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Workers at the Table:

A Case Study of the Harris County Essential Workers Board

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	3
The COVID-19 Pandemic and Creation of the Harris County Essential Workers Board	4
Setting Up the Board	
Harris County Essential Workers Board is Unique in Purpose, Breadth, and Membership	7
Purpose: Provide Feedback and Recommendations and Advise on Programs and Policies	
Breadth: Nine Essential Industries	
Membership: All Members are Current or Former Low-Income Essential Workers	
The Board's Early Results and Successes	10
HCEWB Institutionalized Worker Voice as Part of the Policy Process	
HCEWB Informed and Advocated for Policies	
HCEWB Engaged the Community, Gathering Essential Workers' Insights and Providing Resources	
HCEWB Provided Opportunities for Growth and Leadership to Board Members	
HCEWB Helped Inspire and Inform Efforts to Create New Worker-Centered Boards	
Challenges, Strategies, and Recommendations	16
Recruiting Board Members	
Facilitating and Maximizing Board Members' Participation	
Providing Resources and Support for the Board to Achieve Its Purpose	
Conclusion	26
Endnotes	27

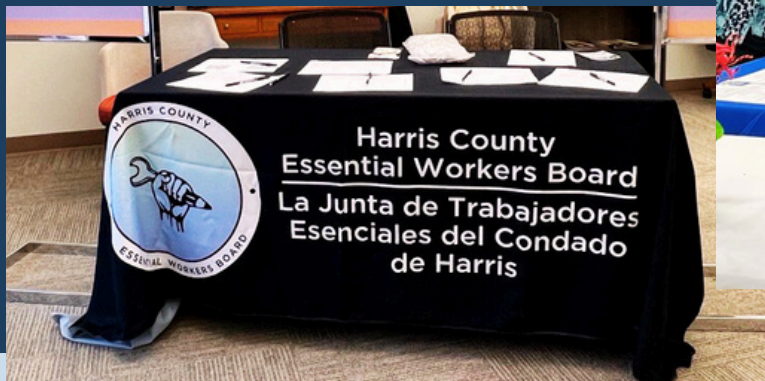
Acknowledgments

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HCEWB Resource Fair

Introduction

As a construction worker in Houston, Texas, Candido Batiz Alvarez had to fight for years to be paid the wages he was owed.ⁱ He got infected with the COVID-19 virus at work and spread the virus to his wife, but his employer tried to deny him sick leave.ⁱⁱ With the physical stress of working in ongoing extreme heat, blood in his urine warned of potential kidney failure.ⁱⁱⁱ Candido testified before the Harris County Commissioners Court,^{iv} joining with other advocates to call for an essential workers' board to ensure their voices are heard on policies impacting their lives. The commissioners voted to create the board, and Candido became one of its first members.^v

During the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of workers like Candido employed in “essential” sectors of the economy—such as health care, food services, and transportation—provided critical services to the public, yet were denied basic benefits and adequate protections on the job.^{vi} Essential workers, unions, and worker organizations fought back, calling for policy changes to ensure more power and better working conditions for the people on the frontlines of the public health crisis.^{vii}

The groundbreaking Harris County Essential Workers Board (HCEWB)—the first essential workers' board in the country—was designed to ensure that

county policymaking is shaped by essential workers' ideas, feedback, and lived experience with the issues at hand.^{viii} Board members, all of whom are essential workers, bring critical expertise because they have experienced firsthand the impacts of existing policy problems. Members understand the challenges and inequities essential workers face, and they are uniquely positioned to develop ideas for solutions that meet workers' needs and priorities.

Based primarily on interviews with board members, county officials, and worker organization representatives, this report examines the early years of the Harris County Essential Workers Board. It analyzes the board's successes and challenges in order to provide recommendations for similar boards that may be created in other states and localities.

After reviewing methodology, this report begins with a brief history of the creation of the Harris County Essential Workers Board. Next, it describes how the board is unique amidst the recent increase in workers' boards in the United States, and it analyzes the board's successes and early impacts. Finally, it discusses the board's challenges and strategies in its early years—and offers recommendations for future all-worker boards.

Methodology

This report is primarily based on 11 interviews with 14 people: HCEWB members (including the board's elected leaders), county officials, and worker organization representatives. The secondary research process included reviewing a variety of reports, news articles, and publicly available resources from the HCEWB and other workers' boards. The authors also attended virtual HCEWB meetings between April 2024 and May 2025 and reviewed recordings of previous board meetings.



HCEWB Executive Committee

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Creation of the Harris County Essential Workers Board

The COVID-19 pandemic vividly highlighted that society depends upon “essential workers” who provide critical goods and services—while also treating them as disposable. They were lauded as heroes for keeping health care, grocery stores, transportation, and other sectors and industries operating while many other people worked from the safety of home. But with little voice or power on the job, essential workers faced a dire situation. They had to risk their health and their lives working in-person, in unsafe conditions without basic safety protections.^{ix} Moreover, essential workers contracted COVID-19^x and died^{xi} at disproportionate rates during the pandemic.

