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# DRIVE FOCUS GROUP REPORT

PREPARED BY THE CENTRAL VALLEY HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE AT FRESNO STATE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH FRESNO BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES



Central Valley Health  
Policy Institute

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## Introduction

The D.R.I.V.E. Initiative (*Developing the Region's Inclusive and Vibrant Economy*) is a 10-year investment plan being developed in the greater Fresno region to create a local economy that is “inclusive, vibrant and sustainable” for residents. To aid in this process, DRIVE and its partners designed a research project to understand residents’ perceptions and needs in this new economy. Through focus groups and surveys, the Central Valley Health Policy Institute (CVHPI) collected data to understand the impact of race/ethnicity in the economy, the types of jobs residents think would improve the economy, as well as job training and preparation residents believe is required for those jobs, and how residents engaged with decision-making bodies based on neighborhood.

## Methods

CVHPI and Fresno Building Healthy Communities (BHC) outreached the following populations to participate in focus groups: African American, Hmong, and Latino residents, as well as residents in Northwest, Southwest and Southeast Fresno, as well as the unincorporated community of Calwa, unemployed adults and adults with higher education, and business owners and stakeholders in Fresno’s Chinatown. During August and September 2019, 10 focus groups were held with 116 participants in the greater Fresno region. Focus groups were conducted in English, Hmong and Spanish, and took place in multiple Fresno locations and neighborhoods, including schools and libraries. On average, the focus groups lasted approximately two hours and all participants were provided with \$15 gift cards as compensation. At the end of each focus group, participants were asked to complete a brief survey that focused on demographic information, such as race/ethnicity, gender, zip code, along with brief open-ended questions about how residents receive local information and their current employment situation.

CVHPI, with feedback from DRIVE partners, developed a focus group guide based on questions formed around the following concepts: Race/Ethnicity, Economy, Human Capital and Neighborhood Engagement (See Appendix A for full interview guide).

## Main Findings

### The Effect of Racism and Discrimination on Economic Prospects

Most participants were not surprised when presented with numbers and graphs illustrating the racial/ethnic disparities in household income and employment rates. In the African American focus group, participants stated that racism does play a role in the racial/ethnic disparities in household income and other economic outcomes. Within the Latino and Spanish-speaking groups, the answers of participants ranged from some participants believing that as long as one works hard, they can get ahead to others stating that Latinos experience discrimination and are marginalized but mainly attributed it to lack of education and documentation/immigration status. At times, the discussion about racism shifted to issues about classism and ageism. However, they were very keen to the fact that economic opportunities in their neighborhood and for their groups were different from those opportunities afforded to the white residents of Fresno.

### *Place Investment as Manifestation of Racism and Discrimination in Economy*

Participants emphasized the inadequate level of investment and development in South and Southwest Fresno, particularly the lack of businesses and projects that promote health and social cohesion. A key example used to illustrate this phenomenon during the discussion was the lack of new schools and grocery stores in these areas. Participants explained that it took more than 40 years to get a junior high school in Southwest Fresno and that getting a Food Maxx in the area took 35 years. During the Unemployed focus group, participants expressed their frustrations with corporations that come into Southwest Fresno, but do not invest in the local community or even hire employees that reside in the area.

Participants in the African-American focus group also expressed concerns about gentrification in Downtown and Southwest Fresno. Specifically, they explained that the Fulton Street revitalization project resulted in the displacement of poor people by "yuppies." Participants pointed out that money is taken from Southwest Fresno and invested uptown, resulting in fewer opportunities for Southwest Fresno residents. One participant discussed the decrease of locally owned businesses in Southwest Fresno and said that the only place that has hired some local residents from the area is Food Maxx.

Participants stated that they would like to see less liquor stores and dirty industries and more grocery stores, community centers, well-maintained parks, and shopping centers like Riverpark in their communities, as these would facilitate healthy living and provide jobs. They also suggested that some sites, such as community centers and libraries should remain open after 5 p.m. to allow greater access for the community and provide more opportunities for employment.

### *Lack of Diversity within Positions of Power and Managerial Positions*

#### *African American Representation and Opportunities in Fresno*

During the African American focus group, participants expressed that they experienced being judged based on the color of their skin rather than their background or education level. Since they are not given an equal opportunity, regardless of qualifications or educational background, they have to work even harder to be recognized. One participant, an African American woman, said she experiences this all of the time; people put her in a category based on the color of her skin and assume she is not a physician. She explained how students did not want to come to a medical assistant course she taught because she was an African American woman. Another woman in the African American focus group, who had previously worked in the medical field, shared how some patients did not want her caring for them, and that she had felt unsafe when a man in a truck drove past the clinic she worked at with a confederate flag flying from the tailgate. Participants in the African American focus group noted the lack of African American employees at the VA hospital recently built in Southwest Fresno.

