Turning Commitments into Change: Workforce Inclusion and Advancement

Workforce Innovation Center

Cohear

Contents

Introduction

In pursuit of a better alignment between employers and their workforce, the Workforce Innovation Center (WIC) at the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber aims to develop strategies and shape new policy. Cohear partnered with WIC to help elevate the voices and ideas of workers across the region, because they are the heart of any potential progress. A more successful local economy depends on policies and practices which are informed by the experiences and wisdom of employees across the economic spectrum. Our work focused on listening to and learning from those employees about what could help them achieve their professional goals, maintain positive mental health in times of strain, and feel included and supported in the workplace.

We organized seven focus groups in order to engage a diverse range of the Everyday Experts--the people who live the issues every day--to share their experiences in the workforce as well as brainstorm ideas for making improvements moving forward.

There were two focus groups with entry-level employees in the healthcare, industrial, and manufacturing fields; three focused on the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and two that sought to better understand the impacts of racial inequity for Black employees. CEOs from various corporations joined a number of these discussions to engage in dialogue and learn from the Everyday Experts.

This report highlights the feedback and experiences of these everyday experts from Cincinnati's workforce, as well as their insights and recommendations on how to improve employee satisfaction and create more inclusive and successful workplaces.

Context

The Workforce Innovation Center was founded on the premise that more inclusive workplaces will lead to more efficient, productive, and dynamic businesses. That dynamic businesses, in turn fueling regional economic growth. If businesses are better places to work, everyone benefits.
 WIC also recognizes the distance we have to go to achieve those goals, and how much work there remains to do. The overarching theory for WIC's efforts is that of inclusive capitalism, the concept that the private sector can be "harnessed to create a more inclusive, sustainable, and trusted economic system."

We began this project just before the pandemic began, and the last 18 months have provided both tragic examples of the ways in which the economy has failed to support and empower workers, as well as tremendous opportunity to innovate and improve. Many of the industries we focused on were those most affected by the pandemic, including hospitality, retail, and childcare. Millions of employees were either laid off, forced to leave the workforce, or seeking opportunities to work from home for their safety and that of their families. Many have yet to return to the workforce.

As with far too many places across the country, race and gender are central to many of the inclusion gaps in Cincinnati. In the region's workforce, nearly half (49%) of all Black women make less than $15 per hour, whereas only 27% of white women earn wages in that same bracket. Many of these individuals are working entry level or service industry positions, two of the fastest growing job opportunities in Cincinnati. And despite college educations, 32% of Black women with bachelor's degrees still make $15 or less, triple the percentage as white men with similar educational backgrounds.
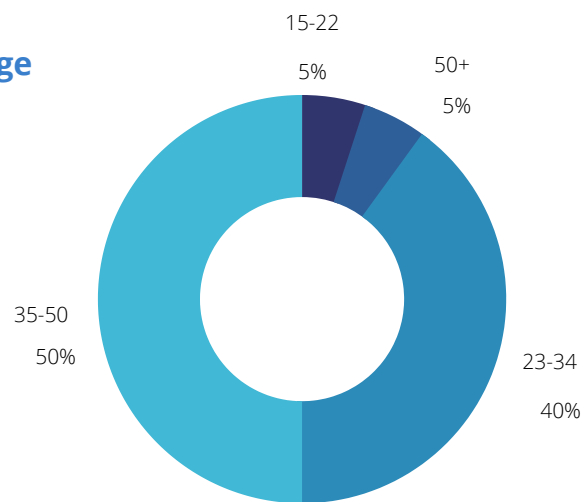
Who We Engaged

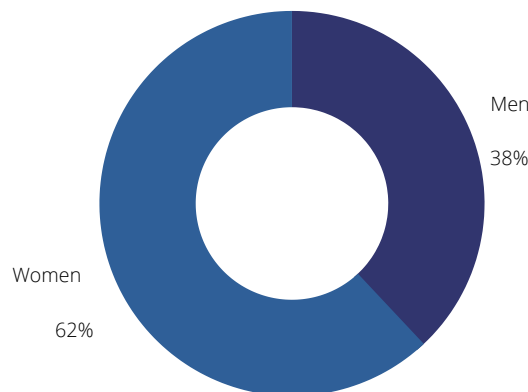**7** **Focus Group Style Conversations**

