

Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund



Summary

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting restrictions necessary to protect public health, brought about sudden and devastating economic consequences. While federal and state governments created relief programs to help people weather the crisis, many people were excluded from receiving this assistance. Cities across the country stepped in to fill the gap and provide direct aid to support the economic security, health, and safety of those carved out of federal and state emergency relief. Philadelphia is proud to be one of those cities.

Based on a strong partnership between the City of Philadelphia (the City), the National Domestic Workers Alliance, local and national philanthropic partners, and trusted community-based organizations, the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund was able to invest in the families and workers who have helped the city manage through the pandemic and who are essential to building a safe and healthy future for Philadelphia. The Fund distributed over \$1.7 million in emergency direct cash assistance to 2,162 Philadelphia workers who were left out of federal and state COVID-19 relief programs. Funds were distributed through a network of community-based organizations with deep relationships in communities that include excluded workers. The vast majority of recipients were people of color from very low-income households, and people used their relief funds to meet basic needs like food, rent, and clothing.

"My work closed because of COVID-19 and I lost my job. This help is very good for me because I am living very difficult times. I owe back rent and bills. Right now, I am without work and pregnant. I have to buy things for my baby. I have nothing; no stroller or crib. I will spend this on necessities for my baby. This fund is important because we did not receive a stimulus check and bills continue to grow. There are more families out there like me who did not receive a stimulus check. I would like us to be treated the same, like human beings. We work hard for a fair salary. I want to thank you for this aid that you gave us and don't forget about us. Thank you."

MARIA, RESTAURANT WORKER, POPULAR ALLIANCE FOR UNDOCUMENTED WORKER RIGHTS

The Worker Relief Fund was made possible by the generous support of our funders:



**The Mayor's Fund
for Philadelphia**

**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**

WILLIAM PENN
FOUNDATION

**The Otto Haas
Charitable Trust
at the recommendation
of Janet and John Haas**

**THE
Allen Hilles
FUND**



**Douty
Foundation**

The Challenge

The month of March 2020 is not a time any of us will soon forget. Protecting public health against the spread of COVID-19 required tough decisions—including the closure of non-life-sustaining businesses, which suddenly put millions of Americans out of work. In Philadelphia, the unemployment rate jumped from 5.9 percent in February to 18.2 percent in June,[1] and between March 15 and August 1, an average of 10,038 Philadelphians per week filed initial claims for unemployment compensation, compared to an average prior to the pandemic of 1,137 per week.[2]

Recognizing the dire economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the state and federal governments provided for direct relief programs to impacted households. While these safety net programs provided critical support for many, the restrictions placed on most of these resources prevented many of those who have the greatest need from accessing them, and significant numbers of people were intentionally excluded from programs like expanded unemployment compensation or direct stimulus payments. Those who were ineligible for this federal and state relief represented a critical part of the Philadelphia workforce. Many were essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic, serving in positions such as domestic and care workers, farmworkers, home health aides, and food delivery workers.



The lack of COVID-19 relief resources increased economic insecurity in communities already experiencing the highest prevalence of low-wage jobs and food insecurity and among workers who were already excluded from many workplace protections and government services. To support the resilience and recovery of the Philadelphia region, local government, community-based partners, and philanthropy saw a critical need to work together to ensure economic relief reached workers and families who were left out of federal and state COVID-19 relief efforts.

The Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund

Faced with this challenge, partners acted quickly to set up the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund in order to deliver \$800 in direct and flexible emergency cash assistance to people who were excluded from other relief programs. While the Fund was not able to guarantee relief to all families in need, it has been an important building block to the recovery of our communities. It has also become a model of trust-based assistance that the City and its partners will build on for future programs and for longer-term engagement with community partners on workers' rights and other issues.

"Due to COVID-19 I lost my job and I am a single mother. The first thing I will get with this money is my medicine. This fund will allow us to resolve a few problems like outstanding rent and bills and buy food as well. Thank you for helping us in this grey moment we are living through."

