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Financial Capability and Asset Building With a Racial- and Gender-Equity Lens: Advances From the Field

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Abstract
This essay explores the enormous potential of social service organizations to contribute to people's financial well-being. It is informed by the work of four pioneering organizations that use a racial- and gender-equity lens to advance financial well-being. It explores five strategies: (a) embedding financial development into social services; (b) focusing on youth transitioning to adulthood; (c) partnering with asset coalitions to expand financial opportunities; (d) partnering with financial institutions; and (e) developing fintech with equity. These approaches hold promise to help address the racial wealth gap and improve financial security.

Keywords
asset building, financial capability, financial services, fintech, racial equity, gender equity, social service organizations

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By now, the statistics are familiar but remain staggering, and they are moving in the wrong direction: Income inequality and wealth inequality are rising in the United States. The racial wealth gap has profound implications for U.S. society.

Work and poverty in the United States coexist to a startling degree. In 2018, at least 7 million adults were classified as "working poor," and the pandemic has inflated that number (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Lack of an adequate financial and digital infrastructure leaves many families without access to basic and dependable financial services. This is particularly true in communities of color. For example, while an estimated one quarter of low-income U.S. households are unbanked and underbanked, nearly twice that many (50.5%) American Indian and Alaska Native households lack a bank account and/or use alternative financial services (Dewees & Mottola, 2017; Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation [FDIC], 2017; Jorgensen &

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Akee, 2017). Compared with white households, Black and Hispanic households are also more likely to be unbanked or unbanked and less likely to have an established credit history (FDIC, 2017). Similarly, young Americans are more likely than older adults to be underbanked and unbanked (FDIC, 2017).

As daily life becomes increasingly financialized, many in our society lack access and tools to participate in ways that improve their financial well-being. This is especially true among low-income and minoritized populations. To achieve stability and security, every family and young adult must have access to high-quality, low-cost financial services, along with the basic guidance and information needed to use them effectively (Sherraden et al., in press). But millions do not, and without those tools, financial stability and upward mobility remain challenging.

This essay explores the enormous potential of social service organizations—due to their large numbers and proximity to low- and moderate-income communities—to contribute to people's financial well-being. It is informed by the work of four pioneering organizations that use a racial- and gender-equity lens to advance financial well-being.

- The *Oklahoma Native Assets Coalition* (ONAC) is a Native-led nonprofit asset-building coalition that works with Native families to build their assets and develop more financial security and well-being. Established in Oklahoma, ONAC now serves Native communities throughout the United States.
- *MyPath* is a national nonprofit that designs models, builds partnerships, and advances policy so that BIPOC youth and young adults have the knowledge, tools, and confidence to get on a path to building wealth. It leverages technology, human relationships, and youth expertise to design and embed effective models in youth and young adult settings. With insights and data, alongside youth stories and advocacy, MyPath engages in systems change centered on the financial and economic inclusion of youth. MyPath built its model on research evidence that youth financial capability and confidence can be improved. Since its founding, MyPath has reached over 25,000 BIPOC youth and young adults in 14 cities across the country.
- *Inclusiv* is a national Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) and network of CDFIs and minority-led credit unions dedicated to promoting financial inclusion. Inclusiv raises and deploys capital, delivers technical assistance and training, and manages a national outcomes-driven financial-coaching program, connecting coaching clients with safe, and responsible credit union products and services. The Inclusiv network is composed of more than 400 community development credit unions in low-income communities and communities of color. Founded and led by and for low-income communities and communities of color, these institutions are devoted to increasing racial and gender equity in the financial system.
- *Change Machine* builds financial security for low-income communities through people-powered technology. Since its founding in 2005, Change Machine has partnered with more than 6,000 practitioners around the country to transform how they work with people to achieve their financial goals.

We begin with an overview of historical and contemporary challenges and opportunities related to financial well-being. We then examine various contributions that social service organizations can make to building financial well-being in underserved communities. We conclude with thoughts about next steps.

