

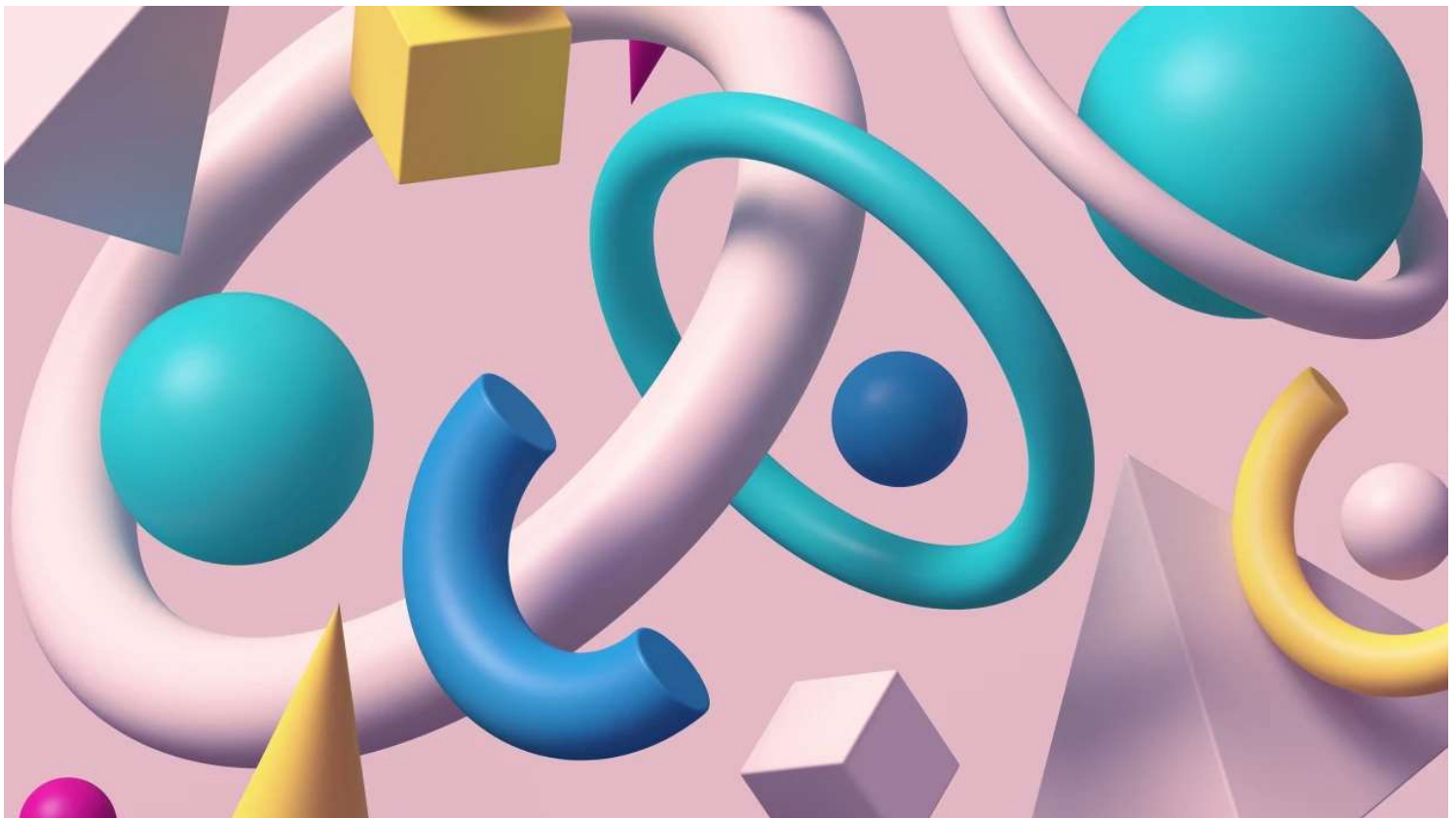


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# 6 innovative projects to improve health and safety for workers during the pandemic

Many businesses failed to protect their workers as COVID-19 struck. Now a series of grants is supporting worker-powered projects that help solve those issues.



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The COVID-19 pandemic has put worker health and safety measures to the test, and workplaces across the country have **fallen short**. Grocery store workers and garbage collectors have had to do their jobs without PPE or cleaning supplies; restaurant employees and gig workers have had to choose between going into work and risking their health or going without pay. Some workers have taken the issue into their own hands, coming up with ways to better protect their coworkers. Now, six such projects are getting help from The Workers Lab.

The Workers Lab, which funds innovations to increase the power of low-wage workers, recently announced the winners of its **Innovation Fund Summer 2020 Cycle**. The Innovation Fund awards cash grants to ideas and experiments that build worker power. Each cycle of the competition is focused on a different theme, and the summer 2020 cycle centered on worker health and safety.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, it was clear that workers in this country, particularly low-wage workers of color, were taking the hardest hit here—economically for sure, but also health-wise and safety-wise,” says Adrian Haro, Workers Lab CEO. Even before the pandemic, health and safety were low on the priority list. When The Workers Lab surveyed investors and donors at the beginning of the year on where their funding was going, only a handful mentioned anything concerning health and safety. It wasn’t a robust study, Haro says, but it showed a lack of investment.

When the coronavirus crisis began, there was also a lacking federal response for workers. “I had a hunch that in the absence of federal response, there were worker leaders and workers themselves all over the country banding together to fight for their safety and fight for their health,” he says. “That was our inspiration—to bring those stories, those solutions and that innovation to light.”

The Innovation Fund awarded grants to six ideas. Three received \$75,000 grants, and three received \$150,000 grants, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. All will also receive mentorship and support from The Workers Lab to implement their ideas.

The \$75,000 grant winners are:

- **Legal Aid Justice Center**, a nonprofit that is creating a COVID Chatbot to help immigrant farm and poultry workers in Virginia identify workplace safety violations and ensure that safety standards are enforced.
- **Medical Center of the Americas Foundation**, a healthcare innovation nonprofit that is launching the Nurse to Innovator Project, which will connect nurses and innovators to create new technologies for nurse health and safety.
- **Mississippi Workers’ Center for Human Rights**, a membership group that advocates for workers and which is creating the Mississippi Essential Workers Justice Project, a Black-led health clinic and learning center to

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The \$150,000 grant winners are:

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- **Building Skills Partnership**, a property service workers nonprofit, that is launching an Infectious Disease Certification Program to train Los Angeles janitors on transmission reduction and COVID-19 centered safety protocols.
- **Justice for Migrant Women**, a civil rights organization that is creating Healing Voices, a project to use technology to bring together farmworkers in virtual support groups so they can learn worker rights, build community, and get support through storytelling.
- **Labor Occupational Health Program**, part of the University of California, Berkeley, which is Building a Strategic Partnership for OSH Enforcement. This will be a new model for protecting workers in a way led by workers, in partnership with California OSHA, and with a focus on low-wage earners, immigrants, people of color, and undocumented workers.

It's not only that worker health and safety needs renewed attention, Haro says. The idea of what worker health and safety is needs to change too, especially in crisis times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These winners don't just focus on the traditional notions of safety, such as "operating machinery, or the health and quality of the working environment," Haro says. They include things such as protective equipment, pandemic resources, mental health, and positive support systems.

All this ties back to worker power. "I'm not sure that a lot of people are thinking about worker safety and health in the definition of worker power, but if you actually just think about what it takes to go to work, a big part of that is feeling okay," he says. "I'm really interested in learning from these grantees about how and why we need to expand our thinking of safety and health, particularly right now."

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