



DIVERSITY AWARENESS & WELLNESS IN ACTION:

DIRECT CASH ASSISTANCE IS GOOD MEDICINE FOR AUSTIN'S ARTISTS AND FRONTLINE WORKERS

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Special thanks to:

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DAWA: Direct Cash Assistance is Good Medicine

A LIVED-EXPERIENCE DATA BLACK PAPER

MEASURE
Community Led. Data Driven.

ABOUT MEASURE

MEASURE is a research and public education organization led by Black women and dedicated to using data and technology to pursue community goals. Since its founding in 2015, MEASURE has provided over 3,014 hours of free antiracist evaluation support to the community to increase their access to and use of data. In 2021, MEASURE staff and volunteers worked to provide direct support to its community partners through the creation of tools and technology used to maintain their organizations, build consensus, coordinate action, collect data, and publicize their results. MEASURE believes that when used strategically, data provides a common language upon which community members can meet and increase their knowledge about the causes and work together to create equitable changes. MEASURE's efforts are innovative within the ecosystem of social justice as it encourages people of color to be data collectors and storytellers. MEASURE recognizes community engagement as a necessary component to address racial equity, public safety, health, education, economics, and to improve community relations and trust.

ABOUT DAWA

Diversity Awareness and Wellness in Action (DAWA) is an innovative initiative based in Austin, Texas. DAWA was launched in September 2019. DAWA uniquely focuses on supporting musicians, artists, creatives, social workers, teachers, integrative healing practitioners, healthcare, hospitality, and service industry workers who are often underserved

while at the same time experiencing negative social determinants of health. Austin is known for its creative class of artists, innovators, and entrepreneurs. Austin also has an increasing cost of living. This can open the door to even the best and brightest talents possibly falling upon hard times. This was true before the pandemic and is likely to remain true for some time. As the world shut down during the pandemic from COVID-19, the Austin music industry felt the impact. Jonathan 'Chaka' Mahone went to work and started DAWA.

DAWA means 'medicine' in Swahili [1] and supports the belief that medicine consists of more than just pills - medicine can be meeting people with practical and immediate resources that bridge the gap when there is a need. According to DAWA, "community is one of the greatest technologies and being together is great medicine for the soul". [2] DAWA's focus is on community building. DAWA was started to address an immediate need for financial support for community members.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

DAWA came to MEASURE to gain insights into the experience of their grant recipients in order to support their next steps. Through two equity focus groups, MEASURE collected input from a pool of DAWA grant recipients. The participants in the focus group provided clear insights into the barriers they face and long-term benefits from programs like DAWA. This report lays out those insights and a path forward for how to take action on them.

MORE ABOUT DAWA

THE DAWA FUND

The DAWA Fund addresses many of the social determinants of health by providing direct financial assistance to people who often do not have a social safety net, supporting them when they experience financial crisis or immediate need. DAWA was launched in September 2019. The problem that DAWA addresses is that people of color who take a path of service often find themselves burdened financially and burnt out mentally. DAWA addresses this problem by providing “community frontliners” with direct financial assistance (currently \$200 Visa Gift card) quickly and easily after completion of a short online application.^[2] DAWA defines a “community frontliners of color” as a person of color who contributes to the physical, spiritual and mental health of community members. For DAWA, this definition includes, but is not limited to: musical and visual artists, service industry workers, healthcare professionals, social workers, workers in the healing arts such as therapists, and educators. DAWA intends to continue supporting these community frontliners through direct cash assistance, but they also want to expand their cultural programming to meet other needs. DAWA sees financial support as a way to help people find space to heal. Through DAWA funding, grant recipients have shared that the financial support provided has helped them buy medicine, food, and other necessities to alleviate pressures that often lead to stress and disease. DAWA has raised over \$153,000 in emergency funds to support community frontliners, creatives, teachers, and healers who were experiencing financial crisis. DAWA donors can become a monthly DAWA member, or make a donation of any amount. All of the donations received are tax deductible and used to provide financial support to community frontliners facing financial crisis. DAWA helps to build a resilient and strong community to support all its members, both donors and recipients.

