

ALL DUE RESPECT

YOUTH ORGANIZING IN THE BAY AREA

**AN EXPLORATION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL LABOR STANDARDS**

*A report of initial research findings
October 2023*

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Introduction

All Due Respect is a national effort working in partnership with organizers, executive directors and funders to set, strengthen and improve labor standards for community organizers, leading to more sustainable organizations and more effective movements. We know that organizers are essential to our movements, and everything we do is geared at building the trust, relationships, and community that is central to organizing work. We are led by former organizers who understand that organizing is already hard under the best conditions, and that the only way forward is to build that much needed trust by working within the ecosystem to create the standards that they deserve. This work follows our national report from April 2022, “All Due Respect: Building Strong Organizations by Creating Fair Labor Standards for Organizers,” on the current state of job quality in the community organizing sector. Findings were sobering but not surprising:

- Nine out of ten organizers reported being burned out and contemplating leaving organizing work altogether;
- Executive directors are struggling to hire and retain organizers and do not have the resources they need to pay more competitive salaries and better support staff; and
- Funders are beginning to recognize their responsibility to ensure that organizations they fund uphold a basic set of standards, but are unsure how to take action.

Building on these national findings, in early 2023, All Due Respect began partnering with the East Bay Community Foundation and the RYSE Youth Center on a research-to-action project to explore current labor conditions for youth organizers in the Bay Area, spurred by the levels of burnout and turnover that groups were anecdotally experiencing. Many young people who are engaging in social justice and community organizing are experiencing difficult working conditions. As a result, they are often choosing instead to pursue a different line of work or struggling to envision a long-term future for themselves as an organizer.



Introduction (cont.)

Taking an ecosystem-wide approach, All Due Respect, East Bay Community Foundation and the RYSE Center sought to identify specific challenges and barriers to youth organizer retention and identify potential interventions in response. While we acknowledge that there is no one specific way to be a community organizer, for the sake of this project we are describing “youth organizing” in two ways:

1. Young people ages 16–26 who are organizing other young people.
2. Young people ages 16–26 who work on a nonprofit organizing team either full or part time (and organize people of all ages).

The first phase of this project entailed conducting research with directors and organizers in community and power building organizations in the Bay Area, defined as nine counties in Northern California including: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma.

The following report details these findings, outlines unanswered questions and ideas to explore further, and uplifts an initial set of interventions that emerged from this phase of research. To maintain the privacy of each individual, all quotations used are anonymous. As this project moves into the next phase, this report will serve as a resource and foundation for Bay Area power building stakeholders—from funders and organizational leaders to youth organizers themselves—to identify, co-create and refine interventions to test together.

Key Themes

From April to September 2023, All Due Respect spoke with executive directors, organizing directors and organizers, with the aim of illuminating the specific challenges organizations and youth organizers are facing, as well as uplifting the types of interventions that may improve working conditions and raise labor standards in the Bay Area youth organizing ecosystem.

Through these conversations, several key themes emerged. For the purpose of this report, we will be focusing on three:

01. Compensation & Financial Stability

Youth organizers are experiencing a significant challenge as it relates to the skyrocketing cost of living in the Bay Area. Many organizations are struggling to have salaries reflect the needs of organizers living and working in the communities they are serving, which leads to organizers moving out of the Bay Area or leaving their roles altogether.

02. Training & Support from Leadership

Mental wellness, burnout rates, and workload sustainability are all factors contributing to the challenge of retention in organizing jobs. Youth organizers in this study indicated that their working conditions would improve with increased access to position-specific training (especially for more green organizers), more shared learning spaces in the youth organizing sector, and added capacity to their teams.

03. Sustaining Organizations & the Bay Area Youth Organizing Ecosystem

Much of the landscape of the Bay Area organizing ecosystem is saturated, which can lead to competing for resources as well as an ever changing cohort of organizations to build a cohesive movement with. Interviewees expressed a need from funders for more understanding of the nebulous nature of organizing, as well as more attention paid to the infrastructure and capacity building that would allow organizational leadership to have a greater focus on programs.

Methodology & Bay Area Rationale

The Bay Area is home to a rich legacy of community organizing and social movements, shaping a distinct landscape of base-building and power-building organizations, coalitions and campaigns. Throughout this research, participants reflected on how this sense of place informs their organizing, referencing the history of Bay Area activism and its impact on their lives and the world of organizing. At the same time, the region is in the midst of rapidly rising costs of living and the impacts of gentrification and displacement, amplifying the choices young organizers may be facing about career pathways, job stability and their ability to stay and work in the places they grew up.

Against this backdrop, and amidst the impacts of the pandemic, the RYSE Center recognized a growing challenge of retention and burnout, specifically among youth organizers. While organizer turnover and burnout is not a new phenomenon —All Due Respect’s own research found that 79% of organizers had thought about leaving the field, and a recent National Council of Nonprofits study reported nearly 3 in 4 nonprofits currently facing job vacancies—RYSE was particularly interested in understanding the specific experiences of youth organizers, and if there were particular challenges facing the field that they and others in the Bay Area youth organizing ecosystem could identify and mitigate. This inquiry formed the basis of the initial research.

79%

of youth organizers we surveyed considered leaving the field



3 out of 4 non-profits are facing job vacancies

Methodology & Bay Area Rationale (cont.)

