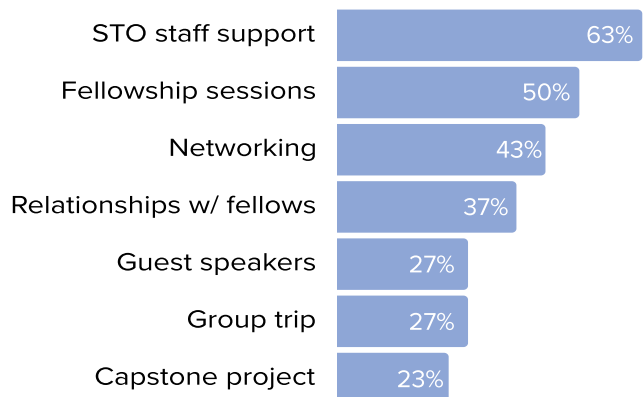
### What do you see as your biggest area(s) of growth?

Select all that apply



### What parts of your fellowship experience were most impactful?

Select all that apply



**“We were at the capitol to meet with a state Representative. They were doing a Q&A. I raised my hand to ask a question, then put it down. I didn’t think anyone saw me. Afterward, Aisha Nyandoro told me she saw me, and told me to always ask my questions because others may have the same question. No questions are ever dumb when seeking knowledge. So now I ask questions”**

# FELLOWSHIP-SPECIFIC OUTCOMES: EDUCATION ADVOCACY FELLOWSHIP



Education Advocacy (EAF) Fellows are equipped with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to advocate for children's education and engage with the Jackson Public School system (JPS). **24 EAF fellowship participants completed the survey.**

## Top 3 Skills:

endorsed by EAF Fellows

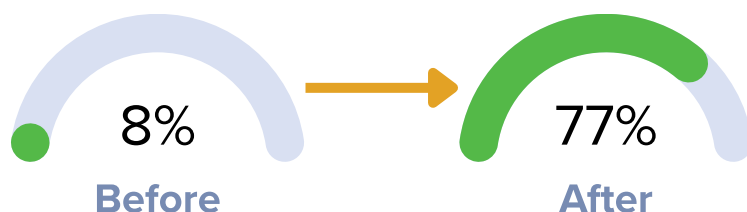
ADVOCACY

UNDERSTANDING  
SYSTEMS

TEAMWORK

## How well do you understand the Jackson Public School System?

% who selected *Well* or *Very Well*



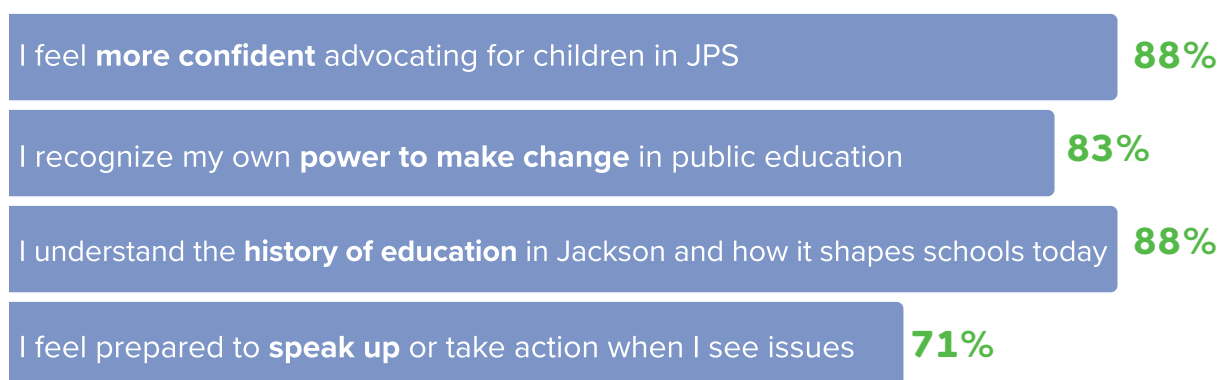
**"I learned that the lack of funding in our schools isn't just bad luck- it's the result of decisions made by policymakers who may have never stepped foot in a community like mine."**