The Long View: Historical Challenges and Contemporary Prospects

The human capital and assets of minoritized groups built the economy and society of the

United States from its inception. European Americans forcibly and violently removed Native peoples, appropriating their ancestral lands and natural resources (First Nations Development Institute, 2009; Guedel & Colbert, 2016). The forced labor and oppression of enslaved people from Africa transformed the new nation into a world economic power (Baptist, 2014). Since then, policies and practices have permitted the legal, illegal, and extralegal seizure of the assets of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx and Asian Americans, and women of all ethnic identities (Lui et al., 2006). Among the many examples of such seizures are the millions of dollars lost by African Americans in the failure of the Freedman's Bank (Baradaran, 2017; Fergus & Shanks, this issue), by Native peoples through the long-term federal mismanagement of Indian trust assets (Echohawk, n.d.),[1] by Latinx people who lost millions of acres of land (Rendón, 1971), and by women deprived of inheritances through unfair laws and practices (Goldin, 1990). Asset stripping has also taken the form of illegal land seizures (Carrigan & Webb, 2015; Villazor, 2010), as well as other legal and extralegal means (Sherraden et al., 2018).

Today, exclusionary policies shored up by institutionalized racism continue to strip resources, preventing the economic stability and security of low-income and minoritized populations. Housing, tax, and criminal justice policies, for instance, deprive people of color from the benefits enjoyed by whites (Alexander, 2010; Rothstein, 2017; Steuerle, 2016). Although the clearest path to building and transferring household wealth in the United States has been homeownership, years of redlining and discriminatory housing policies placed that goal out of reach for millions of Black, Latinx, and Native American households (Rothstein, 2017). As a result, the racial wealth gap continues to widen, and lack of access to safe financial services has been a critical factor in limiting the ability of Black, Latinx, and Native American consumers to build assets.

This history has resulted in widespread distrust of financial institutions among those who have borne the burden of oppressive treatment and inequitable policies. Research suggests that low trust among low- and very-low-income consumers toward financial institutions results from a history of limited direct personal connection or engagement with these institutions. People fear their banks are seeking to make money from them rather than deliver quality service. Locally owned community credit unions have to work hard to overcome those concerns and build trust that responsible financial institutions do better when consumers succeed with their products (National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, 2015). MyPath and ONAC staff observe that young people often adopt their parents' distrust of financial institutions and financial practices. Moreover, young adults' direct and indirect experiences with "banking while Black" (Flitter, 2020) further feed distrust of financial institutions. Unfortunately, distrust, a result of historical mistreatment by various public and private organizations (Guedel & Colbert, 2016; National Congress of American Indians, 2020; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018) is a major barrier to improving financial well-being.

Low levels of trust have been further fueled by the influx of predatory financial services delivering credit products that trap low-income consumers in endless debt cycles (Martinchek & Carther, 2021; National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, 2015). Many consumers reject complex products and digital tools because they do not trust that they will have sufficient information to use the offerings safely and effectively, and they do not trust that the terms and conditions of the offerings are sufficiently transparent (National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions, 2015).

The events of 2020 and 2021 have exposed unambiguously the depth of financial insecurity and racial inequality. Massive social movements and political mobilization followed the stark exposure of state violence against African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Latinx people, and other communities, and the uneven impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on those communities (F. Edwards et al., 2019;

Hansen, 2017). These events also have indicated the structural changes required to advance financial and economic equity.

Large federal and state public-policy proposals aim to expand economic and social infrastructure and boost human rights (White House, 2021). Although some policies have reinforced structural inequality (such as the Paycheck Protection Program in the first stimulus law [Liu & Parilla, 2020]), other efforts such as the second stimulus bill, serious discussions of reparations in more than 15 cities,[2] proposals for baby bonds (Cassidy et al., 2019), guaranteed income pilots in a growing number of cities (https://www.mayorsforagi.org/), and other efforts aim to narrow the racial wealth gap. Philanthropic organizations, such as the Bush Foundation, will select two steward organizations to hold $100 million in community-trust funds for Black and Native communities in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota.[3] These developments are only a beginning. Improving financial security requires participation from all sectors of society, including the social services.