The research phase of this project was shaped by All Due Respect, the RYSE Center and the East Bay Community Foundation, with the aim of gathering perspectives from multiple audiences. Through interviews, surveys and focus groups, the research sought to understand:

- The current state of working conditions for youth organizers in the Bay Area;
- How working conditions for organizers in the Bay Area affect organizational impact and the progressive movements of which they are a part;
- What potential interventions would help create a more just, supportive and sustainable work environment for youth organizers in the Bay Area; and
- Where to focus potential interventions to improve working conditions for youth organizers.

Throughout the period of April to September 2023, All Due Respect conducted one-on-one 45 minute virtual interviews with 24 executive directors and organizing directors, gathered 45 surveys from youth organizers via online form, and held a total of four 90 minute focus groups, three in-person with youth organizers and one virtually with senior organizers and organizing managers. These conversations and surveys covered topics related to:

- Recruitment and retention of youth organizers;
- Advantages and challenges of organizing in the Bay Area;
- Job satisfaction and longevity within the youth organizing sector;
- Circumstances and working conditions specific to organizations with youth organizing programs.

This report summarizes key themes, takeaways and insights from that research, and moreover, is meant to build on and be in conversation with other recent studies such as RYSE's May 2022 Conversations with Young People on Safety, Belonging and Organizing and Youth Organize! California's September 2023 Equitable Youth Compensation in California Youth Organizing.

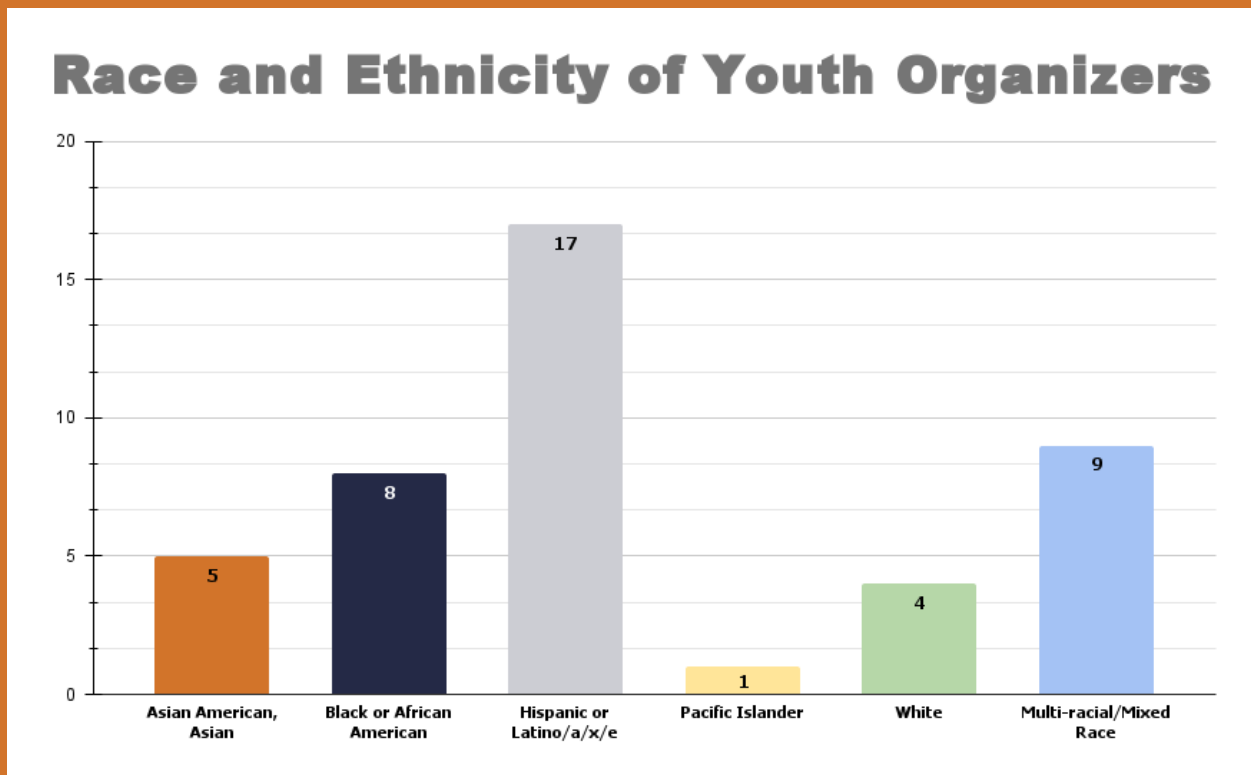
This research builds on other recent studies such as RYSE's May 2022 report, "Conversations with Young People on Safety, Belonging and Organizing," and Youth Organize! California's September 2023 report, "Equitable Youth Compensation in California Youth Organizing." We look forward to continued conversation and partnership with these groups and others.