Essential workers are often low paid, and due to occupational segregation and other systemic factors, are more likely to be people of color than white.^{xii} During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers of color were more likely than white workers to work in in-person essential jobs, risking infection at work.^{xiii} A 2020 study of COVID-19 mortality attributed the disproportionate number of deaths among Black people to the disproportionate number of Black workers employed in essential occupations.^{xiv} Black Americans died from COVID-19 at rates nearly double their share of the U.S. population.^{xv}

Essential workers’ experiences during the pandemic differed based on voice and representation in the workplace as well. A national survey on the experiences of essential workers during the pandemic found that compared to their non-union counterparts, unionized essential workers were more likely to have had access to paid sick leave as well as resources such as personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing from their employers.^{xvi} While the positive “union difference” in workplace health and safety outcomes has been well-documented across multiple industries, the urgency of the pandemic highlighted the need to create more avenues through which workers could have a say in decisions regarding workplace standards and conditions.^{xvii} This was especially critical in regions with low union density rates like the South, where the prevalence of right-to-work laws has been linked to lower wages, benefits, and unionization rates.^{xviii}

In the midst of the crisis, worker organizations at the national, state, and local level came together to form Always Essential, a nationwide campaign to seize the historic opportunity presented by the pandemic to advocate for meaningful improvements in pay, working conditions, and decision-making power for essential workers.^{xix}

In particular, the campaign focused on strengthening bargaining power for low-wage essential workers through four “lanes” of intervention.^{xx}

1. legislation and policymaking at the local, state, and federal levels
2. worker- and organization-led efforts aimed at holding corporations accountable for putting profits before people
3. bargaining for updated and new contracts that ensure strong labor standards for essential workers are inserted into contract negotiations
4. workers coming together with government and industry and corporate leaders to establish local boards with decision-making power, and enforceable workplace health and safety standards, among others.

In Harris County, Texas, a local coalition of organizations—which included Workers Defense Project, SEIU Texas, Fe y Justicia Worker Center, National Domestic Workers Alliance, United for Respect, and Jobs With Justice—

launched and won a campaign exemplifying this fourth approach by establishing a first-of-its-kind, multi-sectoral essential workers’ board.^{xxi} The coalition worked closely with the county government to create a policy within the limits of Texas statute that would ensure the board is meaningfully worker-driven.^{xxii} In November 2021, Harris County Commissioners Court passed the Harris County Essential Workers Board and its bylaws by a 3-2 vote.^{xxiii}

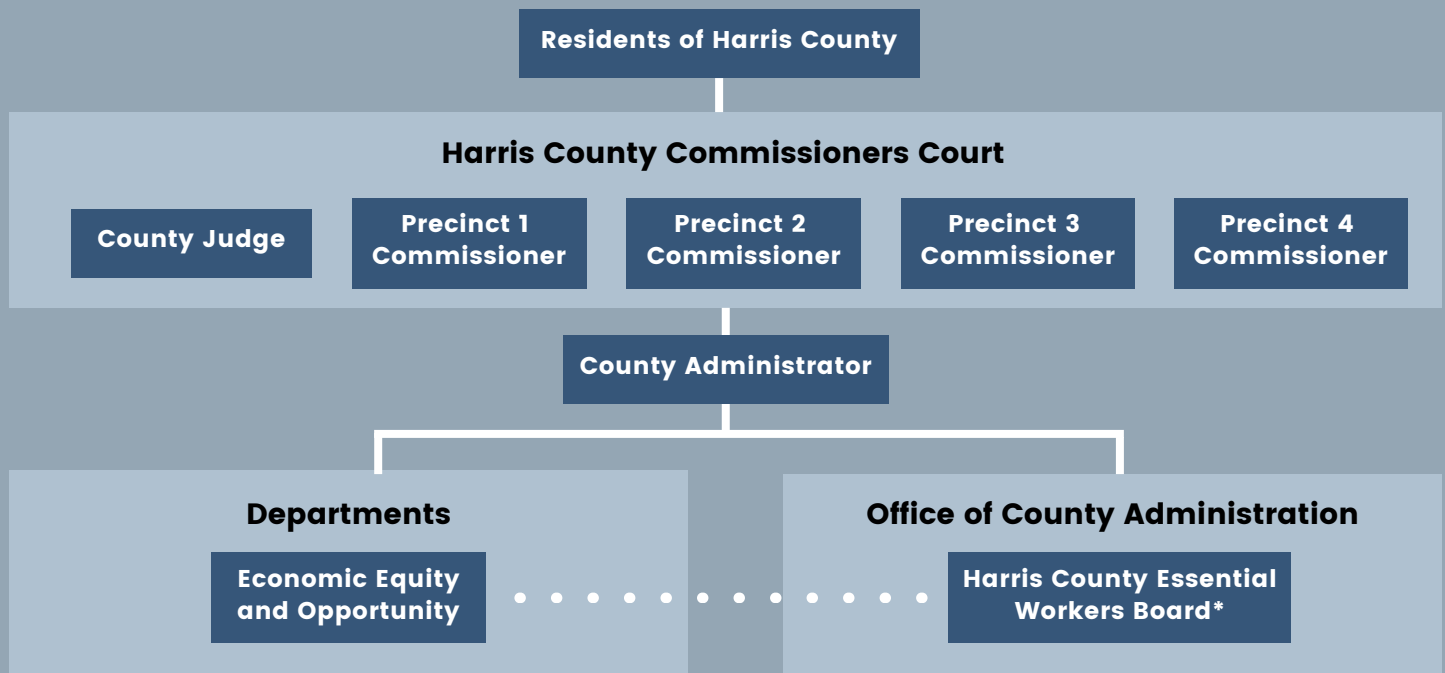
Setting Up the Board

Counties in Texas are each governed by five-member (non-judicial) Commissioners Courts, which consist of a county judge and four county commissioners elected from individual precincts. The Harris County Commissioners Court appoints members of the community into over 400 positions across more than 70 boards and commissions that serve advisory and decision-making functions in the county government.^{xxiv}



Photo credit: Randall Pugh

Harris County Government Structure



*Boards and Commissions is a division of the Office of County Administration. The HCEWB is co-managed by DEEO and the OCA's Boards and Commissions.

The Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity (DEEO), which falls under the Court's Office of County Administration, played an important role in executing the board's design and implementation of elements including procedures, budget, logistics, and support.^{xxv} Advocates from the Always Essential Coalition provided input into the board's design and bylaws.^{xxvi}

The Harris County Judge and Commissioners appointed the initial board members, who reviewed applications and recommended people to fill the remaining board seats.

Various workers who had advocated for the board were appointed as its early members.

