



Cycle 2 - Spring 2026

James Cary Smith Community Grant Program

**Summary of Year 1
In-Person Evaluation Sessions**

Bay Area Air District James Cary Smith Community Grant Program: Summary of In-Person Evaluation Sessions

The James Cary Smith (JCS) Community Grant Program supports community-based organizations that build local capacity for environmental justice in communities most impacted by air pollution.

Cycle 2 of the JCS Community Grant Program awarded nearly \$3.5 million to [twelve organizations](#) implementing three-year projects in Environmental Justice communities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Cycle 2 builds on the Cycle 1 program realignment and evaluation findings by continuing to focus on application accessibility, offering multi-year funding, providing grantee support structures, and maintaining clear onboarding processes. This report captures reflections from in-person evaluation sessions among grantees in March 2026 and contributes to ongoing learning about project implementation and grantee experience within the JCS Community Grant Program.

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Figure 1: Representatives from organizations receiving Cycle 2 JCS grants and Air District staff at an in-person evaluation session held in Richmond, CA on March 18, 2026.



Figure 2: Representatives from organizations receiving Cycle 2 JCS grants and Air District staff at an in-person evaluation session held in San Francisco, CA on March 17, 2026.

Background and Purpose

Cycle 2 of the JCS Community Grant Program began in July 2025. In March 2026, the Bay Area Air District, in partnership with InterEthnica, convened two in-person evaluation sessions in San Francisco and Richmond with the Cycle 2 JCS Community Grant Program cohort. The 2026 in-person sessions align with the JCS Community Grant Program's goals of supporting community-led work, strengthening grantee capacity, and advancing equitable outcomes in communities most impacted by air pollution. The facilitated sessions created space for reflection, discussion, and connection. They were a direct response to grantee feedback from Cycle 1, which identified a desire for more face-to-face connection to support relationship-building, trust, and shared learning. Grantees reflected on their JCS-funded projects and shared what is working, where challenges are emerging, and how their approaches are adapting in response to changing conditions. Grantees also developed their understanding of each other's work and opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange across the cohort.

Format

- Across the two sessions, 20 representatives from all 12 organizations receiving Cycle 2 JCS grants participated.
- Each 2.5-hour session included a welcome and interactive mapping activity, participant introductions, a brief tour of the Air District office and workspace, a meet-and-greet with Air District leadership, and lunch with time for informal networking.
- Grantees participated in an evaluation discussion that focused on their project models, reflected on Year 1 progress, identified successes and implementation challenges, considered potential adjustments for Year 2, and explored opportunities for peer learning and collaboration across the cohort.

Table 1: A summary of the dates, locations, and participating JCS grantees for each in-person evaluation session.

Date	Tuesday, March 17, 2026	Wednesday, March 18, 2026
Location	San Francisco Bay Area Metro Center	Richmond Air District Headquarters East
Participating JCS Organizations	• Brightline Defense Project • California Interfaith Power & Light • El Concilio of San Mateo County • People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER) • San Francisco Bay Physicians for Social Responsibility • Urban Habitat	• All Positives Possible • Breathe California of the Bay Area, Golden Gate, and Central Coast • Citizen Air Monitoring Network • Climate Action Pathways for Schools • La Clínica de la Raza • Multicultural Center of Marin

Key Insights from Grantee Reflections

Grantees reflected on their JCS project Year 1 progress, thinking deeply about what is working, what is challenging, and how their approaches are evolving as they move into Year 2.

What's Working Better Than Expected?

JCS grantees reported a higher level of community interest and participation in their projects than initially anticipated. Grantees attribute this to their ability to leverage established relationships and sustain community trust. Although experiences varied across projects and communities, grantees shared the following insights about community participation:

- Many grantees are seeing community members are actively participating in surveys, workshops, and events
- Returning participants and local leaders are continuing to engage and bring other community members into the work
- Interest in air quality, environmental health, and related topics is growing across communities
- Community members increasingly engaged with workshops, outreach materials, and needs assessments

Across discussions, there was a clear emphasis on pacing and readiness, particularly in work with youth and emerging leaders. Grantees emphasized that building confidence and preparing participants to engage and lead is a key component of their success. This contributes to deeper participation and stronger community ownership of the work. Returning ambassadors and participants are demonstrating increased confidence and deeper engagement with their community by stepping into leadership roles, supporting outreach, facilitating conversations, and sharing information within their networks.