MARTA, RETAIL WORKER, MAKE THE ROAD PA

[1] https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.pa_philadelphia_co.htm

[2] <https://www.workstats.dli.pa.gov/dashboards/Pages/Weekly-UC.aspx>

Partners

Creation of the Fund required collaboration among many partners. The effort was led by two City departments, the Mayor's Office of Labor and the Office of Immigrant Affairs. The Mayor's Fund for Philadelphia served as fiscal sponsor for the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund, enabling the City to partner with 14 community-based organizations (CBOs) to connect to residents who were not eligible for other assistance programs. These trusted organizations held deep relationships in communities across the city and served diverse populations. The CBOs acted as key collaborators in the program design, and they each undertook unique strategies to reach and serve their distinct communities.

Community Based Organization Partners

African Cultural Alliance of North America

African Family Health Organization

Asian Americans United

Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia

Ceiba

Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church

Haitian American Voice

New Sanctuary Movement

Oxford Circle Christian Community Development Association

People's Emergency Center

Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation

National Domestic Workers Alliance

Popular Alliance for Undocumented Workers

South East Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition

To distribute funds, the City partnered with Alia Cares, an online benefits platform powered by the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) Labs. Alia Cares partnered with the prepaid card company Usio to disburse funds on prepaid debit cards that were mailed to recipients. By using an existing platform designed specifically to be accessible to low-wage workers who are excluded from many workplace protections and benefits, the Fund was able to start up quickly without having to design a new delivery system or rely on a platform that was not designed with this target population in mind. Alia also brought significant experience providing customer service and support to end users and partners.

GovLabPHL, an initiative led by the Mayor's Policy Office, helped to design data sharing and evaluation processes to ensure that the City could understand the impact of the Worker Relief Fund while respecting the privacy and data security of participants and partners.

The Worker Relief Fund was made possible by the generous support of local and national philanthropic partners, including: Open Society Foundations, the Albert and Mary Douty Foundation, William Penn Foundation, the Hilles Fund, the Otto Haas Charitable Trust at the recommendation of Janet and John Haas, and Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church. The Mayor's Fund for Philadelphia also contributed to the Worker Relief Fund in addition to acting as fiscal sponsor.



Program Design

The Worker Relief Fund was designed with one element at the forefront: trust. Direct cash assistance programs recognize that low-income families themselves know how best to meet their needs and trusts them to act in accordance without burdensome administrative requirements intended to ensure funds are used the “right” way. The Fund’s design also placed trust in CBOs to design and deliver the most effective outreach and engagement strategies to reach the target population in their communities, particularly in light of restrictions on in-person outreach due to COVID-19. Finally, the model demonstrated trust from philanthropy to fund a program concept that was not fully formed and to allow the city to co-design with CBOs instead of prescribing a formal model or trying to fit the model within their existing funding programs.

“Our clients expressed so much gratitude for this funding, which was urgently needed. They were empowered to spend the money as they needed it, and we were trusted to distribute the money as the community needed it, based on our expertise in the community.

This was a really empowering experience, all around.”

AFRICAN FAMILY HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

In addition to building a trust-based model, the Fund’s design emphasized several other elements that were critical to its success:

Inclusive design and eligibility. The Pennsylvania Domestic Workers Alliance provided input from workers about the narrative and design of the program as well as best practices from their own relief efforts. Eligibility was designed to be inclusive of all workers who were left out of state and federal relief rather than singling specific workers out. CBOs who participated in the program expressed that this helped reduce stigma and made it easier for recipients to come forward.

Existing relationships and partners in distribution. Many of the eligible workers this program was designed to reach are part of communities that have complex histories and relationships with government. Because of this, and due to the vast need and limited resources, the Fund was not intended to have an “open call” for applications. The application process was designed to depend on the existing relationships of the CBOs. The Fund empowered CBOs to conduct outreach and screen eligibility even before a person could be invited to apply for the fund. This allowed CBOs to quickly identify and vet eligible applicants. In addition, each CBO who participated in the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund partnered with ally organizations in order to distribute codes to eligible applicants. This increased the CBOs capacity to distribute funds to diverse communities across the city.

