EQUAL RIGHTS
ADVOCATES
FAMILY
VOICES
AMPLIFIED
November 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Equal Rights Advocates (ERA) is a national civil rights nonprofit, founded in 1974, dedicated to protecting and expanding workplace, economic, and educational opportunities for women, girls, and gender-expansive people. Learn more at ***equalrights.org***. The goal of Equal Rights Advocates' Family Voices Amplified project is to identify how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have impacted the economic and lived realities of Black and Latinx families. Our project focuses on developing narratives that highlight the experiences of communities most impacted by inequity and translating those needs into policy recommendations for systemic change. As we conclude Phase 2, we have expanded our outreach efforts to continue engagement with Black and Latinx breadwinners by: (1) centering and amplifying the voices, stories, and needs of Black and Latinx women; and (2) identifying and advocating for public policy and other interventions, with a strong focus on amplifying community narratives to influence decisionmakers.

Phase 1 (2021-2022)

In partnership with the ***National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)***, we began with a goal of outreach to nearly 900 Black and Latinx women family breadwinners in 16 cities across the country, to learn about their most pressing economic and workplace needs emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, and advocate for direct change. You can view our report with results from Phase 1 here: ***Family Voices Amplified Overview - Equal Rights Advocates.***

Phase 2 (2023-2024)

Continuing our work with NBCDI, and expanding our partnership to ***UnidosUS***, we reached out to new participants within the Black and Latinx communities who shared their experience and insights for this collaboration. We dug deeper into the stories and themes that emerged in Phase 1, revisiting and engaging in deep listening with some former and some new participants, by conducting surveys, small focus group workshops, and in-depth interviews, to hear the stories, concerns, recommendations needed, and reasons for resiliency. We aimed to answer: What do families still need, and how do they envision reform that makes room for them? Additionally, what do they want decision-makers to know about them?

Phase 2 Findings

Our major findings revealed intense economic insecurity and ongoing wage injustice, a lack of paid leave and caregiving support, housing insecurity, and a lack of quality, affordable healthcare, including mental healthcare. Key themes emerged, such as the urgent need for higher wages, ongoing discrimination against Black and Latinx communities, a lack of support for those caring for multiple dependents, and the physical and mental toll of these issues on our participants. These themes highlighted the lack of economic security and a care infrastructure needed for people to care for themselves and their families. Yet, we were also buoyed by stories of resiliency and community support.

Recommendations

This project amplifies the resounding voices and lived realities of Black and Latinx women and caregivers confronted by entrenched structural inequities by centering their narratives in our policy advocacy efforts. Based on those in-depth conversations, we have identified policy solutions needed to dismantle the formidable barriers illuminated through Phase 1 and further unveiled during Phase 2. We also wanted to lift up the resiliency of our participants and where they found strength. Based on our findings, our policy recommendations, discussed more below, include:

1. Providing a Living Wage, Access to Better Jobs, and Stronger Employment Protections
2. Enacting National Paid Family and Medical Leave, Paid Sick and Safe Days, and Stronger Caregiver Supports
3. Ensuring Greater Access to Quality, Affordable Healthcare and Insurance, including Comprehensive Mental Healthcare Access and Support
4. Providing Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Policies

Acknowledgements

This document was created by Deborah J. Vagins, National Campaign Director at Equal Rights Advocates, Catherine Bísọ́lá Lábíran, Culturally-Competent Narrative Building Consultant, and Charlisa Goodlet, Outreach Consultant. We wish to thank Catherine and Charlisa for their excellent and thoughtful work organizing, facilitating, and summarizing the surveys, focus group workshops, and interviews. We would also like to thank our partners — NBCDI, NBCDI Villages, and UnidosUS — in connecting us with participants, providing invaluable feedback on the project, and helping us disseminate this work. In addition, we would like to thank all the participants in this project. We are grateful for their time, openness and insight, for sharing deeply personal stories, and for their bravery in participating in this project. We hope to continue to honor them by urging for policy reforms to help communities grapple with all of the challenges identified by them in this report. We are grateful to the rest of the Equal Rights Advocates' team, including Noreen Farrell, Jacqui Logan, Delia Coleman, and Jess Eagle. Finally, we would like to thank the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support and vision, making this project possible. Designed by Blackbird Revolt. ***Credit must be given to Equal Rights Advocates in any sharing of this report, its findings, quotes, or contents.***

