

# OC Jobs First Collaborative

July 18, 2025

## **Maria Linares**

This program originally began as CERF, the Community Economic Resilience Fund, which had more of an economic and community development focus. The main goal is to increase good paying jobs or support business development and growth in key industries such as tourism and outdoor recreation, med tech, high tech hardware, semiconductors and microelectronics, advanced and precision manufacturing, healthcare, childcare, education, and construction. Projects should focus on the creation or support of business and economic activity. Stronger proposals also show a positive impact on the climate. We have \$3.6 million available for job creating projects. Separately, \$1 million is available for community enhancing projects. These address other regional priorities from the Regional Plan Part 2 that are outside the industries listed above. While they may not meet the definition of a good paying job, they still have strong community impact. Topics include housing, healthcare access, green technologies, childcare access, and climate adaptation. The collaborative decides how this funding is spent. For round two of community enhancing projects, we received 37 applications. You all have access to score them in the grant web portal. While we have \$1 million available, applicants requested nearly \$8.5 million. The poll will launch today and you may select up to three projects.

Answering Iosefa's question in the chat. When we prepared to launch round two, I sent you all a draft of the Jobs First packet showing what applicants would see. No one requested changes to the funding amounts. It would have been difficult to change the funding for community enhancing projects, especially since the state is clearly prioritizing good paying, job creating projects. Still, Jesse, Dr. Walrod, and I along with the OCBC team felt it was important to honor the work of this collaborative and continue supporting community enhancing projects. Out of the 13 regions, most are not funding community enhancing projects. They are aligning with the state's focus on job creation and high quality employment. I see Elva has her hand up.

## **Elva Rubalcava**

Regarding the community enhancing projects, I thought the wildfire response training was especially important given what we are experiencing in California. That is one I definitely want to advocate for. I also want to highlight the Anaheim Unified High School District Career Pathways project. It stood out because it focuses on early education and helping students understand their future direction.

## **Linda DiMario**

One comment I have after reviewing the materials is whether there has been any consideration during the initial review to suggest merging some of the projects. There is clear overlap in intent among several of them, especially those focused on AI and healthcare training.

## **Jesse Ben-Ron**

Linda, in round one, if a project was awarded and there were similar projects whether job creating or community enhancing we shared that information with the awardee. The goal was to see if they were open to merging or collaborating. This happened after submission, not before.

**Long Pham**

I want to show support and add to Elva's point. I believe the wildfire training program is a strong project, and I hope everyone considers voting for it. Wildfire will likely be one of the most urgent challenges in California this year, especially with ongoing drought and climate-related changes.

**Maria Linares**

The poll looks very similar to round one. It is essentially the same process, each organization can submit only one vote. I know some of your organizations have multiple representatives, which is fine. I gave you all access so your team could divide up the scoring, but only one final vote can be submitted per organization. Enter your top three projects using the text boxes. First place receives five points, second place three points, and third place one point. Use the exact project name from the grant web portal. Do not vote for any project that you or your organization are directly involved in. If you do, your entire ballot will be invalid. You will enter your full name, your organization, or write community resident. Then copy and paste your first, second, and third choice project names into the boxes and hit submit. On the back end, I will analyze the data. Jesse and I tested the form, it is a very easy and straightforward process. May I have a motion and second to open the voting poll?

**Johnice Williams**

I move to open the poll.

**Kathy Boyd**

I second.

**Jesse Ben-Ron**

Now let's move into the job creating project awardees. Staff reviewed and discussed the proposals. The next slide shows the breakdown. We have \$3.6 million available, but we received requests totaling over \$15 million, about four to five times more than what we can fund. We will finalize the list by the end of the day on Tuesday. We know you already have a lot to review with the community enhancing proposals. If you have time to review the job creating applications and have feedback, we welcome it. We are committed to transparency and collaboration, but OCBC staff took the lead to thoroughly review each application and develop recommendations based on the values and frameworks we've discussed over the past few months. One example is the proposal to create a Community Development Financial Institution, or CDFI, in partnership with the Hispanic Chamber. CDFIs lend to businesses that typically do not qualify for traditional financing. There are very few CDFIs in Orange County, despite the size of our market. This proposal addressed a clear need that has come up in past conversations. It is focused on supporting minority-owned businesses and is a strong example of economic development, not just workforce training.

Another project we recommend is from the City of Anaheim. It includes a workforce component but also focuses on food entrepreneurship in a disinvested community. The proposal highlights a commitment to reaching residents in under-resourced areas and aligns with upcoming developments like Disneyland Forward and OC Vibe, which will drive food-related demand. This project already has additional funding sources, so our contribution helps push it closer to completion rather than starting from scratch.