Shortly after the creation of the board, airport security officer Mercedes Taylor—an early proponent of the policy who was later elected to the board—shared, “As a frontline worker, I see firsthand the devastation that COVID has brought to my co-workers and their families. I see firsthand what happens when workers are cheated out of their wages, when safety precautions are not followed, or the right ones are not in place. This board will be a great step toward making workplaces safer and more fair.”^{xxvii}

Harris County Essential Workers Board is Unique in Purpose, Breadth, and Membership

Over the past decade, an increasing number of states and cities have created workers' boards across a variety of industries.^{xxviii} Workers' boards—also called workforce standards boards, industry standards boards, wage boards, or sectoral co-regulation—are government entities generally composed of representatives of workers, employers, and the public.^{xxix} Most boards typically focus on a particular occupation, sector, or industry. Although they are no substitute for a union, they increase worker power by providing workers with a formalized role in setting and enforcing labor standards, wage rates, and benefits.^{xxx}

From 2018 to 2021, cities and states passed laws to create the Seattle Domestic Workers Standards Board, Philadelphia Domestic Workers Standards and Implementation Task Force, Nevada Home Care Employment Standards Board, Michigan Nursing Home Workforce Stabilization Council, New York State Farm Laborers Wage Board, Colorado Agricultural Work Advisory Committee, and Detroit Industry Standards Board.^{xxxi} These boards have achieved a variety of policy changes,

catalogued in other reports, including minimum wage increases for nursing home and home care workers as well as reducing the overtime threshold for farm laborers from 60 to 40 hours per week.^{xxxii}

Amidst this increase in workers' boards in the U.S., the Harris County Essential Workers Board is unique in several fundamental aspects of its design. Besides being the first essential workers' board in the country, the board is exceptional in its purpose, breadth, and membership.^{xxxiii} These unique aspects present both opportunities and challenges, as discussed in this report.

Purpose: Provide Feedback and Recommendations and Advise on Programs and Policies

Per the bylaws, "The purpose of the HCEWB is to provide feedback and recommendations to the Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity (DEEO) and other relevant Harris County Departments and, where appropriate, serve in an advisory capacity to Harris County Commissioners Court on County programs and policies that recognize and support Essential Workers..."^{xxxiv}

The bylaws do not specify a process for review of and decision-making on the board's recommendations.

In contrast, many workers' boards have the power to set standards that government officials are compelled to review in a process often designed to favor approval.^{xxxv} As the Center for American Progress explains, "Unlike most commissions and other bodies, their recommendations carry significant legal weight and usually trigger governmental review and action."^{xxxvi} In California, "[wage] board recommendations that receive two-thirds support are automatically incorporated into proposed regulations, which are then subject to public comment and become law unless the government finds 'no substantial evidence to support such recommendations.'"^{xxxvii} Some statutes establishing workers' boards require the government to respond to recommendations within a given time period. For example, the Seattle Domestic Workers Ordinance required the appropriate city council committee to respond to the board's first recommendations within 120 days.^{xxxviii}

Breadth: Nine Essential Industries

While workers' boards generally focus on one particular occupation, sector, or

industry—such as domestic or agricultural work—the HCEWB has a broader, multi-sectoral focus. The board was designed to include at least one member from each of nine essential industries.

These industries are: airport or transportation; construction; domestic work or home care; education or childcare; grocery, convenience, or drug store; healthcare or public health; janitorial; food services, hospitality, or leisure services; and retail.^{xxix}

Membership: All Members Are Current or Former Low-Income Essential Workers

Workers' boards are generally composed of three parties—representatives of workers, employers, and government or the public. In contrast, the HCEWB is made up entirely of low-income essential workers. Per the bylaws, "All HCEWB members must be low-income Essential Workers in Harris County, or have at least 12-months of previous experience as a low-income Essential Worker."^{xi}

Table 1 compares and contrasts the membership structures of ten workers' boards established from 2018–2024 at the city, county, and state levels.

"Workers' boards are generally composed of three parties—representatives of workers, employers, and government or the public. In contrast, the HCEWB is made up entirely of low-income essential workers."

Table 1: Membership Structure of Selected Workers' Boards, 2018–2024

Notes: This table highlights boards analyzed in [Industry Standards Boards Are Delivering Results for Workers, Employers, and Their Communities](#), Table 1, published by the Center for American Progress. All members are voting members unless marked otherwise.

Board	Worker Representatives	Employer Representatives	Government Representatives	Public and Other Representatives
Harris County Essential Workers Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All 13 members must be low-income essential workers, or have at least 12 months of previous experience as a low-income essential worker 	N/A	N/A	N/A
Minnesota Nursing Home Workforce Standards Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 members who represent nursing home workers or worker organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 members who represent nursing home employers or employer organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commissioner of human services or a designee Commissioner of health or a designee Commissioner of labor and industry or a designee 	N/A
California Fast Food Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 representatives of fast food restaurant employees 2 representatives of advocates for fast food restaurant employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 representatives of the fast food restaurant industry 2 representatives of fast food restaurant franchisees or restaurant owners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 nonvoting representative from the Department of Industrial Relations* 1 nonvoting representative from the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 unaffiliated member of the public, who shall be the chairperson of the council
Nevada Home Care Employment Standards Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 representatives of home care employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 representatives of home care employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Director of the Department of Health and Human Services or a designee, who serves as Chair and a nonvoting member* Labor Commissioner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 persons who receive or are representatives of persons who receive services from a home care employee
New York Farm Laborers Wage Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 representative of the New York State AFL-CIO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 representative of the farm bureau 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 member who shall be selected from the general public and designated as chairperson
Seattle Domestic Workers Standards Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 domestic workers or worker organization representatives 2 domestic workers who are not worker organization representatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 hiring entities or their representatives 2 individuals who contract with or hire 1 or more domestic workers 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 community representative