Residents in the African American focus group also discussed the lack of African Americans in decision-making positions and elected leadership. One participant expressed what he saw as a missed opportunity to elect someone into City Council who grew up in Southwest Fresno and is knowledgeable about District 3 due to residents believing that their vote does not count. The participants feel they are not connected to those in power; elected officials need to do their job and represent and help them.

## Business Ownership and Development

Participants in the African American focus group discussed how they would like opportunities and support for entrepreneurship so that they can own businesses within their own communities. It was stated that currently there are almost no businesses around Southwest Fresno that are owned by African Americans, and it was further explained that discrimination and a lack of local banks in Southwest Fresno are barriers to obtaining loans. Another participant expressed that entrepreneurship is a way for African Americans to be able to accumulate wealth through generations.

## Support and Funding Opportunities for African-American Led Organizations and Initiatives

During the African American focus group, participants stated that there was a lack of funding in low-income, minority communities, specifically in African-American led organizations and initiatives. When asked about existing organizations or groups that help empower their respective neighborhoods, participants stated that foundations such as The California Endowment do not invest in African-American organizations. Participants explained that leadership opportunities should be accessible for African Americans, especially for those initiatives intended to address racial inequities in the African American community. Participants expressed that foundations ("independent funders") like The California Endowment do not hire African Americans. Another key example of inadequate African American representation in philanthropic initiatives was the Fresno County Preterm Birth Initiative; participants shared that there was a lack of African American staff and that partnerships were not made with African American led organizations. Thus, while the Preterm Birth Initiative was meant to focus on Southwest Fresno and African American families, participants believed that it fell short of this goal.

## *Barriers to Securing Adequate Jobs*

### The Role of Nepotism and Lack of Quality Jobs

A lack of employment opportunities was a major concern for participants across multiple focus groups. In the Northwest focus groups, participants emphasized the role of nepotism in securing good jobs; they felt that many jobs are unattainable unless you have personal connections. In fact, several participants expressed that job applications are a "facade", as the general public is not genuinely considered for the job since it will most likely be given to someone the employer already knows, regardless of which candidate is most qualified.

Calwa focus group attendees expressed similar sentiments; they have seen this phenomenon take place in packing houses, construction jobs, and farming work. One participant mentioned that his employer would ask for his recommendations when looking to hire new workers. This system makes it difficult for people to gain entry into the workforce, and many applicants never hear back from jobs they applied to.

Participants were also concerned about the quality of jobs available. In the Unemployed focus group, participants mentioned that the only types of jobs most people have access to are survival jobs (e.g., 99 cent store, Little Caesars). Also, while the addition of the Amazon distribution center provided local jobs, one participant expressed concerns that those jobs will be replaced by automation within the next decade.

### Lack of Transportation

Participants in the Northwest Fresno focus group mentioned that transportation is a huge issue in this area of Fresno. Many participants agreed that Northwest Fresno is disconnected from the rest of the

city. The lack of transportation has affected them negatively in many aspects, especially when it comes to applying for jobs. Some participants mentioned that they are aware of the jobs brought by Amazon and they would like to apply, but they cannot travel to the warehouse because there is no public transportation that runs early or late enough.

The lack of transportation also creates complications for parents, who mentioned that they sometimes have to choose between using their transportation for work or for taking their children to school. Participants said that city planning in Northwest Fresno needs to be reassessed by local representatives, as the region is growing rapidly.

### Deselection from the Workforce: People of Color Anticipate Racism in the Local Economy

A common theme across multiple focus groups was that racism plays a major role in hindering people of color from striving for better jobs. This problem begins to develop early on in unsupportive schools and neighborhoods. Through racist interactions with school faculty, students internalize biases against their own racial/ethnic groups. For example, participants pointed out that Latino students experience bullying and other trauma related to their ethnic identity in the school system. This damages students' self-esteem, leaving them to believe that their ethnic identity disqualifies them from being successful in high skilled jobs. Attendees explained that when joining the workforce, many people attempt to market themselves as Caucasian in order to secure a higher paying job with better benefits. During the African American focus group, it was stated that not only can skin color be a barrier but one's name can also be a barrier to getting a job. One participant stated that her mother purposely gave her a white-sounding name to avoid her from being deselected for a job based on the name on her application alone.