Financial Security and Racial Equity: The Roles of Social Service Organizations

Social service organizations have important roles in improving financial security among low-income and minoritized populations. Across the social services, poverty is commonplace, and social service organizations provide resources and support to millions in financial hardship. Often, however, social service organizations must adopt workarounds to address financial problems. For example, during the pandemic, ONAC changed intake procedures to allow for ONAC staff to accept application information from clients by phone when clients had older devices or no internet service and could not otherwise complete the online applications. Several ONAC partner agencies met with rural Native families on their porches to assist with obtaining emergency cash assistance.

This essay presents a multilayered approach—actions at micro, mezzo, and macro levels—to improve the ability of social service organizations to advance the financial well-being of clients who are black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). We discuss how social service organizations can embed financial development into social services, begin young by offering youth an on-ramp to mainstream financial services, join asset-building coalitions, partner with financial service institutions, and contribute to financial technology (fintech) and other financial service innovations. We draw on the data and insights of such endeavors to advance related policy and systems-change efforts.

Embed Financial Development Into the Social Services

What better way to advance financial well-being than by utilizing the existing social service infrastructure across the country? By embedding financial development strategies into the existing fabric of robust social-service infrastructure across the country, financial security and well-being can be scaled while facilitating the important work and outcomes of partner organizations.[4]

Given the barriers people face to achieving their financial goals and building the lives they want, delivering financial development services to those most in need is challenging but essential. As a model for enhancing the lives of working poor Americans and low-income communities, financial development strategies can improve savings and credit while decreasing debt levels (Theodos et al., 2018). How can the field start developing financial security for people when they are young? How can it achieve scale while equitably advancing the financial well-being of those most in need?

Financial insecurity is a foundational issue that afflicts young people, BIPOC, older adults, and single working mothers alike. Administrators who recognize this can embed financial development strategies within their social service organizations. Rather than layering such strategies atop organizations' existing services, administrators can integrate them into their very models with the understanding that the success of the respective missions of social service organizations is in fact codependent.

Social service models running the gamut from workforce development to domestic violence protection to targeted services for young adults. Embedding financial development into existing services offers the flexibility to constantly shape and refine approaches according to the needs of clients, organizations, and communities. Embedding builds upon the invaluable expertise and knowledge of social service organizations, helping them demystify financial well-being. Empirical data show that incorporating financial development into the fabric of the social service mission addresses customers' needs holistically and enhances outcomes. A recent report of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concluded that, across the past 15 years, "a growing body of evidence finds that financial capability programs and services may have some positive effects on the financial well-being of participants" (Treskon et al., 2021, p. 24).

Crucial to the strategy of embedding financial development is that it improves the outcomes of partner organizations and builds on their success. Embedding leverages the knowledge of social service organizations that have built up years of trust among the populations they serve and know well.

Implementing capacity-building programs requires a deep, nuanced understanding of what financial security means to different populations and of what steps are appropriate for improving their financial security (The Financial Clinic, 2011, p. 2). With clients' needs in mind, financial development services can be integrated into delivery models of partner organizations, thereby simplifying processes for frontline staff and making their work easier. Such integration requires shared metrics and meaningful information exchange so that organizations can continually evaluate their work across fields and refine their efforts.

Moreover, successful embedding requires seamlessly integrating new financial development services into partner organizations' own programming. The success of those services depends on how well they are embedded, from streamlining workflows to maximizing natural points of integration. A key to success is to fully integrate the curriculum, delivery, and referral processes of financial development services into an organization's existing services. In one study, for example, workforce programs that integrate financial development strategies into core services, for example, had higher rates of job placement, full-time employment, and job retention than did those without financial services (Corporation for a Skilled Workforce & The Financial Clinic, 2017). Similarly, building in financial development strategies and tools, such as education, bank accounts, and productive credit, can maximize clients' income and demonstrate the positive effects of integration (Loke et al., 2015).

