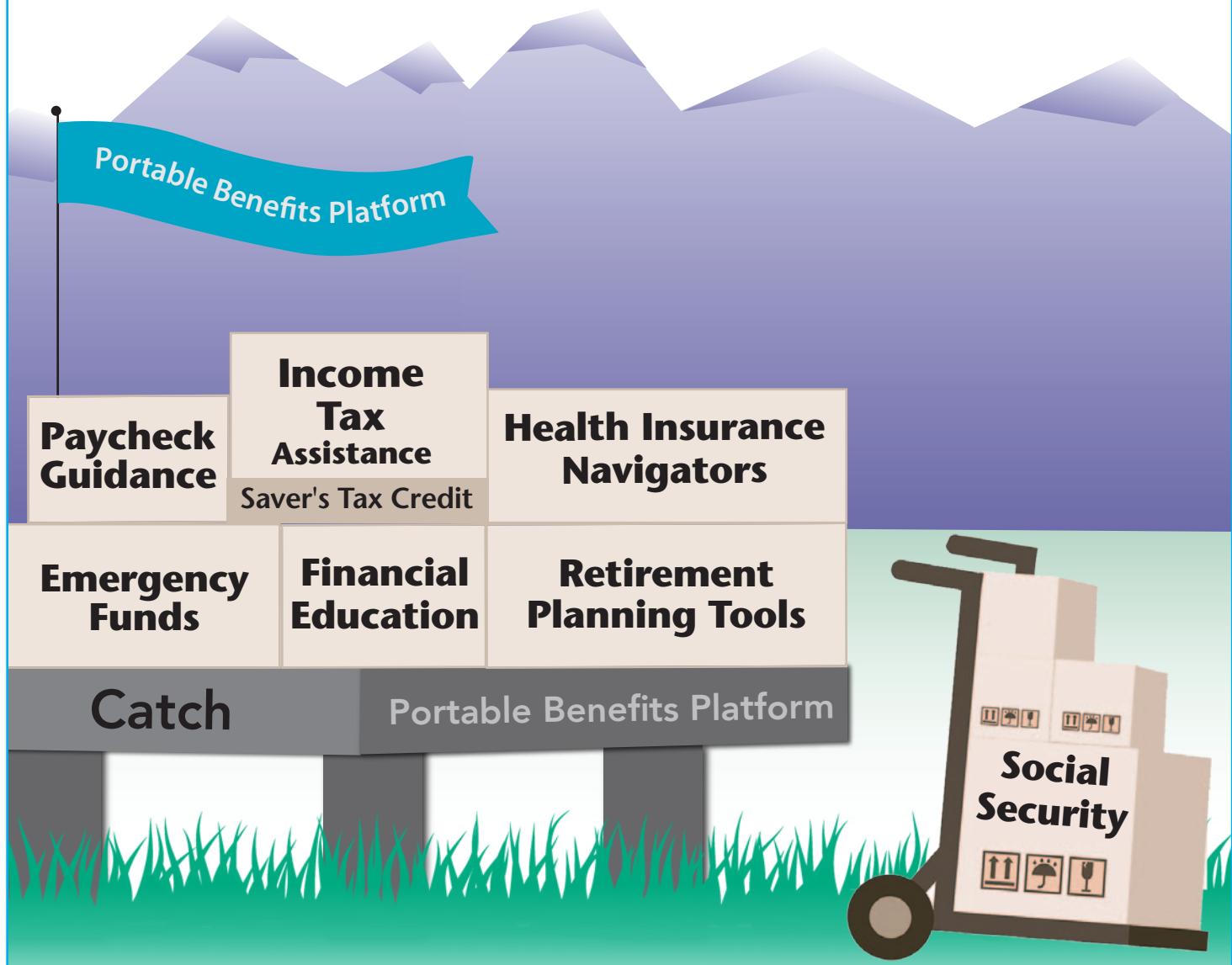


BENEFIT U

Building Portable Benefits for Independent Workers:

A Fintech/Nonprofit Partnership in Appalachia



WISER® • Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement

RURAL RETIREMENT PROJECT

Financial Health Network-Financial Solutions Lab

The Project

Building Portable Benefits is a collaboration between the Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER®), WISER's Rural Retirement Project, Catch (www.catch.co), MountainHeart Child Care Services, and CentralApp. The project was supported by a grant from the Financial Health Network's Financial Solutions Lab.



