

AMPLIFYING PARENT VOICE AND PRIORITIES IN SYSTEMS AND POLICY CHANGE

a snapshot about LIFT

SEPTEMBER 2025



Centering Family Interests

LIFT has always engaged the parents it serves (its “members”) in its work, whether it was co-designing [their coaching model](#) or seeking input on new programmatic offerings. It may come as no surprise, then, that when LIFT decided to shift into a role as a hybrid organization, both involved in systems change and service, the fact that their members would be heavily involved was never in question.

About LIFT

[LIFT](#) is a nonprofit organization that offers one-on-one financial and goal-setting coaching for parents in Washington DC, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Their mission is to break the cycle of poverty for low-income families while building their social connections, well-being, and wealth. LIFT advocates for policies and practices that support families’ economic mobility at the local, state, and national level.

Living into systems change

Systems and policy change was part of the vision for LIFT for many years before they had the resources and momentum to lean into the work fully. Previously, LIFT’s participation in policy and systems change efforts was more ad hoc or predicated on the interest of leadership in each of its sites.

In 2023, LIFT embraced its vision for systems change. Staff dedicated to advocacy were hired to support systems

and policy change nationally. Additionally, as part of its regular strategy cycle, LIFT set priorities for itself over the next few years that included systems change and policy work and a transition to being a systems change organization, not just a service provider.

This snapshot is part of a larger study on family-serving organizations or direct service organizations participating in policy and systems change work. To learn more, please visit this [site](#).

The research was commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation. For more information, please visit www.rwjf.org.

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- Monique Jackson, LIFT member
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Setting the agenda

When it came time to set a policy agenda and decide what priorities LIFT would pursue, it was natural for the organization to turn to the people who would be most impacted by their advocacy—its parent members. LIFT conducted a listening tour with members across their sites. The tour involved first an educational component to familiarize members with the policymaking process. Then, based on their new knowledge and lived experiences, members were asked to prioritize issues and solutions they cared about and wanted LIFT to focus on in their advocacy.

In centering the needs of their members and investing time in their education, LIFT was intentionally pushing back against what they had witnessed with other policy-focused organizations. Previously, think tanks and policy shops would reach out to LIFT to get connected with their members due to LIFT's strong relationships with community. These organizations wanted to hear from people who had experiences with the issues they were working on to help support their policy position. However, because of how policy organizations are typically set up, they often did not have the skills, capacity, or access to build deep relationships with families in a way that elevated their expertise, rather than just their experiences. . Once LIFT's members had shared their stories, policy organizations did not engage them further.

LIFT knew that while policy organizations play a valuable and critical role in the ecosystem, there was space for direct service organizations to help strengthen the impact of policy organizations and enhance the efficacy of policies developed. Additionally, LIFT wanted their

engagement of members to be different. Engaging and centering their members in this meaningful way was necessary because of LIFT's belief that their members have more than their lived experiences to share; they also have the answers to the issues that impact them.



We don't look at members' experience to justify why we do our work. We use their embodied expertise to learn how to attack the issues.

– LIFT staff member

In many ways, the turn to systems change and the process of setting their policy agenda felt like an extension of LIFT's coaching model, which is member-driven. In coaching, LIFT staff ask what people's goals are and then what LIFT can do to help members achieve those goals. This approach centers people's dignity and inherently positions them as experts of their own experience. This mindset is then easily transferred so that members can see themselves as experts of their "sociopolitical experience" and as people who can actively participate and have valuable contributions in the advocacy process and to LIFT's priorities.



Testing the approach

Once their agenda was set and LIFT better understood their members' priorities, they wanted to test out pursuing these priorities in a concrete setting. In DC, they asked members what they wanted LIFT to focus on, and members answered. They had heard of a proposed District Child Tax Credit (CTC) bill that would provide families with children under the age of 6 a tax credit of \$420 per child, up to three children. In a city with such a high cost of living, the CTC would help alleviate some of the financial pressures on moderate and low-income families, helping them meet basic needs and better invest in their families' wellbeing.

Because members had worked with LIFT and appreciated their approach to building wealth and focus on cash and coaching, they brought forward this bill as a priority they felt was aligned with LIFT's expertise.

What was LIFT trying to accomplish?

LIFT and its members saw an opportunity to get more cash into low-income families' hands through a District CTC, helping them build their financial strength. While LIFT and its members began with the goal of obtaining a hearing for the CTC bill in front of the city council, this campaign was also a testing ground for the pursuit of member priorities in LIFT's policy and system change work.

Fighting for a District Tax Credit

After LIFT members identified the CTC as a priority, LIFT organized themselves to begin advocating for a hearing in front of the city council. They joined the [DC Guaranteed Income Coalition](#) with like-minded organizations fighting for policies like the CTC, quickly taking on leadership within the coalition. LIFT was also appointed to the DC Commission on Poverty which advises the city and mayor on policies aimed at reducing poverty. Importantly, they started mobilizing members who were interested in advocating for the bill. Members were key to identifying the policy as a priority, and they would be key to fighting for it as well.