2 With entry-level employees in the healthcare, industrial, and manufacturing fields

3 Focused on the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

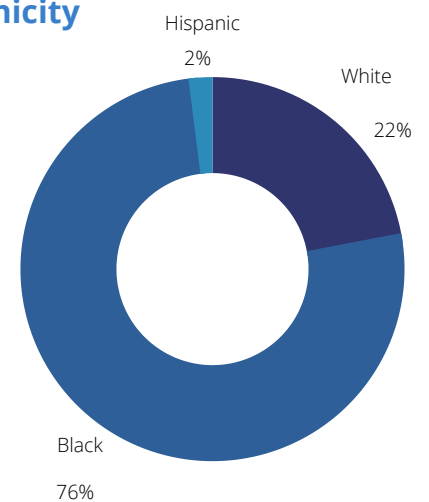**2** That sought to better understand the impacts of racial inequity for Black employees

Age

- 15-22 — 5%
- 50+ — 5%
- 23-34 — 40%
- 35-50 — 50%

Gender Identity

- Men — 38%
- Women — 62%

Race/Ethnicity

- Hispanic — 2%
- White — 22%
- Black — 76%

Key Themes and Recommendations

01 Putting inclusion into action

- Coordinate flexible, affordable childcare access for working parents
- Provide flexible scheduling options
- Allow employees to work remotely when necessary, but respect needed time off
- Create more inclusive tardiness policies for those with transportation challenges
- Provide resources for employees whose first language is not English
- Connect employees to counseling and other mental health services

02 Addressing Racial Disparities in the Workplace

- Proactively seek out quality candidates of color, and find ways to support employees and students of color in industries with low minority participation
- Provide opportunities for training and professional development
- Establish recognition programs in which CEOs and other leadership identify and lift up employee success
- Create space for employees of color to express how they're feeling, and acknowledge and fight discrimination within the company
- Deep inclusion involves employee ownership opportunities: financial, structural, and directional

Key Themes and Recommendations

03 Making Work Better for Entry-Level Employees

- **Make executive leadership accessible to employees at all levels within a company**
- **Acknowledge employees' negative experiences and create mechanisms for showing that actions are being taken to resolve them**
- **Accommodate employees of all abilities**
- **Provide HR employees and managers with training in both empathy and active listening, as well as providing them with a baseline understanding of the duties each employee is performing**

Theme 01: Making Cincinnati a Better Place to Work
Economic Inclusion and Advancement

Employee Experiences

As we engaged entry-level employees across a range of sectors, a number of themes emerged in their descriptions of their workplace environments. In particular, many faced various forms of discrimination or struggled to balance work and family, especially when it came to caring for sick kids or parents. Additionally, many parents described how there is an expectation that working moms should be able to find readily available childcare, without recognition of how difficult that can be.

Unrealistic expectations of parents:

"It got to a point where [my employer] said they couldn't hire any more parents. We hired a girl with a son and looking back, I feel bad because she felt bullied as well when her child was sick. I pulled her aside and said, 'you have to find something else to tell these people because they do not care when your son is sick.' She ended up losing her job." -- Jenel

"With childcare, you go in telling them you have to work certain hours or it just won't work. But then if you don't work the hours they tell you to work, they'll just not hire you." --Queen

"They could literally care less when I need to find a way to pick up my son. One time the pharmacist said to me, "Can't you call your mom?" ...It's like a slap in the face for them to throw that around. Of course if I had someone else to go get them or babysit them I would ask, but I don't." --Jenel

"I had bad experiences with managers. They disrespect you and don't know how to talk to you. The hours were bad too. No one would work around my schedule. The main problem is scheduling around childcare." --Antoinette

Theme 01: Making Cincinnati a Better Place to Work
Economic Inclusion and Advancement

Participants whose first language is not English shared that language barriers can be used as excuses for discrimination and exploitation. They noted how employers utilize the excuse of a language barrier in order to cut corners and disguise their exploitative behaviors.

"People really take advantage of people who don't speak the same language. Companies do take advantage of their hard work. They literally push them to the point where they're trying to catch their breath. It's so sad. They are completely taking advantage of them because they aren't from here." --Queen

In the service industry, some employees described feeling frustrated that their work goes unnoticed and underappreciated. Despite the intense manual and emotional labor that many of these employees are put through, many felt as if the only way to be treated better is to obtain a higher education level or training.