WISER is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the education and advocacy that will improve the long-term financial quality of life for women. As the only organization to focus exclusively on the unique financial challenges that women face, WISER supports women's opportunities to secure adequate retirement income through training workshops, strategic partnerships, research, education materials, media outreach, policy analysis, and advocacy. WISER provides basic programs to help women take financial control of their lives and overcome the barriers that prevent their participation in the nation's retirement system.

The Rural Retirement Project is a research and demonstration project that WISER has operated for the past seventeen years. The goal of the West Virginia-based Rural Retirement Project is to bring innovative grassroots programs and initiatives to the parts of the U.S. where women have low rates of workforce participation, lower rates of savings, and less access to financial education, resources and services. In 2018, WISER created the Benefit U Project and successfully tested the likelihood of a virtual human relations department working for entrepreneurs, self-employed workers, independent contractors, and other workers without access to workplace benefits and resources.

What are fintechs?

Financial technology companies (fintechs) apply technology to deliver financial services in a new way. Examples include mobile apps for banking, payment apps, or "robo advisors" for investing.

Financial Health Network's Financial Solutions Lab



The *Building Portable Benefits* project was supported by a general operating grant from the Financial Solutions Lab Exchange, managed by the Financial Health Network to cultivate, support and scale innovative ideas that advance the financial health of low- to moderate-income (LMI) consumers and historically underserved communities. The Financial Solutions Lab is focused on innovative ideas that support populations facing acute and persistent financial health challenges, including (but not limited to) aging individuals, individuals with disabilities, people of color and women. The Exchange is a program founded on the belief that the complementary strengths of fintechs and nonprofit organizations can be combined to create powerful solutions. Learn more at finhealthnetwork.org

Project Partners

Catch (www.catch.co)

Catch: Catch is an online platform that provides access to benefits for independent contractors and gig workers who lack access to employer-sponsored benefits. It offers tax withholding, retirement investing, individual health insurance, and savings solutions. Catch currently serves more than 30,000 users nationwide who have processed nearly \$30 million in income automating savings and investments to build a stronger safety net for their clients.

MountainHeart Child Care Services



MountainHeart Community Services, Inc. provides a variety of free services to childcare providers through their Child Care Resource & Referral program. The program's mission is to meet the diverse needs of parents, children, providers, and the community through comprehensive, family-friendly services. These services are designed to encourage providers, empower families, and assure all community members that quality childcare for all children is a continued priority. MountainHeart Community Services, Inc. is funded through a grant from West VA DHHR, Bureau for Children and Families, Division of Early Care and Education.



CentralApp

CentralApp is a West Virginia-based firm connecting companies with certified, affordable tech workers in Appalachia. Founded in 2017 by West Virginians with deep roots in the tech world, CentralApp offers a network of onshore certified technology professionals to provide expert and affordable assistance in developing and configuring enterprise level platforms and tools. They are leveraging the opportunities provided through the CentralApp Talent Exchange to mobilize tech talent and cultivate opportunities in high-tech fields within rural communities.

Potential of Fintech/Nonprofit Partnerships

According to the Financial Health Network, "Fintechs and nonprofits complement each other in how they meet consumer needs."