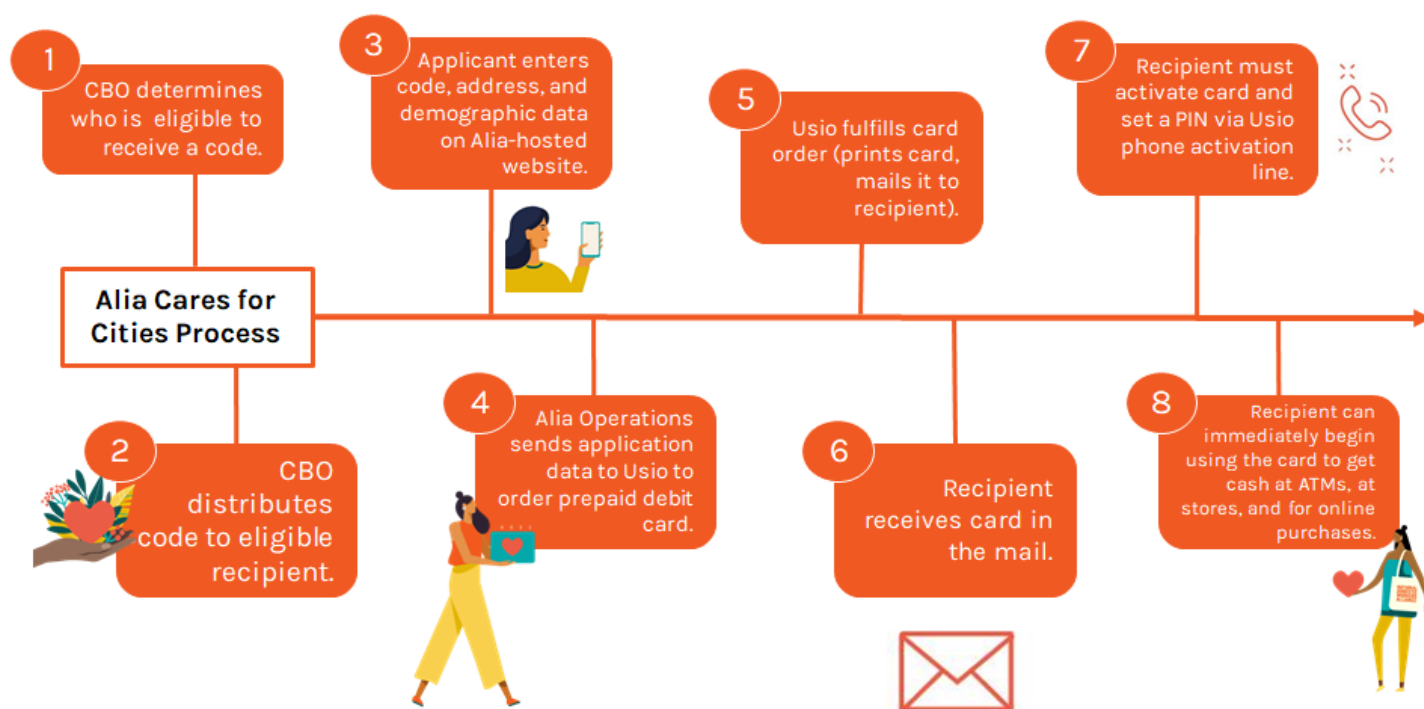
Accessibility. While each CBO had room to tailor their outreach to their unique community, accessibility was a high priority across the board in program design.

- *Language:* The City provided translations for key materials. In addition to the website content and application in Spanish, the application script was made available in 17 languages for the CBOs to use in their engagement efforts.
- *Application:* Some CBOs opted to complete applications via phone for their community to increase access for those speaking other languages and having low literacy. Some opted to have applicants complete a simple form in their preferred language, which the CBO then populated into the actual application. The application was designed in a mobile-accessible format so it could be completed on a phone or tablet.

- **Communications:** Alia Cares hosted weekly office hours where City partners joined CBOs to troubleshoot and discuss next steps. The Mayor's Office of Labor and Alia Cares staffed hotlines for CBOs and applicants to answer questions. Alia Cares also had the ability to call and send text messages to recipients to help them through the card activation process.

Privacy and protection. Decisions about data collection and retention among each of the partners involved in the program design prioritized privacy of workers. Application questions were set with the primary intention of collecting information needed to affirm eligibility and efficiently deliver the debit card payment to the worker. All other demographic fields were optional. The project team also ensured that the application questions complied with the city's welcoming policies which do not permit any inquiry into a resident's immigration status.

