

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF WORK SUMMIT: WORKER CLIFF EFFECTS DISCUSSION SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

United Way of Greater Cleveland launched the Social Determinants of Work Initiative to bring the Greater Cleveland community together to strategically advance access to work through deepened understanding of the barriers faced by workers, including the benefits cliff. To launch this work, United Way hosted a Workers Benefits Cliff Summit on July 14, 2022.

The following summary was created to provide insight on the discussions that occurred at the Summit while providing a roadmap for the upcoming Community Action Planning Sessions.

OVERARCHING TRENDS

At the SDoW Summit, about 150 participants engaged in 12 different discussion groups. Three overarching trends were noted across these discussions, often multiple times per conversation: **benefits**, **childcare**, and **education**.

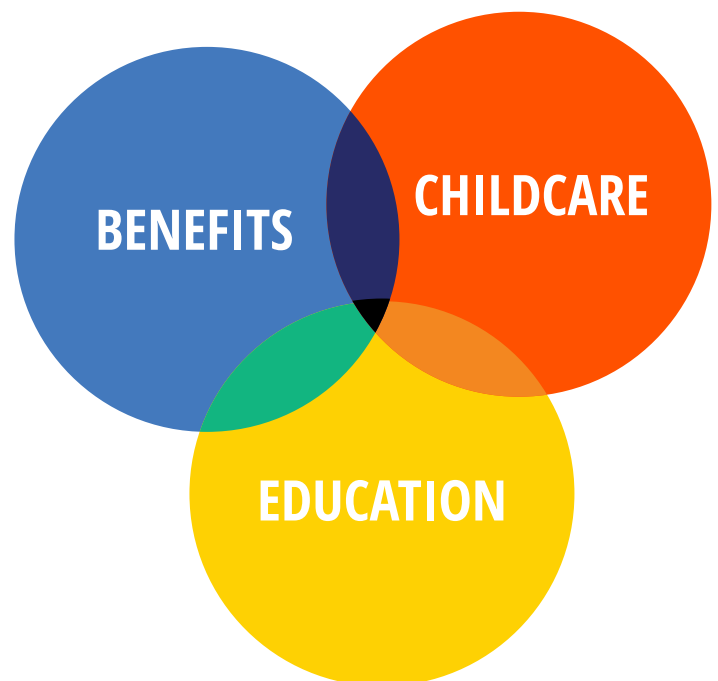
It is interesting to note that each of these trends were identified as gaps in programs/policies, existing programs/policies, as well as areas of opportunity.

Benefits was mentioned with the greatest frequency (~ 46 times) and appeared in all conversations. It is important to note that the term was only included in the analysis when mentioned in correlation with benefits provided by employers, not when mentioned in the phrase “benefits cliff.” This trend is particularly interesting in that it emboldens the participants’ belief that a key to mitigating the federal benefits cliff is by empowering and guiding employers to be flexible and creative with their benefit offerings.

Childcare was the second most mentioned term in the discussion (~ 30 times). Childcare

was the prominent topic in the discussions on gaps and opportunities. It is worth noting that the only mention of existing childcare policies and programs was the example of an employer partnering with a local childcare provider. The frequency of this topic signals not only a great need but a significant area of opportunity for the Community Action Plan.

Education was the third most discussed term (~20 times) and, while it appeared in every conversation, it was most prominent in the conversations about gaps and opportunities. There were two lanes of discussion when it came to education, appearing with similar frequency and importance: education for employers and service providers; and education for those impacted by the benefits cliffs. As with childcare, the need for additional education and awareness came through loud and clear in the discussions and should be a priority for the Community Action Plan.



INDIVIDUAL QUESTION SUMMARIES

Summaries for each question are provided below, including highlights from the discussion, areas of interest (not necessarily frequently noted but worth mentioning), and observations (nonverbal trends collected by the facilitators).



SUCCESSES

What practices/policies already exist in your organization or in other organizations that mitigate the benefits cliff?

HIGHLIGHTS

Supplemental Supports

- Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)
- Sign on bonus
- Gift cards for recognition
- Flexibility compensation packages
- Weekly community meals for employees and families
- Bus tickets or gas cards
- Tuition pre-imburement

- Legal Aid
- Flexible work schedule

Training & Career Growth

- Public libraries provided digital/financial literacy for free
- Financial coaching as a part of staff PD
- Apprenticeship
- Stackable credentials
- Programming and training offered during nontraditional hours
- Self-care training

Childcare

- On-site childcare
- Childcare provided through partnership with nearby provider
- Childcare provided as a benefit

AREAS OF INTEREST

The first area of interest is the creative use of **Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)**. These were the contributions on the gallery wall that received the most engagement/reflection and were noted by the facilitators. It is worth exploring how these existing programs can be expanded and amplified. In particular, there was interest in exploring how EAP can be accessed during work hours and expanded to include benefit bridge consulting.

The second area of interest is **funding**. Although not mentioned in high frequency, it was discussed whether these policies and programs are replicable across different industries and populations due to their high cost. Participants inquired how other sources might supplement the individual company's efforts.

Minimum wage is the final area of interest for this question. Two different participants noted the increase in minimum wage as a successful practice, but they cited different amounts (\$15 vs \$18). This is a good example of how nuanced and confusing this conversation can be.

OBSERVATIONS

Facilitators noted that childcare was a prominent element of the discussions even though few notes were added to the gallery wall. It is also worth noting that many of the responses were centered on gaps or opportunities, rather than successes. It appeared that participants had a hard time focusing on what already exists instead of speaking about what is not.