Education Advocacy fellows described a **powerful shift in how they perceive and engage with the school system**. Many shared that the fellowship helped them:

- gain clarity about decision-making processes and chains of command in the schools
- build awareness of broader systemic issues such as charter school policies and state-level decisions that affect local education
- debunk myths or misinformation they previously believed
- feel **empowered in realizing they not only understand the school system better, but that they also have the right and responsibility to advocate for change**

## As a result of the Education Advocacy Fellowship...

% who selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*



# FELLOWSHIP-SPECIFIC OUTCOMES: WORKFORCE SYSTEMS FELLOWSHIP



The Workforce Systems (WFS) Fellowship builds fellows' understanding of how labor policies, workplace dynamics, and systemic inequities shape employment opportunities in Mississippi. **12 Workforce Systems fellows completed the survey.**

## Top 3 Skills:

endorsed by WFS Fellows

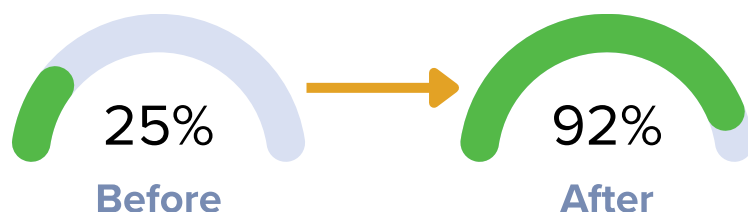
ADVOCACY

LEADERSHIP

TEAMWORK

## How well do you understand the workforce or welfare systems?

% who selected *Well* or *Very Well*



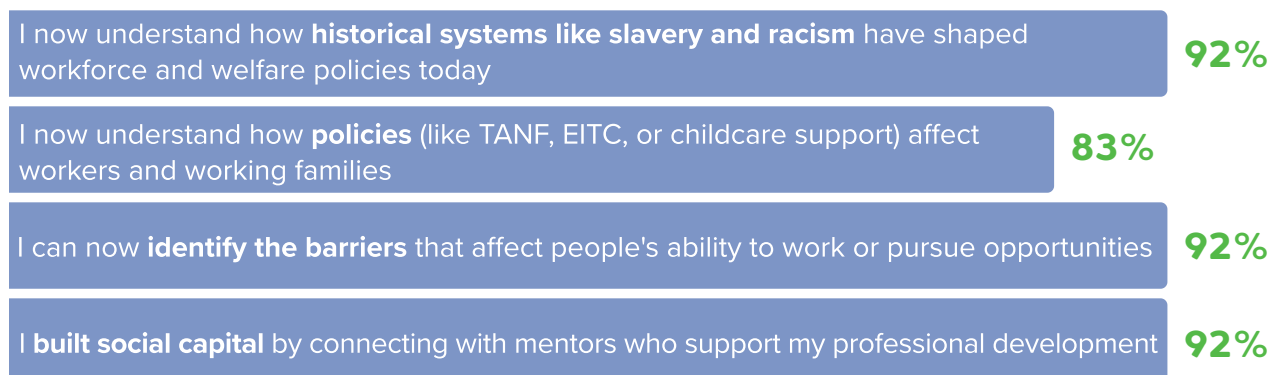
**“I have learned that many policies are not for the good of us employees... and that’s why we have to advocate to fight for equality”**

Workforce Systems fellows described **eye-opening experiences that reshaped how they view policies related to work and equity**. They shared that this fellowship helped them:

- **debunk myths and misconceptions** about eligibility, access, and workplace norms
- understand workers’ rights and protections, including the role of unions and the support available through agencies like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)
- recognize **systemic inequities** that exclude marginalized groups (e.g. Black women) from fair opportunities and economic mobility
- recognize the **power of advocacy** as essential for creating equitable workplaces

## As a result of the Workforce Systems Fellowship...

% who selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*



# FELLOWSHIP-SPECIFIC OUTCOMES: POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE FELLOWSHIP



The Policy & Systems Change (PSC) Fellowship prepares fellows to engage directly with policy processes and advocate for systemic reforms that impact their families and communities. **11 PSC fellows completed the survey.**

