



Economic Justice & Human Rights:

Supporting NYC Worker Cooperatives

Project Summary

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 Message from the Commissioner

3 Methodology

4 Emergent Themes

5 Preliminary Recommendations

Message from the Commissioner and Chair,

Annabel Palma



July 2023

Dear New Yorkers,

The New York City Commission on Human Rights (the Commission) works to deter bias, harassment, and discrimination in the workplace. The Commission prevents discrimination through education and outreach and enforces the New York City Human Rights Law (NYCHRL) across housing, employment, and public accommodations. In order to educate holistically and effectively, the Commission must understand all kinds of work environments.

As New York City recovers from the toll of COVID-19, we recognize the impact on our communities and our workers. This upending period caused many to rethink how workplaces are organized and prompted a deeper investigation into equity in employment.

Worker cooperatives—businesses that are owned and operated by their workers—create communities who value economic democracy and foster networks of support. Research shows that cooperative workplaces in New York City and around the country are predominantly comprised of people of color and immigrant communities—both communities that have long-faced barriers to economic mobility and have distrust of government services. As cooperatives grow across the city, continual conversations between government agencies and worker cooperative members are necessary to understand how we can address discrimination within this growing sector.

Our agency's work rooting out bias, harassment, and discrimination in the workplace has been informed by our partnership with the Center for Family Life and our collaborative project, "Economic Justice and Human Rights: Supporting NYC Worker Cooperatives." Funded by the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE), this project seeks to understand how the NYCHRL affects worker cooperative members in New York City. Over the past year, our participatory research project included one-on-one interviews and focus groups with worker-owners and listening sessions with government, academic, and nonprofit partners.

Detailed in the following project summary, our research showed the need for increased communications with worker-cooperatives, partnerships with sibling agencies to promote economic democracy, support for intergroup relations and bias prevention, and updates to our education and outreach materials as it relates to worker cooperatives. The Commission's work is always ongoing. We will continue to listen to the city's worker cooperative members, provide opportunities for worker-owners to know their rights under the NYCHRL, and work to address the discrimination that they face.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Annabel Palma".

Annabel Palma
Commissioner & Chair, NYC Commission on Human Rights

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METHODOLOGY

Phase 1 Goal: Build on NYC's longstanding support of worker-owned cooperatives through relationship building, and with a human rights lens.

Fall 2022

- Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE) grant funding received by Center for Family Life (CFL) for collaboration with the NYC Commission on Human Rights (CCHR)
- First meeting between CFL and CCHR
- Project goals and methodology are created
- Background academic research is conducted

Early November 2022

- Check-in meeting to finalize one-on-one interview themes, process, and participants

Late 2022

- One-on-one interviews with cooperative members to determine questions for focus groups

Winter 2023

- Transcriptions of interviews complete
- Guidelines set for focus groups
- CFL communicated with community members to identify focus group participants

March 2023

- Focus group members finalized
- Focus group sessions completed

April 2023

- Synthesize focus group findings
- Focus group transcriptions completed

Spring 2023 + Beyond

Explore potential for continued engagement in the NYC cooperative landscape through proposed preliminary recommendations

1

Year of this project

3

Sectors of employment

3

Organizational Partners: Center for Family Life (CFL; Sunset Park, BK), and NYC Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), and Government Alliance for Racial Equality (GARE)

3

Methodology approaches of research including: external engagement, one-on-one, interviews, and focus groups

13

Planning Meetings, including internal meetings, meetings with CFL, NYC Small Business Bureau, Democracy at Work Institute, and Rutgers Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing

10

NYC-based worker-owned cooperatives represented

17

NYC-based worker-owned cooperative member voices heard

100

Co-ops in NYC*

*According to the FY22 WCBDI Report

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EMERGENT THEMES

Distrust in Government Agencies

Perceived lack of support when reporting instances of discrimination, domestic violence, and safety concerns, leading participants to find community supports instead.

Lack of language access was a barrier to receiving services in schools, health care, and other public services.

Language Access

Bias and Hate Based on Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

Incidents of assault and pushing in public spaces, assumptions of gang membership, and derogatory comments when accessing public spaces and services.

Every participant has either personally been survivors of DV or have a friend or family member who is a survivor of DV. Lack of response to reporting DV exacerbated distrust in city agencies.

Domestic Violence (DV)

Impact of Perceived Immigration Status in the Workplace

Poor working conditions included predatory employers, low wages, dress codes for domestic workers, and lack of breaks at work. These challenges were among those that led individuals to seek and join worker-owned cooperatives.

Workplace and housing sexual harassment included not being paid until sexual favors were granted, with threats to report to ICE.

Sexual Harassment

Inadequate Health Care Access

Participants identified instances where they were sent home or not provided adequate care from healthcare institutions.

Participants expressed frustration with lack of access to benefits, such as medical insurance, retirement funds, adequate housing, COVID economic stimulus checks, and others despite their paying taxes.

Economic Instability and Quality of Life

Co-Op Membership Brings Skills, Support, and Education

Participants shared several learned skills in co-ops, including finance, technology, management, and setting boundaries. This also included teamwork and comradery with members.

Effects of discrimination and lack of benefits on children were shared, including generational trauma, feelings of being a burden, as well as mental health issues in children.

Effects on Family Wellbeing

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PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

CCHR-Specific Recommendations

1

Continue to Strengthen and Build Bridges Between Sectors to Advance Support for Worker-Cooperative Members

Given the strong interest in the intersections of human rights, economic democracy, and supporting worker-owner cooperatives, the Commission aims to continue to fortify communication and support between community-based organizations and government agencies to build trust and relationships. A second year of this project could be used to leverage and include: additional NYC-based worker cooperatives; explore public-private partnerships; and engage with other local jurisdictions across the USA who are also focused on improving the lives of worker-owners.

2

Strengthen and Modernize Training and Education Materials

In order to increase awareness of the NYC Human Rights Law and prevent discrimination in housing, employment, and public spaces, Human Rights Law trainings (Human Rights Law 101, Sexual Harassment, and Language Access) should be accessible online and on mobile devices in multiple languages. This would ensure that this training could be utilized for onboarding processes for new worker-owner cooperative members and to others utilizing social support services, such as pregnant individuals in prenatal groups, disability support groups, among others.

3

Supporting Intergroup Relations and Bias Prevention

The Commission on Human Rights can support intergroup relations and bias prevention through community circles and bystander intervention training.

NYC Government-Specific Recommendations

4

Ensure Paid Sick Leave for All Worker-Owner Cooperative Members

Identify and promote pathways of guaranteed Paid Sick Leave fund for NYC-based worker cooperatives along with other city agencies, so that worker cooperative members who are residents of New York have access to paid sick leave via their cooperatives. Doing so will increase economic security and decrease the costs for worker members when they take paid sick leave to care for themselves or family members.

5

Improve New Yorkers' Experiences While Navigating Vital Services, Such as Schools, Hospitals, and Social/Economic Benefits

The Commission will work with government agencies to ensure that schools and hospitals are accessible for all, in cultural competency and language access, to improve individual interactions with government agencies and build sustained government collaboration with cooperatives.

6

Launch a Virtual Worker Cooperatives Resource Hub, Tailored to the Needs of Co-Op Members

The Commission aims to collaborate with NYC agencies to create a worker cooperatives resource hub, which will be a one-stop shop for worker-owners to learn information about their rights and responsibilities under the NYC Human Rights Law. The resource hub will also serve as a central location for worker-owners to access and find out more information about the city's resources and services. This will be done in partnership and collaboration with other NYC agencies and entities. Such hub will be complemented with outreach and education to ensure awareness for immigrant workers under local worker protections.