Grantees also pointed to direct engagement with local jurisdictions and agencies as a key success. Agency staff are participating more actively in meetings and discussions, and these relationships are helping grantees navigate systems, build momentum, and move

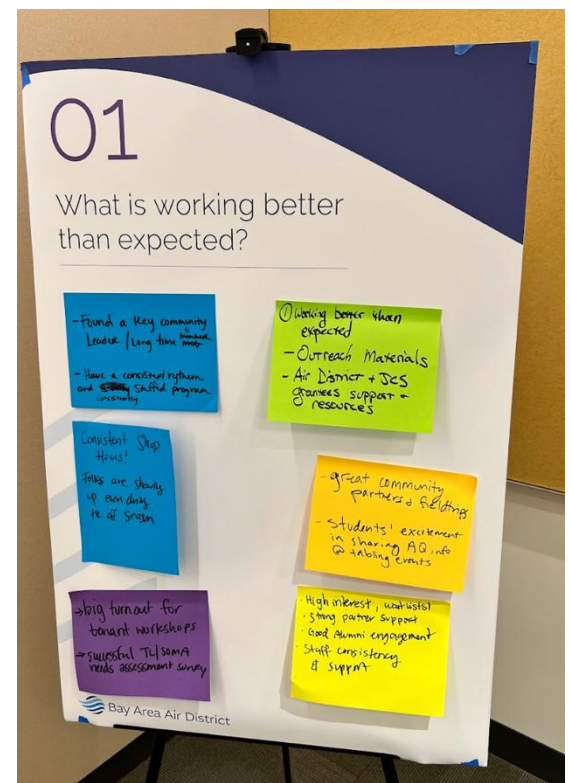


Figure 1: Grantees discussed what is working better than expected in pairs, added sticky notes summarizing their discussion on a poster board.

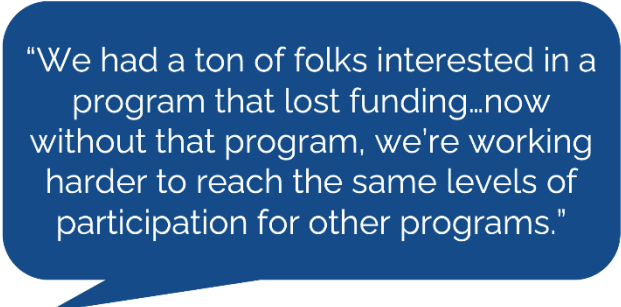
work forward. In several cases, this has led to new collaborations across organizations and sectors.

Grantees also highlighted JCS Community Grant Program supports that are working well. Consistent and timely responses from the Air District, along with quarterly Grantee Network meetings with other JCS grantees, are helping teams move through questions and challenges efficiently, making administration of their projects happen smoother than expected.

Key Challenges and Adjustments

While JCS grantees are navigating strong demand for their programs, strong community interest does not remove all participation barriers and grantee site conditions beyond their control that are limiting organizational capacity and affecting how projects move forward. Grantees shared that demand for programming is high, but funding cuts and staffing constraints are reducing the amount of work teams can execute. In many cases, grantees are managing the same or increased demand for programs with fewer staff and resources available.

Grantees emphasized that current political and social conditions are also impacting community participation. Concerns related to immigration enforcement are limiting attendance at some in-person events, and community members are being more cautious about where and how they engage. At the same time, broader funding cuts are reducing both staff capacity and the number of complementary programs that previously helped drive participation. One grantee described how a different, well-attended program previously hosted by their organization lost funding and sunsetted. Because of that, the organization lost an established channel for maintaining relationships and inviting participants into their JCS project activities, making it more difficult to sustain engagement. Another described how a subgrantee organization has dissolved entirely.



"We had a ton of folks interested in a program that lost funding...now without that program, we're working harder to reach the same levels of participation for other programs."

Figure 2: One grantee describes how the current funding environment puts pressure on projects that have sustained funding.

Grantees also described how these constraints are affecting the pace of their work. Activities that involve skill-building, behavior change, or leadership development are taking longer than initially planned, particularly when working with participants at different levels of readiness. This is especially true for youth programs and community leadership efforts, where progress depends on sustained engagement over time.

In response, some grantees are narrowing their focus, adjusting timelines, or scaling activities to better align with available resources. Grantee adaptations to programs include:

- Expanding virtual engagement to maintain access
- Increasing focus on youth engagement
- Careful considerations about when, how, and who to engage in Spanish-language outreach
- Exploring partnerships with health providers and other trusted institutions
- Using more targeted outreach strategies and incentives to increase participation

These adjustments reflect ongoing learning. A small number of grantees shared that their current approach is working as intended and does not require major changes at this time. However, most grantees are refining their approaches to better align with community needs, available capacity, and changing conditions, while continuing to move their work forward.