This is due in part to a deselection process that eliminates minority applicants from consideration for employment. In systematic deselection, candidates from the community are deselected through one evaluation after the other until no community candidates are eligible. During the Southwest focus group, participants discussed how hiring for the Transformative Climate Community jobs related to the development of high-speed rail became impossible for residents in Southwest Fresno to obtain after the hiring process went through a series of background checks, drug tests, and math tests, which seemed to systematically eliminate candidates from the community.

During the Latina/o focus group, one participant stated that the head/boss of businesses and companies in Fresno are white males. In contrast, Latinos have very poor paying jobs. One participant in the Unemployed/Adults with higher education focus group mentioned that the small number of people of color who have secured positions of power are complacent and do not use their power to pave a path for the rest of the community.

Language also poses a significant barrier for people of color seeking better jobs. In the Spanish-speaking and Hmong focus groups, participants expressed that language barriers inhibit job searches, job acquisition, and job training.

Employment opportunities are also limited by immigration status/documentation, as undocumented residents struggle to find jobs that they qualify for, especially jobs that pay well and offer benefits. Participants in the Calwa and Southeast focus groups mentioned that undocumented workers are often paid less than minimum wage.

## Recommendations

### Economy

#### Increased Availability of High-Skill Jobs for Youth Pursuing Higher Education/Vocational Training

When asked about what kind of jobs they would like to see for their children/youth in the community, attendees mainly expressed that they hoped to see more high-skilled jobs that require higher education (e.g., tech, teaching, law, health professions, engineering) or advanced vocational training (agriculture-related, welding).

In the Northwest focus group, participants mentioned that there should be more emphasis placed on vocational training. One participant stated that they knew of an employer who was searching for a welder, but was unable to find one for weeks. They further mentioned that college does not always do a good job of teaching students marketable skills.

In the African American and Unemployed/Some Higher Education focus group, participants emphasized the importance of encouraging entrepreneurship, as it provides greater opportunities for financial growth. In particular, one participant from the Unemployed/Some Higher Education focus group expressed her frustration with doing manual labor for low pay while her employer earns much more while doing much less work. Participants suggested microloan programs as a source of funding to inspire entrepreneurship.

#### Jobs that are Fair and in the Community

When asked about what kind of jobs they would like to have access to, participants stated that they want well-paying jobs that offer benefits, retirement plans, and health coverage. For Latino immigrants in Calwa, jobs with a steady, year-round income are hard to come by. Many residents work seasonal agricultural jobs, meaning that they experience income volatility during some parts of the year. Moreover, these jobs do not come with benefits and health concerns can pose a significant burden because workers cannot afford to miss a day of work.

Ultimately, participants emphasized that businesses/employers need to be more just about developing jobs. In the Northwest focus groups, participants expressed that many businesses do not offer full-time jobs because employers do not want to provide benefits. Currently, many participants have no choice but to take jobs (e.g., in pack houses, as farmworkers, etc.) that require them to work long hours for low wages, no benefits, and no opportunities for promotions or professional growth.

A participant in the African American focus group expressed that they want and need jobs with good benefits; however, there are few jobs like this in Southwest Fresno. A participant shared that working at the Darling Plant could provide some access to a job with good benefits, if people from the community were hired, but that it came at the expense of their health, as they had to deal with the negative environmental and health impacts such an industry brings when embedded inside of a community. It was also mentioned that these factory jobs are not going to local residents, making jobs with good benefits even more limited in Southwest Fresno.

Parents in the Latina/o focus group expressed that they would like jobs through the schools that their children attend in the community. They stated that they could work for a few hours as security and watching over the students, where they could even help stop bullying in schools. Some participants also mentioned that they would like to see more jobs for limited English speakers or people with limited skills.

### Investment in More Socially Responsible Businesses

Participants discussed that businesses can be more socially responsible in two ways: by hiring local residents and doing their part to enrich the community and keep neighborhoods clean. Across multiple focus groups, participants stated that though many businesses operate in their areas, very few offer good jobs to the people who lives in those areas. For example, at the Unemployed/Some Higher Education focus group, a participant mentioned that Bitwise hires employees almost exclusively from out of the area. Similarly, participants from the Calwa focus group said that Amazon warehouse and factory jobs have not been going to local residents; though the warehouse was initially marketed as a job-creating opportunity for the region, very few community members who applied were offered a position. Participants shared that these jobs also do not pay well, and only those in higher positions are earning good wages. Residents feel that since these businesses benefit from the local community, they should also provide employment opportunities for residents.

Participants also shared concerns about the role some local businesses play in polluting the air and creating unhealthy living conditions for residents, as previously discussed in this report. Looking forward, residents stated that they are hoping to see cleaner businesses that will not harm community health. Overall, participants expressed interest in businesses other than “dirty” industries that could help the local community thrive and provide jobs, such as restaurants or other amenity-based businesses.