^[2]

THE FOUNDER'S STORY

The idea for DAWA developed through the personal life experience during Jonathan ‘Chaka’ Mahone’s journey to fulfill a vision for himself as a full-time self-employed artist. Chaka confronted many mental, psychological, financial, and spiritual obstacles along his road to fully realizing his purpose. Some of those frequent obstacles and threats included depression, anxiety, and homelessness. It was through his community, a loving family, and friends that were available to catch him during these low moments, that allowed him to arrive where he is today. ^[1]

Chaka is a storyteller and rapper who uses visual art, film/video (Uplifted), music (*Riders Against the Storm*), fashion (*NefrFreshr*), and events (Divine and Conjure Enterprises, Body Rock ATX). Chaka was elected the first Black chair of the Austin Music Commission in December 2021. According to Chaka, there are “some great people within the city's fabric working hard” to address the economic inequity issues in Austin. Chaka believes in the power of art, and the importance of the artist as a community catalyst for social and cultural change, economic development, healing, planning, and collective conversation. Chaka wanted to provide a way to provide funding and support community frontliners who were “giving so much great energy to our community”.^[1] According to Chaka, “the story we tell ourselves is one of the most significant determinants of: how we feel, when we find our purpose, what we consider possible, where we end up, and why we end up there” .^[1]

DAWA MISSION AND VISION

The mission of DAWA is to honor, celebrate, and empower the essential work of community frontliners through direct financial support, and culturally relevant health-centered programming.[2] According to Chaka, the goal is to make the DAWA fund a continuous source of support. Chaka would like to increase the amount of each grant provided through DAWA to \$500 in the future. DAWA is exploring ways to bring in more consistent revenue streams to strengthen the fund and to make the distribution process faster and more efficient. Chaka believes "that DAWA needs to have control over its own destiny and fund." [1]

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In a study on cost of living in 2022, Austin, Texas ranks with other cities as having the highest cost of living increases in America.[3] Since the last census reporting period, Central Texas has become more expensive with one of the highest cost of living increases in the country. According to a study published by Filterbuy, The Austin-Round Rock-Georgetown metro area ranked 12th highest. [3] Looking at percent change in cost of living from 2010-2020, overall cost of living, cost of goods, cost of housing and cost of utilities, Austin ranks in eighth place on the list. The I-35 corridor had a 17.4%-17.8% increase in cost of living over the past decade. For Austin, the increase was driven by the high increase in housing and utility prices which also saw a 20.7% and 13.4% increase.[3]

The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development defines "affordable housing" as housing you can obtain for 30% of your income. [4] According to Rent Cafe, the average rent in Austin is \$1690 for 865 square feet. [5] Data For this rent to be affordable by HUD standards, one's income would need to be \$67,600. But data shows that the average public school teacher salary in Austin, TX is \$53,937 as of May 27, 2022 [6] and the estimated salary in 2021 for a musician was \$48,520 per year in Austin, TX [7]. According to the Austin Chamber, in 2019 the median household income for the United States was \$65,712; for the state of Texas \$64,034; and for the city of Austin \$80,954. [8]

DAWA funds seek to meet the immediate need and bridge the gap by providing direct cash assistance through micro-grants. DAWA has completed 3 previous rounds of providing direct cash assistance funding with an emphasis on sustainability, ethical production, and bringing people together. In late June 2020, DAWA opened up applications for the first round of providing micro-grants. DAWA received over 200 applications in 48 hours. Working with a team of volunteers, DAWA distributed \$40,000 in the form of \$200 Visa gift cards to 200 people. During the second and third round of grants in the winter of 2021 and the following summer of 2021, DAWA began a push for funding for Austin's Black community, aimed directly at fellow musicians. DAWA distributed \$40,000 in the form of \$200 Visa gift cards to 200 people during the second and third rounds.[1] DAWA has raised and distributed over \$153,000 in emergency funds over the last 2 years to support community frontliners, creatives, teachers, and healers who were experiencing financial crisis through direct financial assistance. DAWA plans to continue providing supportive services in Austin. A comprehensive data brief was requested from DAWA from MEASURE to provide a sense of where DAWA is currently and where they need to go in the future.