Figure 3: Two grantees engage in discussion about what's been challenging and how they are adapting their JCS projects to address those challenges.

What Grantees are Planning Next

Looking ahead, grantees are focused on building on early momentum, deepening engagement, and expanding the reach of their work. Planned activities reflect a continuation of core strategies, along with targeted efforts to strengthen participation and leadership within communities. Still, community engagement remains central across all projects and will continue to be the primary way grantees connect with residents and gather input. This includes ongoing focus groups, listening sessions, and community-based events, as well as expanded outreach through tabling, workshops, and neighborhood-based activities. Virtual engagement will continue to complement in-person efforts and support broader access.

Grantees are also placing increased emphasis on youth and leadership development and planning to formalize or expand youth environmental justice cohorts, continue investing in emerging community leaders, and create more opportunities for participants to take on leadership roles through community projects and events. Strategies to engage program alumni from earlier cohorts were discussed as a way to bring in new participants, nominate future leaders, and support ongoing program activities.

There is also a continued focus on practical, community-facing activities that make environmental issues tangible and actionable. These include:

- Air quality education through schools, fairs, and public events
- Community research activities
- Leadership cohorts
- Tree planting, clean-up efforts, and other local environmental initiatives

Grantees will not be starting from scratch in Year 2 of their JCS projects. They will refine their approaches based on early learning and expand their work in ways that reflect both community demand and organizational capacity.

Cohort Collaboration Going Forward

The sessions surfaced clear opportunities for collaboration across the cohort. At the same time, they highlighted an important starting point: peer learning depends on a shared understanding of what each organization is doing and where their work is taking place.

During the opening activity, grantees were invited to match organizations to project descriptions and place them on a regional map. In practice, very few participants were able to accurately match projects to organizations or locate where work was happening. This may signal that grantees have had limited visibility into opportunities that help them truly comprehend the scope of the work happening across the cohort.

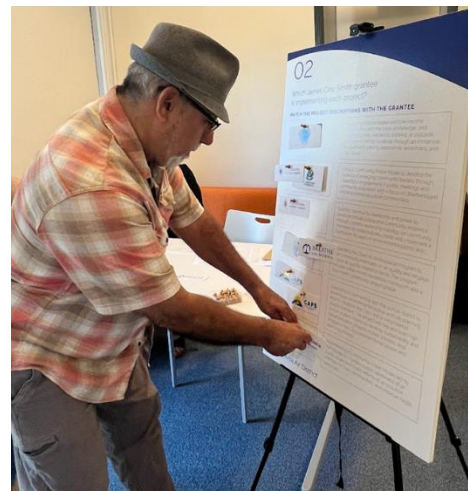


Figure 4: A grantee places another organization logo with which JCS project description they think their peer organization is implementing.

As the session progressed, grantees came forward to correct placements and describe their projects. This created a turning point in the conversation. As each organization shared, participants began identifying areas of overlap, complementary approaches, and potential alignment. This moment reinforced that peer learning begins with a clear understanding of who is doing what. Once that foundation was established, participants were able to more easily identify where collaboration could happen.

Across discussions, several areas of alignment emerged:

- Similar outreach approaches, including community events, research, and education
- Shared focus on youth engagement and leadership development
- Interest in expanding partnerships with trusted community institutions
- Overlapping geographic areas and communities served

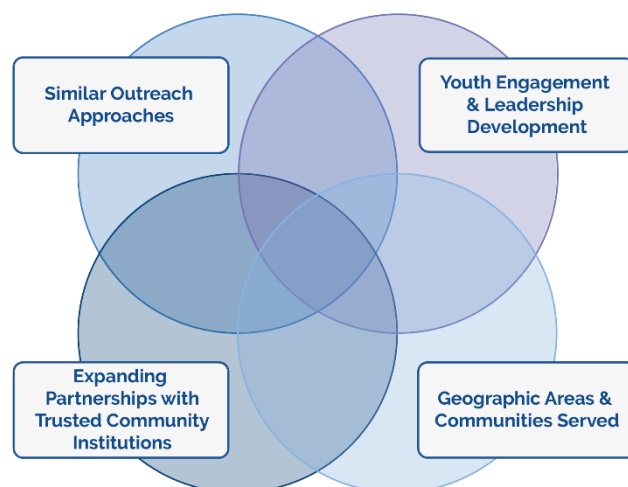


Figure 7: A Venn diagram illustrating overlapping, complementary approaches, and potential alignment among the grantee cohort.