"It's exhausting working at Amazon. You work like ten hours a day. If you're packing, you're most likely by yourself. You get bored and tired because there's no one to talk to. You can't listen to music. You have to listen to whatever they feel like playing. It really brings down morale." --Billy

"Right now I work in logistics. The work is hard. I get up at 3 am to get to work on time. I catch the first bus each day. We have to meet quotas each day, and we don't go home until we do--You're not allowed to leave until everything is done... There's a 95% turnover rate. You don't get benefits until you've been there for 90 days, but that's too long. People get hurt before then. All of these things are set up for you to fail." --Treyshawn

Recommendations: Employers Can Support Working Parents through Better Access to Childcare, Flexible Scheduling, and Respect in the Workplace

Coordinate flexible, affordable childcare access for working parents

Childcare was consistently cited as one of the key barriers to inclusive, successful workplaces. Supporting working parents through providing or subsidizing access to childcare, and respecting their need to handle emergencies relating to their families would go a long way towards that shared success.

"Something that would make a perfect workplace for working moms would be childcare. If I were the employer, I would give employees what they ask for, I would follow the hours they are available. I would show my employees appreciation." --Antoinette

"I think it would be great for more places to look into the value of having childcare on-site... I wouldn't necessarily want to get more money for childcare... But if they could put it on a flex spending COVID childcare card [that would allow me to not lose my childcare voucher]... Just getting creative about those sorts of things." --Jamaica

Provide flexible scheduling options

Flexibility in scheduling was a key priority for many workers. Many needed flexibility as caretakers to elderly parents or yough kids, especially during crises or health emergencies. Allowing employees to create their schedules based on their needs, and keeping an open line of communication could reduce the disconnection between employees and employers.

"I almost feel like there needs to be more flexibility in the schedules. [My employer] in Cincinnati has a union. There's a hierarchy--there's an older woman who gets to choose hours first. Everyone else picks from what is left. But she's older and can't stand on her feet all day, she doesn't want the full 40 hours but that's what she takes because she can get them. We end up losing people because they don't have enough hours. We used to have guaranteed hours but something has changed. They might be using some new predictive model, but now we don't get enough hours."--Jenel
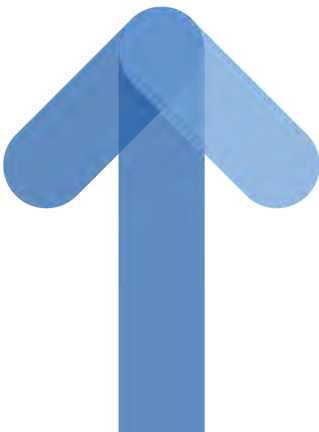
Recommendations: Employers Can Support Working Parents through Better Access to Childcare, Flexible Scheduling, and Respect in the Workplace

Allow employees to work remotely when necessary, but respect needed time off

Working from home should be more accessible for those whom it would benefit, especially when needing to take care of family members--but it is also important that those who are home due to their own or a family member's illness should not be required to continue to work remotely when taking time off.

> "It used to be that way... it used to be if you were at home with your sick kid you needed to focus on your sick kid... Now that [I] can work from home, they're kind of expecting [me] to still [work even if you need sick or personal time off.]" --Jamaica
>
> "At [my work] they're saying, if you cannot teach from the building then you are taking sick time [and cannot teach from home]... So I think it's good that your employer gives you that option of [flex time]." --Sarah

Create more inclusive tardiness policies for those with transportation challenges.

This can include allowing employees to stay later when they arrive late due to unforeseen transportation challenges, or allowing them to make up absences under such circumstances.

> "When I was working when my boys were young, I was taking the bus to work. Sometimes I would be late and they had no patience. The bus is hard. Maybe it's snowing, maybe something goes wrong and I'm late and it wasn't in my control." --Lori
>
> "I would want them to work with us more. If we're on the bus, we should be able to work on a busy schedule." --Billy
>
> "All businesses should be required to have meetings with their employees to hear what's going on. If there's a problem with tardiness, they should have to try to figure out why that is happening." --Rachel

Recommendations: Employers Can Support Working Parents through Better Access to Childcare, Flexible Scheduling, and Respect in the Workplace

Provide resources for employees whose first language is not English

Employers should provide translation and interpretive services when necessary, and create a standard of patience and transparency with employees who are trying to learn. Employer-sponsored English classes could also prove beneficial.

"Because of the language issue, you can't always get things resolved. They didn't bother trying to find an interpreter for me. It would be great for them to offer English classes. It takes a lot of work for me to explain myself to my boss and she just doesn't try to understand. Where I am right now, they do offer an interpreter over the phone."
--Reyna

Connect employees to counseling and other mental health services

Especially in times of strain, companies must make employees' mental health a priority to ensure they are able to maintain an overall sense of wellbeing and satisfaction with work and life. Connect employees to affordable or no-cost mental health services, in addition to incorporating mental health and wellness best practices at the workplace.