Survey Demographics

Race and Ethnicity

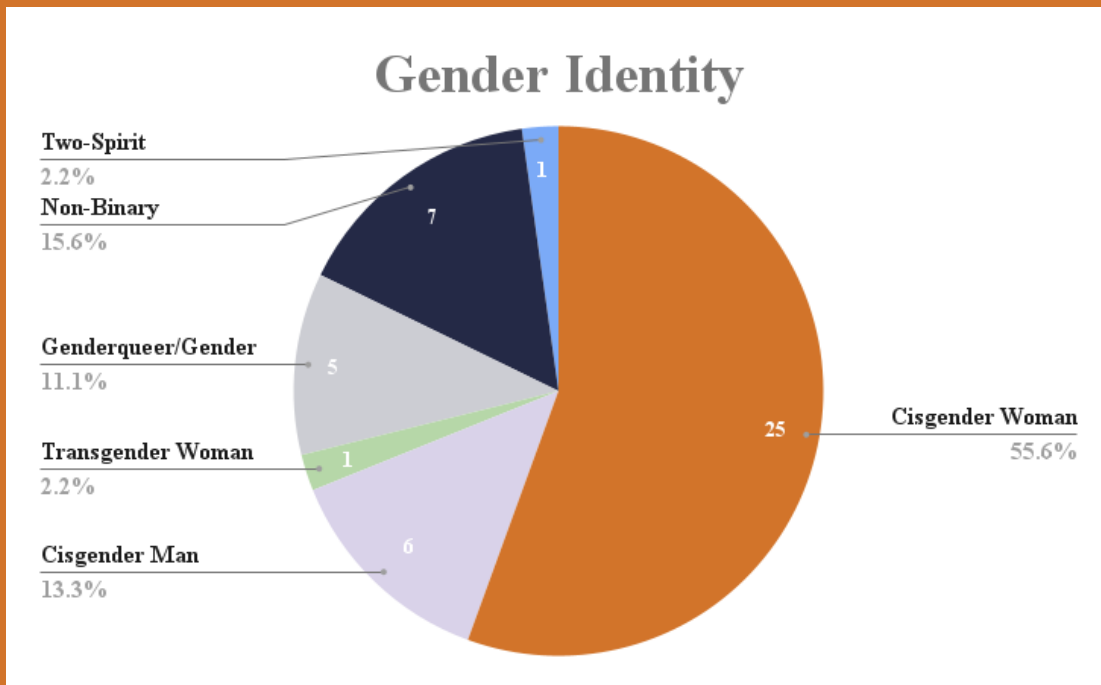
We surveyed 45 youth organizers across the Bay Area. Data from the survey revealed that respondents represented a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds including Asian/Asian American, Black and/or African American, Hispanic or Latinx, Pacific Islander, White, and Multi-Racial. We found that of those surveyed, Hispanic or Latinx respondents represented the majority of the sample with 17 respondents while Pacific Islanders were the least represented with only one respondent.



Survey Demographics

Gender Identity

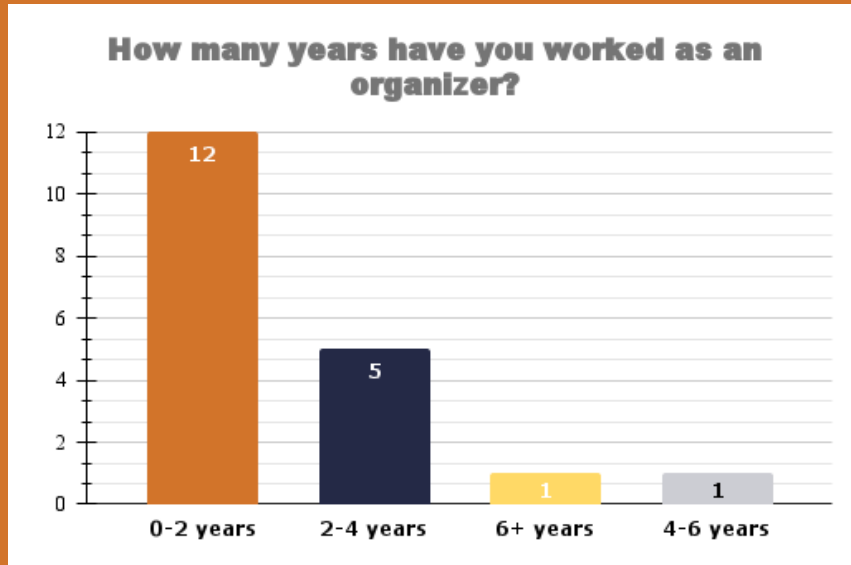
Organizers in the survey represented a broad range of gender identities. The survey captured organizers who are trans women, cisgender women, cisgender men, non-binary, genderqueer and fluid, non-binary, and Two Spirit. Of those surveyed, cisgender women represent the majority of the sample with 25 respondents with Two Spirit as the least represented with only one respondent.



Survey Demographics

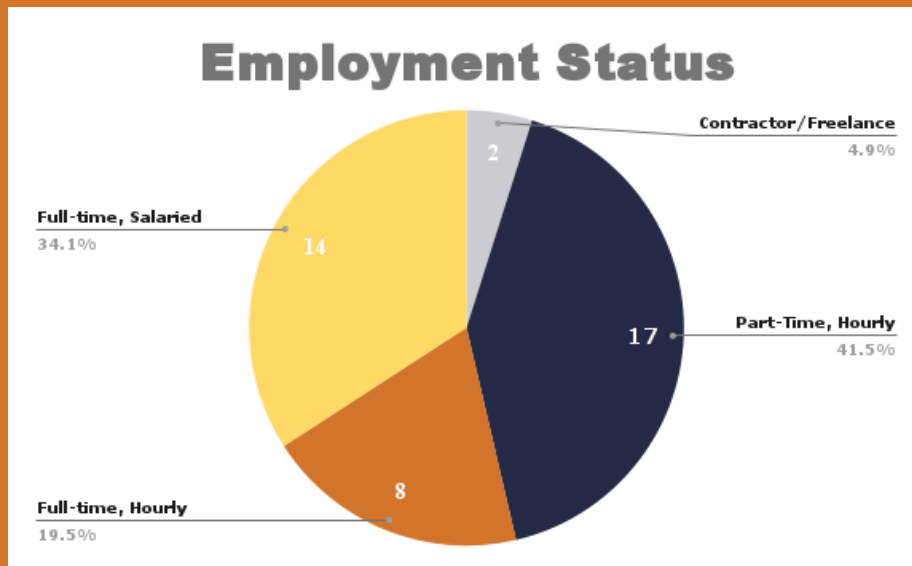
Years of Experience

The survey captured that youth organizers have a wide range of experience as organizers. The majority of respondents have been organizing for two years or less while organizers with over six years experience represented the least of the sample.