Fintechs provide:

- Convenience
- Fast access to information
- Innovative user experiences for money management

Nonprofits provide:

- High degree of trust
- One-on-one support
- Ability to bundle services with other support programs (e.g., financial education, affordable housing or workforce development)

Source: *Financial Health Network, Cross-Sector Solutions: A Guide to Nonprofit-Fintech Partnerships, August 2019.*

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The project was managed by Diane L. Browning, Manager for WISER's Rural Retirement Project and Lara Hinz, MSW, WISER's Director of Programs.

The project was directed by M. Cindy Hounsell, JD, President of the Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement. Special thanks to Beth Almeida, Cove Research and Rusty Toler, WISER Senior Fellow for additional project support.

Introduction

Financial Health Needs of Independent Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought renewed attention to the needs of independent workers. One of the main challenges they face is the fact that these jobs rarely offer access to employee benefits, leaving workers on their own to seek out information and navigate what are oftentimes complicated rules and systems. The economic crisis created by the pandemic only underscored the difficulties independent workers face. Despite steps taken to blunt the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the self-employed, these individuals faced greater risks of economic hardships when the downturn hit.¹

As the ranks of independent workers have grown over time, so too has interest in financial solutions that meet their needs. Prior work by WISER has demonstrated how financial education, paired with opportunities to build savings, can support long-term financial security for independent workers.² And when financial education, savings vehicles and affordable insurance products are available regardless of place or type of employment, it can strengthen the overall job sector both in new and developing job markets.

Benefit U

WISER created the *Benefit U Project* to test the workability of a “virtual human relations department” for workers without access to workplace benefits and resources. The goal was to better understand independent workers’ needs and priorities and to test an easy-to-use fintech solution to meet their benefit needs.

Benefit U undertook market research to examine how independent workers would respond to a fintech benefits solution with a menu of services and tools. Most importantly, it examined how the workers would use it to take action to increase their financial security. WISER identified and tested a fintech tool, the Catch benefits platform (available at www.catch.co) whose services closely matched the criteria identified in the research. The research found that 71% of respondents did not have an emergency savings account, 59% indicated they were interested in creating a retirement account and 53% needed assistance with tax withholding. In-depth interviews with independent workers throughout Appalachia further underscored the need for benefits services and supports among this sector of the workforce.

The *Benefit U Project* provided the learning and the partnerships for future collaboration between WISER, Catch, and nonprofits serving independent workers in West Virginia.

1 Klee, M., Laughlin, L. & Munk, R. 2020. “Self-Employed Adults Hit Harder by Pandemic-Related Business Downturns in Hardest Hit States.” U.S. Census Bureau. June 30.

2 Policy Lab, Inc. 2015. “Savings Matches, Small Dollar Accounts, and Childcare Workers’ Decisions to Save: 2012-2015 Appalachian Savings Project” Women’s Institute for a Secure Retirement. December.

Project Summary

The goal of the *Building Portable Benefits* project is to help independent workers without access to job benefits improve their financial well-being. The project ran from September 2020 through May 2021. Prior work by WISER has demonstrated how financial education, paired with access to benefits and opportunities to build savings, are key contributors to long-term financial security for independent workers.

In 2018, WISER created the *Benefit U Project* and successfully tested the possibility of an online financial technology (fintech) platform to meet independent workers' needs for paycheck guidance, tax assistance, health insurance, emergency and long-term savings, and financial education and retirement tools.³ That project led to a partnership between WISER and Catch, a fintech firm with a comprehensive product platform designed for independent workers.

With support from the Financial Health Network, WISER has built upon the *Benefit U Project's* work and piloted an approach to expand financial education and access to benefits while also leveraging the reach of local nonprofits that serve independent workers in specific sectors. WISER's goal was to play to the strengths of each partner: WISER's expertise in financial education for low and moderate income (LMI) audiences complemented Catch's turnkey technology solutions. Other project partners, MountainHeart Child Care Services (MountainHeart) and CentralApp, are community-rooted organizations that serve independent workers in the childcare and technology sectors in West Virginia. These two organizations played a critical role in 1) elevating the importance of financial wellness with the workers they serve and 2) promoting the Catch platform as a tool to enhance financial security.