### Elements of a Good Economy: Job and Housing Security, and Reinvestment in Local Community

Participants across the African American, Southwest, and Southeast focus groups stated that they would like an increase in support and opportunities to start their own businesses and more investment in entrepreneurship. They would like to see more jobs where people can be hired from and give back to their communities, such as jobs for the elderly through community centers where they can provide a service or teach a skill to the younger residents.

Participants in the Latina/o focus group expressed concern about the expensive and rising rent costs. One participant stated that the apartments in Downtown are expensive and not accessible to local residents because the rent is too high. Participants from other focus groups also expressed that they would like more affordable housing. Participants also discussed the need for investment in infrastructure that supports healthy communities such as adequate and safe sidewalks, streets, and parks. In the Calwa focus group, residents stated the need for investment in basic infrastructure such as traffic lights, street lights, and crosswalks to assure community's safety, especially around schools.

### Democratic Participatory Budgeting Process

Participants in the unemployed focus groups expressed that in Fresno, industries that can generate a large amounts of taxes should be encouraged and supported, especially industries formed by local entrepreneurs. Participants expressed that the city needs to allow and establish a democratic participatory budgeting process to decide where and how tax monies are spent. Participants mentioned



that there needs to be advocacy and support for a community impact fund from taxes to utilize these monies to create the best economic development for the community and that during this process, there needs to be clarity and specificity about how the money will be invested in the community to establish accountability to local folks. According to participants, adopting this model would be extremely beneficial to all communities as it is very inclusive, and that participation should not be based on documentation/immigration status.

## Human Capital

### *Adequate Job Training for “Promising Jobs” and “Other Jobs”*

Participants expressed the need for quality and in-depth job training for “promising jobs” and “other jobs” such as customer service, the restaurant industry, and agriculture. It is preferred that the job training be completed early on in the hiring process before the first day of work. Participants in the Southeast focus group discussed the need for thorough training for all employees, regardless of education level and immigration status, that encompass work safety, discrimination, and harassment.

Many agreed that current trainings are brief and basic and in some instances there is no training at all. As a result, risk of injury is very high. A participant shared that in the restaurant where she worked, she did not receive training, and she had an accident where she burned her hand. It was also shared that some job trainings are provided through computers, which is challenging to complete for individuals who do not have computer skills or access to a computer or the internet. Participants in Calwa added that in a majority of cases, once hired they are told that they will learn as they work. A participant also mentioned that agriculture employees do receive basic training.

### *Preparation for Good Jobs/High Skilled Jobs*

#### *The Role of Schools and Early Education in Preparing Students*

Participants in several focus groups emphasized the key role schools play in not only preparing students to enter the workforce, but also giving them the skills needed to be financially responsible adults. Moreover, the education pipeline and investments in early education need to be strengthened by investing in good quality schools and teachers. It was noted that from an early age, children should receive comprehensive support (including emotional support) to prepare them for good jobs. Participants also stated that higher education should be made more accessible and affordable.

In the Northwest focus group, participants pointed out that schools, such as Duncan High School, are lacking programs that allow students to develop marketable and versatile skills. Generally, schools like Duncan High School push students to pursue higher education rather than giving them the skills needed to enter the workforce. They expressed that there needs to be a balance between pushing students towards professional career pathways and vocational training.

Northwest Fresno focus group participants also mentioned that there needs to be a better way for high school students to learn about job opportunities in Fresno (e.g., vocational jobs, entry-level jobs, jobs requiring 4-year degrees, etc.). They also mentioned that youth often do not have clarity on what career path to pursue because they do not know what kind of jobs exist in this area. It was noted that there

should be opportunities for students to explore professional careers and receive support for professional development early on in their education.

### Education Inequalities: Race/Ethnicity, Place and Language Access

Participants discussed that children fall behind in school for two primary reasons: discrimination due to race/ethnicity and lack of language proficiency. Participants in the African American focus group noted that there are few schools in Southwest Fresno, in black neighborhoods, forcing many students to travel outside of their communities to attend school. The Hmong focus group echoed this idea, that schools are segregated by race/ethnicity, and that not all schools are equal in quality. Participants in Southeast also noted that schools in north Fresno, and Clovis, two areas that are more affluent and with a higher population of white residents, seem to have more funding and resources allocated to them. Participants shared that the money that does come to the south Fresno schools needs to be spent on black and Latino students, on classes that improve their proficiency in English, math and science to prepare south Fresno students for good, high-skilled jobs. Business owners in downtown Chinatown also noted that there are systemic issues in education and that the education system needs to reinforce basic math skills as well as increase proficiency in English and science skills. Participants in the Southeast focus groups specifically stated that funds seem to be allocated away from student learning and reallocated to sports and other non-academic activities.