Board	Worker Representatives	Employer Representatives	Government Representatives	Public and Other Representatives
Colorado Direct Care Workforce Stabilization Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 members representing direct care workers or worker organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 members representing direct care employers or employer organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative of the Department of Labor and Employment • 1 representative of the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing • 1 representative of the Department of Public Health and Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 members representing direct care consumers who receive direct care services from direct care workers
Michigan Nursing Home Workforce Stabilization Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 representatives of the nursing home workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 representatives of nursing home employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of the Department of Health and Human Services, or representative • Director of the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, or representative • Director of the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs, or representative • Michigan State Long Term Care Ombudsman, or representative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 representatives of nursing home residents
Detroit Industry Standards Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 members that are workers, or representatives which have been chosen by workers, in the subject industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 members from management or employer associations in the subject industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative appointed from the Mayor's Office • 1 representative appointed from City Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 representative from the public at-large
Durham Workers' Rights Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 2 members who work at one of Durham's largest workplaces • At least 4 members who work in a low-wage industry • 1 or more members from a worker organization, such as a trade union • 1 or more members from unorganized constituencies 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 non-voting liaison from City Council* 	

The table shows that the HCEWB is the only board made up entirely of essential workers. It also indicates that many workers' boards include worker representatives, not workers. Of the ten boards highlighted in the table, only three boards specifically include workers. These three boards are: the HCEWB, the Seattle Domestic Workers Standards Board (DWSB), and the Durham Workers' Rights Commission. The Seattle DWSB includes two "domestic workers who are not worker organization representatives" and four "domestic workers or worker organization representatives."^{xli}

Although these groups sometimes overlap, workers and worker representatives can bring different expertise to a board. Workers bring critical expertise from lived experience including: the impacts of existing policy problems, the challenges and inequities workers face, and the needs of workers. Worker representatives on boards tend to be leaders or staff members from labor unions or worker organizations, and they often bring policy advocacy experience and expertise.

Who is on the Harris County Essential Workers Board?

The HCEWB is designed to comprise 13 members representing frontline workers across nine essential industries in the region. Per its bylaws, five members of the board were appointed by Commissioners Court, while the remaining eight members were recommended by the board's Selection Committee (formed by the initial members) for approval by the Court. Board members serve staggered one- to three-year terms.

Although the membership of the board reflects diversity across multiple dimensions—including gender, race, ethnicity, and industry/sectoral background—they have personal experience with a number of issues commonly affecting low-wage workers across these sectors, including wage theft, extreme heat conditions, discrimination, and economic insecurity. The essential workers who make up the board also represent groups often excluded from positions of power, including Black and Latine workers, people with low incomes, immigrants, people with a native language other than English, and women.

As one board member noted: "[Board members] have that experience of: my check is short, my lights are gonna get cut off—or we don't have enough money to buy groceries, so now we're eating noodles... The essential workers have gone through some of the struggles that the everyday working class has. And we're able to take our experiences and better advocate for ourselves... This board is giving a voice to the workers."^{xlii}

In Their Own Words: Why HCEWB Members Joined the Board

“

“I wanted to become a member because I wanted to be a part of the decision-making behind some of what essential workers would be responsible for doing in the face of adverse things like a pandemic. I wanted to be at the table when people were deciding this is one of the things essential workers will be doing or not doing or exposed to. I didn't want to be one of those people that complained about what we were supposed to be doing instead of finding a solution. Trying to be a part of the change. That's what prompted me to look into the board and become a part of it.”^{xliii}

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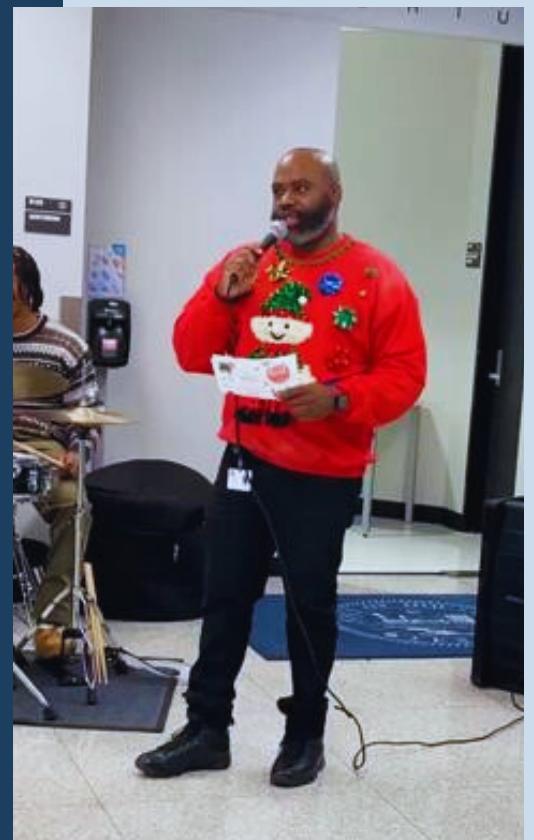
“I would like to address the unfair treatment [of workers]. I would like to see people be treated fairly, like human beings.”^{xliv}

”

“

“Over my career, I have worked in various industries from retail, restaurant, domestic work, call center. I've done a lot of stuff. At the time when I worked several of these jobs, I didn't like how I was being treated... I've been discriminated against... I speak up for those who can't.”^{xlv}

”



HCEWB Board Member Ken Hoskins

The Board's Early Results and Successes

This section highlights five of the board's early results and successes in its first few years of existence. The board:

- Institutionalized worker voice as part of the policy process;
- Informed and advocated for policies;
- Engaged the community, gathering essential workers' insights and providing resources;
- Provided opportunities for growth and leadership to board members; and
- Helped inspire and inform efforts to create more worker-centered boards.