The spread of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped the time frame of the project and interfered with many planned activities, cancelling in-person trainings and other person-to-person opportunities to educate and motivate workers to participate. The pandemic simultaneously created severe financial hardships for many independent workers, undermining a focus on long-term financial goals as many workers were forced to switch their focus to managing their financial emergencies.

But despite the unprecedented upheaval brought on by the pandemic and subsequent shut-downs, the project succeeded in **reaching nearly 600 independent workers** through the intermediary partners:

- MountainHeart serves 12 counties in West Virginia and reached almost **550 childcare providers**, 242 of which are independent providers through the project. Moving forward,

³ Benefit U Portable Benefit Solutions: Financial, Health & Retirement. 2020. Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement.

new providers plus all 550 of the current childcare providers that need to be re-certified each year will receive MountainHeart's training, which will include the financial education that WISER is helping to develop with information about using the fintech resources.

- Central App reached **50 independent tech-sector workers** through its Talent Exchange program. CentralApp will also be including financial education and using the fintech resources with each new worker recruited into their program.

In the end, at least **36 Catch accounts were opened**. Twenty-nine users (80.5%) signed up for health insurance through the Catch platform, and seven users (19.4%) set up banking and savings accounts. This uptake is a testament to the need and the high value that independent workers place on benefits. It also attests to the project's effectiveness in cutting through a chaotic informational environment, during a once-in-a-century global pandemic. In such an environment, trusted messengers like the project partners played a vital role.

Key Findings

- ✓ Finding the right fintech-nonprofit partners takes work, but the initial investments in relationship building and up-front market research will pay dividends down the road.
- ✓ Navigating the benefits landscape can be challenging for independent workers. This creates an opening for nonprofit-fintech partnerships to provide valuable information and assistance.
- ✓ A platform or “menu” of solutions provides a flexible way to meet the diverse and sometimes changing benefits needs of independent workers.
- ✓ Independent workers are not universally tech savvy and/or trusting of online financial solutions. Not every “gig worker” is paid by an app, so promoting fintech adoption might require targeted approaches for different audiences.
- ✓ Online and virtual outreach can play a role but are an imperfect substitute for person-to-person communications, particularly among those who are less tech-savvy.
- ✓ Workers of all types will look to trusted voices and peers in vetting products and solutions. In the face of complex financial decisions, the trust factor is key.
- ✓ Success in this worker arena requires flexibility, commitment and willingness to persevere despite headwinds. Just as building financial security is a long-term proposition for individuals, organizations need to be in it for the long haul.

Scaling Access to Benefits through a Fintech/Nonprofit Partnership

With support from the Financial Health Network, WISER expanded its work in bringing financial education and access to benefits to independent workers to help them build long-term financial security. To achieve this goal, WISER engaged nonprofit organizations that support independent workers in specific sectors to promote the fintech platform to those they serve. Working together, the project partners have expanded the use of the fintech platform as a tool that can potentially simplify the complex world of financial management and planning, while offering services and solutions to help independent workers create their own safety net and build their financial security.

Project Goals and Objectives

The goal of the *Building Portable Benefits* project was to bring financial education and resources for independent workers to scale and help them build long-term financial security. This goal was supported by three objectives:

1. Partnering with a fintech company to promote its platform via nonprofits that support the independent workforce in West Virginia.
2. Engaging nonprofits in educating and promoting financial wellness and the fintech tool with the workers they serve.
3. Testing a “Save-to-Win” (STW) promotion to encourage sign up and savings among this workforce.

WISER’s plan was to run STW campaigns via these nonprofit partners, with the expectation that promoting access to benefits with their independent workers would become more integral in the nonprofits’ mission and trainings over time.