Employment Status

The survey also captured experiences from organizers who represented a range of employment statuses from freelance contractors to full-time salaried employees. Part time salaried employees represent the majority of the sample with 17 respondents while freelance contract employees represent the least respondents with only 2 respondents.



Findings & Toplines

In the vibrant landscape of the Bay Area, where the ideals of community organizing intersect with the realities of a skyrocketing cost of living, conversations with youth organizers and executive directors have revealed a number of challenges and aspirations. During conversations with youth organizers and directors, the three most common recurring themes were: compensation and financial stability, training and movement building, and sustaining organizations and the Bay Area organizing ecosystem. This section will highlight research findings within these themes.

Compensation & Financial Stability:

For youth organizers on the front lines, compensation is the foremost concern. Of the youth organizers we surveyed, **the salary range for full time organizers is between a fellowship stipend of \$9,000 and a ceiling of \$75,000 for salaried positions. The median salary is \$60,270 annually.** Of the organizers we surveyed, the majority of salaried organizers are paid between \$70,000 and \$75,000 annually. Hourly employees report a range between \$15 and \$34 per hour with a median of \$25 per hour. The majority of hourly employees report making \$25 per hour. These organizers speak of being underpaid, struggling to make ends meet in the face of rising costs of living, and the stress of financial precarity.

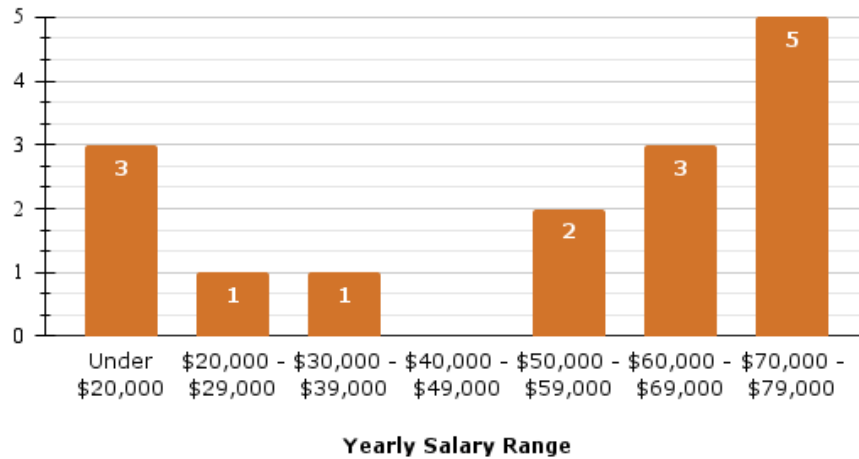
One youth organizer remarked, **“when I first started, I was barely making ends meet to survive. The stress of working and wanting to do my best but also having to go home and be like, what am I going to eat? I am broke as hell. That was really hard... And it's not like our job pays terribly. They pay decent for the Bay, but with my rent so high. It was really hard to balance everything.”**

It's a tough balancing act for organizations as well. Directors acknowledge that low wages often deter prospective organizers, but they grapple with the daunting task of offering a living wage amid the uncertainty of funding sources, often taking incredibly low salaries themselves.

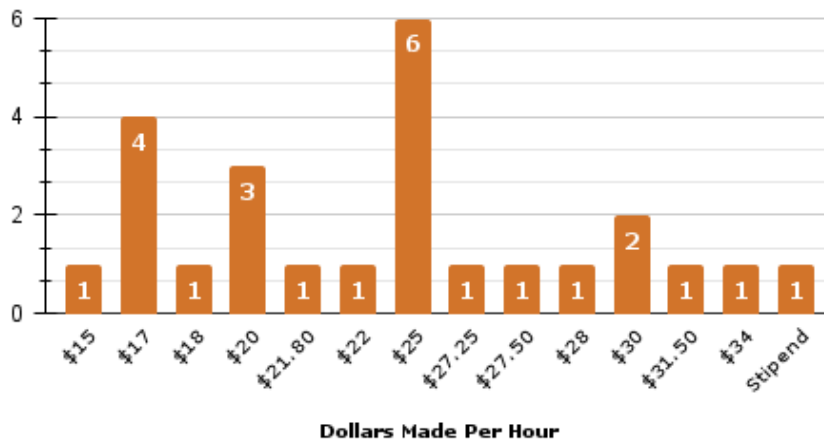
“I WAS BARELY MAKING ENDS MEET TO SURVIVE... HAVING TO GO HOME AND BE LIKE, WHAT AM I GOING TO EAT? I AM BROKE AS HELL.”

