



THE NEW ENGLAND CSA CONSORTIUM

● ABOUT THE NEW ENGLAND CSA CONSORTIUM

A major mechanism for the spread of CSAs in New England was open and ongoing communication among programs. This was facilitated by the New England CSA Consortium, which is convened by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (Boston Fed). Anthony Poore, Deputy Director of Regional and Community Outreach at the Boston Fed, has led the Fed's effort from the project's inception.

In June of 2014, the Boston Fed hosted a meeting with representatives working on CSA efforts in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. This core group would eventually expand to become the New England CSA Consortium. Over the following months, Poore and Colleen Quint, President and CEO of Maine's Alford Scholarship Foundation, met with policymakers and other leaders in each New England state to discuss the possibility of establishing CSAs. In this way, they took on the role of policy entrepreneurs, educating policymakers and other decision makers on CSAs' potential. The Consortium was built out of these dialogues and listening sessions (see timeline in Section II). Poore described the process saying,

Because of the trends I was identifying through their questions, I was able to bring to light, 'Listen, they have the same questions you do. You have the same questions they had. Why are we doing this? Why don't we get together maybe twice a year, just to talk?' (Interview 22)

People working in the CSA field identified delivery mechanisms and account structures as key questions they wanted answered in order to advance the policy processes in their states. In response, in December 2014, the Boston Fed held a CSA policy roundtable meeting for stakeholders from across the nation focused on these issues. At this meeting, states learned about and thought through the different CSA delivery models by considering the question, "What are the trade-offs associated with the savings product that we as states need to be thinking about?" (Interview 22). The Boston Fed invited a broad array of national experts to present so that New

England stakeholders could learn from them and strategically design their paths forward. According to Poore, at this meeting, they discussed how the utility of each platform varies depending on the goals of the program:

If their goal is...to use CSAs as a means to get people banked, then you are going to use a bank model that has a wide branch network, right? Or a credit union, for that matter. If your goal is around asset accumulation as a means to address issues around access and affordability, you're going to go get the maximum rate of return on your investment, thus the 529 model. (Interview 22)

This meeting proved useful for participants and was important to establishing the Boston Fed as a convener and resource within the CSA movement.

The first official meeting of the larger New England CSA Consortium took place in March 2015. The Consortium was formalized at this meeting, and participants committed to meeting regularly from this point forward. Since that time, representatives from cities and states in the region have been participating in a process of continuous shared learning. The Consortium serves several functions, including: facilitating communication among CSA leaders in New England, creating a shared vision, and sharing research and information on CSA efforts nationwide. In keeping with both the social learning and collective impact frameworks, the Consortium constitutes a social network (or container for change), which facilitates continuous and open communication among decision makers from the region.