Two employment sectors with a large independent workforce in West Virginia—childcare and tech—were targeted during the project. To reach and engage these workers, we partnered with MountainHeart, a regional childcare agency, and CentralApp, a tech training nonprofit. These organizations served as “trusted messengers” to help motivate and incentivize workers to make accessing benefits a priority; an issue our research has shown to be necessary to get workers to engage in this type of financial planning.

“Save-to-Win” (STW) is a game / promotion that utilized savings incentives to increase participation.

Childcare Center Owner and Catch Saver Amy Hubbard



Amy Hubbard realized a dream of hers when she opened her childcare center, Little Learners in Fairlea, West Virginia in 2018. Amy finds it rewarding that her center helps families in the community by providing safe, stable care for their children while they work outside the home.

Amy used the 401(k) savings she had from a previous job to buy the childcare center. This decision left her in a precarious position without retirement savings at the age of 50. Recently, she learned of Mountain Heart's Save-to-Win campaign via a mailer from the agency. She was anxious to set up a new retirement account and the campaign encouraged her to do it with Catch.

Amy is currently not able to offer health care or retirement benefits to her employees, but has encouraged them to set up Catch accounts on their own. She hopes they will learn more about the services the platform offers and the benefits it provides for long-term financial security.

Project Activities

The project began by engaging MountainHeart and CentralApp around the importance of access to benefits for independent workers and utilizing savings incentives in the form of a "Save-to-Win" promotion to boost participation. The campaigns would feature weekly drawings for a \$25 prize and the chance to win \$500 and \$1,000 grand prizes. A campaign timeline and outreach strategy was developed with each of the nonprofit partners.

Early on, the project also focused on developing dedicated Catch "landing pages"⁴ for each partner organization to use in its promotion of the fintech tool, both during the STW promotion and beyond. The landing pages were designed to create an easy way to access Catch's platform in a way that fostered familiarity and trust with potential users. In addition, the landing pages created a way for the project to easily track engagement and product uptake originating from each nonprofit partner. With messaging guidance from WISER, the partners also created marketing content that could be used across multiple channels – emails, newsletters, and social media. A local graphic artist was engaged to design content for direct mail inserts as well as social media posts by the nonprofit partners.

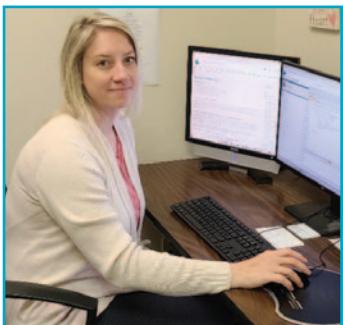
4 A dedicated landing page is the page a visitor arrives at after clicking an ad, or link from another website. The landing page might contain customized content or branding from a partner organization to increase the user's comfort or to promote affinity with the brand.

MountainHeart and CentralApp relied heavily on these “push” modes of communication, as person-to-person interactions were severely limited because of the pandemic. CentralApp included promotional materials in the 1099s sent out to independent workers in their network, ensuring high visibility, as well as weekly mentions on their in-house communications platform. MountainHeart posted the STW campaign on their social media accounts weekly and on their listserv sent to over 300 childcare providers, the majority being self-employed, home-based providers. MountainHeart also included an insert in their monthly mailing.

Throughout the STW campaigns, WISER had the partner organizations share news about winners of the drawings. This strengthened the affinity between organizations and their workers, and reinforced the concept that the nonprofits were the trusted source and provider of this opportunity.

WISER conducted additional outreach and promotion of Catch to independent workers through other nonprofit organizations serving independent workers. These included the West Virginia Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, West Virginia Tech Connect, and West Virginia Hive Network, all of which promoted Catch in their newsletters. WISER also worked with MountainHeart and CentralApp to incorporate financial education and the availability of benefits through the fintech tool into their trainings and orientation for new workers. This was another way to embed these offerings into the organizations’ programming over the longer term, with an eye to enhancing the long-term sustainability of the project impacts.