PHASE 2

Surveys, Focus Group Workshops, and Video Interviews

Intake survey

We reached out to former and new participants to ensure that our focus group workshops and interviews were inclusive of the diversity that is inherent to Black and Latinx communities. Thanks to support from our partners at UnidosUS and NBCDI, 43 people participated in our survey, including some of those who participated in Phase 1 of the project and those who were new to the project. Survey respondents' demographics include individuals in age brackets 18 through 74. Both men and women responded, the majority of whom were Black, Latinx, and Afro-Latino, earning from below $19,000 to $49,999 annually. The majority were caretakers/parents. In selecting participants, we considered interested applicants' availability to attend a workshop and their demographic information, as we were keen to ensure that we were convening a diverse group.

Focus Group Workshops

We held two focus group workshops to provide Black and Latinx participants with the forum to unearth, document, and share their narratives in a healing-centered environment. Our goal was to provide workshops that served as an accessible and intimate environment for Black and Latinx families to share the post-pandemic challenges they are experiencing, as well as the support they have received, and the policies that would radically transform their lives. As in the survey, both focus group workshops included a diverse set of Black and Latinx participants, which, combined, included both women and men and individuals in age brackets from 25 through 74. The majority of focus group participants identified as caregivers/parents, made less than $19,000 to $49,999 annually, and were employed. Both workshops were a mix of individuals who had participated in Phase 1 and new participants for Phase 2. (Please note, those who are identified by initials are our workshop participants, who we are keeping anonymous. Ages are presented in ranges. Quotes have been lightly edited for length and clarity.)

Video Interviews

After the focus group workshops concluded, we conducted in-depth video interviews with four Black women and Latinas. These individuals, from diverse backgrounds, made significant contributions during the focus group workshop with compelling examples of challenges faced by Black and Latinx families and individuals over the past few years. All of our interviewees identified as parents or caregivers. Three out of four are currently working — one person is unemployed. Two out of four interviewees experienced layoff (permanent job loss) or furlough (temporary job loss) during the pandemic. Two out of four interviewees reported an increase in mental/emotional stress. Two out of four interviewees reported that housing insecurity was an issue that they were experiencing/have experienced. Three of our interviewees had participated in Phase 1 workshops, with one new participant for Phase 2. (Please note, those who are identified by their full first name were our video interviewees. Ages are presented in ranges. Quotes have been lightly edited for length and clarity.)

PHASE 2 FINDINGS

Building on the findings from ***Phase 1***, our major findings revealed intense economic insecurity and ongoing wage injustice, a lack of paid leave and caregiving support, housing insecurity, and a lack of quality, affordable healthcare, including mental healthcare. We also heard stories of resiliency and support. We intended to get to the heart of what Black and Latinx communities experienced at the height of the pandemic and what they are experiencing in the present day.

Family Economic Insecurity

> ***"So I overheard this conversation about how 'these people just don't want to work.' And so I invited myself into this conversation with two total strangers, you know, just pointing out the fact that, no, people want to be paid a fair wage. Because even at $20 an hour, a family can't really survive on that, and minimum wage in Michigan right now is still around $10 or $11... so just, inequity on top of inequity."***
>
> ***—AMANDA J. (BLACK, 65-74 YEARS OLD)***

POVERTY-LEVEL WAGES

In both our workshops and interviews, participants expressed the desperate need for higher wages. Some expressed the need and desire to work multiple jobs to bring home what was needed for their families. We heard concerns that people are left with little to no choice but to look for additional work rather than to be compensated equitably. Furthermore, in the interview with Angela T. (Black, 25-34 years old), she describes that there is a widespread misconception that the Economic Impact Payments (stimulus checks) were enough for people to live on and that, since then, financial support has disappeared. A number of our participants had to work multiple jobs during the pandemic, and that still was not sufficient to meet their family's needs. These stories called attention to the poverty level wages many experience across our country, a lack of pathways to higher-wage jobs, and a lack of governmental financial support.