Increasingly, the line between financial services and social services is blurred. For example, ONAC sponsors various financial account opening events for tribal citizens. Prior to the pandemic, the events were held in group settings, such as at tribal offices and community centers. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, ONAC embedded connections to fintech into its programs. This includes providing online program applications for children's savings accounts and emergency savings accounts, instead of the paper applications ONAC previously collected for its programs at in-person events. It also includes electronic links to register for virtual one-on-one financial coaching by phone or teleconference, complete state 529 college savings plan applications, as a step of ONAC providing seed funding for children's savings accounts, lists of Bank On-certified accounts for the unbanked,[5] and the IRS nonfiler portal to help individuals claim federal stimulus and Child Tax Credit payments. In addition, to reduce digital access barriers, ONAC staff offered emergency cash assistance by automated clearing house transfers (i.e., ACH transfers) or check, sometimes contacting applicants by phone and entering information manually for applicants who lacked access to complete an online application. Tribal outreach partners even traveled to the homes of tribal citizens and spoke with them through screen doors to help them access these financial services. Similarly, Inclusiv worked with its network of community development credit unions to fast-forward the implementation of mobile banking tools designed for low-income consumers. Inclusiv also provided a guide for their some members on how to move processes online or through video meeting platforms. In addition, Inclusiv published a guide on how grassroots credit unions could open accounts remotely to help community members become “banked” and receive stimulus payments in a more timely fashion.

Financial coaching is another successful approach. The effectiveness of integrating financial coaching into social service organizations has been demonstrated in a randomized, controlled trial commissioned by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Evidence from that study showed that financial coaching had a meaningful impact on the well-being of New York and Florida residents (Theodos et al., 2018; also see Inclusiv, 2019). Across the social services, financial coaching and counseling are the connective tissue, supporting individuals and families as they navigate a variety of challenges, whether it is helping clients in the banking system or selecting the right financial products and plans to help them build assets.

Financial coaching and counseling lend a multiplier effect if embedded at scale. By streamlining and democratizing financial well-being, systems and services that address poverty can be more effective across the board. Countless human-service professionals already addressing poverty on the front lines. What would it mean to partner with them to support consumers to succeed in the banking system? What would it mean to support consumers with the right financial products, as well as long-term plans to build credit, increase savings, leverage savings for asset purchases, and grow wealth?

Bringing financial security to working Americans and vulnerable populations across the country requires efficiency, accessibility, and long-term impact. As a field-wide strategy, embedding is designed to ensure maximum impact. The promise of embedding financial development is to scale the impact of the field by building partnerships with human-service organizations, understanding the needs of those organizations, and advancing a framework that helps them accelerate mission. Leveraging the expertise of case managers, advocates, and counselors, along with financial development can achieve systems-level change.

Begin Young: The Right to Finance

The United States has enacted bold policies to address poverty and hunger in certain populations. Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps), and Social Security are major examples of such efforts. Policy makers have not made the same kind of investments in youth and young adults, especially BIPOC youth (Bird, 2020). Across the nation, too many young people from low-income families grow up without a visible on-ramp to mainstream financial services. The long-standing misalignment of the legal working age (15 or 16 years) and the legal banking age (18 years) deprives many youth living in poverty of access to banking. This misalignment means that youth without a parent or guardian to serve as account custodian are relegated to costly predatory outlets. Youth in the foster care system, children of undocumented parents, and unbanked or underbanked young parents are some of those shut out of the financial mainstream. Too many youth begin their work life using check cashers and end up relying on nonbank high-cost alternative financial services for their adult lives (FDIC, 2009, 2017).