Rebekah Lilly, Programmer and Catch Saver



“I need to build up savings for an emergency fund... Like last year when I had a busted water line I had to pay for. I didn’t plan for it.”

Rebekah has a degree in computer science and had been working for a data systems company in Beckley, West Virginia for over 20 years. She has a basic health insurance account but no retirement account.

The Save-to-Win campaign came to her via CentralApp and got her over the hurdle of linking a bank account to an online service like the Catch platform, something she was reluctant to do before. She opted to set up a Tax Savings account to help her manage the taxes not withheld from her 1099 income she was receiving from contract work.

Recently, Rebekah left her employment with the previous firm after 20 years. The new job is a 1099 position without benefits. She plans to continue with the Catch platform to set aside tax money and to provide a savings account to help with family expenses.

Project Outcomes

■ *Integration of the Benefits Platform within Nonprofits Serving Independent Workers*

Partnering with credible, trusted nonprofits that serve the target audience of independent workers was a critical component of this project. As WISER's previous research and experience has shown, the use of "trusted messengers" in delivering financial information and resources is key to engaging LMI workers, helping them overcome barriers to savings and motivating them to take action. A primary goal of the project therefore was to elevate the importance of access to benefits for independent workers among the nonprofit partners and embed it as a permanent feature of their programming and assistance to independent workers.

Significant progress was made with both MountainHeart and CentralApp in demonstrating the value in providing financial education and resources for the independent workers they support. Both organizations are enthusiastic, committed and are taking steps to incorporate information on how an individual can set up their personal financial safety net into their agency's trainings and onboarding process. WISER is also helping to inform the education around that, including training the partners on how best to communicate to their audiences why this is important and how workers can access online tools and resources.

■ *Improving Independent Worker Access to Benefits through Financial Technology*

Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic, the project managed to reach nearly 600 independent workers and facilitate the opening of at least 36 Catch accounts.⁵ Twenty-nine users (80.5%) signed up for health insurance through the Catch platform, and seven users (19.4%) set up banking and savings accounts. The project ultimately awarded two grand prizes to workers who participated in the promotion; one from CentralApp and one from MountainHeart. The Save-to-Win promotions were specifically cited in participant interviews as providing a "boost" or getting them over the hurdle to open up an online savings account.

Although take-up was limited (for reasons highlighted below), the qualitative feedback on the Catch platform itself was very positive. Users reported that Catch was very easy to use, provided great offerings and services and had quality customer service.

Interestingly, participants who opened savings accounts noted in interviews that the reason they joined the platform was not primarily to save, but rather because they were looking to automate their tax filing obligations. In other words, the tax solutions (along with the prize

5 The number of accounts includes only those opened via the dedicated landing pages. Some users who learned about Catch from MountainHeart or CentralApp may have opened accounts by going directly to the Catch website rather than using the links provided, so there would be no way to identify those users as connected to this project.

incentives) offered on the platform opened the door to changed savings behavior, which speaks to the benefit of having a menu-type offering, as opposed to standalone solutions.

The high degree of interest in health insurance, and the comparatively lower levels of interest in savings solutions was a notable departure from the market research that WISER conducted in 2018. Then, the independent workers expressed the greatest interest in retirement savings and tax solutions, while giving health insurance a lower priority. This could be an impact of the pandemic, as independent workers lost prior coverage (e.g. through a spouse who lost coverage through a lay off) and sought out new coverage through the fintech platform. It could also be attributable to sample bias, as both the prior research and the current project had small sample sizes. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that another advantage of a platform with a menu of benefit offerings is that it can be more responsive to changing needs, as compared with a more limited or standalone offering.

“I was very pleased with Catch.”