LACK OF BASIC NECESSITIES

Even after the height of the pandemic, a number of our participants named that they struggled to have consistent access to basic necessities including food, clean water, or cleaning products, often struggling with the high costs of caregiving.

> ***"I even was cleaning my house with vinegar. I don't want to spend money [on] utensils for cleaning. That was like for three, four months, we taking care about that. I didn't want to spend any because I didn't have any money."—MARTHA C. (LATINA, 55-64 YEARS OLD)***

"We made a dollar stretch that far and, yeah, it was just, it took a lot. It took a lot. I don't really have a direct, 'Well, I did this, this, this.' It's just different days was different. Some days it's like, 'Well, we going to have just ramen, but we'll boil some eggs and put it in it.' [. . .] To be honest, I can't afford the laundry detergent every single week. It's like, 'Stop wearing so many clothes. We're not going outside. Just wear this.' She don't understand why, and it's like, I don't have it. It's like I said, it took a lot of balancing, sacrificing, balancing, praying, maneuvering, and praying." **—ANGELA T. (BLACK, 25-34 YEARS OLD)**

While some had access to nonprofits that offered support, there was often a waitlist or line for resources due to demand. Participants like Angela T. also shared that their bills, including their electricity bills and heat bills, increased due to the amount of time they were spending at home. A number of participants shared that the cost of living continues to increase while wages stay the same, which leaves them with no alternative but to take out loans.

STRUGGLING UNDER DEBT

"I feel that I still lack economically. I still lack because it was too much things to pay back. I feel that I never get in my track again. I feel that I still paying and paying and paying and then borrow again, and I pay credit cards, and I feel I never get away from that and from all the bills that I being help from my family. If I pay one person, then I have to pay the other person, and I never have the money to saving for a next situation. That is really hard."
— MARTHA C. (LATINA, 55-64 YEARS OLD)

Many participants named that they have debt and feel like they are unable to pay off their medical and/or credit card bills. Debt has trapped them in a cycle where they are unable to save or use their money for other expenses. None of the participants in the interviews or focus group workshops expressed being in a better financial situation now than they were during the pandemic.

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

"When I entered the store, they had sent me an email for an interview, and when I arrived for the interview, the lady saw that I was Latina, that I was Black, that my English was not good, but I could defend myself with English. She told me that there was no position for me, that everything was full. But I told her that she had recently sent me an email saying that the position that I had applied for was open, that it was available. So she said no, she talked to me badly. I was very desperate for the job. I have a child [. . .] My phone rang. The woman who denied the job for me, she was calling. But she called me by mistake thinking it was someone else to give her the job. Then she realized it was me, the person who was before at the store. She said no, and hung up the phone. Based on the treatment she gave me, I felt it was discrimination." **— L.V. (AFRO-LATINA, 25-34 YEARS OLD)**

Many of our participants recounted discrimination they experienced at work and the barriers to better jobs they faced because of their identities and income status. L.V.'s story, cited above, is an example of how anti-Blackness, anti-Latina, anti-immigrant, and xenophobia can intersect and result in rejection from a job opportunity. A number of participants also said that they could not move into higher positions in their workplaces because they do not have a degree and that they could not get a degree because of the cost. Consequently, they are placed at a "ceiling" that prevents them from having upward mobility.

> ***"I made a sacrifice, in so many words, in regards to my pregnancy. I was scared to let my colleagues know that I had went into labor early, and primarily because I didn't want to miss out on any of the opportunities [and] we had to continue our pay. So we were not placed on unemployment or furloughed, or there was work that we could do, but I was just very scared that I wouldn't have any work if I let my employer or my colleagues know that my son came a few weeks early."*** ***— TAMARA O. (BLACK, 35-44 YEARS OLD)***

In the quote above, Tamara O. recounts that she did not feel comfortable letting her workplace know that she gave birth early due to a fear that she would be a victim of pregnancy discrimination, including being put on unpaid leave, or losing her job altogether. Her story is a testament to the fear that employers will not follow pregnancy discrimination laws and the need to provide additional protections and accommodations for new parents.