Youth Organizer

SALARIES OF FULL TIME EMPLOYEES



HOURLY WAGES



Cost of Living in the Bay Area:

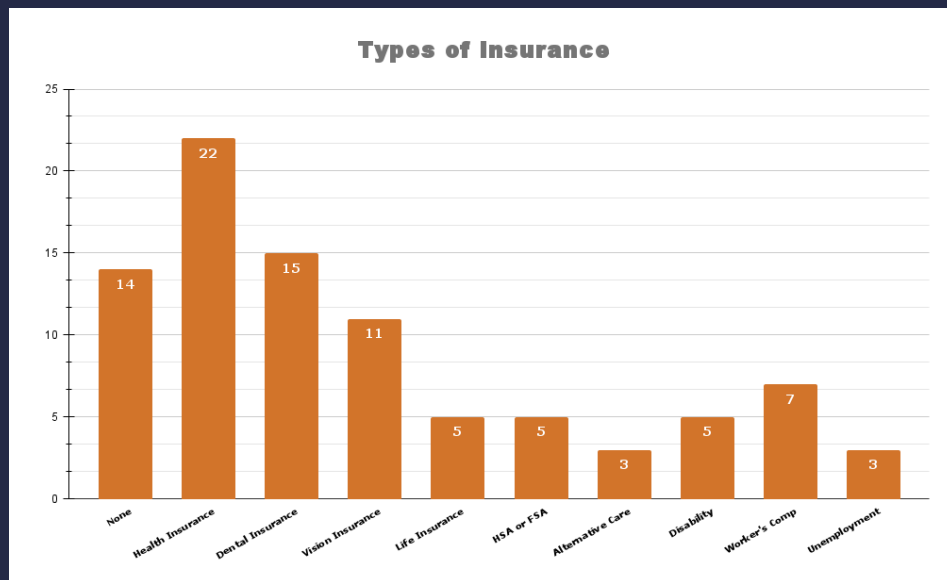
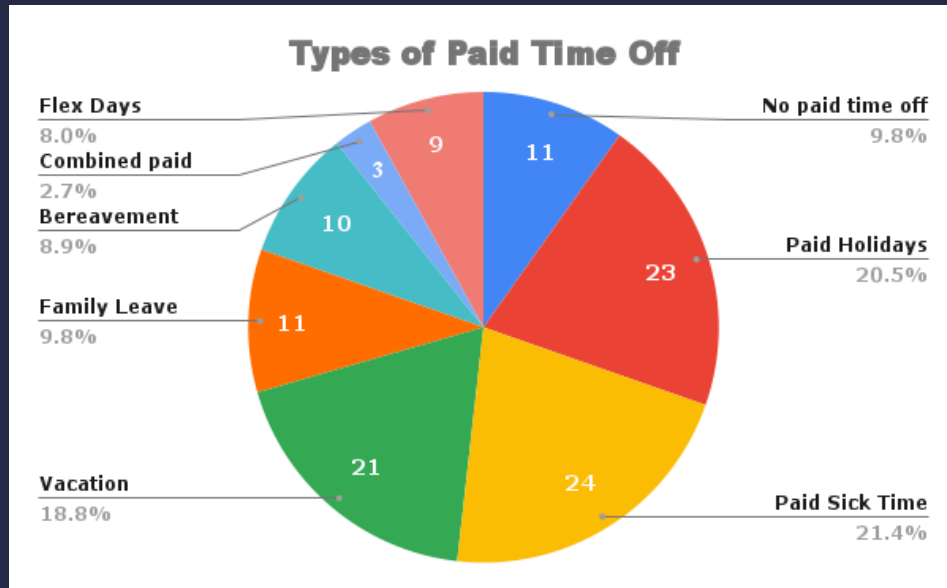
The high cost of living in the Bay Area was mentioned in every single interview and focus group that was conducted in this study. In order to make ends meet, some organizers need to get a second job, which leaves them with less capacity to focus on their organizing roles. Additionally, youth organizers are priced out of the cities where they grew up, forcing them to leave the communities where they are rooted and the neighborhoods they are organizing. While each year the cost of living grows steadily (and has since August 2020), grant amounts do not increase proportionally, leaving the gap significantly wider every year.

