Capacity Building Across EHF

In 2025, EHF continued building on one of its key strengths: helping partners develop the capacity to create greater systems impact. Capacity building is one of EHF's primary tools for supporting grantees, communities, and congregations as they strengthen the skills, knowledge, and infrastructure needed to succeed.

Across EHF's Grants, Engagement, and Research & Evaluation divisions, capacity-building efforts focused on strengthening individual organizations as well as the broader systems and relationships that make lasting community impact possible.

Strengthening Local Community Engagement Work

For more than a decade, EHF's Activating Community Voices (ACV) workshops have helped identify a persistent gap in the nonprofit sector. Few organizations have staff dedicated to community engagement, and there are no clear academic or professional pathways to support people working in this field.

Recognizing this gap, EHF has worked to create meaningful support structures for community engagement professionals and strengthen the work they do in communities.

What We Did

In December 2023, EHF brought together representatives from seven organizations to explore ways to strengthen the capacity of community engagement professionals. This gathering launched a collaborative learning community focused on developing curriculum and workshops to support the field.

For the next year and a half, participants shared experiences, challenges, and successes through peer-to-peer learning. As the group developed, its focus expanded beyond learning from one another to exploring how the network could reach and support more community engagement professionals.

In October 2025, the group took a significant step forward by hosting its first forum, bringing together approximately 70 nonprofit professionals from across EHF's 81-county service area.

What We Learned

The forum provided insights that are helping shape ongoing programming, including additional workshops and independent consulting to provide individualized support. Three lessons stood out:

- Outreach is not the same as community engagement. One of the most significant findings was that many participating grantees were practicing outreach rather than true community engagement. Understanding this distinction, and where organizations fall along the continuum of practice, has direct implications for designing capacity-building strategies across the nonprofit sector.

- Community engagement is most critical during times of crisis. The forum reinforced that community engagement cannot be limited to periods of stability. Whether organizations are responding to hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic, or funding cuts, meaningful engagement with communities is essential during times of uncertainty.
- Peer learning fills a significant gap. Many community engagement professionals have been working in relative isolation and reported significant value in having a dedicated space to connect with others doing similar work. This grassroots approach to professional development is filling a critical gap in the nonprofit sector and helping establish community engagement as a recognized and supported professional discipline.

Looking Ahead

As this collaborative learning community continues to grow in 2026 and beyond, it is building a stronger network of community engagement professionals. Through regular gatherings and opportunities to solve problems together, this growing network represents an emerging infrastructure for shared capacity building across the nonprofit sector.

Spotlight: Activating Community Voices

One example illustrates how ACV training can have an impact beyond an organization's original relationship with EHF. A leader at a nonprofit partner organization who had received training in EHF's ACV framework moved to a new organization and immediately requested the same training for its staff.

The experience demonstrates how ACV skills and competencies move with practitioners, creating ripple effects beyond the original grantee relationship. It is also a meaningful indicator of the framework's perceived value and permanence.

Collaborating for Healthy Communities Initiative (CHCI)

EHF's redesigned Collaborating for Healthy Communities Initiative (CHCI) launched at a critical time for community collaboratives navigating significant changes.

In 2025, EHF launched the third CHCI cohort with a major redesign informed by lessons from earlier cohorts and outreach conducted in 2024. The new approach focused on building the capacity of entire collaboratives, not just individual organizations, to address health-related issues across EHF's three Priorities for Change: Food and Nutrition Security, Maternal Health, and Diabetes Prevention.

This shift reflects EHF's broader strategy to strengthen collaborative capacity and support systems-level impact.

Interest in the redesigned program was the strongest to date, signaling growing demand for collaborative capacity building. In response, EHF more than doubled the number of participating collaboratives, expanding the cohort from five to 12.

The timing of the redesign proved especially valuable. As the 2025-2026 cohort launched, many collaboratives faced uncertainty about how new federal executive orders would affect their work with communities most in need. Most did not have access to legal support to help them understand and respond to the changes.

EHF responded by providing capacity-building sessions led by a trusted legal partner with deep expertise in federal law and policy. These sessions helped collaboratives better understand how the executive orders

applied to their programs, remain compliant, and, most importantly, continue serving their communities effectively.

The launch and ongoing development of CHCI underscore EHF's strategic commitment to building collaborative capacity, rather than focusing solely on individual organizations. The redesign, growing participation, and responsive support demonstrate how EHF is strengthening collaboratives to address community health challenges and advance systems-level change.