Lack of Paid Leave and Caregiving Support

> ***"My husband and I had to close down his small business during the pandemic. My income became the only support for our family. He stayed home with our two boys to manage childcare costs... I'm currently managing medical bills while also working with my husband on our business, which we had to close due to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the income guidelines for support aren't always fair, especially for those of us trying to thrive despite inflation while keeping our jobs."***
>
> ***— Z.R. (LATINA, 35-44 YEARS OLD)***

The pandemic caused many challenges that were hard to address for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a lack of a care infrastructure, job-protected paid leave and caregiving supports.

A number of participants in our workshops needed to provide care for their children and grandchildren, yet did not and do not have access to an affordable, high-quality local childcare facility. For example, Martha C. (Latina, 55-64 years old) mentioned that many of the babies in her local childcare center ended up with bruises and she would be concerned about the wellbeing of her grandson if he was there. Similarly, Angela T. (Black, 25-34 years old) expressed concern that there aren't "seasoned workers" in her daycare facility, which makes it difficult for her to lean on outside support, signaling the need for increased affordable quality childcare options.

Working from home also presented challenges for caregiving. A number of participants shared that their children and/or grandchildren had to live with them during the pandemic. In the case of Angela T., she felt as if she was stretched thin by the amount of roles she had to play during the lockdown. She recalled feeling as if she had to be a mother, teacher, therapist, school nurse, and principal to her daughter and that she had patients who relied on her alongside her partner and other family members, without the needed support.

Remote work from home and homeschooling children meant that some had to juggle responsibilities without caregiving support. A few participants also shared that they were concerned that their children may have "intellectual gaps" due to their learning style and the limitations of remote learning. This adds complexity to the concept of remote work by allowing us to consider that, for some, working from home, without appropriate caregiving supports, can be a hindrance to both work and the children, while reinforcing cultural stereotypes that women's roles remain primarily at home as the sole caregiver.

Tamara O. (Black, 35-44 years old) shared that the center where she works opened their computer lab so that families who did not have access to the internet or computers could use their resources. This shows that some families did not have their needs considered when workplaces and schools went remote. She described that the center was packed each day with BIPOC people, thus demonstrating "the fact that there is this large gap between... the have and the have-nots."

Several participants shared that they have had to put life events on hold due to the caregiving responsibilities they had to prioritize. For example, C.S. (Black, 35-44 years old) shared that her son is a special needs learner and that she is currently prioritizing getting him caught up to where other students are post-pandemic. Due to this decision, she is unable to go back to work or attain the education that she would like to. Similarly, Angela T. (Black 25-34 years old) shared that she could not enroll in school during the pandemic because that would mean that she had to balance her own education alongside homeschooling her daughter and working multiple jobs.

Lack of Stable, Affordable Healthcare, including Mental Healthcare

> ***"Don't mention, 'Oh, I done hurt myself' and now my insurance might not be covering this procedure, so now I got to go pay for that. Don't mention I went to the dentist and like, 'Oh, I need this extraction' and, oh, this plan doesn't cover that. They only cover this. Don't mention life happening and you need anything else because, yeah, no way. Absolutely not, can I, myself ... do it by myself. I hate to say it, but yes, I would need support. I need support from the community. I need support from the government. I need support from people who are in [a] position to create these things."*** ***— ANGELA T. (BLACK, 25-34 YEARS OLD)***

In both the workshops and interviews, participants identified that they would like to have had more financial support for healthcare and better insurance coverage, including mental health support.

Interview and workshop participants were able to name numerous ways that people were denied access to critical resources and support during the pandemic due to their socioeconomic class. N.G. (Latina 35-44 years old) was in Mexico City at the time of the pandemic and shared that finances were the deciding factor that determined whether people had a strong chance of surviving if they were admitted to a hospital. She shared that she lost her aunt to a stroke because "they didn't give her a chance" and that many others lost their family and friends due to similar forms of income inequality and discrimination.