"The City itself does offer counseling and emotional support services, which have been very very nice. They're normally in person, but since the pandemic started they're offering Zoom call sessions." --Alexis

Theme 02: Racial Disparities in the Workplace

Employee Experiences

Some everyday experts have felt tokenized for the purpose of increasing diversity metrics, with little value exchanged in return.

> "The city has an inclusion rate, which is basically including minority [populations], in the city's contract work. ...I was hired 'inclusively' for that position because they were trying to meet that rate." --Cheriese

> "You still have this old school colonial mindset of being chattel. So we're still considered part of the money, we're still being considered [a way] to make a program great, but there's no shared wealth, no shared investment. When do we get a stake in the company?" --Michael

Everyday experts described occasionally feeling as if their companies were only making a surface level commitment to racial equity.

> "A lot of times what I found in places that I've worked is that there might be a 'commitment to diversity' quote, but in terms of how it plays out in reality, we know that it's not always genuine." --Lauren

When companies fail to recognize the effort and leadership that their Black employees have put into their work, it does deep harm. This type of discrimination within an organization can manifest as disparities in terms promotions, growth, recognition, and pay.

> "I was working at a hospital in Cincinnati, and what I noticed is that Black people weren't seen as worthy of getting gold stars. [They were] unworthy of being employee of the month or week, and when it was time for them to get promotions, they were never seen as worthy." --Josselyn

> "I think that's why a lot of African-Americans pull away and keep looking for different jobs. They're not fulfilled because they're giving, giving, giving, but there's nothing in return." --Rosemary

Theme 02: Racial Disparities in the Workplace

Employees of color felt that they had to work harder and obtain more qualifications to be as respected as much as white counterparts, even those with fewer achievements.

"After a while, when you see our white counterparts that might have less degrees and experience being paid ten times more money than we are, you lose a little bit of that hope and you lose a bit of that investment in the company, and then you're kind of in survival mode." --Michael

You've got people that put money or put time and effort into being a 'valuable' employee, but then [they] will never be able to own the things at this company that [they] work for." --Cheriese

Recommendations: Prioritize Incorporating Structural Racial Equity that Uplifts Employees of Color

Proactively seek out quality candidates of color, and find ways to support employees and students of color in industries with low minority participation.

Employees pointed out that working toward a more equitable workforce will likely require dedicated, intentional interventions. Altering hiring practices, partnering with mentoring organizations that prepare students of color for the workforce, developing better internal promotion processes, and evaluating pay and advancement disparities could all help address these challenges.

"If your workforce is predominantly white, then [find out and acknowledge] why and have programs in place that get rid of the barriers for people of color. For instance, if a particular job is predominantly white learning, there might not be as many people of color because there may be a barrier to college or to tuition. Having programs that increase access for people of color to those jobs."--Danielle

"Look at your metrics in terms of your population that you are servicing to find the racial demographics, and try to mirror that in your leadership… the demographics of the people they are serving does not look like the people that are up there. That leads to a major disconnect because they don't have the lived experiences of the people they are serving." --Lauren

Provide opportunities for training and professional development.

Participants highlighted that skill gaps can be solved in a professional context, not just in the education system, and that opportunities for training have made them feel better supported.

"It was really eye-opening in the project I did around the lack of technological openings for African-Americans because there was a huge gap because the schools aren't teaching that stuff. There should be a huge emphasis in school because that's where they're at so why not teach it right then and there." --Devoe

"A big part of that [making me want to stay at my job to advance my career] is training, making sure we have the tools to go to the next level. And also giving us the time for that training… to invest in us." --Brittany

Recommendations: Prioritize Incorporating Structural Racial Equity that Uplifts Employees of Color

Establish recognition programs in which CEOs and other leadership identify and lift up employee success

Participants want to see more recognition programs for employees at all levels in their companies and feel that it would improve morale and provide more opportunities for upward advancement.

"I think it's important that companies do more recognition. Let's say someone was recognized six or seven times that year for the work they did, then when that evaluation came, you have that concrete evidence for that raise or that promotion." --Markita

"[To stay with my current health employer], they would have to show me that they want me to continue with the company. Right now we do get recognized, but I would like to hear more from our CEO… than our managers because it would be a motivational thing. We see our managers every day but we don't hear from our CEOs that often. I'd need more recognition." --Syann

Create space for employees of color to express how they're feeling, and acknowledge and fight discrimination within the company.