The transition to adulthood is a key inflection point, and targeted investments at that point could change the trajectory for youth, preventing many physical, mental, and material challenges in adulthood. For example, starting early could avoid credit problems, major debt, the use of costly, often-risky alternative financial services, and other challenges.

Research finds that high-quality accounts, saving supports, and credit building are powerful tools. They have demonstrated positive impacts on the financial security and financial confidence of youth, as well as on their mindset about the future (Loke et al., 2015, 2016). In particular, MyPath has found these supports to be effective when integrated into youth employment and workforce program settings. However, the findings also indicate that the wages earned by youth are not sufficient to provide a way out of poverty.

To address structural barriers to closing the racial wealth gap and moving BIPOC young people out of poverty, MyPath supported Youth POWER, a small team of BIPOC young-adult leaders, in building a Youth Economic Bill of Rights (MyPath, 2021). It identifies economic challenges faced by BIPOC youth and proposes a set of solutions to address them, reimagining what our country would do if it truly wanted to close the racial wealth gap and provide an economic foothold for youth whose families and communities have been economically excluded.

Starting early to build a strong financial foundation could help youth move out of poverty toward financial and economic security and mobility. Using the Economic Bill of Rights, MyPath and Youth POWER engage key stakeholders and policymakers to advance youth economic inclusion and to ensure that BIPOC youth and young adults hold seats at decision-making tables. Only in this way will youth voices be heard and influence policymaking that impacts their lives.

Join Asset Coalitions: Intermediaries for Improving Financial Security

Social service organizations do not have to do this work alone. They can join asset coalitions, which take up financial challenges, provide resources and services, and promote policy change. They assist with networking, training, technical assistance, research, asset-building program administration, and resources for low-income and low-asset communities. Moreover, asset coalitions often collaborate with larger intermediaries—such as Credit Builders Alliance, the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund, Operation Hope, NeighborWorks America, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, ONAC, and the First Nations Development Institute—to provide resources for social service organizations engaged in improving people's financial security.

There are an estimated 80 asset coalitions in the United States, and although they share an overall purpose, they differ in specific activities (Prosperity Now, 2018). ONAC, for example, directly administers asset-building programs, provides training to other providers, and supports others to develop asset-building programs. It directly offers children's savings accounts, emergency savings accounts, incentive deposits for new bank accounts, financial coaching, emergency cash assistance, and down-payment assistance (ONAC, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). ONAC also provides culturally relevant train-the-trainer workshops for Native financial educators (ONAC, n.d.-b). As an intermediary funder, ONAC funds tribes and other Native-led nonprofits to provide child savings initiatives, Child Tax Credit outreach, and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) programs (ONAC, n.d.-b). In addition, ONAC administers two national networks—the Native Bank On ONAC Network, to increase banking access, and the Native EITC/VITA Network (ONAC, n.d.-a, n.d.-b)—that facilitate Native clients' use of tax credits, including the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

Asset coalitions also conduct research that can help social service organizations develop priorities, design programs, and obtain funding. For instance, ONAC has conducted research on savings initiatives (Finsel, 2020), gender and the racial wealth gap (Scott, 2020), and VITA during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schramm, 2020). It publishes resource materials on managing 529 college savings accounts (ONAC, 2019), designing remote financial education (ONAC, 2020a), supporting Native women entrepreneurship (ONAC, 2021a), expanding banking access through the *Get*

Banked Indian Country initiative (ONAC, 2021b), and claiming Child Tax Credit payments (ONAC, 2021c). It also publishes reports on administering asset-building programs such as those for children's savings accounts (Finsel, 2021), emergency savings accounts (K. Edwards & Finsel, 2021), and emergency-cash assistance during the pandemic (Wagner & Finsel, 2021).