Holy Currencies

EHF's Holy Currencies program helps ministry leaders organize their work and strengthen their ability to have a greater impact on community health. From fall 2024 through spring 2025, three collaborative groups representing 12 congregations participated in the program.

What We Observed

- Leadership capacity creates a pathway to civic action. The work reinforced a clear progression from leadership development to civic engagement to collective action. Congregations that strengthened leadership capacity among lay leaders demonstrated greater readiness to participate in community initiatives and launch new efforts. This added capacity was a direct result of the program's emphasis on engaging the surrounding community as an equal partner, setting Holy Currencies apart from traditional leadership development programs focused solely on internal institutional leadership.
- Training continues to influence practice. Participants incorporated the Holy Currencies framework into their decision-making beyond the training itself. When one congregation's resource center identified a funding gap, leaders returned to the program materials to help determine their approach. As the work continues, EHF has remained alongside this partner, providing support as new needs emerge.
- Listening helps uncover community priorities and cultural context. During EHF-facilitated listening sessions with Latino congregations, conversations quickly shifted from nonprofit education topics to pressing community health concerns, including mental health. This shift demonstrated how EHF's approach to listening created space for communities to openly share their needs and priorities.

Lessons Learned

The Holy Currencies work demonstrates that effective capacity building with congregations requires more than providing a framework or funding. Sustained attention to relationships, trust, and cultural context is essential to helping congregations strengthen their work and engage more meaningfully with their communities.

In addition, EHF has made building research and data capacity among congregational partners an important part of its work. Several programs support this commitment, including the newly developed Called to Community Learning Journey, presentations at clergy conferences, and a capacity-building data cohort.

Evaluation Capacity Building

In 2025, EHF engaged an external consultant to lead an optional Evaluation Learning Collaborative for 16 grantees working in at least one of EHF's Priorities for Change.

Because participating organizations had widely varying levels of evaluation experience, the collaborative was

designed to meet grantees where they are. It provided accessible starting points for organizations newer to evaluation while offering opportunities for more experienced organizations to expand their skills and knowledge.

What We Are Hearing

Even in its early stages, the collaborative is generating meaningful learning:

- Larger, more experienced organizations are finding value. These organizations are benefiting particularly from peer learning and opportunities to strengthen qualitative evaluation and lived-experience data collection, areas that even sophisticated organizations often underinvest in.
- Organizations newer to evaluation are engaging deeply. Participants with less evaluation experience are gaining substantive expertise while contributing fresh and distinctive perspectives to collaborative discussions.
- Building grantee capacity also strengthens EHF's learning. The collaborative is not only improving grantees' evaluation capacity, but also the quality and depth of learning EHF receives as a funder. As grantees evaluate their work more rigorously, EHF gains a better understanding of what is working and why.

Key Insight

The Evaluation Learning Collaborative reflects EHF's commitment to treating evaluation capacity building as a mutual investment. Rather than simply transferring skills to grantees, EHF is creating opportunities for shared learning and inquiry that benefit the broader learning community.

Cross-Cutting Reflections

Across EHF's capacity-building work in 2025, five consistent themes emerged. Together, they demonstrate the value of investing in people, organizations, and relationships to strengthen community health efforts and support lasting systems change.

1. Peer learning is uniquely powerful. Across the community engagement forum, Holy Currencies cohorts, and Evaluation Learning Collaborative, partners consistently identified learning from one another as one of the most valuable parts of capacity building.
2. Trust and relationships are prerequisites, not byproducts. Across EHF's work with congregations, communities, and grantees, the most effective capacity-building efforts began with listening and building relationships before introducing frameworks or expectations.
3. Capacity building works best when it is responsive and adaptable. Efforts redesigned based on prior experience, tailored to cultural context, or structured to meet partners at different starting points reflected the greatest depth of engagement.
4. Capacity building is a long-term investment. Much of this work spans multiple years, and some of the most significant outcomes, including practitioner confidence, organizational readiness, and stronger relationships, are not visible within a single grant cycle. EHF's willingness to continue working alongside partners over time is itself an important form of capacity support.
5. Coordination across EHF's divisions multiplies impact. Several partners participated in efforts supported by Grants, Engagement, and Research & Evaluation at the same time. This coordination suggests that EHF's greatest capacity-building leverage may come from connecting its tools and resources, rather than relying on any single approach.