THE HISTORY OF RACISM IN AUSTIN & THE IMPACT ON AUSTIN'S COMMUNITY FRONTLINERS

1865-1920's	1920's	1930's & 40's	1950's	1960's & 70's	1980's & 90's	2000's & 2010's	2020's
<p>AUSTIN'S EARLY DIVERSITY</p>  <p>15 "freedman" communities throughout Austin.</p> <p>Red River community along Waller Creek (after 15,000 years of indigenous occupation) was a center of Black and Hispanic cultural life.</p> <p>Tillotson College, established in 1875, was Austin's first institution of higher learning.</p>	<p>INTENTIONAL DISPLACEMENT & UNDER-REPRESENTATION</p> <p>The 1920's saw the birth of the Harlem Renaissance, a rich cross-disciplinary cultural movement of Black intellectualism, art, theatre, politics, dance, fashion, literature and music.</p> <p>The 1928 Master Plan moved all Black Austinites to a 6 square mile area in East Austin. The plan led to segregation of the Hispanic and Latino community as well.</p> 	<p>COMMUNITIES RISE & THRIVE</p>  <p>In 1933, the first library was moved to East Austin.</p> <p>1945 - The Victory Grill was opened on 11th Street, hosting musical greats for decades.</p> <p>Thriving businesses grew.</p> <p>Community gardens and fruit trees grew, with families sharing produce.</p>	<p>INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT & UNDER-REPRESENTATION</p> <p>In 1953, Austin adopted a model for city council, based on "at large" positions, limiting place-based representation.</p> <p>1957 - All property in East Austin was zoned as "industrial," including single family residential uses.</p> <p>No bank loans for home repair laid the groundwork for gentrification.</p> 	<p>CIVIL RIGHTS & NEW DEVELOPMENTS</p>  <p>1960's - The Brown Berets and Black Panthers worked together in Austin to fight racial discrimination.</p> <p>1975 - Waterloo Park was established as a "revitalization" project, displacing families along Red River.</p>	<p>ART GROWTH & "SMART" GROWTH</p> <p>1980 - George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center</p> <p>1983 - La Resistencia Bookstore</p> <p>1984 - Mexic-Arte Museum</p> <p>1986 - Stubbs BBQ</p> <p>1987 - SXSW</p> <p>1995 - SIMS Foundation</p> <p>1998 - Mexican-American Cultural Center</p> <p>1999 - Millennium Youth Entertainment Complex</p> <p>The Smart Growth Initiative protects Barton Springs but identifies areas of Central East Austin as Desired Development Zones.</p> 	<p>"PROGRESS"</p>  <p>2003 - Austin Affordable Housing Corporation is established to address affordable housing. Most "affordable" units set at 60 MFL.</p> <p>2005 - HAAM founded</p> <p>2005 - Rainey Street rezoned</p> <p>2012 - Imagine Austin "Comprehensive" Plan leaves people out of planning</p> <p>2013 - Six Square established</p> <p>2017 - KUT reports 1/4 of E. 12th is owned by Eureka Holdings</p> <p>2018 - CODE Next is defeated</p> <p>2019 - DAWA is founded</p>	<p>PANDEMIC IMPACTS</p> <p>March 2020 - Pandemic Shutdown</p> <p>June 2020 - George Floyd protests</p> <p>Summer 2020 - DAWA Round 1</p> <p>2020 - Music Commission establishes Systemic Racism Working Group</p> <p>Winter 2021 - DAWA Round 2</p> <p>February 2021 - Storm Uri</p> <p>2021 - Shuttered Venues Grant, created to support live venues and festivals, benefits larger and whiter small businesses</p> <p>Summer 2021 - DAWA Round 3</p> <p>March 2022 - County Eviction Protections Expire & Rent & Mortgage Assistance programs are launched.</p> 

Sources 9-38

DEEPENING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The disproportionate impact of displacement and the pandemic to Austin's community frontliners is connected to a long history of racist policies, discriminatory practices, and lack of inclusion in many aspects of citywide planning processes. The harm experienced by these communities today is connected to harm from the past. It is a history marked by intermittent waves of White-led oppression and remarkable community resilience.

1865-1920's

157 years ago, when news of the Emancipation Proclamation had finally reached Texas, Austin's community landscape was far less segregated than it is today. Throughout all parts of Austin, 15 freedman communities had been established and were beginning to thrive. [9] These communities, though predominantly African American (or Black), also included people of Mexican descent and some White people of low income. The names of several of these communities (such as Clarksville, Wheatsville and Barton Springs) are echoed in today's richer and predominantly White neighborhoods. Of these 15, the Red River community along what is now Waller Creek, [10][11] after 15,000 years of indigenous occupation, had become a center of Black and Hispanic/Latino cultural life. Samuel Huston College, the first institution of higher and an historically Black college, was established in 1875. It would later become Huston-Tillotson University. [12]

1920's

In the 1920's and 30's the Harlem Renaissance elevated Black artistry, intellectualism, and self-empowerment. A golden age for African American artists, writers, and musicians, the cultural movement brought with it a sense of pride in and control over the cultural narrative. [13]

Parallel to this elevation of the Black experience were nationwide racist and oppressive policies that disrupted communities and led to a decades-long extraction of generational wealth. In Austin, the pinnacle of this era was the 1928 Master Plan. Approved by an all White and male city council, the Master Plan mandated that in order to receive city services, all Black Austinites must move into a 6 square mile area in East Austin. Although written to address “negro” residents, the policy impacted all communities of color. [14]

1930's & 40's

Despite economic and cultural impacts of the Master Plan and the redlining that followed [15], communities in East Austin grew and began to thrive. Community gardens and fruit trees were established, and small businesses took root with hyper-local support. In 1933 the first library was moved to East Austin. [16] In 1945 the Victory Grill opened on 11th street, becoming a beacon in the community, and host to generations of famous Black musicians. [17]