## Top 3 Skills:

endorsed by PSC Fellows

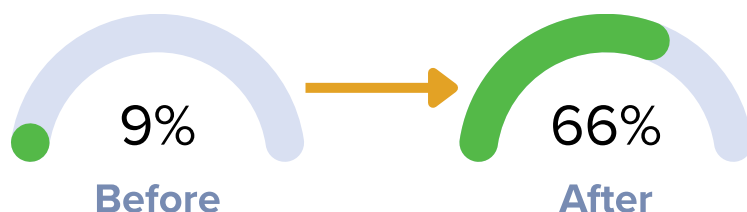
IDENTIFYING  
SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

TEAMWORK

RELATIONSHIP  
BUILDING

## How much do you see yourself as someone who can influence change?

% who selected *A lot* or *Very Much*



**“[Before], I believed that my opinion never mattered. Now I speak up for others and myself when I know there’s something to be done.”**

PSC fellows described the transformation to **seeing themselves as capable** of shaping the policies that affect their lives and communities. The fellowship helped them:

- gain a clearer understanding of how bills, laws, and policies are made, building confidence to **navigate political systems**
- **shift from silence to advocacy**, realizing their voices and perspectives hold power
- develop a stronger **sense of agency**, moving from feeling distant from policymaking to seeing themselves as active participants in it
- draw strength from **peer and community support**, which helped them overcome fear, feel empowered, and connected to a larger collective

## As a result of the Policy & Systems Change Fellowship...

% who selected *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*

I have a better understanding of how **multiple systems intersect** to affect me and my community

**100%**

I know how to **map power and identify decision-makers** who influence issues I care about

**64%**

I improved in my organizing skills and ability to support advocacy campaigns

**88%**

I have expanded my **connections to leaders or organizations** involved in policy or systems change

**71%**






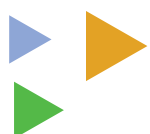
# CROSS-FELLOWSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Across all three fellowships, participants reported **significant** gains in knowledge, skills, and confidence. While each program focuses on different systems, they share a common goal of equipping fellows with the tools to understand, navigate, and influence the structures that shape their lives. The chart below highlights the percentage of fellows who reported gaining specific skills, **illustrating the continuum of learning and personal development that connects the three fellowship programs.**

**Cross-Fellowship Skills Chart**

< 50%
  50 - 74%
  ≥ 75%

	 <b>EAF</b>	 <b>WFS</b>	 <b>PSC</b>
Advocacy	71%	83%	64%
Career goal-setting	33%	67%	18%
Community organizing	33%	50%	36%
Identifying systemic barriers	50%	58%	100%
Leadership	46%	75%	64%
Power mapping	17%	67%	64%
Project management	13%	58%	36%
Public Speaking	42%	42%	64%
Relationship-building	67%	58%	73%
Storytelling	33%	42%	64%
Teamwork	67%	75%	82%
Understanding systems	67%	67%	64%



# NAVIGATING BARRIERS

## Barriers that Transcend the Fellowship

While survey data demonstrate that the fellowships strengthened fellows' political awareness, confidence, and sense of agency, some respondents expressed hesitation about civic engagement in their broader communities. During a meaning-making session, fellows identified three interconnected barriers: **fear of judgment, feeling powerless against systemic oppression, and fear of political retaliation.**

### Fear of Judgment

**“Some women that came to me... They don't feel like putting [themselves] out there because they feel like they're going to be judged.”**

**“See, I want to be out front. I want to be the leader. But then again, is my mental health strong enough to take in the backlash?”**

Although many fellows learned to reclaim their personal narratives around subsidized housing and public benefits, they noted that stigma persists. When fellows encourage peers to participate in civic or political spaces, they often encounter hesitation rooted in racialized and gendered stereotypes, particularly those directed at Black women who rely on social support programs.

While residents know these narratives are false, the absence of platforms to challenge them can lead them to withdraw from civic engagement or community leadership to avoid judgment and emotional harm. As one fellow noted, many residents are already balancing underemployment, unfair pay, and childcare challenges; the added burden of public scrutiny can threaten their mental health.