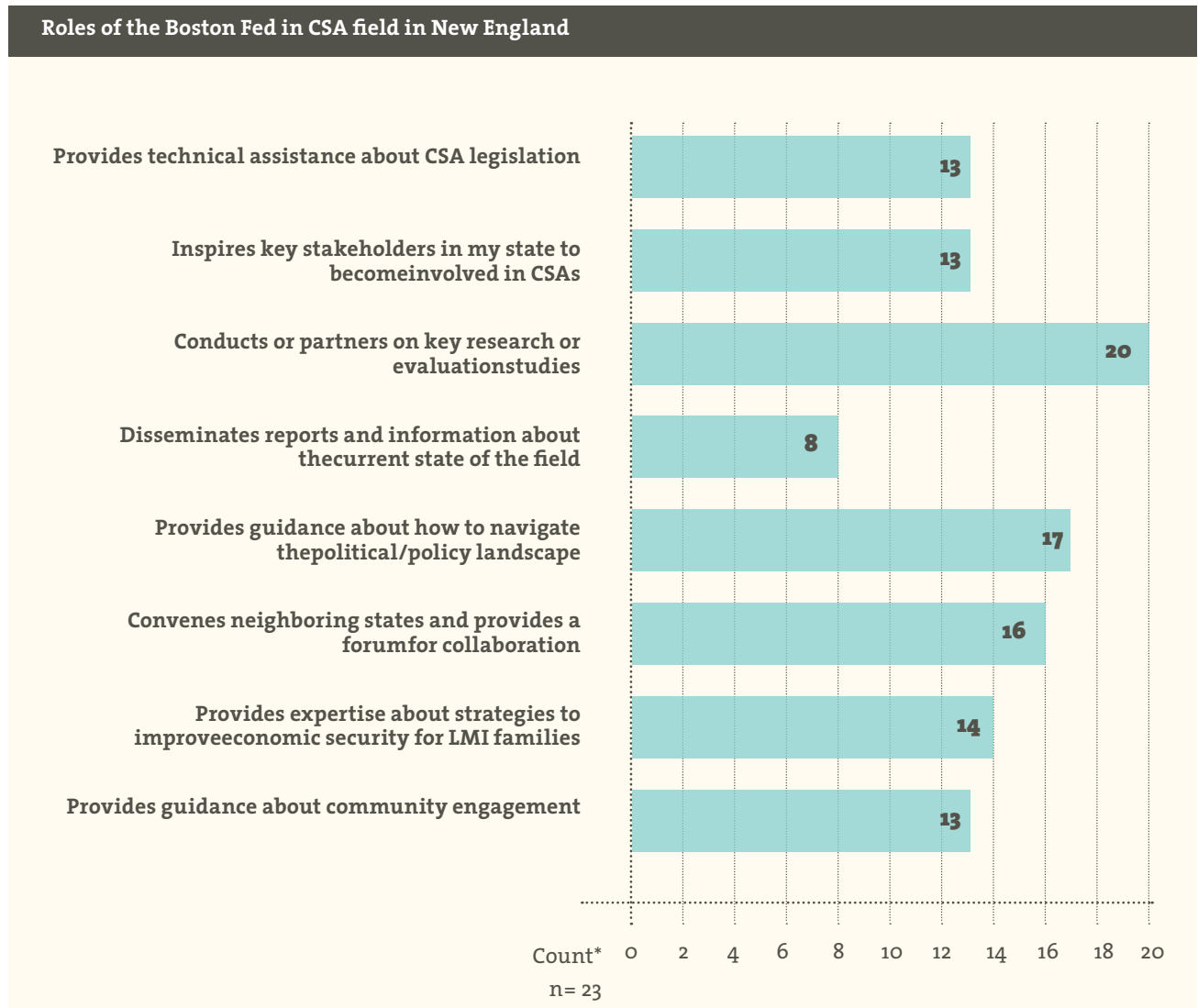
The Consortium’s membership continues to grow and may vary from quarter to quarter. Most recently, regular participants include representatives from all six New England states and beyond, as listed in Table 3 in the Appendix.

ROLES OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON

Our survey respondents reported that the Boston Fed plays a range of roles in the CSA field in

New England, including convening players, disseminating information, and conducting or supporting research (Figure 2). In this section, we highlight four of the Boston Fed’s roles that emerged from our interviews: backbone organization, convener, technical assistance provider, and the “wind at the back” of CSA efforts.

FIGURE 2: SURVEY RESPONSES ON ROLES OF THE FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON IN THE CSA FIELD IN NEW ENGLAND