1950's

Over time, new Austin policies and ordinances further oppressed communities of color. While redlining from real estate agencies, mortgage lenders, and insurance companies robbed families of their generational wealth, new zoning laws from the 1950's designed property in East Austin as “industrial,” including single family residences. This ushered polluting facilities into the neighborhood, where they caused illness and lowered property values. [18]



[P1] 1950s Austin TX East Hwy (now I-35) source: TexasFreeway.com

1960's & 70's

As the Civil Rights movement swept across the nation, in Austin, the 1960's and 70's saw a new emergence of resistance and solidarity among communities of color. The Brown Berets and Black Panthers worked together to fight racial discrimination and injustice [19], and the environmental movement of the 1970's began here as an intersectional one, [20] only later becoming more divided by noninclusive environmental policies. Still, 1975 saw further harm done by the “revitalization” project, Waterloo Park, which displaced many families of color along Waller Creek (previously known as “Red River”). [21]

1980's & 90's

The 1980's and 90's was a period of both cultural preservation and problematic “Smart Growth.” This period saw the establishment of the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, La Resistencia Bookstore, Mexic-Arte Museum, Stubbs, PODER, the SIMS Foundation, the Mexican American Cultural Center, and the Millennium Youth Entertainment Center. [22 -29] But once again, parallel to these important improvements was the designation of Central East Austin as a “Desired Development Zone”, a policy that was attached to the Smart Growth Initiative, which established groundbreaking protections for Austin's aquifers, especially Barton Springs, and despite having a pivotal role in the integration of Austin's swimming pools, [30] provided most benefit to the predominantly White community of Central Austin.

2000's & 2010's

The 2000's and 2010's brought some progress, but also saw the continued exclusion of communities from important policy-making. The Austin Affordable Housing Corporation was established in 2003, and affordable was largely defined as 60% of the median family income. [31] While this was initially promising, as of 2021, Austin's MFI was 98,900, 60% of which is \$59,340, an income not seen by most families of color being displaced in the housing market. 2005 brought the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians (HAAM). [32] Also in 2005, rezoning of Rainey Street as commercial property led to the displacement of the remaining families of the historic Red River community. [33] Members of Austin's communities were frustrated by the lack of inclusion in the development of the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan of 2012 as well as the now defeated CODE Next of 2018. [34-37] Established in 1987 as an event featuring regional artists, in this period SXSW stopped prioritizing local artists and became an international event, the cost of which excluded many local participants. In 2017, KUT reported that one quarter of properties on East 12th Street had been purchased by a single real estate developer. A center of Black-owned businesses in Austin, the merchants of East 12th Street have been a vital backbone in the community's cultural strength over time. [38] The purchases raised concerns over the future of this historic district.

2020's

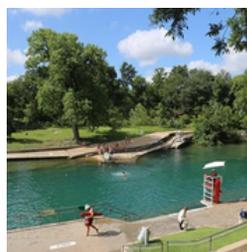
In 2019, DAWA was founded by Jonathan "Chaka" Mahone to address the growing hardship experienced by Austin's community frontliners. In the 2020's with the pandemic shutdown making these impacts exponentially worse, DAWA became a vital resource to the community, with three rounds of low-barrier cash assistance provided to hundreds of folks in the summer of 2020, the winter of 2021 and the following summer of 2021. [1]

Chaka was frustrated by ongoing conversations among industry leaders that discounted the struggles of historically marginalized artist communities in the city. "They were talking about the difficulties of living in Austin, as a musician or as a creative, as an artist. What about Black people? What about generations of Black people who have been displaced?" he said. "You can literally look at, in 1991, when the moniker was given, the Live Music Capital, (the) Black population was at 12%. Now we're at 7.4%. Literally from that time, when you decided we're going to brand ourselves and market ourselves as this great destination city, we're going to bring people in, and those people – guess what, they're going to like it, and then they're going to stay here – there is a direct correlation to the decrease in the Black community and the Black population." [1]



From left to right:
1870's photo of Samuel
Huston College, Image
of the Master Plan, The
Victory Grill, and the
Holly Plant (a polluting
factory in East Austin)
[P2-P5]

From left to right:
Cesar Chavez, Barton
Springs, East Austin
mural, woman in Black
Lives Matter mask
[P6-P9]



FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

The MEASURE Equity Focus Group Tool utilizes racial-equity lenses whereby those who are historically and systematically impacted by disparate social outcomes make up most of those in the community focus group. This prioritization results in an elevation of community members' lived-experience and voice as meaningful understanding of the subject is gained.

