

Healthy Work Collaborative Process Guide

How to address complex problems through
cross-sectoral partnerships

[Healthy Communities through Healthy Work](#) 



**Center for
Healthy Work**

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Executive Summary

The U.S. is experiencing a profound change in employment relationships due to the explosive growth of the contingent workforce, including temp workers, gig workers, part time workers, and contract workers. Employers increasingly prefer such arrangements to cut labor costs and to minimize their obligations under labor and employment laws. This business model is resulting in low wage employment without benefits for millions of workers, often accompanied by unhealthy working conditions and abusive, discriminatory, and unlawful employment practices (Weil, 2014; Smith & McKenna, 2014). Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change initiatives may be applicable to precarious employment, addressing community and structural-level causes of health and disease (Lieberman, Golden & Earp, 2013). Aligned with [Public Health 3.0](#), the CDC's Call to Action for Public Health, governmental public health has the opportunity to recognize and address work as a structural determinant of health through PSE change.

Public health institutions and health care providers can play an important role in addressing the root causes of precarious work as a social determinant of health. Indeed, there are calls for the public health community to tackle such problems by thinking creatively about effective approaches to promote healthy work, not only inside the workplace, but outside of the workplace in communities and through the use of policy, systems, and environmental change approaches (Baron, Beard, & Davis, 2013; Total Worker Health Website, 2015; Bhatia, Gaydos, Yu, and Weintraub, 2013). Initiatives that are community led and which support building community capacity are associated with long-term community improvement (Dombrowski et al., 2013; Aboelata and Navarro, 2010; Cohen, Davis, Lee & Valdovinos, 2010).

Healthy Communities for Healthy Work, a project of the University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work, invited public health and healthcare entities to participate in a training series, called the Healthy Work Collaborative, to better understand precarious work and pathways to healthier work. The Healthy Work Collaborative is an evidence-informed capacity building policy, systems, and environmental change (PSE) initiative. Labor unions, worker advocacy organizations, and worker centers shared skills, strategies, and approaches as technical assistance providers throughout the process. Together, participants and technical assistance providers explored PSE change initiatives that address health in the context of precarious employment and committed to work together to identify pathways to healthy work.

The lessons learned from this project have resulted in the [Healthy Work Collaborative Case Study Guide](#) and this process guide, which we believe can be used to address not only employment inequities, but other societal issues that are social determinants of health (Bonney, et.al, 2020, Welter, et.al, 2021). The Healthy Work Collaborative Process Guide documents the steps to develop the Healthy Work Collaborative and highlights critical activities for those interested in applying lessons learned with their partners.

Background

The Healthy Work Collaborative Process

Healthy Communities for Healthy Work (HCHW), a project of the University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work, established the Healthy Work Collaborative (HWC) in 2017 as a collaborative learning network with organizations who saw a need to increase their understanding of precarious work and to develop pathways toward healthy work. The HWC process consisted of six half-day meetings wherein health-focused participants and labor-focused technical assistance (TA) providers had the opportunity to learn from one another and collaborate to design policy and systems changes to address precarious work.



Social advance depends as much upon the process through which it is secured as upon the result itself.

– Jane Addams



The goals of the Healthy Work Collaborative were to:

- 1 Further explore the root causes of precarious work and the pathways to healthy work
- 2 Connect public health and healthcare organizations with worker centers, labor unions, and other worker advocacy organizations to collaborate on resources and initiatives
- 3 Access additional tools, strategies, and approaches to improve work experiences and the health of workers in precarious employment
- 4 Define actionable next steps to address the drivers of precarious work across systems levels



Through funding to support implementation of projects proposed by HWC participants, several teams continued on to expand and/or more deeply institutionalize PSE strategies explored during the process. HCHW continues to document and build the evidence base, with its funded partners, to promote collaborative approaches that advance workers in precarious jobs to healthy work.

This Process Guide details the steps to develop the HWC.