Given current capacity constraints across grantee organizations and the broader funding and political climate, the existing JCS Grantee Network and Grantee Resource Library provide a foundation for strengthening peer learning, and there is a clear opportunity to strengthen peer learning in ways that support the day-to-day work of grantees. Grantees consistently expressed interest in learning from one another, particularly through sharing materials and examples that can be adapted to their own work. Given current capacity constraints, many organizations do not have the time to develop materials from scratch or to train new staff without reference points. For the JCS cohort, peer-to-peer exchange can support this by creating structured opportunities to access examples, such as surveys, outreach materials, or workshop plans. This can serve as a practical tool to support learning, reduce duplication, and help generate ideas more quickly.

Learning Lanes for Collaboration

Collaboration can be organized around shared areas of work, or "learning lanes," where overlap is strongest. These lanes reflect where grantees are already working in parallel and provide practical entry points for peer-to-peer learning, sharing, and coordination, which could ultimately lead to more organic organizational partnerships.



Figure 8: Grantees share their core project methods with the cohort.

Learning Lane	What Grantees Are Already Doing	How to Get Started
Youth Leadership and Community Development	Grantees are building youth cohorts, leadership pathways, and community capacity through trainings, recruitment, and ongoing engagement.	Share training materials and recruitment approaches; exchange ideas on cohort structures, cadence, progress, and promising practices
Community Research and Data Collection	Grantees are developing surveys, focus groups, and needs assessments to understand community priorities and inform their work. Some grantees are actively building these tools while others are using insights from previous research to design next steps.	Share surveys, focus group guides, and assessments or learnings from such; explain how tools were developed and what worked; use existing examples as a starting point; share findings to inform each other's work; have discussions about data gathered and how it might be used to understand where to go next
Air Quality Education and Technical Content	Grantees are developing and delivering education on air quality, health impacts, and environmental topics. There is overlap in both content and the challenge of translating technical information into accessible materials.	Share and adapt educational materials; co-create workshop ideas that combine technical and community expertise; align messaging around air quality data and opportunities
Program Delivery and Engagement Strategies	Grantees are designing and implementing workshops, events, and outreach strategies to engage community members.	Share workshop ideas and outreach stories; provide examples of what worked and what didn't; co-develop materials where feasible

Table 2: A description of potential learning lanes, what grantees are already doing within the lane, and ideas to support starting peer learning

Across all lanes, collaboration does not require formal partnerships. In many cases, it can begin with sharing materials, stories, coordinating efforts, and maintaining visibility into each other's work. Establishing consistent opportunities for project share-outs, whether through the existing JCS Grantee Network or regular updates, can reinforce awareness of who is doing what and where, and support more intentional peer-to-peer collaboration over time.

Operationalizing Peer-to-Peer Exchange

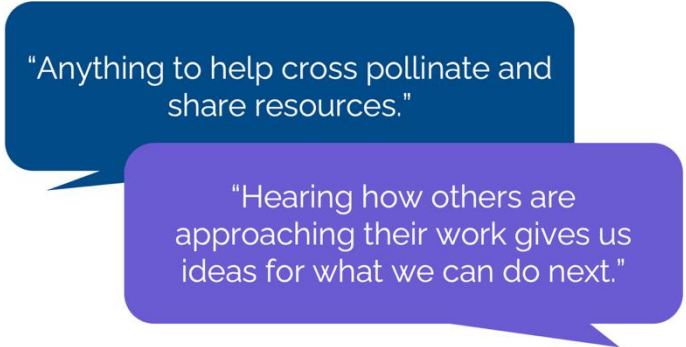
Grantees expressed strong interest in continuing these conversations beyond the in-person evaluation sessions, particularly with organizations working on similar issues, activities, or in nearby communities. Establishing consistent, structured opportunities for this type of exchange throughout the grant cycle can strengthen peer learning, reduce duplication, and support more intentional collaboration across the cohort.

The JCS Grantee Network already provides a foundation for connection and was designed to be grantee-led. For Cycle 2 Grantees, the Grantee Network serves as a key opportunity for operationalizing peer-to-peer exchange moving forward. A few ideas to operationalize peer-to-peer learning within the Grantee Network (or beyond) are below. This is not an exhaustive list but a starting point based on what grantees noted they'd like to engage in during discussions at the in-person sessions.