*Amy found the online benefits platform offered by Catch easy to use and liked the tools they offer to project how much she needs to save to reach her goal:
“I don’t want to be making house payments when I am no longer working.”*

—Amy Hubbard, Project Participant

Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic

Unquestionably, the pandemic blunted uptake on the platform. Plans to reach independent workers at trainings and other regularly provided in-person events had to be cancelled. For instance, normally, MountainHeart has a “Trails” van that makes onsite visits to childcare providers where they have spread the word about financial opportunities in the past. During the pandemic, however, they were prevented from entering the childcare providers’ homes. With opportunities cancelled, the project had to rely solely on “push” modes of communication – social media, electronic and print. This was perhaps the greatest challenge the project faced for multiple reasons.

For starters, WISER knows from prior experience that when it comes to motivating workers to save, especially LMI workers, the in-person and face-to-face experience is key. A high degree of trust is required for someone to decide to link their bank account and begin saving into an online app or tool, especially if they are wary of new technology. There are also benefits that come from learning in a peer-to-peer environment where simply being in a group setting can motivate workers to act. In a project debrief, Catch revealed that getting their platform inside a product like DoorDash generates higher uptake, as those workers are already tech-savvy and using the app so trust is built-in as something DoorDash offers. Catch agreed that a large

segment of the independent workforce will not have opportunities like that, so it is still going to take outreach and grassroots work to reach them and motivate them to sign up.

The project's heavy reliance on electronic, "push" modes of communications also meant the project was competing for independent workers' attention in an unusually noisy and sometimes confusing informational environment. One childcare provider interviewed used a single word to describe operating during the pandemic: "Chaos." MountainHeart noted that project communications were hitting workers' inboxes at the same time as a flood of notices throughout the pandemic about opportunities for grants, information from the state about the Cares Act, and updates to COVID childcare safety protocols, which made it hard for information about the STW promotion to stand out. They noted that uptake for other programs they offer were also not getting as many responses from the childcare providers they serve – even a \$50 giveaway for toys had no entries.

Finally, the pandemic also created a great deal of economic uncertainty for many workers. Promoting a savings message and the STW campaign in the context of such uncertainty was challenging when many workers were more focused on meeting immediate financial needs than long-term financial security. For instance, MountainHeart reported losing five to ten childcare providers weekly during the first year of the pandemic. In the face of these challenges, the successes achieved by the project partners are all the more notable.

Beth Fanning Taylor, Solutions Architect and Catch Saver



"I loved the Catch app. It was easy to use. I liked the idea of setting the tax payments and forgetting about it and knowing it was being taken care of. I would recommend Catch to others—anything that can help people save and make it easier."

Beth Fanning Taylor decided to try Central App's training program after having a baby so that she could work from home. Working remotely allowed her to keep working wherever her husband's job took the family. By doing this, Beth avoided an economic pitfall that many women experience if they leave the workforce to care for children—losing salaries and savings opportunities.

With her husband's double degree in finance and economics, she believes that her family has fairly solid personal finance skills and knowledge. She has maintained the 401(k) retirement funds she received from her past employment. She learned about the Catch platform through Central App and became interested in Catch's tax withholding product because "We have all this stuff automated on my husband's side, but nothing was automated on my side. So, I thought it would be a good idea to automate tax withholding for myself."

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

■ *Developing Successful Nonprofit Partnerships*

The partnerships with the local nonprofit organizations serving independent workers were a key feature of the project, and there were familiar aspects to working with these groups that WISER has experienced in other related projects.

First, it is important to build in extra time and flexibility as things often take longer than expected and unexpected things can often happen, like changes in staffing. Our timeline and priorities for the project did not always coincide with the top priority of the local nonprofit organizations who typically have other programming and activities going on. Keeping the project on track required constant, ongoing communication.

Second, it often takes several “touch points” to get a new organization engaged. While we held off on starting a Save to Win promotion with a farm sector group for this project, we did continue to cultivate those relationships for future opportunities and found that it takes very careful and persistent communication to get others on board. That persistence pays off once potential partners become aware of the issues and are motivated to engage. As one contact with a farm sector nonprofit realized and noted, “No one talks about the financial consequences of choosing an agriculture career. It’s so important.” This project provided a foundation for future collaborations that will result in greater impact down the road.