There are four steps that comprehensively present critical activities to address and solve complex problems within a defined target area (whether a community, city, county, or state). Each step presented in this guide builds upon the next. These steps and their corresponding action steps can be used to address precarious work as well as other complex problems. We will focus on precarious work as the example of a complex problem and to illustrate the HWC.



Step 1:

Readiness to Address a Complex Problem



Action 1

Identify partners and assessing partner needs and assets to address precarious work.



Action 2

Establish trust to address complex problems together.

What We Did

In spring 2017, the Center for Healthy Work's Healthy Communities through Healthy Work (HCHW) project conducted 55 interviews with national, state, and local organizations across sectors.¹ **HCHW aimed to establish an understanding of the affected constituency and their potential needs. Through existing relationships, HCHW identified additional interview subjects when conducting the scan, this is referred to as respondent-driven sampling.**

Why are these activities important?

- Partners provide significant practical knowledge and expertise in the area of interest.
- Getting to know partners helps to begin the relationship building process by authentically getting to know one another.
- These conversations can reveal the needs, strengths, challenges, and opportunities for which to begin identifying shared goals and collaboration opportunities.
- Communicative and transparent relationships with partners allow for increased trust and understanding when working together.

¹ <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.cc.uic.edu/doi/full/10.1177/1524839920953116> (Welter et al., 2020) Welter, C., Jarpe-Ratner, E., Bonney, T., Pinsker, E. C., Fisher, E., Yankelev, A., Zaroni, J. (2020). Development of the Healthy Work Collaborative: Findings from an Action Research Study to Inform a Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change Capacity-Building Initiative Addressing Precarious Employment. Health Promotion Practice. doi:10.1177/1524839920953116

From these interviews, over 184 partner initiatives that advance worker health were catalogued. Findings from the interviews highlighted public health and healthcare organizations' limited knowledge of precarious employment.

In addition, interviews exposed a lack of collaboration between health and labor organizations, despite the fact that public health and healthcare organizations recognize work as a key social determinant of health. Interview findings were used to develop the next phase of the project, which included an intersectoral capacity building initiative—formation of the Healthy Work Collaborative (HWC).

In follow-up conversations with partners, HCHW researchers inquired about what was most relevant, feasible, and actionable going forward. Recurrent conversations with partners established trust between HCHW and partners, ensuring that all future activities were mutually beneficial.

Case Study

Over the past few years, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos—United Workers Center (CTU) and the Cook County Department of Public Health (CCDPH), in partnership with Arise Chicago, have engaged in conversations regarding the intersection of work and health, focusing on how racism contributes to health inequity in the context of work. CTU held conversations with workers and community members about how work impacts their health. The team also invited local elected officials, public health professionals, local businesses, and other coalition partners to discuss the public health impact of minimum wage and paid sick leave, which generated more advocacy for labor rights in the south suburbs.

CTU's collaboration with the Community Activism Law Alliance demonstrated how the combined power of several organizations working together can help achieve health and justice for workers.

Tips for Success

- **Consider:** Who are the experts? Who are the change agents?
- Start with an authentic desire to understand others' perspectives, definitions, and ways of working
- **Consider:** How are the concepts of health, work, and more specifically precarious work, perceived and characterized by partners at the local, regional, and national levels?
- Develop a formal process for conducting interviews and reviewing the data, ideally including a group of diverse staff or partners to look for themes in the interviews
- **Consider:** What initiatives are currently underway that our partners identify as possible pathways to promote healthy work at these levels?
- Present findings back to your partners to ensure they represent what they said and to discuss next steps

Resources to Get Started

- [Partner Identification](#) 
- [Mapping Assets](#) 
- [Community Tool Box](#) 
- [Best Practices for Community Health Needs Assessments](#) 
- [Analyzing the Data](#) 

Step 2:

Building a Shared Understanding and Gaining Momentum



Action 1

Work towards a shared understanding of a complex problem.