### Feeling powerless against systemic oppression

Another critical barrier fellows described is the sense of powerlessness that comes from constantly navigating deeply inequitable systems- especially at the intersections of race, gender, and poverty. They explained that being Black women supplementing low wages with public benefits often leads to punitive treatment within workforce and welfare systems. For example, the fellows detailed experiences of the “benefits cliff,” where modest increases in income lead to an immediate rent increase or reduced benefits (e.g., SNAP), while those same systems are slow to readjust when income decreases. This pattern reinforced their belief that welfare systems are *designed* to keep them in poverty, a belief that can hinder their sense of agency and make it more difficult to see pathways for change. As one fellow described, *“it feels like we just can't get ahead.”*



### Fear of retaliation

**“I believe people have fear that if they do stand up and use their voice that the people that are actually in places that can affect us are going to retaliate.”**

Fellows also expressed concerns about political retaliation against Black communities in Jackson in response to their advocacy efforts. Some referenced recent state actions, such as Mississippi’s “Jackson takeover laws”, which expanded Capitol Police authority and placed it under state control. They perceived this measure as a deliberate attempt to weaken local Black leadership and suppress civic engagement.

For fellows, these dynamics represented not only threats to their safety but also reminders of how fragile democratic participation can be for marginalized communities.

These fears and challenges reflect **long-standing, deeply rooted inequities** that have historically limited Black women’s civic participation and access to power. The fellows’ experiences reveal how systemic exclusion continues to shape not only policy outcomes but also residents’ sense of safety, belonging, and agency.

**Even so, the fellowships provide a critical counterforce. By equipping participants with political awareness, advocacy skills, and networks of solidarity, the programs help fellows begin to dismantle internalized powerlessness and navigate barriers with courage and community.**

**“All that I have learned has given me confidence to fight and be a voice for my community. At first I wouldn’t have had any knowledge or confidence to believe I could make a change.”**



# INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation has demonstrated that participants are using the tools they gained from the fellowships to persist in advocacy, embrace leadership, and educate peers. While fellows acknowledge the ongoing tension between their voices and the dominance of systems they seek to change, they also recognize that the fellowship equipped them to challenge those barriers. The impact of the program transcends the cohort as fellows encourage others to recognize their personal power to drive change.

**“Since being in the program, I feel like a leader...just talking to other women and just letting them know the information that I have learned and stuff that I have done.”**

**To continue expanding the reach of this work, the following insights and recommendations highlight key practices from STO’s fellowship model that can inform organizations, funders, and practitioners seeking to build programs that harness community voice as a catalyst for systems change.**

## 1. Community-Led by Design

### ► Insight:

At the heart of the fellowships is STO’s commitment to systems change to transform the education, workforce, and political structures that shape the lives of residents in subsidized housing. **Their work begins with community voice.** Residents lead the identification of systemic challenges and co-create the strategies to address them. **Centering lived experience within each fellowship’s curriculum allows participants to build skills that respond to present realities while laying the groundwork for long-term policy and structural transformation.**

STO’s approach aligns with other field practices such as the [Appalachian Transition Fellowship](https://highlandercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2018-19-AppFellows-Evaluation-Report.pdf), which placed fellows with local host organizations to shape their agendas in alignment with grassroots needs. Fellows in this program reported that the co-development process deepened their understanding of how they could contribute to broader change.\* This evidence supports STO’s practice of co-design, affirming that building *with* the community is integral to program success.



\*<https://highlandercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2018-19-AppFellows-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

► **Recommendation:**

Organizations seeking to strengthen advocacy or systems-change efforts should co-create with the communities they serve **from the outset**. Programs should embed community voice in design, implementation, and evaluation to authentically reflect their realities and ensure that skill-building is anchored in participant needs rather than external assumptions. Funders and partners can support this work by resourcing time for deep relationship-building, compensating community members for sharing their expertise, and allowing communities the autonomy to shape decision-making and strategy.

## 2. Connecting Past and Present

► **Insight:**

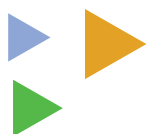
Each fellowship's unique curriculum enables fellows to connect their daily realities to broader policy systems. Grounded in the reality that public policy is not created in isolation but is shaped by political agendas, and the economic, social, and cultural landscapes, STO's approach **bridges the historical and contemporary exclusion of Black Americans from political processes with the challenges that residents navigate today**.