HCEWB Institutionalized Worker Voice as Part of the Policy Process

By creating a standing formal structure within the government, the HCEWB has institutionalized worker voice as part of the policy process. The board's existence creates an expectation for county officials, including commissioners and departments, to socialize any labor-related policy with the board.^{xlvii} This is groundbreaking because it ensures that low-paid essential workers with relevant lived experience can provide feedback on all new labor-related policies in Harris County. "Now that the board exists, anytime that there is something related to labor at the court, [the commissioners] are aware that they need to socialize the policy with the

essential workers' board, just like they need to socialize the policy with labor stakeholders and with other partners in the community."^{xlvii}

HCEWB Informed and Advocated for Policies

To date, board members' policy engagement has focused primarily on two Harris County policy changes: (1) the contractor safety policy; and (2) the minimum wage increase for county employees and contractors.

Board members have engaged, and continue to engage, with the County Commissioners and/or DEEO to inform and shape the Harris County Contractor Safety Record Policy.^{xlviii} This policy, passed in 2023, was designed to protect construction workers by ensuring that Harris County engages prime contractors and subcontractors that prioritize workers' safety and health. While county officials were developing the policy in 2023, the board members with construction work experience met with the county attorney and commissioners to share their experiences and insights.^{xlix} As of June 2025, a new county workgroup is developing updates to strengthen the policy to better protect workers; the DEEO lead will work with board members to revise the policy. As a first step, DEEO has sent a survey to some board members

to collect their feedback on the current policy.ⁱ DEEO noted that the proposed changes are in alignment with Harris County's strategic plan to foster a more inclusive economy through living-wage jobs that ensure worker safety, benefits, and stability.ⁱⁱ

Harris County commissioners voted in March 2025 to raise the minimum wage for county employees and contractors; board members met beforehand with county officials to discuss the policy and then publicly supported it. Board Chair Kara Levy attended Commissioners Court on the day they voted on the policy, and she spoke in support of the policy during the court meeting and at the associated press conference. Levy's testimony spoke to the economic realities of workers who would be impacted by the policy: "Our essential workers, home healthcare aids, grocery clerks, childcare providers, restaurant staff, and more keep this county running. Yet many of them can't afford to live here."ⁱⁱⁱ

As of June 2025, board members were developing new policy recommendations to share with county officials. For example, one of the board members worked with Workers Defense Project on drafting a policy idea—rooted in their experience and coworkers' experiences—to improve enforcement of federal and state workplace health and safety laws. After a few board members work with Workers Defense Project to flesh out and refine the policy idea, they plan to share it with the full board for consideration.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

HCEWB Engaged the Community, Gathering Essential Workers' Insights and Providing Resources

In April 2024, the board held a bilingual town hall for essential workers in Harris County to learn more about the board, meet the board members, access resources, and share challenges they face as essential workers.^{liv}

"The board's existence creates an expectation for county officials, including commissioners and departments, to socialize any labor-related policy with the board. This is groundbreaking because it ensures that low-paid essential workers with relevant lived experience can provide feedback on all new labor-related policies in Harris County."

Over 50 people attended the town hall. Board members asked attendees how the Essential Workers Board could assist them. Attendees used a digital platform to share a variety of needs such as: fair wages and protection from wage theft, good health care, paid leave, more consistent schedules, safe workplaces including heat safety protections, connections to available resources, and improved employer training and awareness of laws.^{lv} After the town hall, the board submitted a transmittal to Commissioners Court summarizing essential workers' feedback provided at the event.^{lvi}

At the town hall, vendors provided educational materials and other resources in English and Spanish, including information about apprenticeship opportunities. Vendors included labor unions and federations, nonprofits, and government representatives. To ensure that essential workers know their options, vendors shared information about local "earn while you learn" apprenticeship programs that offer the potential for low-paid essential workers to transition into a better-paid job without accumulating student loan debt. One attendee commented, "I didn't know that I could go and get this construction trade for free, and then upon completion they would work with me to find a job."^{lvii}

As of February 2025, the board reports having engaged over 400 community members^{lviii} by hosting public meetings and events, participating in events coordinated by others, and connecting with people who reached out to or about the board regarding various topics.^{lix}

HCEWB Provided Opportunities for Growth and Leadership to Board Members

The HCEWB has provided its members with opportunities to grow their knowledge and skills and to exercise leadership. Board members have built skillsets through trainings provided by DEEO and through a variety of experiences, such as assuming board leadership positions and testifying before the Commissioners Court. As one board member noted, "[the Board] has empowered me a lot. With this board, we achieved something that, in a way, was unthinkable—we are the first one in the U.S. This fills me with a lot of satisfaction and motivates me to keep being an active leader inside and outside the board... I've been really empowered by this. It's helped me take leadership in a way that gives me satisfaction. We are leaders who want to do something different for our community."^{lx}

HCEWB Helped Inspire and Inform Efforts to Create New Worker-Centered Boards

New worker-centered boards are being considered in Texas and other states, and the HCEWB has helped inspire and inform these efforts. Various stakeholders leading these initiatives have contacted and referenced the HCEWB.^{lxi} In San Antonio, for example, city council members proposing a worker-centered San Antonio Trades Advisory Board noted that this new board would follow similar initiatives such as the HCEWB.^{lxii}

Challenges, Strategies, and Recommendations

Based on the qualitative interviews and secondary research, this section presents three key challenges—for DEEO and/or board members—from the HCEWB’s early years:

- recruiting board members;
- facilitating and maximizing board members’ participation; and
- providing resources and support for the board to achieve its purpose.

Each subsection discusses the challenge, strategies used to address the challenge, and recommendations for establishing workers’ boards in other places. The recommendations are designed for future all-worker boards, but are relevant for any board that includes workers. The recommendations are intended for policymakers, advocates, members of future boards, and government staff members supporting boards.

Recruiting Board Members

In setting up the board, recruitment was one of the greatest challenges to the DEEO and the early board members. Recruitment continues to be a challenge. This section discusses: the process to fill the board, difficulty recruiting applicants, difficulty fulfilling industry representation requirements, worker organizations’ and unions’ critical role in recruiting members, and recommendations for future boards.