What We Did

After completion of interviews and follow-up conversations with partners, HCHW obtained and secured partner participation in focused projects to explore or address precarious work. Organizations that participated in the Healthy Work Collaborative (HWC) were required to:

- Identify an issue or challenge related to precarious work that the organization hopes to address, or a question about precarious work that an organization hopes to answer.
- Create a collaborative team with another organization(s) that operates in another sector or at another level (local and state level, healthcare and labor sectors, for example). Together, these organizations were required to demonstrate how they

As HWC teams consisted of multisectoral partners, building a shared understanding of precarious work was necessary to act collaboratively. HCHW built group consensus and encouraged usage of common language to gain understanding of participants' mental models as each had varying degrees of understanding of precarious work. Labor technical assistance providers were invited to facilitate roundtable discussions with HWC participants.² This step allowed for the opportunity to use experts to help participants come to a consensus as well as break up different groups of actors so discussions were occurring across sectors.

Initial HWC sessions also included an ORID activity, a framework that enables focused conversation to undertake

group decision-making around complex problems. ORID facilitated shared understanding of the HWC team's issue or challenge related to precarious work. ORID focuses on:³

O stands for objective, or what the group already knows

R stands for reflective, or how people feel about the problem being discussed

I stands for interpretive, or what issues and challenges exist

D stands for decisional, or the group response to the problem

2 (Bonney et al., 2019; 2021) Bonney, T.; Welter, C.; Jarpe-Ratner, E.; Conroy, L.M. Understanding the Role of Academic Partners as Technical Assistance Providers: Results from an Exploratory Study to Address Precarious Work. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2019, 16, 3903.
Tessa Bonney, Christina Welter, Elizabeth Jarpe-Ratner, Alisa Velonis, Lorraine Conroy, Role of technical assistance in U.S. labor and health sector collaboration to address precarious work, *Health Promotion International*, Volume 36, Issue 4, August 2021, Pages 1095–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daaa124>

3 Adapted from *Practical Facilitation: A Toolkit of Techniques*, Chapter 3 (Christine Hogan, 2003, Kogan Page Publishers)

HWC participants then created a [rich picture diagram](#), or systems map, to identify root and proximal causes to their issue. Rich pictures facilitate an understanding of the myriad of factors that impact complex problems, like precarious work.

Why is this activity important?

- Developing a shared understanding of a complex problem helps to uncover divergent perspectives as well as areas of opportunity and alignment; it also helps ensure everyone is on the same page.
- Discussion about various, different perspectives can help build understanding and new ideas about ways to work together.
- Identifying a shared vision or goal helps ensure everyone is headed in the same direction.

Tips for Success

- Working on understanding the challenge together using different exercises helps to reveal new ideas and pathways for change.
- Consider: What are perspectives and definitions of precarious work?
- Reflection is important to learning. While it is difficult, journaling and writing may help to realize existing mental models.
- It may take some groups longer than others; there are varying degrees of understanding and biases that need to be overcome collectively.

Resources to Get Started

- [Mental Models](#) ↗
- [ORID](#) ↗
- [Rich Picture](#) ↗

Case Study

[Boone County](#) ↗

Learn more about how partners in Boone County developed the Boone County Health Work Initiative (BCHWI) to collaboratively address precarious work in Boone County.

Step 3:

Planning for Action



Action 1

Build skills to address complex problems



Action 2

Explore existing initiatives that address precarious work

What We Did

The HWC curriculum was intended to be practical for all participants. Each HWC session was geared towards increasing knowledge and building skills so that organizations could take sustainable action to address the issue of precarious work in their communities. HWC learning objectives poised participants to:

- Analyze and address complex problems, particularly precarious work
- Discuss barriers to addressing precarious work that may impact activities related to team projects
- Begin to identify areas for action

HWC sessions aimed to help participants understand all of the players in the system and who could be potential collaborators or allies in the future, as well as understand opposing factions. The activity, Power Mapping, helped create guidance on how the problem will be addressed and can serve as a foundation for the goals of the project.