The City and Alia Cares provided training to CBOs to help them understand eligibility requirements and the application process. Once screened by a CBO, eligible recipients received a unique code in order to complete the application on the Alia Cares platform. The full application process is outlined in the graphic below.



Graphic provided by Alia Cares

Results

Methodology

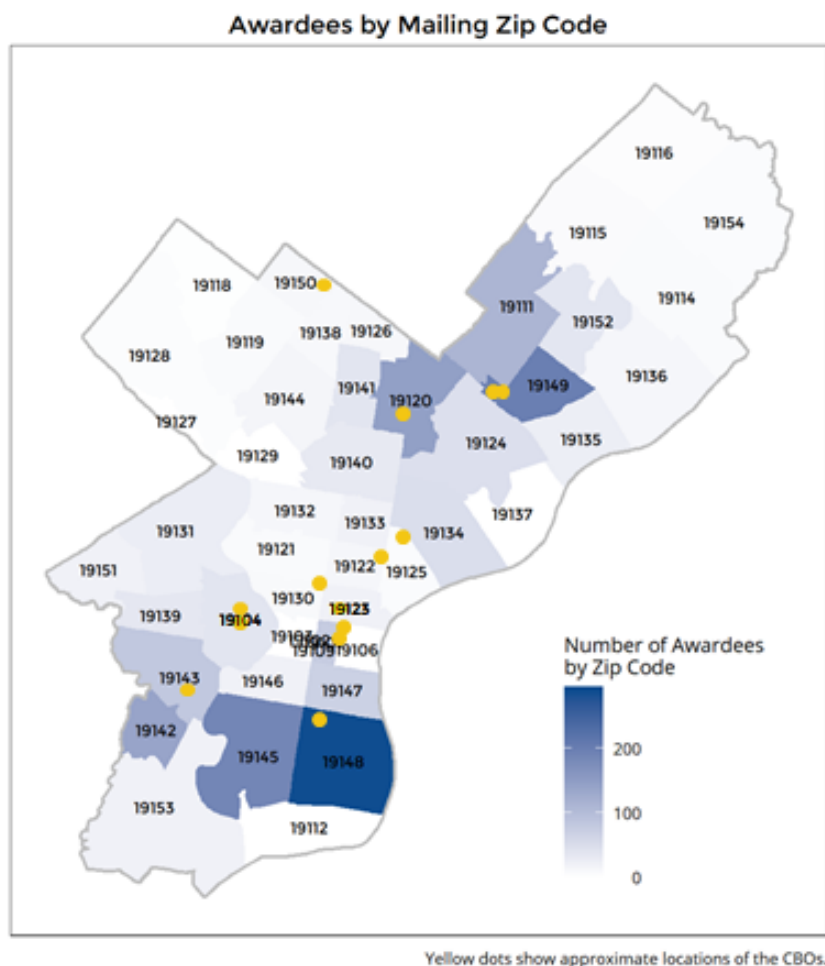
Through the Alia Cares platform, NDWA Labs provided GovLabPHL with de-identified applicant data to analyze. Bi-weekly updates were provided to track progress towards the goal of CBOs distributing all the codes before they expired. The data also included self-reported demographic information, allowing a breakdown of who received funds by gender, race/ethnicity, age range, household income, and household size. To understand spending trends, GovLabPHL analyzed de-identified transaction data from the prepaid cards, provided by Usio.

Application Process

CBOs were able to vet applicants and help them complete the application quickly. Over a period of only a month and a half (July 7, 2020 through August 28, 2020), 2,206 application codes were used—about 45 codes per day and 99 percent of all the codes issued. Of the applications submitted, almost all (97 percent) of the applications were approved. Just 0.7 percent were reissues—applications where there was an issue with the application or debit card, including mailing address updates or lost debit cards that needed to be reissued. Only 44 applications were rejected, almost all of which were noted as duplicate applications.

Two-thirds of the applications (68 percent) were completed in English and one-third (32 percent) were completed in Spanish. This only reflects the language of the application in the Alia Cares system, not whether a translator or other assistance was provided. Given the diversity of languages spoken by applicants, many of the CBOs provided additional support either by assisting individuals in various languages as they completed the application or providing translated materials.