The Process to Fill the Board Took 1.5 Years

Filling the board was designed to be a multi-step process—first, the Harris County Judge and the four Commissioners would each appoint one board member, and then these initial five members would review applications

and recommend eight people to be appointed as the remaining board members, to be approved by the Commissioners Court. The Judge and three Commissioners appointed the first four members in May 2022. One Commissioner did not appoint a board member, so that board seat was vacant until a new Commissioner took office and filled the vacancy in October 2023. Therefore, it took 1.5 years to complete the process of filling the board, which was much longer than expected.

Recruiting Applicants Required Time, Effort, and Personalized Outreach

It took time, effort, and a variety of approaches to recruit members for this new board—resulting in delays. As Results for America and Trailhead Strategies

explained, “As the concept was new, it took time to ensure individuals understood what [the board] was and how they could engage. This required many targeted outreach activities, individual conversations and follow up. While information was available online, recruiting for this type of entity is very much a personalized process that requires building trust, empowering people, and demonstrating that their voice is valued.”^{lxiii} Some applicants submitted incomplete applications with key information missing.^{lxiv} With a small initial applicant pool, the early board members chose to extend the deadline, reopen the application, and conduct personalized outreach to ensure they had a variety of candidates and could select a board that truly represented the community.^{lxv}

One of the challenges was recruiting frontline workers, not managers, to fulfill the vision of a board truly made up of essential workers with low incomes.^{lxvi} As one interviewee noted, “Essential workers are blue-collar workers; those in management were not the target population... So a lot of people in management positions were applying, but that was not the target population. We truly wanted blue-collar workers. A challenge was thus to get actual first-line, blue-collar workers rather than people in management positions.”^{lxvii}

Industry Representation Requirements Were Difficult to Fulfill

The board is required to have at least one member from each of nine essential industries, which makes it more

representative of these industries but makes it harder to fill the board.

These nine industries are: airport/transportation, construction, domestic work/home care, education/childcare, grocery/convenience/drug store, healthcare/public health, janitorial, food services/hospitality/leisure services, and retail. The board received more applications from some industries than others. It took longer to find a board member to represent the healthcare industry, for example.^{lxix} By the end of 2023, the board had four members from the construction industry but no members from the food services/hospitality/leisure services or retail industries.

Worker Organizations and Unions Helped with Recruitment

Worker organizations and unions—particularly those that advocated for the creation of the board—have played a critical role in recruiting potential members. Some of the worker leaders who urged the Harris County Commissioners to create the board, such as Candido Batiz of Workers Defense Project and Mercedes Taylor of SEIU, subsequently were appointed to the board. As of June 2025, at least six of the Board’s ten current members are members of Workers Defense Project, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), or the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT).

Even before recruiting these board members, worker organizations and unions provided opportunities for them to develop crucial skills in leadership, organizing, and advocacy. Board Chair Kara Levy previously was a domestic worker leader and completed a fellowship in organizing with We Dream in Black, an initiative of the National Domestic Workers Alliance.^{lxx} A part of Levy's fellowship involved organizing meetings that helped to lead to the creation of the board, after which she was appointed to serve as one of the

Board's initial five members.^{lxxi} After working in construction, board Vice Chair Rixi Castillo became a union organizer with the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades and has since worked in organizing and advocacy.^{lxxii} For board member Maynor Álvarez, becoming involved with Workers Defense Project and taking their courses and workshops developed his courage to stand up for his rights, including by sharing his story before the Commissioners multiple times.

Recommendations for All-Worker Boards

- When determining a board's size and membership eligibility requirements, consider possible tradeoffs. A larger board and more specific eligibility requirements could have benefits in diverse representation but could make it take longer to recruit applicants meeting those requirements and successfully fill the board.
- The larger the board, and the broader the scope, the longer it may take to fill the entirety of the board's seats, so design board structures that are able to act while still conducting recruitment.
- Budget time and resources for recruitment, including a variety of outreach activities and personalized outreach.
- Consider adopting a multi-pronged publicity strategy (e.g., social media, press coverage, and in-person engagement) for recruitment.
- Partner with labor unions, worker organizations, and other organizations to recruit applicants.
- Since appointments are impermanent and new board members will be needed, build ongoing recruitment efforts into the board's activities.

Facilitating and Maximizing Board Members' Participation

All boards should be designed to facilitate and maximize members' participation. From the beginning, DEEO has taken many critical steps to foresee and address potential barriers to members' participation in the HCEWB. These steps include stipends, an accessible meeting time and format, and technology and language access. However, the board has experienced participation challenges and continues to work to address them.

Inherent Constraints of Low-Paid Work Can Lead to Lower Than Ideal Participation

A board made up of low-paid workers must be designed carefully to facilitate and maximize members' participation. In many low-paid jobs, work schedules are unpredictable and inflexible,^{lxxiii} which present challenges to consistent participation in board activities. At large retail and food-service firms in the U.S., for example, two-thirds of workers receive less than two weeks' notice of their work schedule, and 70 percent experience last-minute schedule changes.^{lxxiv} Multiple HCEWB members report having been required to stay at their job unexpectedly to work additional

shifts, such as when a storm arose.^{lxxv} Low-paid workers also have much less access to paid time off work than high-paid workers.^{lxxvi}

One interviewee noted that in contrast to the HCEWB, various other Harris County boards and commissions have many members with higher-paying jobs with flexible hours, and some members are retired.^{lxxvii}

The HCEWB's elected leaders—the Executive Committee—have discussed participation challenges with board members and asked them for greater participation both during and outside of board meetings. One Executive Committee member said that board membership takes quite a bit of time, and members may not have known the extent of the time commitment, but participation is crucial. They noted, “We have the ability to create change for essential workers in Harris County. That work can't be done without participation.”