FOCUS GROUP GOALS

The MEASURE Certified Measure Educators used 2 equity-focused focus groups to better understand the needs, desires, and barriers experienced by the communities most impacted financially and mentally by financial hardships (during and after the pandemic) in order to improve the DAWA Funding Program. The equity focus groups informed and guided the identification of recurring themes relevant to support and advance the mission and funding capacity of DAWA.

TARGET POPULATION

MEASURE's Certified MEASURE Educators (CME)'s conducted and facilitated 2 focus groups with DAWA participants who received funding in the past rounds to provide a deeper understanding of and feedback regarding their lived experience of social injustice and the financial hardships experienced. Target population consisted of community members who identified as being community frontline workers in Austin impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT PROCESS

MEASURE's Equity Focus group tool was selected to support DAWA with obtaining and collecting data and lived experience, knowledge, and insights from community members who were previous recipients of DAWA funding support. MEASURE CME's developed focus group recruitment strategy in partnership with DAWA organization in recruiting participants via email and a registration form. The recruitment method used was a drafted email with a link to the registration form provided by DAWA organization founder, Chaka via email and phone calls to DAWA organization list of previous fund reciprocents. Of the 47 people who completed the focus group sign-up registration form, 18 participated in the focus groups. DAWA's Equity Focus Group #1 took place virtually using the Zoom platform on Saturday, April 30, 2022 from 3-4:30 pm CST. DAWA's Equity Focus Group # 2 occurred virtually on Zoom on Saturday, May 14, 2022 from 3-4:30 pm CST. Participants from both Equity Focus Group 1 and 2 received compensation from DAWA organization for the amount of \$50 within 7-10 days of completing focus groups via PayPal or Venmo.

FOCUS GROUP MEETING DETAILS

DAWA's Equity Focus Group #1 took place virtually using the Zoom platform on Saturday, April 30, 2022 from 3-4:30 pm CST. DAWA's Equity Focus Group # 2 occurred virtually on Zoom on Saturday, May 14, 2022 from 3-4:30 pm CST. Two remote equity-focused focus groups were conducted with community members who identified as being community frontliners in Austin impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. The two focus groups included previous DAWA funding Program recipients.

Participants were requested to use their cameras or phones if possible. Each session lasted 90 minutes and covered the following activities: Core Values & Biases Assessment, Define the Problem, Historical Timeline, Equity-Focused Questions, and Wrap Up & Closing Remarks. The participants were recruited by DAWA's founder and MEASURE CME consultants. Equity focus group 1 was a research group to evaluate and provide feedback regarding the established protocol and included participants based on community availability. Equity focus group 2 was conducted to gather feedback regarding lived experience of community frontliners and consisted of participants based on community availability. Focus group participants spoke English.

Equity Focus Group Questions:

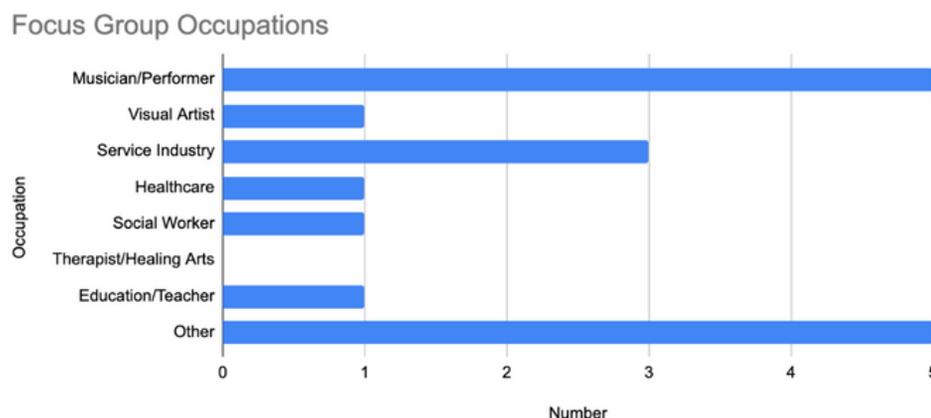
1. How did you hear about DAWA's funding opportunity?
2. Can you share a little more about your financial situation going into applying for DAWA funds. What brought you to seek support from DAWA?
3. What was your experience from the process of applying for funds from DAWA?
4. What was your experience from the process of receiving funds from DAWA?
5. How were you or your family impacted by the funds you received?
6. Can you share about any obstacles or barriers you experienced throughout the process of applying or receiving funds from DAWA?
7. Is there anything you would like or suggest to see improved or added in the future?