K.O. (Latina, 35-44 years old) said she was asked for a social security card or state document to take a COVID-19 test and that when the vaccine came out, undocumented people were the last to receive it. M.D. (Latina, 45-54 years old) shared that the financial relief that the government provided did not extend to undocumented people. Tamara O. (Black 35-44 years old) also experienced racism during the pandemic in her access to healthcare, but in her case, it revealed itself during her birthing experience. In her interview, shared that she was treated like "trash" based on what she looked like, and they treated her husband like a "stranger" and refused to acknowledge him.

> ***"So, okay, I did the therapy. I started it. So first of all, you have to take time off of work to even be able to go to therapy, because they're doing the same hours as you're doing at work. So that's number one. I did have the community health services where they paid for the therapy, which was amazing, but then I had to take off of work to go. So you only get a certain amount of paid leave, sick leave, whatever, so that was that. So I got into the groove and then I realized, like every 60 days, there was a new therapist, and you had to tell your story over, you had to get to learn this person over, and it was like so many barriers to like trying to help yourself..... And I do feel like the health-based community healthcare that I have now is not going to get me there. I feel like if I pay for the insurance from my employer, I could probably get a therapist that was gonna stick around, but that's another barrier"*** ***— S.D (BLACK, 35-44 YEARS OLD)***

Many also voiced the need for mental health support to deal with challenges including COVID-19, deaths, family stress, and despair caused in the wake of George Floyd's murder. However, there are barriers that made accessing mental healthcare a challenge. As S.D. (Black, 35-44 years old) shared above, her mental health was impacted, and it was difficult to take time off for therapy and to have continuity with therapists under a limited community health program. S.D.'s account is a powerful demonstration of how difficult it can be for people to access quality mental health support due to factors including lack of paid time off and cost barriers.

In reflecting on their experiences during the pandemic, some participants shared that they felt lonely because they were physically isolated, and others shared that despite having family around, they felt isolated and lonely too. Others shared that their mental health was implicated by the grief of losing loved ones. Many of our participants were unable to attend the funerals of their loved ones due to the lockdown, which has left them without a feeling of closure.

One of our participants shared that her daughter's mental health was impacted by the isolation that she experienced during the pandemic, and became worse as news broke about police violence against Black people. In reflecting on her own mental health, Martha C. (Latina, 55-64 years old) shared "I didn't have any more tears. In the beginning, I got so nervous. I thought that was the end of the world. But because I have my family, that was my big responsibility. If I got totally depressed, who's going to take care of my family?" This disheartening story demonstrates the connection between the consequences of the pandemic and the violence of the police state, hence why many referred to the compounding violence as a "dual pandemic," for which support was lacking.

Housing Insecurity

Participants also recounted how their income status compounded race-based discrimination based on ingrained stereotypes, especially with respect to getting safe housing.

> ***"One thing that I did notice that is happening is that if you're low income, I have section 8, so they cannot discriminate or look at your credit report. ...[but] I'm still discriminated on, and I'm still looked over, and they find other reasons why not to give me housing. And so this is one thing that I really feel that we need help with here is this, this set up to where we have more people that are being homeless. And I'm going to all the programs. I'm doing everything I can."*** ***— C.S. (BLACK, 35-44 YEARS OLD)***

C.S. (Black, 35-44 years old) shared how difficult it is for her to find safe and affordable housing for her and her sons because credit scores are used as a mechanism of discrimination. To avoid being without shelter, she mentioned that she has been utilizing the 16-day free hotel stays that her county offers, and that she has been spending time with her mother. Several of our participants experienced similar circumstances in the past.

Martha C. (Latina 55-64 years old) shared in her interview that it took six months for the government to provide her with rent assistance, and by the time she received that support, her landlord had evicted her. Angela T. (Black, 25-34 years old) shared that she believes that if there was a cap on rent, it would help "…. the connections amongst people…the hatred will go down, crime rates will go down, because people out here are struggling, and they're tired and they're exhausted."

Amanda J. (Black, 65-74 years old) mentioned in her interview that while she grew up very comfortable, she was homeless in 1995 as a result of domestic violence and divorce. She shared that she is "only now really beginning to be able to claim full-fledged participation in this society" and that it "has been a long and arduous journey." The responses across interviews and workshops illustrate how commonplace housing instability is in Black and Latinx communities, and how long it can take people to recover from its consequences. If we want our communities to thrive, it is imperative that we address the rising cost of rent and the widespread implications that the lack of quality housing can have on Black and Latinx lives.

