



# THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

## **Re: GEAR Center Request for Information**

**Responding Organization:** Center for Public Justice

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### **About Center for Public Justice**

The mission of the Center for Public Justice (CPJ) mission is to equip citizens, develop leaders, and shape policy. The Center for Public Justice promotes government policies, public attitudes and organizational practices that safeguard the religious freedom of faith-based organizations. For 41 years Center for Public Justice has been a trusted provider of training and assistance to federal, state and local governments as regards the collaboration of faith-based organizations and government in providing needed services. From Charitable Choice through the policy frameworks undergirding the Faith-based Initiatives, Center for Public Justice has provided expertise relevant to public-private partnerships. In 2017, CPJ served as a subject-matter expert for AriA's SBIR development of MICA, a natural-language query system for government contracting personnel and small and nontraditional offerors (think "Siri for contracting). CPJ's work with faith-based organizations provided a documented pool of nontraditional offerors to engage with government acquisition requirements for nontraditional providers. CPJ also provides advising and responses to requests for comment to various agencies and branches, as outlined below.

### **Section A: Informing the Gear Center**

**Question 1b: What are specific areas of innovation and practice to prioritize?**

The GEAR Center should prioritize and incentivize the inclusion of the faith-based and community-based sector when seeking to establish innovation in public-private partnerships. Faith-based and community-based organizations serve the most vulnerable Americans, often on a grassroots level, and address specific needs within hard-to-reach communities. CPJ's work has shown that faith-based and community-based organizations have difficulty understanding the possibilities for and the process to establish government partnerships. This is due in part to government-provided resources for such partnerships written for contracting officers in the government workforce, and not with the faith-based or community-based sector as a key audience and potential partner. Faith-based organizations providing crucial services cannot divert their limited resources towards time spent navigating complex regulatory requirements or drafting extensive response documents. Additionally, the level of knowledge among faith-based organizations regarding the implications of generally applicable regulatory language and/or contract clauses is the primary reason why many faith-based organizations do not participate in public-private partnerships to provide services to the most vulnerable Americans. While these organizations are often uniquely positioned to meet the needs of those around them, have the trust of those they already serve, possess innovative solutions on how to address government-identified needs and problems at scale, and have subject-matter expertise in their respective fields, these organizations are not well-versed in government regulations or contract negotiation. The highly technical nature of government RFPs and contracts precludes them from achieving government partnerships. For these reasons, faith-based and other underrepresented organizations are often not establishing public-private partnerships. This diminishes the potential for their significant contributions to society and inhibits the development of innovative solutions -- particularly in workforce and skills retraining leading to family stability and economic advancement -- which are outcomes most needed by vulnerable Americans. As will be described further below, competency in communicating with faith-based and community-based organizations are also key factors to advancing the 21<sup>st</sup> century government workforce, as government seeks to expand innovation and partnerships.

The GEAR Center should include faith-based organizations in its design for at least the following three reasons. First, there is ample precedent for the government to seek out the most effective partners, whether those providers are religious or nonreligious. The faith-based initiative, based on federal Charitable Choice provisions enacted over twenty years ago, requires federal, state and local governments managing funds not exclude religious organizations because of their religious character or activities. Since its genesis, the faith-based initiative has continued under each Administration and has had broad support, with a notable record of faith-based organizations offering innovative, effective contributions through government partnerships. When government seeks out the most effective partners, it allows for optimal collaboration between the government and civil society organizations, be they religious or nonreligious. Second, incorporating faith-based and community-based organizations increases industry innovation. When these types of organizations are considered by the government the most

qualified organizations – including faith-based and other underrepresented ones – have equal opportunity to compete for government partnerships through grants and contracts. This creates a level playing field and fosters competition that in turn sparks innovation. Third, these organizations are most often uniquely positioned to address community-specific needs – they are already “boots on the ground”. By ensuring the provision of genuine opportunity for public-private partnerships with faith-based and community-based organizations, the government can reform capital allocation and more effectively address public issues.

In 2017, CPJ responded to a request from the Department of Health and Human Services advising how to remove barriers for religious and faith-based organizations to better participate in HHS programs and receive public funding for their work in vulnerable communities. The findings of our research report indicated that faith-based groups, specifically African-American-led religious organizations, felt excluded from every aspect of the processes involved in forming both financial and nonfinancial partnerships with the government. The federal government’s funding application process was perceived as “cumbersome, confusing and non-navigable” for these organizations. The report also noted that HHS had demonstrated a limited understanding of the distinctives of African-American-led organizations and the challenges they face. Additionally, these groups reported they had limited access to information about federal grants and government partnerships, often finding out about opportunities only after partnerships established with other organizations who were not rooted in their local communities became public. Moreover, there was a widespread perception that the system favored previous grantees and larger organizations that were not from within local communities. These findings are consistent with the trends CPJ has witnessed within the broader faith-based and community-based sector, and with government partnerships among other agencies. Our findings shared with HHS further underscore both the opportunity and the need to involve historically underrepresented organizations in the establishment of the GEAR Center.

## **Section B: Anticipated Early Focus Areas**

### **Question 7a – d: What are early focus areas for reskilling and upskilling Federal Employees?**

The early focus on reskilling and upskilling Federal employees must include substantive training for faith-based initiative officials and procurement personnel, housed within every agency. The federal government, starting with the Charitable Choice legislation during with the Clinton administration and continuing under every administration since, has made specific efforts to expand partnerships with faith-based organizations and community-based organizations in order to partner with the best service providers. However, the federal employees often lack the requisite training and knowledge necessary to facilitate these partnerships well. Agency officials need to understand both government—how it operates, its abilities, its resources—and also understand civil society organizations—their character, values, and needs. Faith-based and community-based organizations are comprised of organizations of diverse sizes, goals, and are

often reticent to form government partnerships for fear of losing their faith-based identity. It is crucial for government officials and agency personnel to understand the value of civil society organizations and, in accordance with the faith-based initiative, ensure these organizations have equal opportunity to compete for government partnerships. Currently there is no formal or specialized training available to these officials or personnel. The GEAR Center should contribute to resolve this important issue. The GEAR Center can work with advisory organizations to identify specific hindrances faith-based and community-based organizations face when seeking to partner with the government, and fund innovative new training programs for government officials and agency personnel tailored to address this need for upskilling.

CPJ has an innovative design prototype this type of training which includes a cohort-based learning community to both equip government officials and upskill agency personnel. Our approach ensures that government can effectively form partnerships with faith-based organizations and community-based organizations that are vital to the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce and make significant contributions to the greater good. Our approach involves seminars, a learning community, coaching sessions, and opportunity for individual consultations. Training in these ways provides innovative opportunities for learning through various methods (e.g. cognitive, experiential); it also fosters communities of knowledge in which officials can continue to learn from one another and disseminate information amongst themselves on an ongoing basis. This kind of training can be scaled and replicated to ensure all public officials serving in the faith-based initiative are equipped to carry out their work effectively.

## **The Opportunity**

At its outset, the GEAR Center has an opportunity include faith-based and community-based organizations as innovators and partners. By recognizing these civil society organizations, the Federal government can increase innovation and more adequately address needs for expanding economic opportunity for all Americans. The GEAR Center is positioned to assist in reskilling Federal employees to effectively partner with these faith-based and community-based organizations, based on the existing faith-based initiative. All these considerations present an opportunity through the GEAR Center to increase government efficiency, add competition to public-private partnerships, foster innovation, serve vulnerable Americans and grow the economy.