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS WHO ATTENDED

In total, 18 people participated in the focus groups. 10 of the 14 participants recruited attended the virtual Equity Focus Group #1 on April 30, 2022, and 8 of the 33 participants recruited attended the virtual Equity Focus Group #2 May 14, 2022. Given the consistency of comments across both groups the following demographic represents both groups collectively. Generally, the demographics of the focus group loosely reflected the demographics of the DAWA's recipient population.

Like DAWA's recipient base, musicians made up the largest share of grant recipients. All other categories were represented with the exception of therapy/healing arts. This included visual artists, service industry workers, healthcare workers, social workers, and educators. [Figure 4]

Figure 4



PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS WHO ATTENDED

- The age of participants ranged from 25 to 54, with over 50% falling in the 25-34 year-old category. [Figure 6]
- Male, female and genderqueer or gender non-binary was relatively well-balanced (47%, 35% and 6%, respectively.) 12% preferred not to answer. [Figure 7]
- People of color were the prioritized participants, with 70% identifying as Black or African American and 12% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, 12% identifying as multiracial or biracial, and 6% preferring not to say. No individuals identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or Native American participated in the focus group. [Figure 5]
- While income was not assessed across the body of DAWA participants, income in the focus group ranged from under \$10,000 to \$59,000, with the smallest percentage (12%) falling in the range of \$20-\$59,000. It is worth noting that the highest level of income is still below 60% of Austin’s median family income (\$98,900). It’s also worth noting that at higher levels of household income, the average number of people per household was also higher. [Figure 8]

Figure 5

Focus Group Racial Demographics

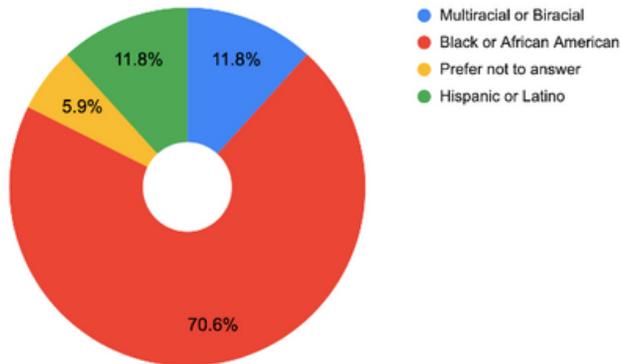


Figure 6

Participant Age Range

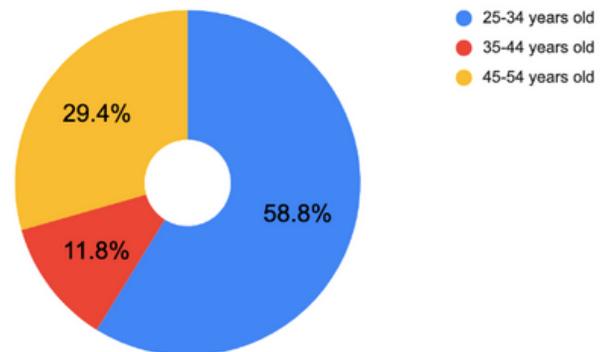


Figure 7

Gender Identity

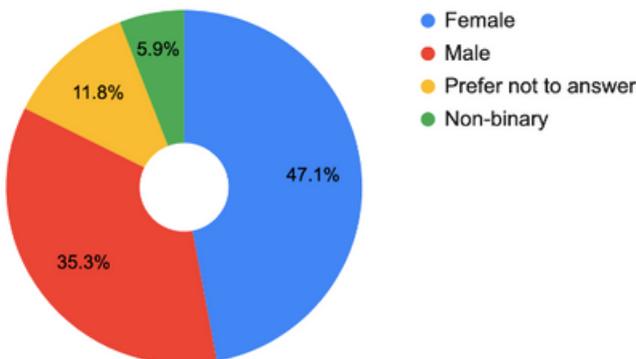
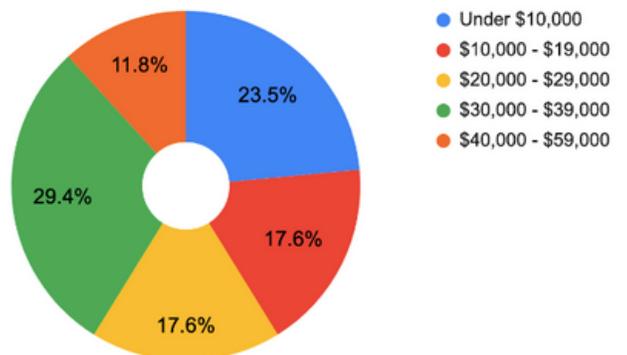


Figure 8

Participants by Income Level



THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Participants Felt Unfairly Disadvantaged by Historical Harm

After reviewing the historical timeline, we asked both groups to respond with their thoughts and comments. Not only were participants generally aware of the Master Plan and its general impact on them personally, many expressed feeling the personal impact of being unfairly disadvantaged, as well as the lack of sufficient support for correcting the damage. They shared that it was getting worse, not better, for themselves and many others in their community. While both groups expressed their appreciation for learning more details about Austin's history of racism, they did not express surprise over those details.