Partner With Financial Institutions

The modern-day community development credit union movement grew out of the need to address systemic capital gaps in BIPOC communities through the formation of financial cooperatives that pool savings and redeploy the assets as loans. But for decades, they lacked the size, capital, and capacity to deliver home mortgages to all who needed them. As the movement and institutional capacity of community development credit unions has grown, so has their ability to design and deliver homeownership and small business opportunities in their communities.

Social service organizations can partner with financial institutions, such as (CDFIs), credit unions, and community banks, to develop financial products and avenues for inclusion. Organized and led by community leaders dedicated to filling capital gaps and addressing systemic barriers to the financial mainstream, CDFIs, and community credit unions can be ideal partners for social service organizations.

These alliances focus on connecting financial coaching and counseling with the types of products and services that build financial stability and security in households. The offerings include safe accounts (with low and transparent fees), savings accounts, and a variety of loans (e.g., for transportation, microenterprise, small business, home buying, home repair, and energy efficiency upgrades). Loans for credit building and repair offer ways to refinance high-cost debt. Such partnerships can nurture productive, lifelong relationships between financial institutions and low-income families, especially youth in those families (Libby et al., 2015). Inclusiv and its partner, Neighborhood Trust Financial Partners, built a financial coaching program, Pathways to Financial Empowerment, which enables financial coaches to integrate their recommendations on responsible and affordable financial products and services offered by credit unions.

Community development credit unions provide a platform and support for financial counseling and coaching. In Atlanta, three of these unions joined Inclusiv to launch the On the Rise Center, delivering both group-based financial advising and one-on-one financial coaching sessions to residents on Atlanta's West Side (Capelouto, 2020). Coaches deliver overall financial education and then meet one-on-one with coaching clients to set both long-term goals and immediate "Take Action Today" steps. Through the steps, clients work toward their financial goals. Residents can open accounts at the credit union, build and repair their credit, and in some cases, complete homeownership counseling to qualify for homeownership. On the Rise Financial Center works in partnership with Clark Atlanta University's School of Social Work to engage the school's students by offering them experience in counseling and coaching as part of their work-study activities ("New internship program for social work students at Clark Atlanta University," 2018).

All social service organizations can use the resources of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to inform their work and help their clients. The Bureau is charged with making consumer financial markets work for consumers; protecting them from unfair, deceptive' or abusive practices; and arming people with the information, steps, and tools that they need to make smart financial decisions (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, n.d.-a). "Your Money, Your Goals" is a financial empowerment resource that social service organizations can use with clients (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, n.d.-b). When human-service professionals observe exploitative practices by financial firms, they can report them to the Bureau, which has the power to impose fines (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, n.d.-c).

Social service organizations can also support regulatory policies to advance financial inclusion. For example, they can promote inclusion of youth by supporting the creation of universal, noncustodial starter accounts (for savings and transactions) with features and enrollment processes that are youth friendly. For example, Excite Credit Union in San Jose, California, adopted MyPath's youth-friendly account standards. Today, it partners with MyPath and the County of Santa Clara, California, to provide financial mentoring to emancipating foster youth who receive guaranteed income payments from the county. In some circumstances, the processes of complying with the Community Reinvestment Act (specifically, with a requirement that banks meet the credit needs of communities in which they do business) can be leveraged to promote community development and financial inclusion goals (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2021). In some cases, banks have invested in supportive services that link financial access to youth employment and foster youth programs and to other youth services.

Realize the Promise (and Avoid the Pitfalls) of FinTech

With its rapid rise over the past decade, fintech has already transformed the banking and financial services industries. From consumer financial services to mobile payments, fintech is now ubiquitous. Fintech offers those in the social services an additional strategy for reaching the underserved and for achieving scale. Just as financial insecurity is the connective tissue across social service models, so technology unites social service fields and the populations they serve. Organizations are increasingly reliant on digital technologies to interact with the communities they serve, such as through virtual counseling and financial coaching. Likewise, most Americans depend on internet access and various forms of mobile technology; the pandemic has only pushed the country further toward a digital, cashless economy (Allam, 2020).