We want to shift the narrative and how the political ecosystem engages with people with lived experience.

– LIFT staff member

Learning the DC policy process

While members in DC were informed about their representatives, not everyone was familiar with the policymaking process itself. To support member engagement in this campaign, LIFT offered members a crash course in how the DC policy process works and how to best engage with their council members.

Educating members on the political process went beyond the intricacies of passing a bill. It was also supporting members in reframing their lived experience as expertise in the issues that affected them. Members were already natural advocates when it came to their families and children, but LIFT helped them translate this experience and apply it to policy advocacy.

Similarly, LIFT encouraged members to think of the skills and experiences they developed as part of this work as assets they could use in their professional lives, as well. Learning the policy process was not just beneficial for the work LIFT was leading. It was also an intentional investment in members that could go beyond the campaign for a District CTC.



Giving testimony and meeting lawmakers

As LIFT began working on securing a hearing for the CTC, members made it clear that one of their priorities was going to be meeting with and engaging councilmembers and other decisionmakers directly. LIFT did just this, bringing members directly to councilmembers' offices to discuss the CTC including the councilmember who first introduced the bill. In addition, LIFT hosted their first Advocacy Day where LIFT staff and members came together to meet with DC Council staffers to discuss the importance of the bill to families. LIFT also prepped members to engage with councilmembers in townhall-style conversations. This consistent and direct interaction between members and policymakers paid off. Only a few months after beginning their advocacy, they had already secured a hearing for the District CTC for January 2024.



[LIFT] have a great way of making all of those moving parts—us [members] being the moving parts—they have a great way of transferring that or mobilizing that to a bigger platform.

— DC LIFT member



During the hearing for the bill, members had the opportunity to give testimony directly in front of the city council, which LIFT prepped and primed them for. They were able to share directly with decisionmakers their own experiences and why the CTC was important to them and families like them. When a parent member could not make it to the hearing, a LIFT staff member stepped in to read her testimony on her behalf.

So on these big, big things that [LIFT] have going on, they managed to make sure that my little voice is a part of it!

— DC LIFT member

In these ways, at every step of the fight for the CTC, LIFT positioned itself not as the sole leader of the work, but rather a catalyst for the voice and will of members.

After the Win

As a result of LIFT and its members' work, the DC CTC not only received a hearing but was eventually written into the 2025 city budget. This meant that low-income families with children under the age of 6 were now eligible for a tax credit of \$420 per child and up to three children—and more breathing room in one of the country's most expensive cities. However, this win was only one among many impactful changes that occurred.

Increased social capital

Throughout work on the CTC, LIFT was intentional about investing in members in ways that could benefit them beyond the campaign. LIFT helped build members' self-efficacy, for example, by reframing their lived experience and knowledge as expertise that could make an impactful contribution to policymaking. Rather than passive recipients of policy, members had the power to direct it.

In addition to self-efficacy, LIFT wanted to ensure that members were building “social capital,” as one LIFT staff member put it, throughout. The skills they learned and applied in campaign work—their advocacy, writing, organizing—could be leveraged in future employment and positioned as concrete experience.



They're experts in their lived experience and can then be experts in providing [the] policy solutions that can affect their lives.

– LIFT staff member

Engagement beyond LIFT

Perhaps most importantly in the eyes of LIFT staff, parent members took their experience in the campaign, their self-confidence, and transferred them to other issues, expanding their impact and contributing to social change beyond just the organization. LIFT primarily focuses on wealth building and financial stability, but members' lives are affected by many more issues where they want to see change. After working with LIFT on the CTC, LIFT staff noted that members felt more comfortable in pursuing other interests with other organizations and campaigns. LIFT helped start many members on their systems change and policy journey, but it was never meant to stop with them.

Holistic approach to cash benefits

While LIFT campaigned primarily for the CTC, members also expressed a desire to see other cash policies take a holistic approach, by offering coaching supports similar to what LIFT offered in its service delivery. As a result of their CTC work and building connections with other policy organizations in DC, LIFT was able to introduce the idea of supplemental LIFT-style coaching in these new spaces even if the CTC ultimately did not include these provisions.

However, the [Fair Budget Coalition](#), one of the biggest collectives advocating for policies that address systemic inequality in DC, incorporated coaching services in its recommendations for future cash policies as a result of LIFT's presence and advocacy.

Working with LIFT reminds me that it's possible to do both direct service and policy work.

– UPO staff member

Strengthening LIFT's reach

Through this campaign work, LIFT was also able to raise its own profile and reach in the advocacy space. Other organizations continue to want to partner with LIFT as a result of their work and their approach centering parent members. In October 2024, LIFT and the United Planning Organization (UPO) partnered to hold [a summit](#), bringing together policy and decisionmakers along with DC residents to discuss solutions to the benefits cliff in DC. Though the CTC bill had already been passed at this point, LIFT used this platform in partnership with UPO to continue advocating for low-income families in the capital.