It's important for employees of color to be given space and time to process major events, in addition to establishing a consistent workplace culture in which conversations about racism are not confined to major cultural events. This might include providing professional emotional and mental support to employees who are negatively impacted by systemic racial discrimination or better training HR departments and staff to be able to handle the concerns and stresses of employees of color. Recognizing the hardships that employees of color experience outside of work and taking a proactive approach to give them the space to be heard and understood would be beneficial for a more inclusive work environment.

## Recommendations: Prioritize Incorporating Structural Racial Equity that Uplifts Employees of Color

"When a big uprising happens, like 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, organizations wanting to make space for people and have conversations during team meetings. Leaving space for people to feel how they feel is really nice. Having those conversations all year long to make people feel like they are included and letting them know how they are dismantling systems of oppression, and dealing with the race and gender wage gap."
--Danielle

Deep inclusion involves employee ownership opportunities: financial, structural, and directional

Creating more opportunities for employees of color to own a share of the company their work, or take part in guiding the future of the organization, would create a deep sense of inclusion among many workers of color.

"[Being respected as an employee] looks like allowing me ownership over ideas that I put into the pot, allowing me to grow, putting me in positions where I will grow, giving me promotions. That's what that has looked like [at my current job]." --Josselyn

"Is there a path to where I have ownership in this company? When you have stock options, you are invested in the company... you have a voice in the company. And when you have a voice in the company, they aren't going to just throw you to the dogs [by firing you]." --Michael
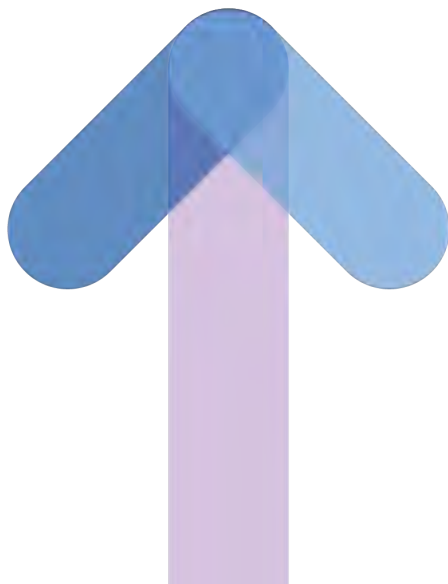
Theme 03: Making Work Better for Entry-Level Employees

Workplace inclusion has to start with the lowest paid employees. For so many of the employees we spoke with, the old adage about being judged by how you treat the least among us rings true: the merit of a company or organization lies in how the lowest paid employees are valued and treated. Focusing on the challenges these employees described can ultimately help companies create more inclusive, equitable, and successful cultures.

Employee Experiences

Some employees feel trapped in entry-level roles with no choice of upward mobility within their companies, forcing them to move to different companies frequently.

"In the entry-level role, it feels as though it is extremely hard to get out of them. There's no way to move around. Especially if you work at a smaller company, it's much harder to move around. You can't just go from where you are making appointments for patients to HR or to any other role that you feel like you have the qualifications for. It's very difficult to do." --Mary

Pathways to advancement are often not clearly communicated, and participants feel that the criteria for promotions are not straightforward or fairly applied. Employees have felt frustrated by a lack of clarity or consistency in advancement opportunities and would like to see more dedicated pathways and eligibility criteria. Many described a sense that their promotion requirements were based on nepotism or racial identity, instead of talent or work ethic.

"Having that conversation about it [advancement and training]. What measures or metrics do I need to hit to move up? Be direct. Am I even eligible? Give me all the things [information] that I need to advance and actually want me to advance." --Devoe

"I used to always hit my [key performance indicators], and it was never good enough, even if it was way beyond what I was supposed to hit. It was never ever good enough. So a company culture where there is recognition and not expecting more and more and never being satisfied." --Danielle

There is no path towards becoming a manager… The whole process is very unclear."
--Jenel

Theme 03: Making Work Better for Entry-Level Employees

Entry-level employees shared that they were working to survive, so had to put up with awful conditions and treatment by managers.