Financial Instability & Uncertainty

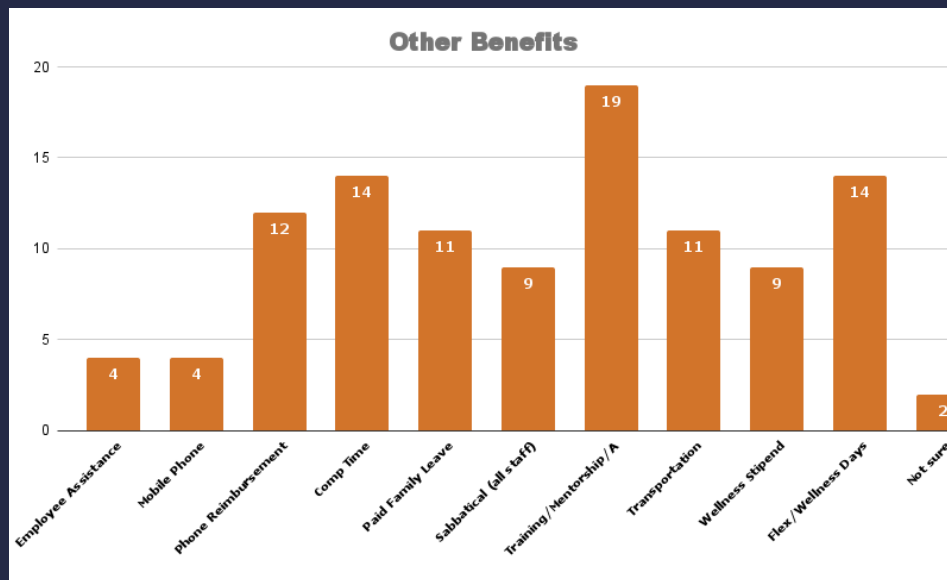
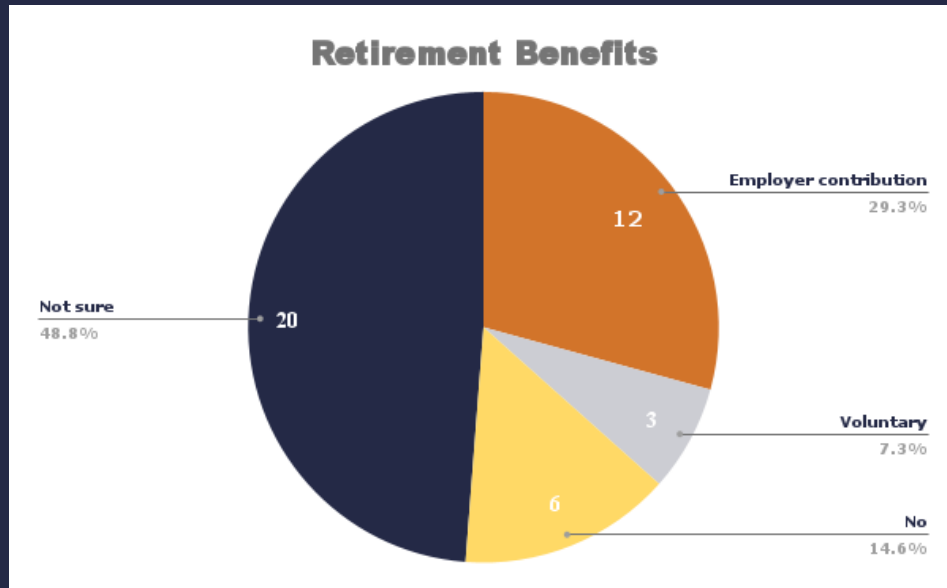
This high cost of living leads to pressing concerns among youth organizers about financial instability and uncertainty. Organizers often find themselves working long, inconsistent hours and juggling multiple jobs. Despite the vital nature of their work, many face uncertain job security, with some resorting to "freelance organizing"—working multiple organizing contracts at a time across multiple organizations—just to piece together a livable wage. Organizers also have concerns about benefits, or for some, a lack thereof. Survey data reveals that the majority of full time employees receive some sort of benefits from paid time off to health insurance to retirement benefits. Despite having benefits like health insurance and paid time off, conversations from focus groups with organizers highlight that even minor emergencies become potential financial catastrophes due to a lack of savings or cushion. Therefore, even though some organizers have access to these benefits, low wages remain a persistent problem for both part time and full time employees. Further, when we look at benefits such as retirement accounts, the majority of organizers are not sure of their employers' offerings, which reveals that even if organizers do have benefits, they are unclear on how to access them.



Benefits



Benefits



Training & Support from Organizational Leadership

Mental Health, Burnout, and Wellness

The nature of organizing comes with many challenges, such as working with traumatized community members, pushing through fast-paced campaigns, working evening and weekend hours, and continually facing hard campaign losses. These challenges are at the core of the emotional burnout many organizers are facing, and are often outside of the control of the organizations they work for. These challenges may be inherently part of what it means to build a base within communities that face enduring hardships. Still, leaders are recognizing that there are wellness policies and practices they can implement to help support organizers in dealing with these stressors. Youth organizers in this study have voiced the need for more material support in navigating emotional hardships and preventing burnout. Directors also understand the importance of wellness support for individuals but broaden their focus to the sustainability of the entire organizing model.

Education, Training, and Support

Numerous youth organizers advocate for a structured educational framework that equips them with historical and political context, policy expertise, and a nuanced understanding of how the non-profit landscape functions, both within their own organizations and more generally. Directors also acknowledge the importance of robust political education, seeing it as a means to empower the next generation of organizers with the knowledge and strategic skills necessary for impactful organizing work. Both groups share a common understanding that passion, while crucial, must be complemented by comprehensive political education to drive meaningful change. Organizers also seek guidance on time management, goal setting, and leadership development, recognizing that these foundational skills are integral to their long-term success. Additionally, organizers sought insight to the inner workings of their organizations, with a desire for more information around how to create budgets, board governance, and how programs are developed. Directors, cognizant of the challenges organizers face, endorse the need for comprehensive support structures for their staff.

Sustaining Organizations & the Ecosystem

The Role of Funding

Organizers and directors emphasize the significance of multi-year funding to ensure job security and community impact. They highlight challenges in the nonprofit landscape, including competition for resources, laborious grant reporting, and aligning with funders' shifting interests. Both groups urge funders to support long-term sustainability and underscored the need for authentic partnerships between funders and organizations to address systemic issues effectively.

Inclusion in Decision Making

The topic of inclusion in decision-making emerges repeatedly as youth organizers express their desire for authentic participation in their organizations. They perceive a gap between the rhetoric of being “youth-led” with the reality they experience day-to-day. One organizer remarks, “some organizations make a big... thing about that they're youth led. And then in reality the decision making structures are very not transparent, and it's like, where are the youth giving their input?” Youth organizers want to share their knowledge and experience of the broader group that they are representing and wish for this experiential expertise to be honored in decision making. Youth organizers see their inclusion as an opportunity for fresh perspectives and innovative solutions, potentially strengthening the organization's mission. This disconnect can lead to frustration and hinder effective communication. The challenge lies in striking the right balance of decision-making power between youth organizers and experienced leaders.