EFFECTS

What impacts of the benefits cliff are you seeing in your industry?

HIGHLIGHTS

Fear

- This was the most mentioned impact across all the discussions

- Not able to accept employment or compensation out of fear of losing benefits
- Fear of having to leave jobs/change jobs to support family
- Fear of losing housing voucher
- Fear to move up the ladder
- Fear of promotion

Burnout/Stress

- All contributing fear factors noted above lead to burnout
- Employees less productive due to stress
- Lack of opportunity and economic mobility increases stress and starts to create mental/emotional barriers
- Volatility in all aspects of life (housing, employment, etc.) lead to additional stress
- Lack of stability

Retention/Advancement

- Employees are unable to advance in their career
- Employers cannot "grow" talent internally
- Hire turnover rate and roles are often left unfilled
- Individuals struggle to realize their potential
- Increased competition between agencies and companies

AREAS OF INTEREST

A particular area of interest noted in the discussion was the emphasis on **urgency over access to and quality of childcare**. Participants flagged that while childcare is an overarching challenge, the urgency to find anything that works is also putting quality by the wayside. This is important to consider when we think about the future workforce and how not taking action now will impact the educational outcomes of future generations.

The second area of interest is the impact of benefits cliffs on **multigenerational households**. Not only is there a need for framing this challenge as a family issue instead of an individual issue, this is a multigenerational issue.

For example, the impact on work of caring for elderly parents or family members is often excluded from the conversation.

OBSERVATIONS

Facilitators noted great conviction and passion from participants when engaging with this question. It was also noted that participants were clearly empathetic to the experience of the community and perhaps felt that others did not share the same degree of empathy.

GAPS

What gaps exist in practices/policies that mitigate the benefits cliff?

HIGHLIGHTS

Education/Awareness

- Debunking the myth that employees do not want to work
- General awareness of the benefits cliffs
- Giving employers the tools to create policies that mitigate the benefits cliff
- Framing the business case for assisting employees who face the benefits cliff

Supportive Benefits from Employers

- Healthcare is too expensive or inaccessible
- Lacking childcare support/stipends/benefits
- Flexible compensation package that controls the severity of a drop in income
- Everything takes financial capital, where is this funding coming from?
- Wrap-around services also require human and financial capital

Strategy

- It is unclear what the best investment or opportunity is and therefore companies lack strategy on how to support employees in this situation

- There is also a lack of strategy in federal and state-level policy

AREAS OF INTEREST

The first area of interest is the **language** used when presenting this work—those impacted by the benefits cliffs are not clientele but rather people, parents, caregivers, and a part of a larger family unit. This was endorsed by many and highlights the importance of having a human-centered approach to addressing these issues and empowering those most impacted.

Another area of interest is the need for **safe spaces to share cliff challenges**. Even if employers provided the appropriate supports, would employees feel safe and comfortable sharing? What would it look like to provide these safe spaces? This is important to consider when thinking about an employer toolkit.

A final area of interest is the phenomenon that **employees may be facing similar challenges to those they serve**. Participants noted that this is more likely from a service provider perspective and could create challenges in ensuring all members of the ecosystem have the support they need.

Even though the summary is brief, facilitators noted that participants were discussing the gaps during the other three questions as well. It was also noted that participants were less motivated to provide examples of the gap because the gap is so pervasive that examples are limitless.

OPPORTUNITIES

What practices/policies can organizations implement to support those who are impacted by the benefits cliff?

HIGHLIGHTS

This question had the most responses and annotations of all the questions and therefore has many items worth highlighting.

Benefits

- Benefits beginning on day one of employment
- Creative benefits such as gift cards, bonuses, bus passes, Uber gift cards, breakfast or lunch
- Promotion options that include benefits and not just wage increases
- Affordable or prorated medical insurance
- Individualized approach to benefits, rather than one size fits all approach
- Employer small dollar loan program
- Employer rainy day fund to support employees in emergencies
- Pre-imbursement tuition for continued education

Education

- Financial literacy training for individuals and families
- Coaches to support financial literacy
- Financial literacy through the lens of the benefits cliff, helping individuals know what will impact their benefits and empowering them to advocate for themselves
- Benefit Coaches who can support employees as they navigate the cliffs
- Additional training for HR professionals
- Replicate the coaching model found in the Bridge Pilot

Childcare

- Free or subsidized childcare
- Childcare included in benefits package upon hiring
- Free afterschool programs
- Aligning work schedule with school schedule
- Employers partnering with local providers to subsidize cost and remove transportation/schedule barriers

AREAS OF INTEREST

Similar to the question about successes, the first area of interest is **funding**. While not mentioned frequently, some noted concerns about where

the funding would come from to support the proposed solutions. This concern was extended to civic funding (federal/local funds) as well as for employers.

The second area of interest is **shared data**. While only noted once, it was endorsed by a few other participants and was a unique suggestion. The conversation centered on creating a system or method of sharing data between employers, service providers and federal/local government. There was some concern around privacy and control, but the primary discussion was how we could streamline the mitigation process by ensuring everyone is on the same page.

The final area of interest is partnering with the public library. Again, not noted with great frequency but an interesting point to consider. It was discussed that public libraries offer many of the proposed solutions, such as financial literacy, afterschool programs, career coaches, etc., and have funding streams in place to sustain these efforts.

OBSERVATIONS

Facilitators noted that participants were eager to provide recommendations and were passionate about expressing their beliefs. It is worth noting that this question, similar to "Gaps," produced the most "us versus them" discussions. Many of the participants were service providers and were quick to offer opportunities for employers and policy makers.