After gaining an understanding of the power dynamics involved in addressing precarious work, participants explored existing initiatives and approaches used to respond to their team's challenge. Through assistance from labor and TA organizations and literature searches, participants began to further understand existing resources and activities that could be leveraged.

Principle steps in Power Mapping are to:

- 1 Define the major issue or problem.
- 2 Define competing agendas surrounding this problem.
- 3 Sketch any current policy battle related to the major issue.
- 4 Identify the centers of major decision-making on the agenda.
- 5 Identify the organized opposition.
- 6 Identify key organized proponent groups.
- 7 Identify key sectors or groups that are not part of organizations (*include population demographics).
- 8 Analyze the picture, create strategies for shifting the balance of power.

Why are these activities important?

- These activities commence action planning and incorporate systems knowledge to effectively address change.
- An understanding of power dynamics allows for effective and targeted opportunities for PSE change.

Resources to Get Started

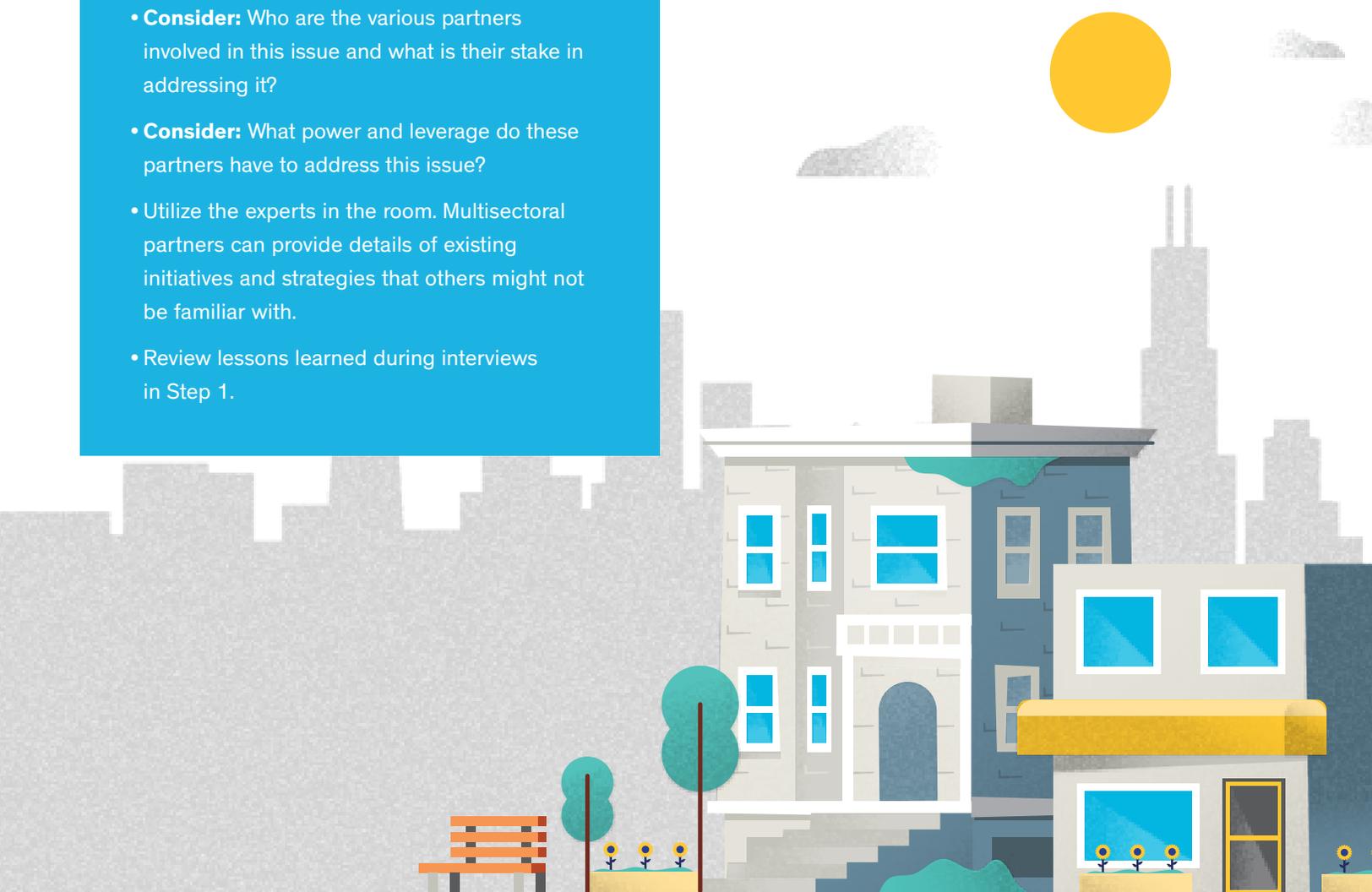
- [Power Mapping](#) 