*Respondents could select more than one option

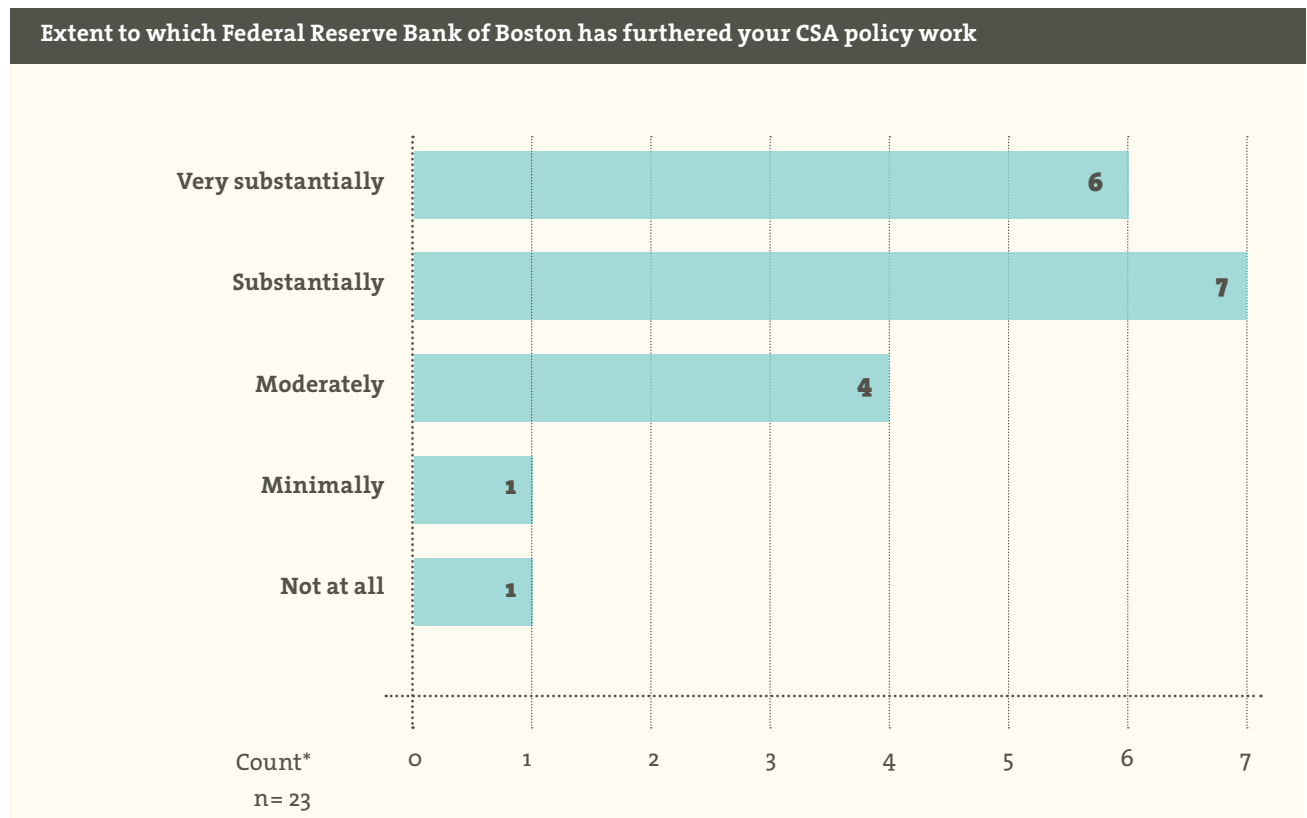
BACKBONE ORGANIZATION

The Boston Fed is a strong and reliable backbone support organization for New England’s CSA work. Indeed, the efforts of the Boston Fed have been central to the Consortium’s success. Respondents described the Boston Fed as an “aggregator & promotor,” an “amplifier” (Interview 23), and a “shining beacon” (Interview 25). Others noted that the Boston Fed adds legitimacy to the CSA effort and that its “useful and relevant” research boosts its credibility as a convener (Interview 23).

Our respondents also reported that the Boston Fed’s commitment of staff time has made it a stable backbone organization for New England’s CSA work. While many other organizations spend time

figuring out how to sustain their work and pay their staff, necessitating an inward and narrow focus, the staffing from the Federal Reserve for the leadership in regional CSA policy development was never in question. Poore stated simply, “At the end of the day, we don’t have to worry about keeping the lights on” (Interview 22). This financial security enabled the Consortium’s backbone organization to be patient, to not have to answer to specific funders or other stakeholders, and to be able to truly listen (patiently, because this is slow work) to the needs and questions that were being expressed/asked in the region. Additionally, most of our survey respondents reported that the Boston Fed played a substantial role in furthering CSA efforts in their own states (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: SURVEY RESPONSES ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON FURTHERED CSA EFFORTS IN NEW ENGLAND



*Respondents could select more than one option

CONVENER

The Boston Fed also played the role of convening the Consortium members, and our respondents were emphatic in their opinions that the Fed is an effective convener. Respondents described the Boston Fed as a “catalyst that brings us all together” (Interview 5). They praised the Fed for creating a “cohort of entities that were working on CSAs” (Interview 21) and for fostering collegiality and openness within the group. A respondent from Massachusetts described the Boston Fed’s role this way:

I really can't underplay the role the Fed has had for us in helping to launch our program. They helped, you know, raise the questions that we didn't necessarily know needed answering. You know, the fact that the Fed was able to help connect us through Consortium, through phone calls outside the Consortium meetings, and being able to talk to other states, I think really helped us create a solid program so that we were going to see success very early on. I was...at the Consortium meeting... earlier this month, and, you know, again, we had just launched, and I had a couple states come up to me and go, 'Oh my God, I can't believe you've just launched and you've already done x, y, and z.' And I said, you know, 'It's because we came to these meetings and we learned from all of you.' (Interview 14)

Critical to the success of this type of facilitated learning, especially given the different political landscapes and CSA efforts within each New England state, was identifying the right questions to convene around. For instance, Poore described hosting a meeting on CSA delivery models “because that was the question that the kind of burgeoning consortium was at...we bring value to the group by meeting them where they are at, not where we want them to be” (Interview 22).