With fintech, there is a unique opportunity to facilitate financial security and improve financial well-being among low-income and minoritized populations. It can prevent often-costly workarounds that social service organizations currently may have to use (e.g., manual data entry), though there must be access to internet services and computers or other devices. Fintech has potential to lower rates on loans and decrease punitive fees while also providing tools to normalize metrics, track developments, and monitor success rates. It can reach the underbanked and unbanked, offer access to safe accounts, improve access to credit, and provide ease and convenience to consumers. Fintech can facilitate access to safe accounts, digital banking tools, and access to fast, easy, and convenient credit. For example, linking a work permit with bank account enrollment could facilitate financial access for minors before they get a job because the data required for the work permit are the same as the data needed for account opening (and know your customer [KYC]). In other words, there is a very real opportunity to shape the development, distribution, and outcomes of new products and platforms in ways that benefit the underserved.

Although the possibilities of fintech are endless, and the promise of expanded access and opportunity very real, fintech must be designed for equity (Grote, 2020). This transition must be managed with conditions and financial requirements of low-income and minoritized populations in mind. If it is not, the transition could worsen financial insecurity. The proliferation of predatory lending and banking processes online can sink individuals and families into debt. The lack of regulation, oversight, and consumer protections are cause for concern, especially in low-income communities that are vulnerable to exploitation. Data privacy is another red flag and a potential barrier to ensuring trust among communities (Change Machine, 2021). Language access, digital access, identification requirements, and algorithmic bias also challenge the equity of fintech.

American Indian and Alaska Native communities offer windows into fintech's limitations. Many members of these communities lack access to broadband, home internet services, and affordable devices. Many, especially tribal elders, are uncomfortable with fintech and worry that it involves scams. It is important, therefore, to offer options to talk face-to-face with a banker (instead of using online banking), to use 529 savings program account paper applications, make deposits by mail for children's savings accounts held through 529 programs, and offer devices for families to claim their Child Tax Credit payments through nonfiler tax portals, such as GetCTC.org. Recent legislation discounts the cost of home internet services and devices for very low-income families; these measures can help (Federal Communications Commission, 2021), but the costs still remain prohibitive for many.

It is paramount that the financial security and social service fields work together to ensure that fintech addresses the needs of underserved communities. In 2018, Nonprofit Leaders in Financial Technology (nLIFT), a coalition of organizations, outlined a manifesto articulating a vision of nonprofit leadership in the fintech field (Nonprofit Leaders in Financial Technology [nLIFT] & Aspen Institute, 2018). The manifesto proposed "mission-driven fintech" to promote financial security in low- and moderate-income households (Nonprofit Leaders in Financial Technology, 2018, p. 12).

There are several successful examples of partnerships between nonprofits and fintech developers. One example cited by the nLIFT manifesto is Mission Asset Fund, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that helps low-income and immigrant households pay debt and build credit through low-interest loans. It developed lending circles across the country, delivering zero-interest loans to unbanked and underbanked households. This allowed Mission Asset Fund to respond quickly when the Trump administration terminated the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in 2017. Delivering much-needed loans, it disbursed over $4 million to more than 10,000 young immigrants nationwide in 1 month (nLIFT & Aspen Institute, 2018, p. 14). In 2016, Change Machine successfully launched WorkBOOST NYC to embed financial security strategies into the city's existing social-service delivery model. Through this municipal-nonprofit partnership focused on integrating curriculum and referral processes of financial security services into organizations' own service, program participants "saw improved job placement after working with a financial coach and were more likely to stay in their job" (Change Machine, 2019, p. 17).