Case Study

[ROC and CDPH](#) 

Tips for Success

- Time is necessary to work through each activity in this section.
- **Consider:** Who are the various partners involved in this issue and what is their stake in addressing it?
- **Consider:** What power and leverage do these partners have to address this issue?
- Utilize the experts in the room. Multisectoral partners can provide details of existing initiatives and strategies that others might not be familiar with.
- Review lessons learned during interviews in Step 1.



Step 4:

Action & Sustainability

Step 1

Current State, Future State

Step 2

Theory of Change

Step 3

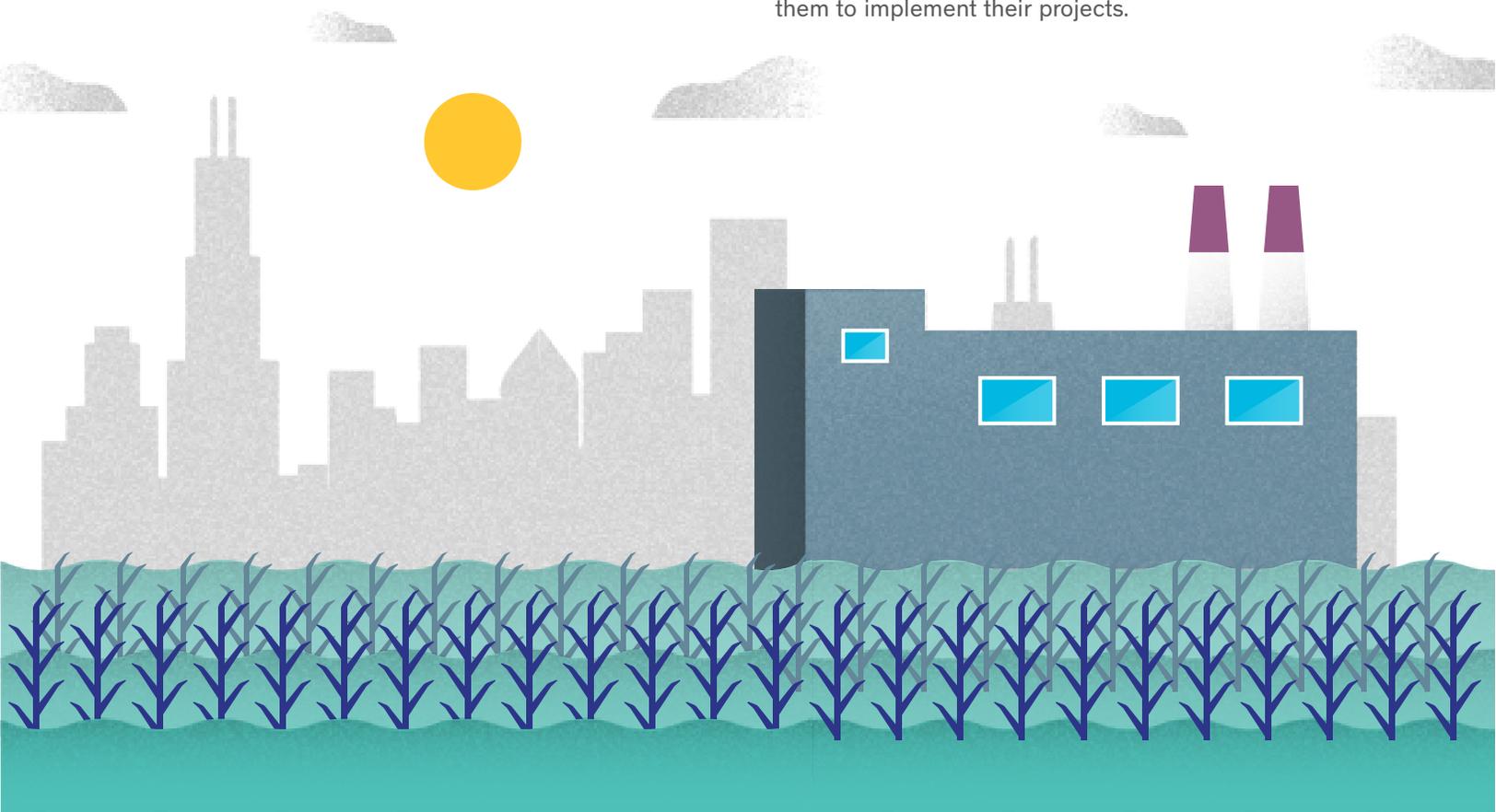
Looking Forward

What We Did

Sustainable change requires strategy. The final HWC sessions encouraged teams to identify short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals of their proposed projects. Creating action plans with a shared goal and agreed-upon action steps helps focus the work and increase likelihood of implementation and future partnership. HWC teams identified the current and desired future state around their project. This included compiling and categorizing a list of existing initiatives, from Step 2, to address precarious work in the system that may impact activities and decisions related to proposed projects.

Teams were advised to begin to frame issues or challenges to identify appropriate and effective strategies for action. HWC teams identified resources and support needed to implement their projects and ensure success, as well as identifying and justifying entities that were best poised to promote social change in the system.

After HWC teams identified the stakes and potential outcomes of their projects, Theories of Change were developed as a final step. A Theory of Change is a clear and comprehensive description of a desired change, how and why it will occur, and what is expected to happen in a particular context. Each team's Theory of Change prepared them to implement their projects.



In order to better understand the value and impact of the HWC as an approach to address precarious work, several evaluation components were conducted throughout the sessions. Evaluation was used to guide decisions around future iterations of the HWC. Questions used in the evaluation to inform future activities were:

1. What are participants' perceptions of precarious work and barriers to addressing precarious work?
2. What are participants' perceptions of their roles in and approaches to addressing precarious work?
3. What specific initiatives are under way that address precarious work?
4. How can the findings be used to facilitate opportunities for healthy work?

Why are these activities important?

- These activities build upon Step 3 and continue action planning, understanding, and incorporating systems knowledge into project implementation.
- Continuous reflection and evaluation of activities allow for readjustment and realignment as needed.

Tips for Success

- **Consider:** What do teams want to achieve and by when? What support and resources do they need to achieve it?
- Time is necessary to work through each activity in this section.
- **Consider:** What was learned throughout the process?
- Discern what types of technical assistance each team requires and identify who and how this can be provided. If possible, provide continued funding for projects to build on their work.
- Continue providing opportunities for resource sharing, network-building, and goal-setting in order to collectively address precarious work.

Resources to Get Started

- [Current State, Future State](#) ↗
- [Theory of Change](#) ↗
- [Evaluation](#) ↗

Concluding Statement

The University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work is committed to contributing to the evidence base to support workers and our partners. We aim to turn unhealthy work into healthy work. HCHW will continue to support our HWC partners to improve the health of workers in their communities. The UIC Center for Healthy Work would like to extend a sincere thank you to each of the individuals and organizations who participated in the Healthy Work Collaborative and subsequently mobilized to develop and implement policy, systems, and environmental change initiatives aimed at addressing precarious work. Each of these individuals and organizations dedicated significant time and resources to these efforts, and without these inputs this work would not have been possible.