Next is the in-home childcare and training proposal. Childcare is a priority sector and also acts as a workforce enabler. This project falls under the concept phase category, meaning it's still in planning. It received \$50,000, which makes sense for this stage. By organizing projects by phase such as concept, acceleration, and last mile, we can better compare their scope and impact. This project not only helps entrepreneurs launch in-home childcare services, but also supports parents entering the workforce.

We also reviewed a workforce innovation project focused on neurodivergent and differently abled individuals. This was the only proposal across both rounds specifically serving this population. The team already had strong relationships with healthcare employers and had begun internships. It was not just planning outreach, they had proven engagement. This combination of targeted population, employer partnerships, and workforce goals made it a strong candidate.

Another proposal from the City of Anaheim recommended waiving permit fees for businesses opening in disinvested areas, particularly Anaheim Canyon. This was a concept phase project focused on reducing startup barriers and attracting businesses to underserved areas. It is one of the few proposals that offers direct support to businesses through local government strategy, not just training or services.

The HealthWorks OC project from the County Workforce Board takes a systems-level approach to addressing workforce gaps in the healthcare sector. Instead of focusing on direct services alone, this project looks at collaboration across K-12, community colleges, four-year universities, and nonprofits to strengthen the entire talent pipeline. Given the strength of healthcare as a high-wage sector in Orange County, the potential impact of this systems change is significant.

The OC MITA project came from a local building and trades union. It proposes emissions assessments for businesses alongside union-aligned workforce training. The climate impact and direct business services stood out, along with the added value of union benefits like higher wages, retirement, and long-term advancement pathways. This aligns with the state's incentive structure, which prioritizes projects that include labor partnerships.

Another funded project focuses on creating a pathway from Certified Nursing Assistant to Licensed Vocational Nurse through the Santa Ana School of Continuing Education. This program stands out because it is free, located in a disinvested area, and meets a known labor shortage identified by the Hospital Association of Southern California. About half of the budget is dedicated to physical infrastructure like equipment and training space, not just staff or admin, which makes it a strong investment.

We also included a project that received partial funding in round one: a regional effort to strengthen Little Saigon's identity across Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and Fountain Valley. This multi-city collaboration aims to build a stronger sense of place, similar to recognized neighborhoods like Chinatown or Little Italy. Given the region's large Vietnamese population, this project offers a unique opportunity to boost tourism and local business through cultural placemaking.

A related proposal from the City of Westminster builds on that effort. Westminster holds the largest share of the original Little Saigon designation and has plans to expand on that legacy. Funding both proposals helps strengthen the overall regional strategy for cultural and economic development.

Santa Ana Unified proposed a Culinary Arts project focused on workforce and small business training. The demand for this program has grown significantly since COVID, expanding from 25 to nearly 500 participants. Much of the funding will support building a culinary kitchen, offering both skills training and a business incubation component.

A second Culinary Arts project through the Coast Community College District includes partnerships with Cypress and Saddleback Colleges. This regional project is more traditional workforce development, but it includes strong employer engagement through the National California Restaurant Association. Its regional reach and industry partnership make it a solid investment.

Goodwill Industries proposed a climate-forward workforce project focused on training people to repair electric vehicle charging stations. This model was developed in Georgia and is being brought to Orange County. It offers high wages of up to \$80,000 annually and targets disinvested communities, making it a strong example of equity-focused, high-impact training.

Finally, Octane submitted a project that uses artificial intelligence for healthcare innovation. Rather than generic AI training, this project applies AI to a priority sector with strong industry engagement. Octane will be more intentional about supporting disinvested communities through this initiative. Since the state prioritizes industry-specific AI applications, this project is well aligned.

The last project is Little Village, a woman-led social enterprise in South Orange County. It proposes a co-working and play café model that combines childcare with economic opportunity. This was the only South County project in round two and directly responds to the collaborative's request for geographic equity. It also reflects a deep equity focus and community-driven approach to economic development.

### **Ana Urzua**

I was really impressed with the projects. Many of them clearly align with our priority areas and reflect what came up during the community engagement process. It's encouraging to see cities getting involved, for example, the pilot project in Anaheim focused on reducing business permit barriers stood out. The placemaking strategies around Little Saigon are also exciting, as is the continued focus on childcare. I do have some questions about repeat awardees, particularly larger organizations that may be receiving multiple awards. I want to ensure we are applying consistent standards for what qualifies as a good employer, especially regarding labor practices.

### **Jesse Ben-Ron**

Thanks, Anna. Let us know what you're thinking, and we can follow up. Any feedback you have is welcome.