Besides participating actively in board meetings at least once every other month, significant engagement is expected from members between meetings. For example, members are asked to: attend events, help organize

“We have the ability to create change for essential workers in Harris County. That work can't be done without participation.”

events such as the town hall, review documents such as new member applications, respond promptly to emails and text messages, take on roles such as managing the board's social media accounts, and consider participating in a variety of additional engagements such as Commissioners Court meetings or sessions with county officials to provide feedback on a particular policy.

Stipends Facilitate Participation

Membership on county boards and commissions is often uncompensated, but county officials recognized the necessity of stipends for HCEWB members. As one interviewee explained, “The very essence of the idea of gathering essential workers was—we want actual people who are directly impacted, and in doing so, we can't ask them to donate their time. People cannot do or should not be told to do so.”^{lxviii}

DEEO recommended implementing stipends for HCEWB members, and in July 2022, the Commissioners Court approved a policy providing HCEWB members with a stipend of \$100 per meeting of the full board.^{lxxix} Members are not compensated for board work outside of meetings. The policy's purpose is “to ensure that Harris County Essential Workers Board members receive a stipend to lessen the cost burden for those who experience barriers, such as LMI (Low to Moderate Income) essential workers, to participate and to value the community for their wisdom, lives, and professional experiences.” The policy notes that “the national best practice of compensating

community members as subject matter experts has increasingly become more prevalent in government policies,” and “stipends have been implemented in other jurisdictions for boards that heavily rely on the input and guidance of low-income and/or historically marginalized residents.”

Indeed, workers' boards in other jurisdictions have lost members who could not afford to do unpaid work. In Seattle, the Domestic Workers Standards Board recommended that the city begin to provide compensation to domestic workers for time spent working with the board.^{lxxx} They noted, “We have already lost valuable board members, all of them domestic workers, who cannot take the unpaid time to commit to this work. This is a loss not only for the board but for the goals of the [Domestic Worker Organization].”^{lxxxi}

Evening Meeting Time and Hybrid Format Facilitate Participation

HCEWB board meetings are typically held in the evening every other month and are typically hybrid, allowing members to participate either in person or virtually. Most members usually choose to participate virtually. With the virtual participation option, members do not have to spend time and money commuting to and from the meeting. Despite the benefits of allowing remote participation, multiple board members noted that it can reduce connection and engagement during the meeting. The board strives to ensure that in-person meetings or activities take place at least once every six months.

Technology and Language Access Facilitate Participation

Harris County provided a mobile hotspot and iPad for each board member to ensure they were equipped to participate in meetings remotely, review materials, and correspond by email.^{lxxxii}

DEEO ensures language access so that all board members, including members whose primary language is Spanish, can participate fully. Simultaneous

interpretation (which required upgrading Zoom accounts) is provided at board meetings, trainings, and events. All materials are translated into Spanish—including the board’s bylaws, meeting agendas, annual reports, and Harris County policies for review. The board often communicates between meetings on WhatsApp, a cross-platform messaging service, which translates text from one language to another as needed.

Recommendations for All-Worker Boards

- In the board’s bylaws, clearly define board member responsibilities.
- Provide stipends to board members. Ideally, stipends would cover all time spent on board activities.
- Implement policies to maximize meeting accessibility (with respect to meeting time and format, for example) and technology and language access.
- As part of the board member selection process, interview candidates before recommending them for appointment. Interviews provide an opportunity for the interviewer to learn more about the prospective board member and their perspectives (including the worker issues they prioritize); ensure the prospective member understands the board member experience, time commitment, and expectations for participation; and answer questions.
- Budget funding—and staff time from the relevant government department—to facilitate these recommendations.

Providing Resources and Support for the Board to Achieve Its Purpose

Depending on their purpose and membership, among other factors, boards need varying amounts of resources and support. The purpose of the HCEWB “is to provide feedback and recommendations to the Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity (DEEO) and other relevant Harris County Departments and, where appropriate, serve in an advisory capacity to Harris County Commissioners Court on County programs and policies that recognize and support Essential Workers...”^{lxxxiii} For the HCEWB, given the board’s purpose and membership—as described below—a high level of resources and support is needed for the board to fully achieve its purpose.

As discussed earlier in this report, the HCEWB’s entirely worker-led structure distinguishes it from workers’ boards models that include some mix of employer, government, and union representation. In addition to ensuring that the board “not be used to promote industry or employer interests that are inconsistent with the rights of Essential Workers” (as stated in its bylaws), policy advisors involved in the drafting of the bylaws noted that this design was intended to support a truly worker-driven ethos, “where [workers] are coming up with the ideas and [the county] is just supporting.”^{lxxxiv}

This section describes specific challenges and lessons learned with respect to the unique structure of the HCEWB. These reflections underscore the

importance of providing a robust range of support and resources to set up similar all-worker initiatives for success.

Board Membership and Policy Recommendation Development Are New to Most Board Members

Given the board’s membership and policy mandate, significant challenges include:

1. For most HCEWB members, this experience is their first time serving on a board, so there is a lot to learn. In interviews, board members explained that they are figuring things out as they go, including how to achieve the results they want. All of this learning requires time and patience. As one interviewee noted, “Working the kinks out for something brand new like this has required a lot of patience on everyone’s part.”^{lxxxv}

As a board member shared, “None of the board members have been on anything like this [board], so we’re figuring things out as we go. Sometimes it’s been like, ‘You’re expecting this result, but I have no idea how to get to that result’... We all came onto the board with the idea of bettering policy for workers. But what does that look like? Every day we’re learning something new.”^{lxxxvi}

2. The board is expected to engage with county officials on policy, including offering recommendations, but developing policy recommendations is new to most board members. HCEWB members are experts who bring lived

As a board member shared, “When you come in as a worker, you were not involved in politics and the ins and outs of the city council. So, the education part is important.”

experience as essential workers. They know the struggles that essential workers face, they know what needs to change for workers, and why, and they bring great enthusiasm and energy for this work. However, upon joining the board, most members are not yet very familiar with how to develop policy recommendations, how policy is created and passed in Harris County, and which issues can be addressed at the county government level. Resources and support are needed for the board members to translate their lived experience and energy into policy recommendations and advance them.