**ORGANIZATIONS MAKE A
BIG THING ABOUT THAT
THEY'RE YOUTH LED... AND
IT'S LIKE, WHERE ARE THE
YOUTH GIVING THEIR INPUT?**

Youth Organizer

Unique to the Bay Area Ecosystem

Tech Sector

The well-paying jobs in the booming Bay Area tech sector create a compelling alternative for young activists looking to make a living in their communities. The result is a significant and worrying retention challenge within the grassroots sphere. Even when groups are able to invest in an organizer's training, they are still competing with other sectors who have started to adopt the language of being a place to create "progressive change." While the competition for nonprofits with other higher-paying sectors is neither new nor specific to this region, Bay Area organizers have an even more enticing pathway directly to the tech industry.

Shifting Communities

Gentrification and changing demographics—like the push out of Black residents in historically Black neighborhoods—significantly impact the landscape of local organizing efforts. Gentrification, marked by the influx of wealthier residents into previously affordable neighborhoods, not only alters the socioeconomic fabric but also creates challenges for long-standing organizations who have been working in these communities. These shifts in population can also lead to displacement, pushing out organizers who have historically been at the heart of local activism and who are deeply invested in their neighborhoods. Additionally, changing demographics have left some youth organizers in the Bay Area unable to communicate fully with the immigrant communities they want to serve, particularly in communities of majority elder immigrants.



Generational Shifts

Within grassroots organizing, there is a tension between the traditional self-sacrificial models sometimes held by seasoned organizers and the evolving priorities of youth organizers of this generation. The elder generation, deeply rooted in the historical struggles of core movements bred in the Bay, like the Black Panther Party and LGBTQIA+ liberation, sometimes uphold a model of organizing characterized by relentless dedication, long hours, and personal sacrifices that were central to their movement. While some view this style of organizing as incredibly effective, it led to organizer burnout and an inability to care for themselves in their own lives.

“MAYBE IT’S BECAUSE I CUT MY TEETH FROM THE OLD VANGUARD, WHERE MOVEMENT WAS EVERYTHING AND PEOPLE SACRIFICED FAMILIES AND ALL KINDS OF OTHER SH*T.”

Nonprofit Director

When discussing the generational divide between people working in the movement, one director remarked, “There’s a rub... generationally. Maybe it’s because I also cut my teeth from the old vanguard, where movement was everything and people sacrificed families and all kinds of other sh*t... That wasn’t really healthy. And the nonprofit industrial complex was seen as a sellout. Like, if you were a [Black] Panther, you weren’t a nonprofit if you were an AIMster (American Indian Movement)... But obviously things have shifted. Most movement building work nowadays moves through 5013C’s... So there’s been that necessary counter culture around really building well being and wellness.”

In another conversation with youth organizers, this was juxtaposed when one organizer shared a story of their experiences with burnout and the need for a culture that more explicitly supports taking care of oneself: “The first year I started, I was really tired and I was getting sick a lot... I was stressed because... it’s like I was holding a lot more than I had ever held in my life... It was just a balance of trying to do my best at work [and] to show up as my best self. But I wasn’t really getting real rest... because we have so many people in our job that are like, ‘we do this no matter what.’ I wanted to show up like that. So I was pushing myself. Pushing, pushing. And I just kept getting sick...”

I WASN’T REALLY GETTING REAL REST... SO MANY PEOPLE IN OUR JOB ARE LIKE, ‘WE DO THIS NO MATTER WHAT.’ I WANTED TO SHOW UP LIKE THAT. SO I WAS PUSHING MYSELF... AND I JUST KEPT GETTING SICK.”

Youth Organizer

Young organizers are attempting to create a pathway to financial stability through paid organizing work, which ideally, will lead to higher rates of retention, job satisfaction and more effective organizations. However, this generational divide reflects not only a clash of organizing philosophies but also a broader shift in societal values, as younger activists prioritize sustainable, supportive working conditions. This generation is also coming into the workforce with different expectations of what should be provided by one's job, for example, access to mental health and wellness benefits that had previously been considered a personal choice outside of traditional health care costs.

We do not believe it is possible to make organizing inherently easy, or even a job that anyone can do. This work has always been and will always require a varied skill set and demanding schedule. However, as a movement, we can provide support that helps people move through the peaks and valleys of the work, and build organizations that take organizing seriously as a skill.



Work Structure

Some youth organizers are supplementing their organizing positions with gig economy jobs. These organizers often face job insecurity and limited access to benefits, making it difficult for them to engage consistently in community organizing efforts. Organizers who are engaging in gig work face inconsistent working conditions and are frequently searching for their next paycheck, which leaves them unable to focus on the responsibilities of their organizing positions or to do their jobs effectively.

Additionally, the Bay Area has a high concentration of undocumented workers navigating the VISA system, which presents unique hurdles like tying citizenship and immigration status to their employers. Because the VISA system is set up in a way that disallows organizations to place workers without U.S. citizenship or a green card on full-time payroll, organizers who don't have documentation are only able to take contracting roles or incremental payments, which leaves these workers without benefits like health insurance or paid time off. This not only presents a hurdle for workers seeking full-time organizing work, but also for organizations seeking to retain their organizers by providing consistent compensation and benefits.