Renewed commitment

Getting the CTC passed, however, like many singular policy changes, was not the end of the story. Despite LIFT and members' hard work, the [District CTC is now in jeopardy](#) as Mayor Bowser has proposed its repeal for fiscal year 2026, in addition to the defunding of other important social programs. LIFT's work in DC has now turned to defending the Tax Credit while continuing to advocate for the additional inclusion of coaching with new cash policies at the request of their members. While the future of the CTC is still undetermined, LIFT feels a strengthened commitment to centering its parent members and their priorities in the work.



Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Trust and relationships are key to engaging people in non-extractive ways.

The key to LIFT being able to engage with their members authentically and in a non-tokenizing manner has always been earned trust and relationships. LIFT starts building strong relationships with its members from the get-go. Its coaching model is rooted in trust between a parent and their coach, and the former is positioned as the expert of their own experiences, rather than a passive recipient of services. From the beginning, the relationship is designed to be reciprocal, more of a partnership between LIFT and its members.

From that initial connection, you know their work with you is not restricted to a number crunch. Not only as a household are we growing our finances and budget, we're also doing it as a community.

– LIFT member

This approach translates into their systems change work where LIFT staff strive to be inclusive of members beyond simply asking them to share a story of their experience. Instead, LIFT invests time and effort into educating its members and ensuring they understand the power of their

own expertise and the impact it can have on policy and systems change. The work is not a transaction, but a collaboration, and members' experience is not sidelined or lost in the pursuit of the policy change.



They figure out how to make [members'] small piece and our small voice a part of their huge platform without overwhelming us [...] so that it doesn't become more about the policy than it becomes about the experience that I've had with this policy.

– LIFT member

Taking the time to establish solid relationships and trust can be challenging when weighed against the expectations of funders, and even community members, for what pace and on what timeframe change needs to happen. However, when it comes to how LIFT wants to center their members' voices, it is an imperative.

Lesson 2: Integrating service and systems change centers the voice of those who need to be heard.

For LIFT, fully integrating their service and systems change work was key in their ability to accomplish their mission and deeply engage members. LIFT sees this as challenging the status quo of how most nonprofits are structured. Direct service organizations are able to have direct insight into the issues that their communities and constituents face every day—thanks to the trust they build with them—but the current system is set up so that direct service and systems change work is siloed, often housed in separate organizations. This makes it more difficult to feed direct service insight into policy and systems change work and thus it—and the contribution of direct service organizations in the policy space—is easier to overlook.

Our ability to meet the moment for members is built off the strength of our direct service work. We're directly hearing about member solutions and challenges all the time. That's a strength for us. We can support members as they're facing challenges.

– LIFT staff member

By combining both strands of work, LIFT is creating a more direct pipeline between community and policy and a mechanism by which the people most affected by an issue might be best heard in a system that is not designed to listen to them—and often actively silences.

The work that we do in our direct service work and the way that we do it and the way that we design [it] informed how we do it in policy and advocacy, then the work that we're doing in policy and advocacy [...] then feeds into what we should focus on in direct service.

– LIFT staff member



Lesson 3: Basebuilding is how you build a movement that lasts beyond the campaign.

Finally, a key learning from the CTC campaign is the importance of basebuilding when working toward long-term social change. While the campaign itself had a narrow goal of first getting a hearing for a bill and then having the tax credit included in the city budget, LIFT did not envision its work beginning and ending with one campaign. So, while they worked toward policy change, they were also cognizant of the need to build a base of involved and activated people who would push for change beyond the CTC.

To do this, LIFT intentionally invested in members' political education and sense of self-efficacy—and they did so widely. Rather than working with the same small group of members over and over as so often happens in policy and

systems change work, LIFT brought in and built up as many of their members as possible. This allowed them to tap into a wider group of people and ensure less burnout from members being over-engaged throughout the campaign.

The importance of basebuilding in this manner is clear when looking at the CTC work itself. Despite initially succeeding, the policy is now in danger of being repealed; the work for lasting change often spans years rather than one policy cycle. Systems change work requires endurance which basebuilding supports.



Our members, they're not just doing policy and advocacy work with LIFT anymore. They are a part of [another coalition]. One of the members supported a campaign for someone who was a candidate for their ward's council member seat. We are seeing our members get comfortable being in this space and they are pursuing their interests. And I think out of everything I just named, that is the biggest win.

– LIFT staff member

What's Next for LIFT and its Members?

Despite the potential repeal of the CTC, LIFT's systems and policy change work continues and was never meant to end with one campaign. As they and their members continue to fight for cash for DC families, they are also pursuing other areas of their member-driven policy agenda, including focusing on getting holistic coaching and supports for families included with future cash bills. LIFT continues to work on local campaigns in their other sites, leveraging the lessons learned in DC.

This snapshot was written by Cory Georgopoulos from Innovation Network (www.innonet.org), with support from Kayla Boisvert and Rebecca Perlmutter. It is part of a larger study on family-serving organizations or direct service organizations participating in policy and systems change work.

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