STO fortifies their fellowship curricula by providing networking and other engagement opportunities with elected officials and local community leaders, giving fellows a chance to apply what they have learned to real-world advocacy. This practice is also reflected in programs like the [Community Food Funders Seeding Power Cohort](https://communityfoodfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Seeding-Power-evaluation-23-24.pdf).<sup>\*</sup> Both STO fellows and Seeding Power Cohort participants reported that their leadership skills grew through these interactions and that they became more adept at navigating challenges that were related to engaging with community and organizational leadership.

► **Recommendation:**

Programs that aim to strengthen participants' policy knowledge and civic engagement should anchor learning in both historical context and lived experience. **Teaching policy as a living system - shaped by social, economic, and political forces - enables participants to understand not only how policies are made, but why inequities persist.**

Practitioners can deepen this learning by designing curricula that connect past injustices to present-day challenges and by facilitating real-world advocacy experiences where participants engage directly with policymakers and advocates. Funders and partners can further this impact by resourcing experiential models that link systems education, historical understanding, and community-based leadership development.



<sup>\*</sup><https://communityfoodfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Seeding-Power-evaluation-23-24.pdf>



### 3. Turning Lived Experience into Action

► **Insight:**

STO transforms lived experience into collective actions for tangible advocacy and policy outcomes. Fellows' insights, wisdom, and priorities directly inform STO's organizational strategies, advocacy agenda, and program design. This approach creates visible feedback loops where residents witness how their voice makes a difference. **Seeing their perspectives reflected in real outcomes reinforces fellows' confidence, strengthens trust, and deepens understanding of how advocacy drives change.**

► **Recommendation:**

Organizations should treat lived experience as both evidence and strategy. Create clear mechanisms for participants' feedback to inform decision-making and policy priorities. Practitioners can strengthen impact by demonstrating to participants how their input is used. **Transparency about how insights are used sustains engagement and ensures that lived experience remains a driving force for learning, advocacy, and change.**

### 4. Centering Wellness as a Strategy

► **Insight:**

Most STO fellows navigate the compounding pressures of race, gender, and poverty and face daily challenges that impact mental, emotional, and physical health. **STO views fellows not simply as trainees or participants, but as whole people. Thus, their approach treats wellness not as an add-on but as an essential strategy for sustainability.** By integrating practices of reflection, self-care, self-love, and community support, the fellowships **help participants build emotional capacity and pursue advocacy and systems change work without sacrificing well-being.**

A key aspect of this wellness-centered approach is STO's intentional, structured support that enables fellows to fully participate. Practices such as providing stipends, adjusting schedules to accommodate childcare, and offering one-on-one outreach demonstrate care while reducing participation barriers. **These efforts make the fellowships more accessible and reflect STO's commitment to [holistic prosperity](#).**

Similar approaches in initiatives like the [Seeding Power Cohort\\*](#) and the [Promising Minds Initiative\\*\\*](#) highlight that addressing both structural and personal barriers is essential to sustaining engagement and leadership among marginalized communities.



\*<https://communityfoodfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Seeding-Power-evaluation-23-24.pdf>

\*\*<https://www.hawaiicommunityfoundation.org/file/2025/Promising-Minds-Evaluation-Report.pdf>

### Recommendation:

Programs that build advocacy or leadership capacity should **invest equally in participants' emotional, social, and material well-being**. Wellness should be integrated into program structures through both subjective practices (e.g. self-care, reflection, affirmation) and structural supports (e.g., stipends, flexible scheduling, mentorship). Funders and practitioners can amplify impact by resourcing mentorship and healing-centered spaces recognizing that **care is not peripheral, but rather a prerequisite for sustained engagement**.

## 5. Adaptive by Design

### ► Insight

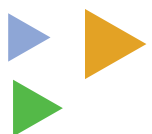
**STO fellowships are intentionally designed to evolve** alongside the changing realities of fellows and the broader sociopolitical context. Curriculum, guest speakers, and experiential learning adapt based on fellows' feedback and current events, ensuring relevance and responsiveness. This flexibility enables fellows to connect learning directly to lived experience and equips them to address challenges with confidence.