A Saturated Non-Profit Landscape

The plethora of social justice nonprofits and community organizations in the Bay Area create opportunities for collaboration, resource sharing, community-centered partnerships, innovation, youth empowerment, and the celebration of community values. But it also fosters competition for limited funding and talent pools. Often, organizers leave their organizations for others that might provide more lucrative pay or pathways towards upward mobility. This creates competition around recruitment and retention of organizers, hindering the possibility for strategic and functional partnership as an ecosystem. By creating a shared staffing strategy and working together, these organizations could enhance their collective impact, align initiatives with local needs, generate fresh solutions, empower youth organizers, and honor the region's rich history of community activism.

For Further Exploration

Through interviews, surveys, and focus groups, certain themes began to emerge but still require further exploration.

Impact of COVID-19

Organizing work had always been done primarily in-person but quickly shifted to exclusively digital organizing during lockdown. Still now, many organizations are still playing catch up as to what it means to be an organizer with the skills needed to meet this moment of flexible online and offline engagement, and the training required to do both of those things well. Our research so far has touched on, but doesn't directly address, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grassroots organizing in the Bay Area. As we advance this work, we will continue to explore the ways in which youth organizers have been impacted by starting their organizing careers during a pandemic.

Citizenship Status

As mentioned, for youth organizers in the Bay Area who do not have citizenship status, the struggles for fair compensation and benefits are greatly exacerbated. In our interviews with directors, it's clear there is not a practical way to add undocumented organizers to payroll but instead have to rely on paying them as contractors without access to benefits. More research is needed to determine how best to support undocumented organizers and the directors who rely on them.

Freelance Organizing

The concept of "freelance organizing," which emerged in conversations with youth organizers, deserves closer examination. How do individuals engage in grassroots efforts as independent contractors or freelancers, and what are the implications for job stability, benefits, and their ability to effect change?



Adultism and Ageism

Discussions with organizers and directors revealed complicated feelings and frequent instances of adultism and ageism in grassroots organizing. Adultism, as a form of discrimination against young individuals, highlights power dynamics within organizations, emphasizing the need for increased representation that includes the input of younger leaders. While there are very real differences in how varying experience levels can inform decision-making, it is worth further exploring how instances of ageism show up in organizational processes and what pathways can be taken to incorporate the vision of young people, while also leaning on the wisdom of more seasoned leaders.

Interventions to Explore

The next phase of this work is moving from conversations into action. The interventions below represent initial jumping off points for continued exploration and additional ideas, tailored to the needs and potential of the Bay Area organizing ecosystem.

Develop Organizers Early

Creation of a multi-organization program to recruit and prepare college (and/or high school) students to become organizers, who are then placed in those same organizations in funded positions after graduation. Organizers are supported as a cohort and community throughout a five-year period of time.

Training on Organizer Retention

Development of a training module for organizational managers on recruitment and retention of BIPOC organizers, with a goal of 75% retention rate over two years within each of their organizations. Accompanied by a funder-supported process to institute transparent, thriving wage scales across participating organizations.

Focused Convenings

Funder-sponsored bi-annual convenings of members of the Bay Area power-building ecosystem including funders, directors, and organizers. Through these convenings, participants will better learn and understand the realities and specifics of the youth organizing sector and each others' jobs. Each convening could include a pre-conference day specifically for organizer training and networking.

Shared Guidelines for Organizing Positions

Development of a shared set of guidelines and best practices for the recruitment, hiring, and retention of youth organizers in the Bay Area, to be used by organizations for hiring and onboarding organizing positions including: job descriptions, responsibilities, and management strategies. Funders commit to providing the resources their grantees need to be able to adopt these guidelines.

Capacity Building Fund

Creation of a joint capacity-building fund to support the needs of youth organizers (age 16-26) through coaching, organizational development needs, compensation shifts, unionization support, and other measures. Grantees are able to apply for additional money from the joint fund on top of existing general support grants.

Cost of Living Adjustments

Funders commit to re-evaluating grant amounts and strategy annually in order to match an updated cost of living specific to the Bay Area. Additionally, funders commit to adding a standard % increase as a part of every grant renewal to support increased wages for staff.

Transparency in Wages

Funders publicly commit to asking grantees and potential grantees a set of questions related to wages and benefits, including setting a wage floor and a commitment to support the organizations who are underpaying their teams. This wage data is anonymized and shared as part of an annual reporting process to examine wages and benefits trends within the organizing sector over time.

The next phase of this project will test an intervention to improve working conditions for organizers, co-designed with local organizers, directors, and funders.

Acknowledgements

All Due Respect Program Director, Rebecca Gorena, serves as the project lead for this research and the lead author of this report.

The research team at All Due Respect is led by Co-Directors Alicia Jay and Kevin Simowitz and Program Directors Rebecca Gorena and Kara Park.

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Immense gratitude to all of the Bay Area organizers, directors, funders, and leaders without whom we would not be able to conduct this research. We are incredibly appreciative to learn alongside you as we work to improve labor conditions for a thriving organizing ecosystem.

This research and pilot would not be possible without the ongoing guidance and partnership from the RYSE Center and East Bay Community Foundation. Many thanks especially to:

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For further learnings, we encourage you to explore our national research report: "Building Strong Organizations by Creating Fair Labor Standards for Organizers," as well as our Sustainable Jobs for Organizers toolkit. Both of these can be found on our website at <https://www.allduerespectproject.org/resources>.

If you have any further questions about this ongoing project, please contact

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