Once the application was complete, it took a relatively short amount of time for the payment process to begin. Of the applications that were approved without issue (2,147 applications), 56 percent of the applications took less than one day from its submission to approve the payment. Twenty-eight percent took one day, fourteen percent took two days, and three percent took three or more days but were approved within one week.



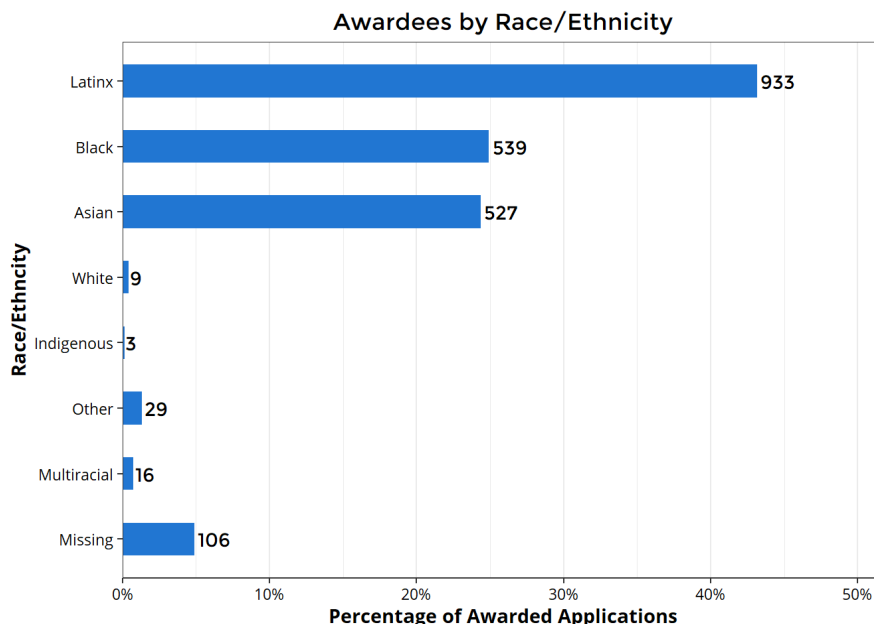
Who Received Funds?

Using data provided on the application, GovLabPHL was able to analyze demographic data of the 2,162 people who received funds.

Of people with mailing addresses in Philadelphia and excluding those who opted to have their cards mailed to the CBO (1,971 awardees), many awardees were located in South, West, and Northeast Philadelphia. Many CBOs reached individuals beyond the immediate surrounding area of their physical location. The map at left may not reflect the zip code of an awardee's residence if they opted to mail the card to a different address such as a trusted neighbor, family member, or friend due to privacy or security concerns.

Funds were awarded to almost twice as many females compared to males (58 percent and 35 percent, respectively). Less than 1 percent identified as another gender, and 7 percent opted to not disclose their gender as this question was optional on the application.

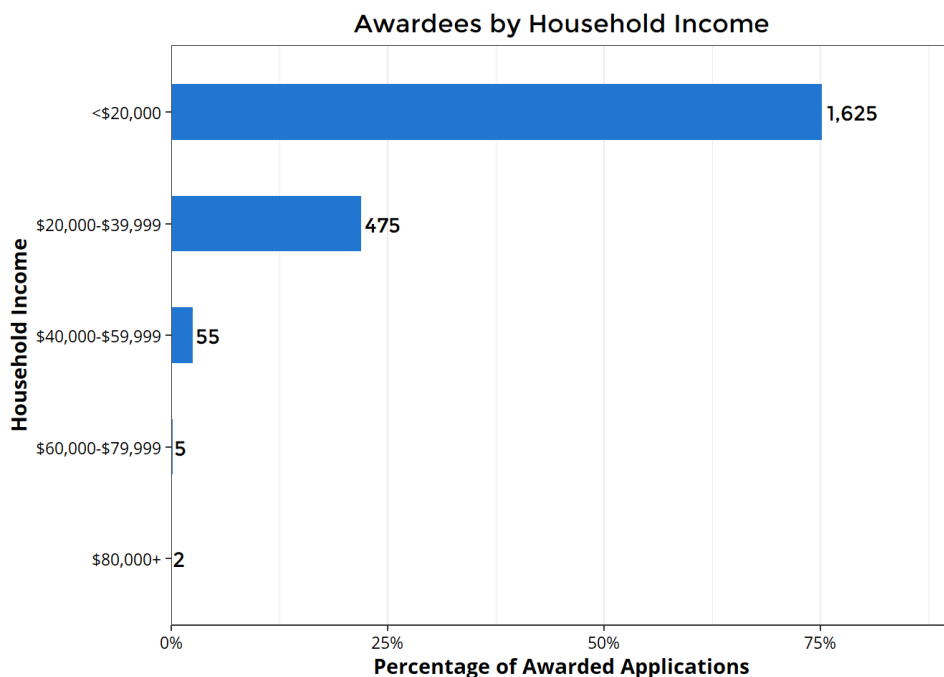
Nearly all of the funds were awarded to people of color, which make up a greater proportion of immigrants, domestic and essential workers, and individuals with low-income. Forty-three percent of awardees were Latinx, a quarter of awardees were Black, and another quarter (24 percent) were Asian. Three percent identified as another race or were multiracial, and 5 percent opted to not disclose their race or ethnicity as this question was also optional.