Limitations in fintech can be solved by integrating the principles of mission-driven work. As they possess knowledge of the barriers faced by low-income communities, social-service and financial-security leaders can spearhead fintech development and leverage their direct experience with the financially underserved. Social services can link the populations they serve with trustworthy fintech, facilitate trust among the populations they serve, and ensure that fintech tools are being used effectively and appropriately. A 2020 Urban Institute report addressed the potential for partnerships between nonprofits and fintech companies, concluding that "participating nonprofits gained valuable knowledge about the potential benefits of fintech overall for their clients, as well as insights on how to match products to the needs and preferences of their clients" (Bogle et al., 2020, p. 2). Similarly, during the coronavirus pandemic, Change Machine introduced a recommendation engine on its platform. The engine equips social service practitioners to confidently vet and connect their customers with trustworthy fintech products and services. As part of the recommendation process, customers are informed about how fintech companies might collect, use, and store their information, as well as about how their data are protected.

Together, social-service and financial-security leaders can translate the knowledge of the field into design principles and practices for fintech. This can enable the social services to achieve better outcomes—tools to maximize financial well-being at scale. In fact, given that technology can enable basic payments and transactions at scale with little or no cost, finance in its most basic form could become a public good, regulated like other public goods. This would ensure that financial services actors do not profit from the most vulnerable consumers (Huang et al., 2021).

Conclusion

People working in social services bring unique knowledge and skills to efforts to improve the financial well-being of low-income and minoritized families and communities. They understand that culturally appropriate financial education, seed deposits and other financial subsidies, assistance with opening financial accounts, and changes in our economic and social policies can remove barriers and provide equitable access to banking and asset-building tools.

Families and young people generally do not think about their financial situation separately from their overall well-being. They are inextricably connected. Their financial well-being creates conditions in which families can survive and thrive. Professionals should adopt the same view. Greater cooperation and linking between social and financial services makes sense.

Although social services are partners in building financial security, they are underresourced for the breadth and depth of work they undertake. Even if they have the administrative infrastructure in place to do financial work with clients, including trained staff, evaluation capacity, and long-standing relationships with the community, they still require substantial resources to improve clients' financial well-being. Helpful resources include down-payment assistance, seed deposits for emergency savings and Child Development Accounts, funds for training financial coaches, guidance provided by the Youth Economic Bill of Rights, and other financial supports for low-income families and youth.

Finally, to make good on the approaches discussed in this essay, the field must commit to closing the racial- and gender-wealth gaps. It is not enough to focus only on accessibility. From the outset, the field should emphasize the priorities of working-poor Americans and communities of color, with their success front of mind and with an emphasis on outcomes.

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Notes

1. In 2010, Eloise Cobell, a member of the Blackfoot Nation, won a $3.4 billion settlement in a 15-year lawsuit challenging the federal withholding of more than $150 billion owed to Native Americans (Warren, 2010).
2. The cities include Burlington, VT; St. Paul, MN; St. Louis, MO; San Francisco, CA; Asheville, NC; Denver, CO; Los Angeles, CA; Austin, TX; Durham, NC; Sacramento, CA; Tullahassee, OK; Kansas City, MO; Tulsa, OK; Providence, RI; and Evanston, IL (Mayors Organized for Reparations and Equity, 2021).
3. Additional funding for Native communities would be a dramatic shift in philanthropy. Currently, they receive only a small portion of philanthropic funding (0.4% on average), and only a sliver of that goes to the Native-led nonprofits that administer asset-building programs in Native communities (Candid & Native Americans in Philanthropy, 2021; see also Bush Foundation, 2021).
4. In its *2021 Blueprint of Federal Social Policy Priorities*, the National Association of Social Workers called on national leaders to "establish a federal 'financial guidance for all' initiative to train every social worker and counselor to provide basic financial guidance and resources for millions of underserved families who are struggling financially" (National Association of Social Workers, 2021, p. 24).

5. Bank On is a partnership with financial institutions for safe and affordable banking products and services (Bank On, n.d.). The Bank On standards identify bank and credit-union product features considered "critical" for consumers currently outside of the mainstream banking system (e.g., the unbanked and underbanked; Bank On, 2021).

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