Availability of Support Networks

> ***"The neighborhood that I lived in at the time was very…we kind of looked out for one another. So we had people knocking on the doors bringing food. And we were renting a home in this neighborhood, so they just kind of checked on everybody like, 'hey, how's it going? Here's some helpful links we got, like ways to apply for aid' almost like once a week… They were like, 'hey, if you weren't able to qualify for this program — here's another program!'"*** ***— TAMARA O. (BLACK, 35-44 YEARS OLD)***

"I didn't have any circle of people around me with whom I could talk, with whom I could orient myself.That is to say that someone could have told me 'you can go to this organization. They are giving away food' or any other situation. Even on social media, sometimes I would also look to see what I could find there. But I never found an organization that really helped me, that gave us some kind of guidance about which food banks to go to, which days we could go for food. And, as a result of that, obviously in the present, in the now that we are in, all that will always have repercussions. Why? Because maybe we got into debt to pay rent. Maybe we had to take out loans for that, which we still have today. Why? Because we still have to pay the interest and all that. So more than anything else, it is the fact that finances have been a critical point during and after the pandemic." — *K.O. (LATINA, 35-44 YEARS OLD)*

The quotes above present contrasting realities as it pertains to the support networks that Black and Latinx families had access to during the pandemic and after. Examining what worked or was not available, provides important information to determine the support that communities and governmental bodies can provide.

FAMILY MEMBERS/FRIENDS/NEIGHBORS

Several participants named that their family members have been instrumental in supporting them since the height of the pandemic to the present day. Angela T. (Black, 25-34 years old) shared that she coordinates with her sister to plan events, share meals, and offer childcare support. Martha C. (Latina, 55-64 years old) shared that her two friends were instrumental in making sure that she recovered from COVID-19, as they brought her food when she did not have any.

One participant said that her neighbors played a pivotal role by performing wellness checks, providing food, and sharing links to raise awareness about available resources. C.S. (Black, 35-44 years old) said that she felt that the pandemic was a time when people came together, across their differences, to support one another.

NONPROFITS

Several participants shared that they were able to access support from nonprofits, in addition to family members, at the height of the pandemic. They shared that nonprofits were instrumental in providing them with access to resources including diapers, food, face masks, housing support, support to pay bills, and transportation to doctor's appointments.

WORKPLACES

Some workplaces became more flexible with employees by allowing them to pick up their children early, offering remote work options, and letting staff go home early. Amanda J. (Black, 65-74 years old) shared that her workplace sent her home with full pay during the lockdown, which allowed her to focus on her family. Participants shared that platforms like Zoom allowed them to maintain workplace relationships.

SCHOOLS

S.D. (Black, 35-44 years old) shared that, despite school being closed, her local school district continued to provide breakfast and lunch for the children. Additionally, they provided families with food stamps to help offset the cost of children being home all day.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

"People are still starving. People are still underpaid. People who have lost their jobs, people who have lost wages and stuff that still need that help with food, still need their help with like extracurricular activities for the children and stuff like that, it's so hard to get. It is like, for the middle class, it is like you either make too much for the programs that are available or you don't qualify at all because you don't make too less...it is very hard. So I feel like the support was heightened more with the pandemic, and now that it's not, it's kind of like the people that was giving and giving is like 'no more to give! Figure it out like, find your way!'" — ANGELA T. (BLACK, 25-34 YEARS OLD)

According to Census data, we know that Black women and Latinas suffer under appalling pay gaps as compared to non-Hispanic white men, and are overrepresented in low-paid, minimum and subminimum wage work, which frequently lack benefits like paid leave. Also the overall gender wage gap ***widened for the first time in 20 years***, between 2022 and 2023, during the pendency of this project. It is not surprising that our participants' lived experiences reflected these disparities.