When comparing gender and race together, Latinx awardees were more likely to identify as female than other awardees, and Asian awardees were less likely to identify as female than other awardees. Black awardees had similar proportions of females and males.

More than half the funds were awarded to individuals between 30 and 49 years old (57 percent). Seventeen percent of awardees were 18 to 29 years old. Twenty-four percent of funds went to individuals ages 50 to 69, and a small percentage (3 percent) were 70 or older.

Funds were awarded to households of varying sizes. Thirty-two percent of awardees had one or two members in their household. Forty-four percent had three or four household members. Nineteen percent had five or six. A small percentage (5 percent) had seven or more. The distribution of household size was relatively similar across all household income ranges.



Almost all of the funds were awarded to very low-income families, with about 75 percent of awardees having a household income of less than \$20,000. Another twenty-two percent had a household income of \$20,000 to \$39,999. The rest, just 3 percent of recipients, had a household income of \$40,000 or more.



The table at right shows the awardee demographics compared to the overall population demographics of Philadelphia, calculated using 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data. The Worker Relief Fund reached relatively more people who identify as female, people of color, low-income households, and larger households compared to the overall population makeup of Philadelphia.

Where Did Recipients Spend Funds?

Using transaction data provided by Usio, GovLabPHL was able to analyze how the funds were being spent by awardees. While there may be delays between when cards were issued to awardees and their activation, the card loads were spent quickly and consistently over time. As of October 20, 2020 (date of the most recent transaction report), 90.3% of issued funds (\$1,561,221 of \$1,729,600) had been spent.