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDER

In addition to its role as a convener, the Boston Fed also provides technical assistance to participants of the Consortium and others in the CSA field by sharing resources, research, and technical support. For instance, the Boston Fed has invited speakers from established CSAs, such as Promise Indiana and San Francisco’s Kindergarten to College

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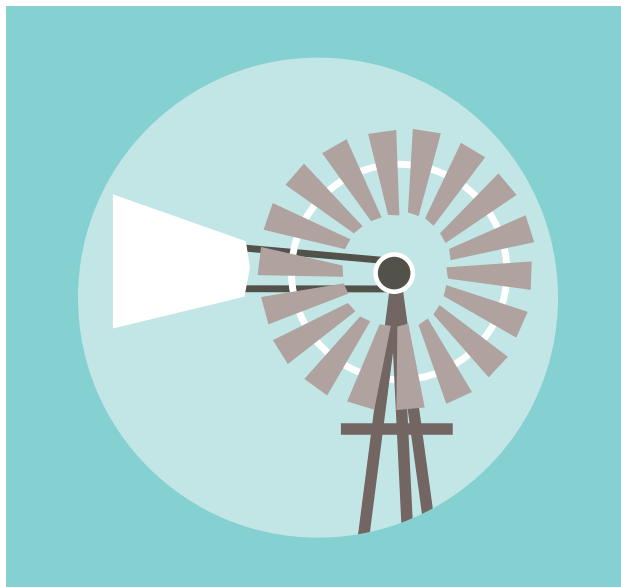
program, to present at Consortium meetings. Respondents praised the quality and value of the information presented at Consortium meetings and through the email listserv. A respondent from Connecticut stated, “Number one, it’s networking. But number two, they just have very high quality presentations that pull in expertise from around the country and make you think a little bit outside your own box” (Interview 7). Another respondent underscored the value of the Boston Fed curating and sharing information about the “mechanics” of CSAs:

If you can tell people, 'Okay, this is how you work it with a 529, this is how you work it with a financial institution. Just in terms of really, technical stuff. So people don't have to figure that out on their own. They don't have to reinvent the wheel...You can say, 'This is what you'll need to do, or these are the choices that you have, given the current legal, financial, whatever, environment.' (Interview 25)

A respondent from New Hampshire noted that the Boston Fed has also connected Consortium members with researchers, which may ultimately lead to improvements in the field:

With [these researchers], you have an opportunity to learn about what's happening in the field and potentially become part of research projects as programs are rolling out so we could begin to measure the success or lack of success from various approaches and then hopefully over time refine our efforts so that we're all using the best mechanisms for our particular circumstance. (Interview 11)

Notably, the Boston Fed's provision of technical assistance goes beyond its direct role with Consortium members. Indeed, the Boston Fed has also convened stakeholders from programs nationwide and provided education and technical assistance to CSA players and partners in other parts of the country. For example, the Asset Funders Network¹ helped to facilitate a relationship between the Boston Fed and several key players in CSA efforts in Texas. Today, the Boston Fed is partnering with the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (which has recently adopted CSAs as a part of its community development agenda), CFLeads, and the Democracy Collaborative² to educate and engage several community foundations from across the country about CSAs.



WIND AT THE BACK OF EXISTING EFFORTS

A unifying theme that connects the varied and interconnecting roles that the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston has played in the New England CSA Consortium is helping to fuel each member's work,

or providing wind at the back of existing efforts. Because each state finds value in CSAs for different reasons (as described in Section IV), the Boston Fed works to understand the goals of each potential stakeholder and make connections for them, weaving their local or regional goals to align with CSA policy. One way they do this is by leveraging efforts from other regions around the U.S. to share lessons learned and build thought partnerships. The following example illustrates how this skill has contributed to the spread and growth of CSA policy in specific locations:

Massachusetts' Working Cities Challenge,³ led by the Boston Fed, has active initiatives in 14 cities across the state. Knowing that Massachusetts was considering expanding their CSA pilot from Worcester to additional cities, Poore suggested to the Treasurer's office that they consider the second round of Working Cities as additional CSA sites. Poore suggested that the CSA program would provide "additional wind at the back of these sites" (Interview 22). This vision will become a reality in the 2017-18 school year, when the SoarMA pilot is launched in five elementary schools in the participating cities (Massachusetts Office of Economic Empowerment, 2017). The Boston Fed has been engaged in facilitating visioning, identifying intermediate and long-term goals, and providing technical assistance regarding program models. Examples like these across the New England region demonstrate how seeding change in local programs simultaneously grows the regional field.

¹ The [Asset Funders Network](#) is an affinity group of national, regional, and local foundations that works to advance economic opportunity for low- and moderate-income people through philanthropy.

² [CFLeads](#) is an organization that aims to build the leadership capacity of community foundations. The [Democracy Collaborative](#) is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to inclusive and sustainable community development.

³ The Boston Fed's [Working Cities Challenge](#) is a grant competition focused on building cross-sector collaborative leadership supporting the economic growth of smaller postindustrial cities in New England.
<https://www.bostonfed.org/workingcities/about/index.htm>