Within our workshops, there was a range of attitudes toward policy and systems change, considering how many felt left out of support when most needed. But even those who expressed some disillusionment continued to hope and work for change at the grassroots and community level. Some, like Tamara O. (Black, 35-44 years old), stressed the importance of Black people having a seat at policy tables by asserting that "we need opportunities to speak up." Regardless of where participants landed in their feelings, they were all able to share a compelling list of policy recommendations.

Based on our deep listening during the focus group workshops and interviews, we have connected the needs discussed with possible interventions by policymakers. The conversations have reaffirmed many of the policy solutions that Equal Rights Advocates has long advocated for at the state and federal levels. Some examples of the policy recommendations which emerged from this project, include the following:

Provide a Living Wage, Access to Better Jobs, and Stronger Employment Protections

Many of the concerns that were identified could be eased if there were access to higher paying and better jobs, as well as stronger tools to enforce employment discrimination. Our recommendations include a living wage that reflects the true cost of living, especially for marginalized communities, including many Black and Latinx families. We also heard the need for more opportunities for free and low cost education and career development support, to allow workers access to better jobs. These reforms should be paired with stronger employment protections against workplace discrimination and inequities, including better accommodations for caregivers and people with disabilities.

Some of the federal bills, currently pending in Congress which would provide support include the **Raise the Wage Act**, which would gradually raise the federal minimum wage to $17 and end the poverty-level subminimum wages for tipped workers and many workers with disabilities; and the **Paycheck Fairness Act**, which would modernize and strengthen the Equal Pay Act of 1963 to better combat pay discrimination and close the wage gap, by protecting workers from retaliation for discussing pay, banning the use of prior salary history, providing stronger remedies, and codifying pay data collection, among other updates.

Enact National Paid Family and Medical Leave, Paid Sick and Safe Days, and Stronger Caregiver Supports

Family economic security cannot be attained without comprehensive paid family and medical leave policies and paid sick and safe days. Unfortunately, caregiving still falls disproportionately on women, and particularly women of color, who already hold the majority of low-paid work without comprehensive paid leave benefits. Such benefits would provide job protected, paid time off for individuals to care for themselves, their children, or family members without fear of losing their jobs. We also recommend investments in the care economy and more access to affordable, quality childcare -- a theme that echoed throughout our focus groups and interviews. Policies like this would allow caretakers to more easily balance care responsibilities without the fear and worry we heard from our participants.

Some of the federal bills, currently pending in Congress that would provide support, include the **Healthy Families Act**, which would set a national standard for paid sick and safe days to allow workers in businesses with 15 or more employees to earn up to seven job-protected paid sick and safe days each year; and the **FAMILY Act**, which would provide workers with up to 12 weeks of partial income when they take time off work for their own serious health condition; the serious health condition of a family member; the birth or adoption of a child; to address the effects of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking; and for certain reasons related to military deployment.

Ensure Greater Access to Quality, Affordable Healthcare and Insurance, including Comprehensive Mental Healthcare Access and Support