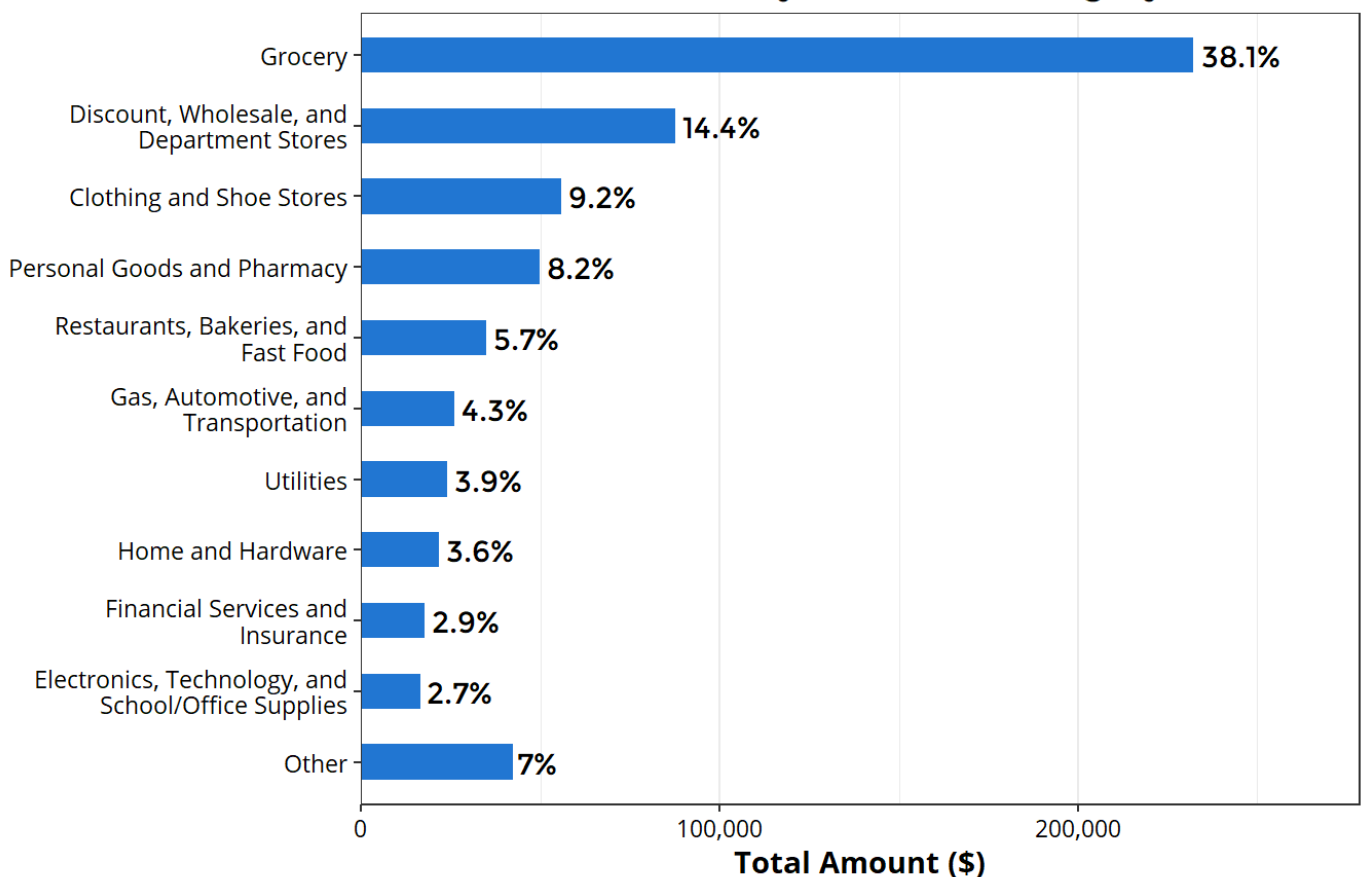
Fifty-nine percent of all funds were withdrawn in cash using ATMs or another source. While there was no way to track spending of the cash, the high use of cash might suggest that awardees are more comfortable with cash and/or reside in neighborhoods with more cash businesses. Some responses to surveys conducted with recipients indicate that cash may have also been used for some large payments, such as rent, where a card is not typically accepted.

Demographic Category	WRF Awardees	Philadelphia
Gender (18+ population)		
Female	58%	54%
Male	35%	46%
Nonbinary/Third Gender	0.1%	NA
Transgender	0.1%	NA
Other	0.4%	NA
Race/Ethnicity (18+ population)		
Latinx	43%	12%
Black	25%	40%
Asian	24%	7%
White	0.4%	39%
Indigenous	0.1%	0.2%
Other	1.3%	0.4%
Multiracial	0.7%	1.6%
Age		
<18	NA	22%
18-29	17%	21%
30-49	57%	26%
50-69	24%	22%
70+	3%	9%
Household Income		
<\$20,000	75%	29%
\$20,000-\$39,999	22%	22%
\$40,000-\$59,999	3%	16%
\$60,000-\$79,999	0.2%	10%
\$80,000+	0.1%	23%
Household Size		
1	14%	39%
2	18%	28%
3	22%	14%
4	23%	10%
5	13%	5%
6	6%	2%
7	3%	0.8%
8	1%	0.3%
9	0.3%	0.1%
10	0.1%	0.01%
11+	0.2%	0.1%

59%
of all funds were
withdrawn in cash

Thirty-eight percent of the funds were used for direct purchases or bill payments where information on the merchant category was collected. Transaction data included over 170 merchant category codes assigned to each purchase made directly from the cards. These codes were categorized into summary categories for analysis. (Cashback transactions, representing 2% of funds, were excluded.) The data indicated that funds spent directly from the cards were predominantly used at merchants selling goods for basic needs, such as food and clothing. The graph below shows the distribution of funds spent across summary categories.