Along with more funding and resources, participants also reported the overall quality of education, including the capacity of teaching staff, seems higher in north Fresno and Clovis schools. In the Southeast focus group, a participant shared that teachers seem more intent on getting along with their students instead of supporting student learning.

### Racism and Language Play a Role in Education

The lack of teachers of color in schools in African American and Latino neighborhood schools, who are representative of the students attending their schools, was mentioned in multiple focus groups. In the African American focus group, participants shared that teachers and staff at schools did not always understand African American children, or were noticeably biased against African American children, with punishments being more punitive for students of color. The Latino focus group also expressed that racism exists in schools and noted Latino students received harsher discipline when compared to white students, and that school counselors discriminate against students of color.

Another topic that emerged from this discussion was that the categorization of students as English Learners (EL) has negative academic affects children that later affect their progress to obtain high-skill jobs. Attendees in the Unemployed and Calwa focus groups highlighted that more focus and resources need to be invested in children who are categorized as EL. As participants explain, once children are identified as EL students, their academic programming diverges from non-EL students, with their education being less rigorous than that of non-English learner, which is an obstacle to getting the education they need to obtain high-skilled jobs later. Parents questioned who benefitted from assigning children to the EL category and whether the practice of labeling students as EL was beneficial. Overall many participants noted that being labeled as EL leads to receiving an education that is potentially harmful to their overall educational outcomes and future job prospects.

## Programs and Services for Professional Development (Adults)

Attendees in the Southeast focus group stated that they need support and advice when it comes to crafting resumes, since that is a crucial component of the job application process. In the Hmong focus group, participants mentioned that limited English language proficiency and limited computer skills can also be barriers to searching for jobs. A participant in the Latino focus group also mentioned that it would be useful to receive training on how to apply and prepare for jobs.

## Neighborhood Engagement

### Disconnection with Local Decision Makers

Participants in Northwest Fresno focus group expressed that they feel forgotten by their local representatives. In the past, residents have tried to utilize the Fresno website, but even the act of getting online is difficult in Northwest Fresno because many parts of the community lack adequate internet access. Participants feel that Council representatives need to be more aware of the issues faced by residents in the areas they represent. For example, in Northwest Fresno, there are issues with sidewalks and flooding, but residents are often not sure who to contact about these problems. Participants in the Northwest Fresno focus group strongly suggested Council representatives responsible for Northwest Fresno to reevaluate plans for the area, taking into consideration its rapid growth. According to Northwest Fresno residents, to date, Council representatives have not done this, resulting in serious consequences for them. For example, in the past 10 years, three schools have been built in Northwest Fresno, but access to public transportation and expanded roads is still severely lacking.

In the African American focus group, participants stated that they do not feel as if they have a place to go when they have a problem in their community, nor do they feel as if there is an organization that can help connect them to people in power. Calwa residents described the need for investment in basic infrastructure to assure their community's safety, and also expressed their struggles in receiving such funds and support from elected officials; they feel that Calwa is a neglected area. The Southwest focus group stated that while they do have leaders in their community, they often don't have a consistent person that they can go to within the halls of power, it depends on who is in office.

When faced with issues in their neighborhoods, participants mentioned a few organizations/leaders that they turn to, including Friends of Calwa, BHC, or other CBOs/community leaders. According to some participants, the best way to access decision makers is to attend city council meetings or to engage with community/neighborhood leaders that can bridge the gap between the community and elected officials. It is also important to note that when people said they did have somewhere to go to, such as with the business and Southwest focus groups, those people relied on receiving good and reliable information and when they did not, that hurt the trust that others in the neighborhood place on them.

### Space and support of Community leaders from underserved communities

Participants in the unemployed focus group agreed that many times organizations are limited in advocacy work because of grant systems/limitations. Participants said that within the underserved communities, there are leaders willing to speak on their behalf and discuss bold ideas. Participants would like to see the organizations doing advocacy make space and provide support to existing community leaders. Participants expressed that this is necessary to change the way decisions have been

made for their neighborhoods, behind closed doors, leaving out the people who have to deal with the consequences of such decisions.

## Next Steps

Moving forward, there are four remaining focus groups that will be conducted in Fresno County. While these focus groups take place, DRIVE and partners will see how the perspectives of residents can align and help to inform the implementation plans as they are in development. After these remaining focus group conclude, the surveys completed at the end of each focus group will be analyzed and shared out through a follow up summary. We will continue to look for opportunities to engage communities through the DRIVE process as next steps emerge.