View the [case study guide here](#) for more details about Healthy Work Collaborative team projects.

University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work (CHW)

The Center for Healthy Work (CHW) is a research and education center established in 2016 to advance the health and well-being of workers in Chicago, the state of Illinois, and the nation. The Center's mission is to remove barriers that impact the health of low-wage workers in the increasingly contingent workforce by identifying and promoting programs and policies that improve worker health. To that end, CHW builds long-term collaborations with community organizations, non-profit groups, government agencies, and health care providers to research and implement activities that support healthy jobs.

Healthy work is defined as jobs that:

- Are free from workplace hazards
- Pay thriving wages
- Offer job security
- Provide benefits such as health insurance, vacation, sick leave, retirement
- Are free from discrimination and exploitation
- Offer opportunities for advancement
- Provide freedom to express concerns, organize, and participate in workplace decisions

Total Worker Health

[Total Worker Health®](#) (TWH), a NIOSH-funded program, is defined as policies, programs, and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury and illness prevention efforts to advance worker well-being. Total Worker Health acknowledges risk factors related to work that contribute to worker and community health problems. The Total Worker Health approach seeks to improve well-being in the American workforce for the benefit of workers, employers, and the nation by protecting safety and enhancing health and productivity.

Glossary

Complex problems

Issues that require various and often competing perspectives and solutions, such as precarious work. Because of the complexity, these problems are best addressed using policy, system, and environmental strategies.

Environmental scan (ES)

The process of gathering information from organizations and partners through an interview style approach to understand stakeholder perceptions of complex problems, as well as ongoing initiatives addressing it.

Healthy Communities for Healthy Work (HCHW)

The HCHW project is a participatory action research (PAR) project designed to include multiple cycles of systematic inquiry, analysis and planning, and action across three phases: Plan, Implement, and Evaluate (Stringer 2014). The goal of the HCHW project is to bring public health and healthcare organizations together with labor partners (unions, worker centers, worker advocacy organizations) to understand and explore initiatives that may address health in the context of precarious employment.

Healthy Work Collaborative (HWC)

A project by the University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work that aims to change the perception of healthy work by addressing root causes of precarious work at a systemic level.

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

A federal organization responsible for researching and making recommendations that promote workplace wellness and health. The Total Worker Health™ approach, which focuses on promoting a hazard-free workplace, is a NIOSH program. The University of Illinois Chicago Center for Healthy Work is a Center of Excellence for Total Worker Health.

Precarious work

Workplace experiences that give rise to instability, lack of protection, insecurity, and social and economic vulnerability.

Policy, systems, and environmental change strategies (PSE)

Approaches to respond to complex problems by targeting legislative, organizational, and environmental change with the goal of creating long-term and viable improvements to a population's health.

Structural determinants of health

Systemic mechanisms that create and reinforce social class, highlighting positions of status, power, and disparities in access to resources.

Total Worker Health (TWH)

Total Worker Health® is defined as policies, programs, and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury and illness prevention efforts to advance worker well-being. Total Worker Health is a holistic approach to worker well-being. It acknowledges risk factors related to work that contribute to health problems previously considered unrelated to work. The Total Worker Health approach seeks to improve well-being in the American workforce for the benefit of workers, employers, and the nation by protecting safety and enhancing health and productivity.

List of Acronyms

CHW Center for Healthy Work

ES Environmental scan

HCHW Healthy Communities for Healthy Work project

HWC/HWC MASC Healthy Work Collaborative to Map Action for Social Change

NIOSH National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

NORA National Occupational Research Agenda

PAR Participatory action research

PSE Policy, systems, and environmental change strategies

SDOH Social Determinants of Health/Structural Determinants of Health

TA Technical assistance

TWH Total Worker Health®

UIC University of Illinois Chicago

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