Resource Share Outs

Grantees are looking for ways to quickly understand how tools are being used and apply them without starting from scratch. They suggested inviting fellow grantees to bring one resource, such as a survey, outreach flyer, workshop plan, or curriculum outline, and briefly share:

- What the material is and how it is used
- What the goals were
- What worked well in practice
- What they would adjust or improve



"Anything to help cross pollinate and share resources."

"Hearing how others are approaching their work gives us ideas for what we can do next."

Figure 9: Grantees express interest in peer learning

This can be followed by a brief discussion where grantees identify how the approach could apply to their own work and share advice or adaptations.

Problem-Solving Sprints

Grantees valued having a space to talk openly about challenges outside of their day-to-day organizational context. Discussions pointed to a need for timely, practical support on upcoming activities or challenges in a setting where it is acceptable to be honest about what is not working or where additional input is needed. This can be structured through prompts such as:

- "We are preparing to do (activity) and are running into (challenge)."
- "We're planning to try (method) and are unsure about (how to deliver/how it will land)."

Grantees can work in small groups or pairs to problem-solve together, followed by a brief share-out of relevant experiences, examples, or materials.

Ongoing Knowledge Sharing

Grantees expressed interest in simple ways to stay aware of what others in the cohort are working on, without adding additional meetings or time burden. One idea that emerged was the use of short, written updates to maintain visibility across projects.

This could take the form of a rotating project profile spotlight in a quarterly or bi-monthly email, highlighting one or two organizations at a time. Each spotlight could include a brief overview of the project, tools or approaches being used, a quote, and contact information. To keep the process light-touch, grantees recommended providing a short form for the spotlighted grantee to answer questions. The Air District would develop the spotlight email. This approach gives grantees an easy way to stay up to date and, when relevant, reach out directly to connect, ask questions, or build on each other's work. It also supports ongoing peer learning between convenings without requiring additional coordination.

Session Experience

Across the two in-person evaluation sessions, 20 representatives from the 12 Cycle 2 grantee organizations participated. All attendees were invited to complete a brief post-event survey, and 14 responded. Feedback from the post-event survey and participant comments shows that the in-person sessions were highly valued and worth participants' time. Every respondent indicated they left with an insight, idea, or connection they will use in their work. Grantees also responded positively to how the sessions were structured. The balance of reflection, discussion, and time to connect supported meaningful participation and made it easy to engage.

A consistent theme across responses was the value of bringing grantees together in person. Participants highlighted that gathering in the same space made it easier to build relationships, understand each other's work, and exchange ideas in ways that are difficult to replicate in virtual settings. Beyond positive feedback, the sessions created meaningful conditions for learning and connection across the cohort. Grantees identified new opportunities for collaboration, and being in the same room allowed them to better understand each other's work and see where efforts could align.

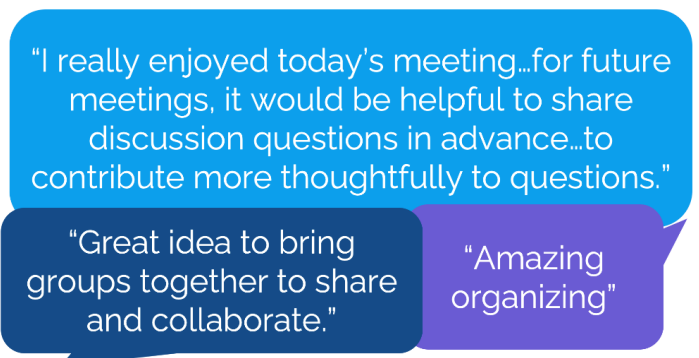


Figure 10: Grantees shared about their experience at the in-person session

Looking ahead, grantees expressed strong interest in continuing and expanding in-person gatherings, with a focus on how to build on and deepen these convenings. Key suggestions included:

- More time for discussion across projects
- More time for informal conversation and connection
- Opportunities to bring the full cohort together in one setting
- Sharing core discussion questions in advance
- Continuing to bring in content experts on key air quality topics

The In-person Evaluation Sessions highlight both the strength of the JCS cohort and the conditions needed to support their peer learning moving forward. Grantees are seeing strong demand and meaningful engagement in their projects, while also navigating real constraints in capacity and external conditions. The sessions demonstrated that bringing grantees together in person creates space for connection, shared learning, and practical collaboration. Strengthening simple and consistent systems for peer learning and resource sharing can help the cohort work more efficiently and extend the impact of individual projects across communities. At the end of the sessions, grantees were asked to reflect on the discussion and share one word that encompasses what they would like to bring forward during Year 2 of their JCS projects. Their responses encompassed a clear, key theme— collaboration.