As a board member shared, “When you come in as a worker, you were not involved in politics and the ins and outs of the city council. So, the education part is important.”^{lxxxvii}

One interviewee thought that the “biggest hurdle” the board members face is learning how county government works and how policy is created and passed. The interviewee shared, “These [board members] are essential workers who know the issues firsthand and they know what their demands are, but they’re not necessarily familiar with how government works and how policy

works... So that’s been a learning curve for this board specifically.”^{lxxxviii} The interviewee suggested this challenge is why, so far, the board has provided county officials with feedback on existing or proposed policies but—despite having a variety of ideas for policy improvements—has not yet shared a policy proposal of their own. The interviewee contrasted the Harris County Public Defender’s Office Board with the HCEWB, noting that the Public Defender’s Office Board “is filled with lawyers” who have a background in how government works and often have experience with how official meetings are conducted and other procedures useful for board membership.^{lxxxix}

DEEO Supports the Board

DEEO prepared extensively to create the HCEWB and now supports and oversees it. DEEO began in 2020—as a newly-created department—by researching best practices for supporting local government advisory boards and considering how to best design, staff, and launch an essential workers’ board.^{xc} After standing up the board, DEEO provided (and continues to provide) capacity building and training in key areas such as policy analysis and how policies are passed in Harris County.^{xcj}

At least one DEEO staff member attends every board meeting and handles the logistics including the meeting space, virtual meeting platform, and interpreter. DEEO is also available to support the board in drafting formal policy recommendations in “transmittals,” which are documents for consideration by the Commissioners Court.^{xcii} Additionally, DEEO helps to coordinate with other departments within the Harris County government to set up policy briefing sessions with the board.

DEEO Navigates the “Balancing Act” of Supporting the Board While Members Lead

A delicate balance for DEEO is fulfilling the responsibility to “oversee and facilitate the activities of the HCEWB”^{xciii} while fostering the board members’ ownership and leadership. As one interviewee explained, since the board is intended to be worker-driven, “The balancing act is not forcing it, and letting them lead, while also being there to support them.”^{xciv}

The previous Results for America case study highlighted DEEO’s intentionality in honoring the board’s ownership and independence: “The board exists because of them,” shared Igbani [DEEO]. “We wanted them to feel it was theirs, not ours. This meant thinking carefully about centering the goals of the board and [sic] as well as things like what colors were used on slides, trying hard to differentiate board materials from those of DEEO, so it truly felt different.”^{xcv}

Additional Resources and Support Would Help Similar Boards Achieve Their Purpose

For future boards, HCEWB members suggested additional trainings and resources such as a road map to offer more guidance on what to do, how to do it, and how to achieve results. Members suggested that it would be useful to learn from an experienced board—ideas included mentorship and coaching (even just for the new board’s leadership) and observing an experienced board’s meetings to see how they flow, what they do, and what protocols they use.

Recommendations for All-Worker Boards

To set all-worker boards up for success in achieving their goals:

- For all-worker boards that are expected to provide policy recommendations, consider structuring the board to include a non-voting member—who is a worker representative or government representative—with expertise in policy design. Various workers’ boards and commissions include non-voting members who are government officials. Examples include the California Fast Food Council, Nevada Home Care Employment Standards Board, and the Durham Workers’ Rights Commission. (See Table 1.)

- Provide staff from the relevant government department(s) for training, administrative, operations, logistical, policy, and other support. Train government staff in preparation for navigating the balancing act of supporting the board and providing technical assistance while fostering board members' ownership and leadership.
- During onboarding and on an ongoing basis as needs arise, provide board members with trainings for skill- and knowledge-building (with trainers from both within and outside government) and resources—such as a road map and templates—to support the board in understanding and fulfilling its mandate, including brainstorming, setting, and achieving goals. (As an example, a recent Seattle DWSB Training covers some of these topics^{xvii}).
 - Identify the skills and knowledge board members will likely need to achieve the board's purpose, compare them to the skills and knowledge they already have, and provide the training needed.
 - Depending on the board's purpose, training could include: policy design, policy analysis, policy advocacy, advancing equity, common board procedures, public speaking, leadership development, facilitation, and negotiation. If board members' schedules allow, consider options such as bootcamps, retreats, or workshops that provide an opportunity to step back from routine business and focus on training and development.
- Provide training for the board's leaders in board leadership best practices and fulfilling their unique roles and responsibilities.
- Ensure that the board has the opportunity to learn from a similar but experienced board, perhaps through training, mentorship, coaching, and observing an experienced board's meetings.
- Allow significant time for a new all-worker board to issue policy recommendations.
- Budget funding to facilitate the above recommendations.

Conclusion

Essential workers play vital roles in supporting the health, safety, and well-being of their communities, both in and out of times of crisis. Although the HCEWB was created in response to the acute needs of essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it serves a broader purpose for workers and their communities in Harris County. In recent years, essential workers in Harris County have also been at the frontlines of disaster relief in response to flooding, hurricanes, and other severe weather-related events. As the frequency and severity of natural disasters continue to increase throughout the region, so too will the risks to essential workers' safety and working conditions—underscoring the importance of entities like HCEWB in ensuring that workers have a say in shaping the policies that impact their livelihoods.

Furthermore, the HCEWB story more broadly attests to the potential for innovative, pro-worker policymaking when coalitions of allies at the local and national levels work collaboratively to achieve common goals. Creating the board was just the first step, however—ongoing strategy support and resources are crucial to address challenges that arise and set up the board for success and longevity. As policies like the HCEWB inspire pro-worker policy interventions in

other parts of the country that enable more opportunities for workers to lead, states and localities will continue to play an important role in building worker power and in turn, the broader project of democracy-building as a whole.

Endnotes

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