Purchases by Merchant Category



Direct purchase transactions and 3rd party bill payments only.

The top five spending categories among direct card purchases were:

- Grocery stores and supermarkets (38 percent of purchases)
- Discount, wholesale, and department stores (14 percent)
- Clothing and shoe stores (9 percent)
- Personal goods and pharmacies (8 percent)
- Restaurants, bakeries, and fast food (6 percent)

Kay is a single mother who lives with her elderly mother and her four-year-old son. Kay lost her elderly father about seven months ago, in a tragic accident. In addition to supporting her mom and her young son, Kay is financially supporting her other two children who live elsewhere. When the pandemic started in spring 2020, Kay was laid off from the dry cleaner that she was working at. She is not eligible for unemployment benefits. Kay received her Worker Relief Fund and was very thankful because this funding helps her entire family to breathe more easily. This is a hard time for immigrants. We come to this country and we try so hard to make it better for our families.

SUBMITTED BY SEAMAAC

Lessons Learned

Over the course of less than two months, the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund delivered more than \$1.7 million in emergency cash assistance to 2,162 Philadelphians who had been excluded from state and federal relief programs. In the process, the City learned important lessons that will continue to inform how we reach and serve excluded workers and build a more inclusive safety net.

Develop strong community-based partnerships. It took the will and engagement of many partners—each bringing different strengths and playing a unique role in planning, designing, and administering the Fund. In particular, the leadership of CBOs was critical to building trust among communities with understandable distrust of public institutions.

Make communication easy and accessible. Residents and CBOs had convenient and accessible ways to get more information about the program. A daily hotline was staffed for inquiries along with weekly office hours and email updates. Language access was available for the hotline, and translated resources were provided. Alia Cares also had the ability to text recipients. For example, if a recipient had not activated their card, Alia Cares could send a text message to remind them how to complete the activation process.



Design with intention to anticipate barriers and evaluate impact. Partners were committed to designing an accessible program that minimized the burden on CBOs and recipients and got funds into workers' pockets quickly. The team also prioritized evaluation discussions at the onset of the program design to ensure the City could access de-identified program data in order to monitor progress along the way and understand who was reached at the conclusion of the program.

Looking Ahead

At a critical moment, the Philadelphia Worker Relief Fund was an investment in the recovery of our neighborhoods and an initial building block for a safe and healthy future for all Philadelphians. Recipients include domestic workers, restaurant staff, gig workers, factory employees, and more. Despite being part of the backbone of America's economy, excluded workers were left behind by the federal government's major COVID-19 relief efforts. By providing these individuals and their families with \$800 each in cash, the Fund made an immediate impact on their lives. When given the flexibility to make their own decisions about how to spend cash relief, recipients made decisions based on the most urgent needs for their families—everything from rent and utilities to groceries and gas.

Many of the workers who were excluded from state and federal relief programs are also those who are most likely to experience labor law violations. The Mayor's Office of Labor will build on the positive relationships developed through the Worker Relief Fund and will continue to work with participating CBOs to promote the City's labor laws that protect workers as they return to work and help to rebuild the economy.

The success of the Worker Relief Fund shows that cash assistance can work. It is also a reminder that cash assistance can do more good when families have access to funds before a crisis hits. For many, emergency relief comes too late. Based on the success of the Worker Relief Fund, Mayor Kenney joined Mayors for a Guaranteed Income to advocate for cash assistance programs and to learn from a network of cities across the country that are invested in identifying the most effective ways to deliver cash assistance.

"For me, this support means so much to me as a single mother. Being able to receive this money gives me hope that I am taken into account and supported because I don't qualify for any other kind of government support. It's the ability to breath a little better because now I can say I will be able to pay another month of rent, and this is so important for me and other domestic workers. I'm also thankful for the Domestic Workers Alliance for fighting with and for us. Through this organization we are organized as domestic workers and have access to this support. Thank you to all the workers who actively fought to become reality."

MARIA HERRERA, HOUSE CLEANER, NATIONAL DOMESTIC
WORKERS ALLIANCE - PA CHAPTER LEADER