

Evidence to Practice

Collaborative Solutions to Improve Services

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Many nonprofit organizations face barriers to delivering effective services. It takes time and effort to identify those barriers and implement appropriate solutions that address them. MDRC has extensive experience using research methods to describe the root causes of the problems organizations face, identifying potential evidence-based interventions to overcome them, and helping implement sustainable services effectively. This spotlight describes how MDRC partnered with Slingshot Memphis to diagnose challenges for Memphians looking to find living-wage work, and to address those challenges by strengthening the service delivery of programs focused on improving employment pathways, building a poverty-fighting collaboration rooted in evidence.

The Opportunity

A third of Memphis residents are currently experiencing or at risk of living in poverty: As of 2024, 200,000 people lived near or below the federal poverty line and the city's poverty rate was more than double the national average.¹ And employment and education by themselves are not always



enough to enable people to emerge from poverty: In 2024, roughly 50 percent of Memphis residents experiencing poverty were either employed or looking for work.² Workers with skills, training, and experience still struggle to find living-wage jobs – that is, jobs that offer enough money to cover their family’s basic needs, including food, housing, childcare, and health care. It is clearly a problem that work in Memphis does not provide a pathway out of poverty for so many people there. To address this problem, it is important to understand why it exists in the first place, and then to use that information to identify evidence-backed interventions that address those issues directly. MDRC takes this very approach, drawing on data and the perspectives of staff members and participants to identify issues, codesign and test solutions, and implement sustainable strategies.

Making the Difference: Partnering with Organizations

MDRC brings research approaches and evidence-based strategies to an organization with an aim of working *with* the organization rather than doing things *to* it. Such relationships are long-term, joint endeavors in which each party brings its expertise to the table.

Memphis Works for Everyone (MemWorks), a collaboration between MDRC and [Slingshot Memphis](#), aims to determine what programs, policies, and interventions may be needed to help more Memphians experiencing poverty find living-wage work and improve their economic mobility.* This partnership is an example of [MDRC’s Evidence-to-Practice work](#) that is squarely focused on helping a local backbone organization use evidence to build a stronger network of local services. The MemWorks collaboration brings together:

- Slingshot’s understanding based on data of the challenges facing those experiencing poverty in Memphis
- MDRC’s extensive portfolio of postsecondary and workforce projects that have tested and expanded interventions to improve college access, college completion, and career pathways for people with low incomes
- Slingshot’s strong relationships with the local nonprofit and funding communities, as well as workforce stakeholders
- MDRC’s strength in synthesizing large amounts of data and communicating insights across domains and geographies
- Slingshot’s deep understanding of the Memphis poverty-fighting ecosystem
- MDRC’s expertise in the effects of policies that create pathways out of poverty

MemWorks seeks to amplify, not duplicate, existing workforce initiatives and help unify numerous, disparate efforts already underway in the city. It hopes to do so by working with local stakeholders to establish a shared understanding of the problems in Memphis’s workforce system and a common, evidence-based path for improvement.

NOTE: Slingshot Memphis, “Overview of MemWorks” YouTube video at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ln-4wOBKlIB0>.

The Approach: Data Analysis, Primary Research, and Action Plans

MemWorks began in three phases, starting with data analysis and primary research (interviews and focus groups) to diagnose problems, and then proceeding to action plans based in evidence that attempt to address those problems.

Data Analysis

The first phase focused on developing an empirical understanding of Memphis's workforce-development ecosystem and identifying potential barriers to living-wage employment. The MemWorks team worked with MDRC's [Center for Data Insights](#) to analyze U.S. Census data on demographics, employment, education, and local workforce services, supplemented by existing research.³ Based on the data, the MemWorks team hypothesized some major roadblocks to employment for Memphians living in poverty.

Primary Research

The primary research phase focused on integrating the perspectives of Memphians experiencing poverty or seeking to improve their earnings, to complicate or confirm the hypothesized employment barriers above. The team conducted focus groups and interviews with workforce staff members at over 30 organizations and over 60 workforce participants seeking to improve their earnings. These discussions helped the team refine the insights from the data analysis phase and led to a more thorough understanding of Memphians' employment roadblocks.⁴ Coupled with available research, the team identified potential evidence-based solutions that might remove those roadblocks.