"It just seems like it's an ever-growing gap in between, I don't want to say the haves and have nots"

"My great grandparents got over 200 acres of land. Unfortunately I'm struggling. I'm a descendant of the Russell. What happened to my generational wealth?"

They Give Here but They Can't Live Here

People in both focus groups reported either being pushed to the outskirts of Austin or knowing many who had been. Both groups also acknowledged that many of Austin's community frontliners that work in Austin are not actually living within the city limits. Many of the most active community members, while they work in Austin and contribute to its culture, have been physically displaced to areas outside of Austin as a result of the rising cost of housing.

"I used to tell people, as long as we at least keep a foothold in the Rosewood area, whatever, we're fine. But even that's slipping away"

Mental Health Stressors Were Common

Both groups shared sentiment that community frontliners in Austin were not paid enough for the value they provide. Participants shared experiences of stress, depression and resignation due to the recent hardships they had experienced, especially during the pandemic. They additionally felt that programs like DAWA's were necessary to help fill that gap.

"I was referred. I was depressed not knowing how I was going to pay a Bill. I got a letter from DAWA with a debit card. it was the amount I needed. God is good."



DAWA's Human-Centered Approach Is Highly Valued

Focus group participants were universally appreciative of the funding they received from DAWA, the way they provided it, and the contribution DAWA makes to the community. What they generally valued most was the human-centered experience and low-barrier application. They reported that this was different from other programs, citing that it was often hard to meet the qualifications for programs, and that DAWA's process was easier and faster. Despite having a wide range of needs for funding, participants universally shared a positive experience of this low-barrier approach. They also commented that the funding filled a gap, and that it did so "just in time."

"I feel like an alien in my hometown... But I am hopeful with the DAWA program."

"Without aid, I wouldn't be able to keep stable enough to fight. Government hasn't been here for me, but my community has in the form of direct mutual aid from individuals and programs like DAWA."

Low-Barrier Cash Assistance Has a Powerful and Long-lasting Impact

Participants reported several common positive impacts of receiving low-barrier cash assistance. These included: feeling less stress; feeling more connected; feeling seen and appreciated; feeling respected and trusted by the process. The mini-grants awarded to participants appear to have a deeper impact than the cash value alone. Participants reported experiencing the alleviation of stress, and a sense of being seen and valued. One participant shared (with broad agreement from the group) that when you are working so hard not to give up, a small gift like DAWA's cash assistance has a lasting impact.

"It gives you not only that financial aid, but that you feel held by the community. You also feel like you're seen and supported, which is really important. I think"

DAWA's Approach, Communication, and Processes

DAWA's approach is relational and community-centered. Participants reported experiencing being part of a supportive community, and grateful for the departure from the more transactional experience of traditional grant opportunities. Communication with DAWA was also discussed. Most people heard about DAWA's funding rounds through word of mouth in their existing communities. DAWA's connection to communities throughout Austin is broad, though statistical analysis might reveal areas and subcultures that present opportunities for new relationships. Overall, participants agreed that communications were straightforward, with one participant calling it the "smoothest grant process ever." Some participants did report failing to receive a confirmation email, but quickly followed by saying that the rapid release of funds made up for it.

Recipients Feel Invested in DAWA's Mission

Participants seemed to be personally engaged and invested in DAWA's mission. This sharing of goodwill and support toward DAWA and its programs was unsolicited and very common among participants. They wanted to see DAWA get more funding to be able to continue its work, and many were willing to be quoted for their positive comments.

LIVED-EXPERIENCE DATA & STORYTELLING



"I got evicted last... last month and I'm back in west Texas. It's been nothing but depressing with how Austin is."

- Focus Group Participant

"My great grandparents were placed in Pflugerville, Texas in the 1800s. My great grandpa was born in slavery in Pflugerville. My great-grandma was also born in slavery at as a Blackfoot and they have a street. They have a street Russell. Also my great grandparents got over 200 acres of land. Unfortunately I'm struggling. I'm a descendant of the Russell. What happened to my generational wealth?"

- Focus Group Participant

"When they have these city meetings, they don't include the people that need to be heard. They overlook us like in the name of development."