### ► Recommendation

Organizations should design advocacy, leadership, or systems change programs with **built-in adaptability**. Content and activities should be flexible enough to evolve based on participant input and changing conditions. Continuous feedback loops and iterative evaluation are essential to help keep programming responsive and effective.

STO exemplifies this approach in its close integration within residents' housing communities, leveraging these relationships to continuously assess how fellowships can best serve residents' needs. Similarly, programs like [Seeding Power](https://communityfoodfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Seeding-Power-evaluation-23-24.pdf)\* and the [Mississippi Community Research Fellows Training](https://jces.ua.edu/articles/115/files/62e3e02bb92ff.pdf)\*\* incorporated structured cycles of evaluation and reflective learning that, like STO, positioned fellows' insights as a strategic asset. These practices strengthen program responsiveness *and* enable organizations to track how their collective work contributes to building community power.

**Taken together, these insights reveal what it means to build change *with* communities rather than *for* them. Springboard's approach is one that honors lived experience, nurtures well-being, and transforms collective wisdom into action. STO's fellowship model demonstrates that when residents are trusted as the architects of change, transformational change is possible.**



\*<https://communityfoodfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Seeding-Power-evaluation-23-24.pdf>  
\*\*<https://jces.ua.edu/articles/115/files/62e3e02bb92ff.pdf>

# CLOSING REFLECTIONS

## Process and Outcome Learnings

This evaluation affirms that the fellowship process aligns closely with STO's mission to lead with resident voice. Each fellowship is co-developed with residents, strengthening both the programs themselves and STO's broader advocacy initiatives while advancing policy priorities grounded in lived experience.

Emerging outcomes are clear. Fellows described reclaiming their voices and developing a deeper understanding of how public policy shapes their lives. Many reported feeling newly empowered to engage with systems, advocate for themselves and their families, and share what they learned with their communities.

Within Jackson's complex political landscape, fellows acknowledged persistent fears of judgment and retaliation, particularly for Black women who rely on social safety net programs. Yet they emphasized that the fellowships provided language, encouragement, and collective support to confront these fears. Knowing that STO stands behind their advocacy is a critical source of strength.

## Voice and Power Reclamation

Fellows reported gaining the confidence, skills, and tools to translate knowledge into action. For many, this meant becoming stronger advocates for their children and families, speaking up when they witnessed inequities, and obtaining access to resources needed to thrive. One participant shared that the fellowship prepared her to “*speak up about things [she] had concerns about,*” which led to her child receiving vital support at school.

Storytelling also emerged as a powerful form of advocacy. By connecting their lived experiences to policy knowledge, participants reclaimed both voice and agency—transforming from observers into active advocates aware that their voices can drive tangible change.

**The outcomes mirror the pathways outlined in the [Fellowship Theory of Change](#), demonstrating that the fellowships are achieving their intended impact and laying essential groundwork for sustained community leadership and systemic transformation.**

**STO's fellowship model aligns with best practices observed in other community-based fellowship and cohort programs. STO weaves together core values of participatory engagement, collaborative program design and feedback, network building, wellness and adaptability to effectively support marginalized communities in connecting with the democratic process and exercising their power to improve their realities.**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to Springboard to Opportunities for continued partnership and commitment to advancing resident-led systems change. Special thanks to the Fellowship Director, Paheadra Robinson and STO staff for their time, insight, support, and feedback throughout this evaluation process.

We are especially grateful to Carleen, our alumni consultant, whose wisdom and thoughtful guidance ensured that fellows' voices remained central to the evaluation.

Heartfelt thanks to Bernice, Ashley, Shomari, and Deborah, the four alumni fellows who participated in the meaning-making session and whose reflections added depth, context, and richness to this report. We also thank all current and alumni fellows who completed the survey and shared their experiences and stories.

**Your stories, perspectives, and advocacy illuminate the transformative power of community voice and continue to shape what resident-driven change can look like in Jackson, Mississippi, and beyond.**

In Partnership,

Social Insights Research  
Jamela Clark & Christyl Wilson Ebba