Action Plans

The findings from Phases 1 and 2 helped the team determine what programs, policies, and interventions might be needed to help more Memphis workers obtain living-wage jobs. MemWorks has started to work with community partners to bring these ideas to life through a set of suggested action plans.

The action plans are evidence-based interventions that address root causes of employment roadblocks identified in Phases 1 and 2. Realizing they couldn't implement every action plan, the MemWorks team identified the factors necessary to implement the solutions successfully, and determined what ideas would have the highest impact and highest feasibility.

For example, one of the high-priority action plans focuses on strengthening Memphis' health care sector-based strategy and codifying an improved service-delivery model that can be replicated across industries. MemWorks is partnering with the Memphis Medical District Collaborative's Hire Local program to expand career pathways in health care. The initiative aims to develop 10 new training tracks that enable participants to advance into living-wage roles, while significantly increasing the number of individuals Hire Local can serve annually.

To strengthen the program, the MemWorks team is taking the lead on the following activities, enabling Hire Local to expand and enhance its program:

- Developing a five-year strategic plan
- Mapping high-wage, high-demand health care careers
- Designing additional training tracks in the health care sector
- Supporting staff recruitment and training for Hire Local
- Adding support services for participants
- Providing ongoing implementation assistance

The associated learning agenda focuses on identifying best practices for building robust programs focused on particular economic sectors that can be replicated in other high-growth industries across Memphis. In the short term, the team is also working to establish real-time data-tracking systems to monitor progress and report outcomes. The team is focused on long-term sustainability through employer partnerships once a proven model is in place.

As of this writing the action plan phase continues to operate and to propose evidence-based solutions.

Implications for the Field

The MemWorks collaboration has allowed the team to identify root causes to the challenges service providers face when delivering services, develop evidence-based solutions, and implement them through various channels in a concentrated geographic area. By combining MDRC's nearly 50 years of rigorous research with nonprofit organizations and government agencies across the nation with Slingshot's deep understanding of Memphis, MemWorks has been able to begin to implement stronger services that address the barriers that Memphians living in poverty are facing.

The collaboration with MDRC has enabled us to achieve progress toward economic mobility in Memphis that would never have been attainable otherwise. The power from contextualizing MDRC's national expertise for the Memphis community has unlocked an understanding of our employment roadblocks and the evidence-based solutions to overcome them that has empowered our community to know what to address and how to best address them!

— Jared Barnett, president and CEO of Slingshot Memphis, Inc.

The technical assistance approaches that MemWorks employs can be beneficial to a wide range of organizations interested in identifying and solving challenges that get in the way of strong services. MDRC knows how to work with localities and organizations to use both qualitative and quantitative data to identify what is getting in the way of good services and then codesign and test solutions

to address those issues that are informed by evidence. When structuring these types of engagements, MDRC emphasizes local expertise and investing in relationships, leading to more sustained and stronger outcomes. MDRC's early focus on sustainability, strong communication, and collaboration from its technical assistance teams, and a flexible yet consistent approach, position partners for long-term success.

Resources

<https://memworks.org/>

https://memworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/MemWorks-Data_Analysis_Summary_Report.pdf

<https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/they-look-outward-talent-here>

Notes and References

1. MemWorks, *Summary Report: Data Analysis Findings* (MemWorks, 2024).
2. MemWorks (2024).
3. MemWorks (2024).
4. Annie Utterback, “‘They Look Outward, but the Talent Is Here’: Worker Voices on Economic Mobility in Memphis” (MDRC, 2025).

This spotlight is a part of a series that highlights [MDRC's Evidence to Practice: Creating Change Together](#).

MDRC's technical assistance draws on rigorous evidence, deep programmatic expertise, and creative collaboration. We can work with you to build new evidence, use existing evidence, and harness data to advance your goals — all of which will maximize the difference your services are making and lead to improved outcomes for the people and communities you serve.

Interested in partnering with MDRC to assess, expand, and improve your organization's work? Reach out at E2P@mdrc.org.

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