### **Iosefa Alofaituli**

Some projects seem closely aligned with our work, and we'd like to explore potential collaboration. When we see that kind of alignment, it opens the door for us to support each other. I also want to raise a broader point. This entire effort is centered around disinvested communities, and it's difficult to have this conversation without acknowledging what is currently happening to many of those communities. I may have missed a session or two recently, but I'm wondering if there's been any communication or commentary from Go Biz about how these circumstances might impact future rounds of funding under California Jobs First. Has there been any guidance or updates from the state?

**Jesse Ben-Ron**

I haven't seen anything from Go Biz directly addressing this. There may have been a grant related to immigrant entrepreneurship through the Office of the Small Business Advocate, but I'd have to go back and find that email.

**Linda DiMario**

Jesse, just to note, we did fund the Orange County Iranian American Chamber of Commerce. I believe the program was called the Tavan Program, which focused specifically on small business development for immigrants.

**Iosefa Alofaituli**

This type of work is shifting in real time. Many of the people we serve can no longer engage in business, so even if we build entrepreneurship capacity, it doesn't matter if they're not in an environment where they can operate. That undermines the entire premise of entrepreneurship as a path to income and financial stability.

**Jesse Ben-Ron**

We can reach out to Go Biz to see if there's been any formal response. I haven't seen a press release or statement from them. The administration may be aware and working on something, but I'd need to ask directly.

**Iosefa Alofaituli**

For organizations focused on immigrant communities, we're having to carefully review our digital presence to avoid making ourselves targets. That includes how we frame our work in applications to government agencies.

**Maria Linares**

I was in a meeting a few weeks ago with the state, this conversation has come up, specifically around using terms like "undocumented immigrants" on our websites as one of the 13 regions. One thing we discussed was whether we should avoid using that language directly, linking to specific organizations that serve those communities. The concern is that it's easy to trace those orgs and locations, which could unintentionally put people at risk. I will say that the state has been more reserved about what they share directly. Their role has been more about facilitating conversations so that all 13 regions can stay on the same page. We're all expressing concern about how to protect our communities in this new climate. That has definitely been part of the discussion. However, when it comes to actual funding or financial support for these communities, that hasn't really been addressed yet.

**Ana Urzua**

There is one more round, correct?

**Jesse Ben-Ron**

There will be a round three. We'll make sure to notify you about the details and parameters before anything is released publicly. As collaborative members, you'll always have the opportunity to review those materials before a NOFO goes out.

**Dyana Peña**

If we want to receive feedback should we schedule a call with you Jesse or Maria?

**Maria Linares**

Yes, I am happy to hop on a call with you.

**Ana Urzua**

Sorry I didn't come off mute earlier, but yes it sounds like we'll have more time leading up to Round Three. In the context of the conversation Iosefa raised, I've been thinking about how, as a collaborative, we can stay focused on strategies that may not be explicitly named in proposals, especially since putting certain things in writing right now can pose a risk.

**Jesse Ben-Ron**

One small thing I want to add is just to recognize that if you applied under job creating, you're naturally going to receive more robust feedback. That's because, with community enhancing, the selection process is driven entirely by the collaborative's votes, we don't have visibility into which projects individuals supported or didn't support. What we can share is if a project received a significant number of votes but wasn't funded, or if it received zero votes, that might be a helpful indication. But beyond that, it's going to be harder for us to assess things like whether the collaborative felt a proposal had strong equity outcomes, high impact, or a solid budget. We just don't have that insight. OCBC staff can still provide general feedback, but we can't speak on behalf of the collaborative or interpret their intent. There were a few extra slides prepared, but given time, we'll hold off on those. Just a quick verbal update on Round One: 12 out of the 14 projects have been contracted, and we're working closely with the remaining two to finalize their agreements. Some projects have already received advanced pay and a few have started submitting invoices, so overall, things are moving forward. In about two months, we'll bring back a fuller update to share how implementation is going, and to ensure that the projects selected, both by OCBC staff and all of you as the collaborative are staying on track and on budget. Maria, anything you'd like to add before we officially close?

**Maria Linares**

As always, you will receive a recap email. Typically, it's sent by Tuesday or Wednesday, but because the voting poll closes on Tuesday, I'll be sending the recap within the next 24 hours. You'll have access to all the materials we reviewed today, a summary of key discussion points, and the link to the voting poll. Please also take a moment to review Natalie's slides when you have time, they contain helpful context if you're interested in learning more. With that, I adjourn today's meeting at 10:00 a.m. Thank you all for your time and continued engagement.