"One time a pharmacist was making racist comments… it got to the point where customers were hearing what he said. They reported him to Corporate, and Corporate called him in. He came back and said, 'girls,'--and that's another thing, I'm a grown woman with almost-grown kids, don't call me 'girl--'I just went to Corporate and apparently I've been saying some things… if I offended your Blackness, next time let me know so I don't have to go all the way to the office.'" --Jenel

"I hate my job. I feel like I'm in prison, like I'm trapped. And as a felon, I know I'm always going to be a second-class citizen. I'll always have a sub-par job unless I'm able to get some sort of training or education. They don't care. Everyone is talking about the employment rate being at an all time low, but not for us." --Treyshawn

Recommendations: Invest in Entry Level Employees by Facilitating Growth and Ownership

Make executive leadership accessible to employees at all levels within a company

To achieve a more inclusive workplace, companies can shift the way they view entry-level employees and encourage executive leadership - especially CEOs - to be accessible to employees at every level of their organization. Knowing that leaders at their companies care about their employees and their experiences has made a huge positive difference for participants' feelings about their company culture.

"There was leadership that reached out to me when they could see I was exhausted from running back and forth. They showed that they cared right up to our CEO, Nick Recker. He is amazing. Nick has done very well with making sure he is reachable to every single employee at any given time… He wants to be inclusive. He wants to be in the know. He wants to know how things are operating and what is going on." --Mary

"I hear from our CEO… every week. He has [a livestream] that is broadcast to all of our employees. He's always visible. Online. Keeping us abreast of what's going on, especially over this last year. Just a little nudge…." --Markita

Acknowledge employees' negative experiences and create mechanisms for showing that actions are being taken to resolve them

Improving the feedback process to protect employees is a relatively straightforward way to empower entry-level employees. This process should be done anonymously, and without any adverse employment actions being taken against participants.

"It really feels good to be heard. I don't want to feel like I'm just typing into some system." --Jenel

Recommendations: Prioritize Incorporating Structural Racial Equity that Uplifts Employees of Color

Accommodate employees of all abilities

Sustainable, accommodating job opportunities for those whose abilities change or are already living with disabilities are an important aspect of creating an inclusive workplace. Providing extra support, and opportunities for employees to request assistance are steps that can decrease inequity among employees with disabilities
.

"You have something happen, an illness or something, and then you need an accommodation. I think being able to provide accommodations for people, whatever it is that they need [is important]. Whether they are vision imparied, hearing impared, having options for them to be able to do their job at least at the same level they were able to do it before they were impaired in some way. That shows dedication as well. Or if you go in with these disabilities and they hire you is important." --Danielle

Provide HR employees and managers with training in both empathy and active listening, as well as providing them with a baseline understanding of the duties each employee is performing

In order for employees to be successful and fulfilled in their positions, it helps to have acknowledgment of the validity of their experiences from HR employees and management.

"Before you get promoted, you should have to take a class on empathy. There are people managing others, but they don't understand how that person's job even works." --Rachel

"[If I was in charge] I would have discussions with HR to make sure they are listening to their employees, that they are compassionate and understanding. You [employers] need to care about how we feel. We're the ones allowing you to get richer and richer and you don't care how we're doing." --Doneisha
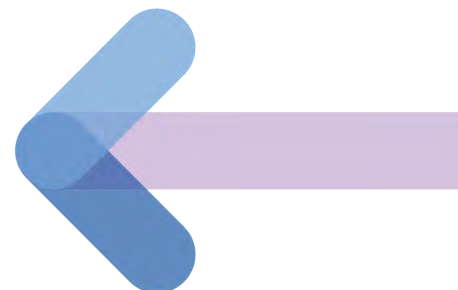
Conclusion

Being committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion requires hard conversations, tangible change, and meaningful action. If and when companies are genuinely committed to those principles, they can create a workplace where everyone--Black employees, New Americans, parents, employees with disabilities--feel that they are respected, have clear paths to advancement, and have the potential to be heard and have ownership in their organizations. Today, too many employees work in environments where they face exploitation, discrimination, and a lack of support.

Progress towards a more inclusive and successful workforce in Cincinnati will require more empathetic practices that take into account the needs of working parents and caretakers, including subsidized or on-site childcare, more flexible scheduling, and support with transportation.

When management and HR departments are trained and knowledgeable about the systemic headwinds that many of their employees have to work against, and make a concerted effort to listen to the concerns of these employees and implement real change, they will likely see a tremendous difference in the commitment and trust of their employees. By seeking to understand and invest in their employees, employers in Cincinnati have the potential to recruit sustainable, hardworking workforces.

This report is just one of many that highlights the obstacles that employees face, as well as their ideas for how to build a more sustainable and inclusive economy. The future they described in these discussions is one in which every employer values and respects their employees, in turn creating stronger, more durable companies. There is a long way to go before we create that economy locally, but the suggestions of the everyday experts --employees--are a good place to look for guidance moving forward.