- Focus Group Participant

"I kind of moved out to Austin with this, with these like rose colored lenses on like, I'm not seeing all the red flags, but I mean, the red flags became very clear, very early and I've never actually been able to afford to live in Austin."

- Focus Group Participant

our experience
makes us

EXPERTS

INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT: EVIDENCE SUPPORTS DAWA'S THEORY OF CHANGE

DAWA's Theory of Change has two key elements:

1. Beyond the immediate financial impact, providing human-centered, low-barrier cash assistance allows people to be seen and feel supported, creating a lasting impact on their mental and emotional health and well-being.
2. Prioritizing community frontliners has an amplifying effect on the entire community. Nourishing them nourishes the whole community.

Traditionally, many assistance programs are tied to significant verification and qualification processes. The negative impacts of these institutional barriers on our most vulnerable communities is well documented, but alternatives are less studied. However, recent research would support DAWA's low-barrier approach.

On May 5, 2022, shortly before our first focus group, The Conversation published a briefing of recent research on cash assistance. The studies, based in countries beyond the US, clearly show the positive and lasting financial and mental health impacts of low-barrier direct cash assistance. The systemic review and other reports show that these positive impacts not only included improved lower poverty rates, but also improved mental health, improved food security, and better school attendance. According to the article, "Governments, nonprofits and researchers around the world are increasingly experimenting with a simple approach to reduce poverty: giving people money to spend on whatever they need." The article goes on to say that more research is needed in the US. [39]

The findings of these focus groups overwhelmingly support the conclusion that DAWA's approach, consistent with these latest radical innovations in addressing poverty, is having a broad and lasting impact on Austin's community frontliners.



RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPAND ON EXISTING STRENGTHS

#1 Study Long-Term Impacts of These Small Unrestricted Grants

DAWA's work should be studied further and published nationally. Given the high value of DAWA's experimental approach, and its consistency with new international research, with capacity-building and research support, DAWA's work should be elevated as an example of models that work. This could also help provide a valuable unrestricted income stream as well.

#2 Engage the Existing Support Community

DAWA has a robust support community that includes their past grant recipients. Grant recipients frequently expressed interest in helping to forward DAWA's efforts, including in many cases, volunteering their voices for testimonials. DAWA recipients are not only grateful for the unconditional support they received, but they also value the benefit to others in their community, and want to help DAWA's work reach more people.

#3 Expand the Existing Model

With the minor exception of email confirmations, DAWA's delivery model is working beautifully. Rather than focus on improvements in process, we recommend focusing on receiving more funds in order to widen the recipient pool. Keep the barriers low. It's working.

FUNDING DAWA MAKES SENSE

#4 Advocate for Funding for New Inclusion Strategies

Despite already having a deep and meaningful reach into Austin's most impacted communities, DAWA's leadership expressed interest in finding and including hyper-local communities yet to be served. While DAWA can accomplish some of this through its excellent relationships with a variety of grassroots organizations, what it really needs is additional unrestricted funding to staff higher-touch "go-to-the-people" low tech approaches or to subcontract organizational support. Given the efficacy of DAWA's approach, Austin's more forward-thinking funders that value anti-racist approaches should be highly motivated to support those efforts.

#5 Provide Unrestricted Funding for DAWA

Much like their recipients, a number of groups like DAWA benefit highly from unrestricted funding. DAWA's leadership did express frustration on the limits of their funding pool. The great news is, adding funds would have maximum benefits. Because DAWA's approach is so streamlined and simple, the lack of bureaucratic processes makes them highly efficient with low administrative costs. However, DAWA faces the frustration included with the heavy red tape of organizational grants. DAWA's generous and trusting approach should be matched by an equally generous donor pool and funding community. DAWA intends to expand its offerings to include educational opportunities and other support. We believe this should include opportunities for funding institutions to learn from DAWA's approach.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it is our recommendation that DAWA's work be supported by Austin's funding institutions with the following fundamental structures that would fully support and amplify their work:

1. More unrestricted funding
2. Capacity support and/or funding to elevate DAWA's approach through community-centered publishable research
3. Opportunities to learn from DAWA's expertise to inform other local funding approaches

Qualitative data through lived experiences of community members and DAWA recipients expressed during both of the focus groups offered overwhelming support for DAWA's Theory of Change. This data begs for action by the funding community. For community frontliners who are struggling financially, mentally, and emotionally, DAWA is seen as an antidote to the impact of systemic harm.

The Bottom Line: Fund them, Learn from them, and keep the barriers to access low.



**"ONE CAN SAY, 'TEACH ME WHAT YOU KNOW,' BUT THE BETTER REQUEST IS, 'TEACH ME ABOUT WHAT TEACHES YOU.'
- MALIDOMA PATRICE SOMÉ**

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