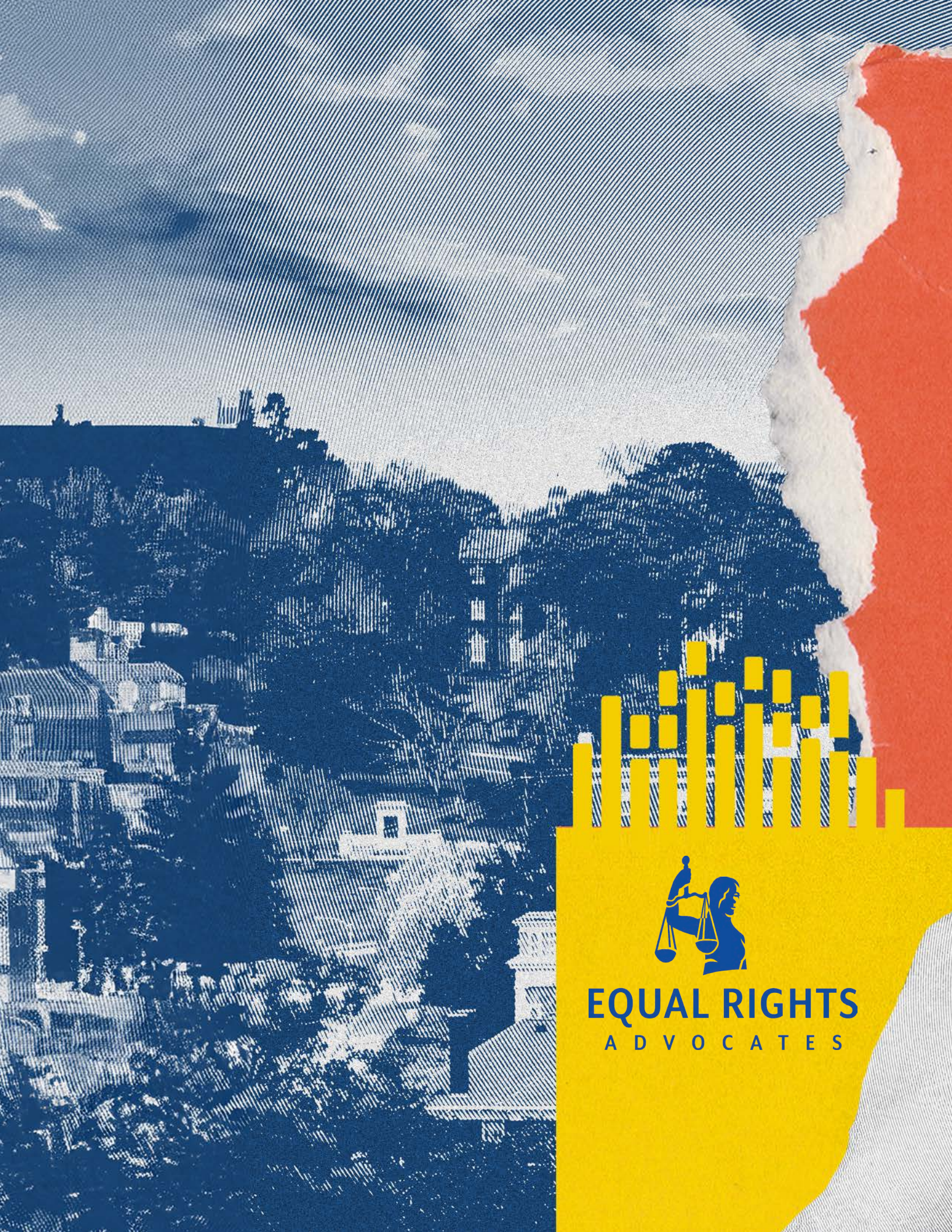
There is a need for health insurance programs for unemployed, low-income, and moderate-income families to be expanded to provide greater access to high-quality, low-cost, quality health insurance plans with less exclusions. We recommend that all healthcare options guarantee affordable, culturally-competent mental health services for all, with a particular focus on marginalized communities, such as Black and Latinx families. This policy should include expanding access to mental healthcare through insurance coverage, increasing the availability of community-based mental health resources, and integrating mental health services into primary care settings. Importantly, mental health insurance plans must increase the covered number of treatments, allow participants to keep professionals they like, and ensure mental health professionals are trained to address the specific needs and traumas of marginalized populations. It should also focus on reducing stigma and addressing barriers to accessing care, such as cost, time, and transportation.

Provide Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Policies

While the pandemic worsened housing instability, this sadly is not a new problem and continues today for millions. We recommend increased investment in affordable housing initiatives to ensure access to safe, stable homes for marginalized communities. This should include policies to support housing stability, including home ownership, rent stabilization, rent caps, and rent assistance. Moreover, policies should include anti-displacement measures to prevent gentrification from pushing low-income families out of their neighborhoods, along with rental assistance and housing subsidies for those facing housing insecurity.

CONCLUSION

The deep listening of Phase 2 of Family Voices Amplified revealed the stories and needs of a diverse range of Black and Latinx individuals. Across the workshops and interviews, participants shared harrowing stories of how economic injustice continues to impact their lives. They also shared the strategies, resources, and networks they lean on to support themselves and their families. The policy recommendations that have surfaced present an opportunity to ensure that Black and Latinx community voices are centered in policy and systemic change. We urge action on these critical needs.



EQUAL RIGHTS
ADVOCATES