■ *Addressing the Unique Financial Needs of Independent Workers*

The financial needs of independent workers reinforced the pressing need for easy-to-access benefits and financial education. It also bolstered what we know about the importance of trusted sources when it comes to navigating the complexities around financial planning and benefits.

Independent workers’ benefits needs are diverse and likely to change over time.

Product uptake in this project diverged from pre-pandemic market research. This year, the health insurance uptake was higher than the demand for savings solutions by roughly a two-to-one margin. Two years prior, a similar group of independent workers prioritized retirement savings solutions and tax help. This highlights the value of a menu of product and service offerings since benefit needs can be highly fluid with this workforce. The menu approach also may encourage greater adoption of multiple offerings, as illustrated by project participants who joined the platform to automate their tax filing obligations, but then took part in the savings promotions. In other words, the tax solutions offered on the platform (along with the prize incentives) opened the door to changed savings behavior.

■ ***Building Financial Security through Innovative Solutions***

It's easy for independent workers to identify challenges they are facing, but harder to know where to go for solutions. Workers can get "stuck," as competing, more immediate demands on their time and attention crowd out a focus on long-term goals. This creates an ideal opportunity for fintechs and nonprofits to offer solutions. WISER's programs use financial education as the jumping off point to help people "connect the dots." The result: more information fosters greater awareness and urgency, which then sets the stage for taking action.

Fintech-Nonprofit partnerships hold great promise – the strengths that each party brings are complementary and enhance the ability of others to find success. This project built on prior market research to identify independent workers' specific needs, as they articulated them, then finding the right product/platform to meet those needs. Catch's product offering proved to be a good match with the needs of the independent workforce we were targeting. Users also reported that it was easy-to-use and provided great customer service.

What Participants Are Saying

"When you are employed by a big company, they [provide information about benefits] for you and give you options to choose from. When you are on your own, and people are turning to you for help, you have to stay in tune with the changing environment and [keep yourself informed]". That is why I was so happy when this program came out."

—Amy Hubbard, Project Participant

"We have savings automated on my husband's side, but nothing automated on my side, so I thought it would be a good idea to set up a [Catch] account."

—Beth Fanning Taylor, Project Participant

"Making benefits a priority is a challenge when simply making a living is a challenge."

—Diane L. Browning, Project Manager,
WISER Rural Retirement Project

"I don't know what I don't know... It is like flying without a net."

—Kelsey, Project Participant

Likewise, the local nonprofits who partnered in the project had a deep well of credibility and connection with independent workers in their respective sectors, enhancing project success.

Independent workers are diverse and while they often share common needs, the way they find solutions may be very different. Despite the familiar images of app-based independent workers (e.g. so-called “ride-sharing” and delivery workers or contract tech workers), there are many others whose work involves limited interaction with the virtual sphere – the self-employed child care workers engaged in the project are just one example. As a result, simply offering up a self-service, DIY-type app will not work with every group; some may need guidance in navigating new products and technology.

Independent workers are similar to others in that they rely on trusted voices and peers in the face of complex decisions. The regional childcare agency and tech training nonprofit that partnered on this project served as a network of trusted messengers to help motivate and incentivize workers to make accessing benefits a priority; an issue our research has shown to be necessary to get workers to “cut through the noise” and engage in this type of financial planning.

Person-to-person communications still matter. Prior research has uncovered that live information sharing, whether from trusted messengers or among peers, can be highly effective in motivating individuals to set financial goals and to take action in support of those. The uptake rates measured on this project reinforced the importance of going beyond “push” modes of electronic and printed forms of communication. Repeated contacts and ongoing support are key to helping independent workers take and maintain action to achieve financial goals.

■ *Flexibility and Adaptability – Keys to Success*

Helping independent workers achieve financial security doesn’t happen overnight and may require course corrections as things play out. This project had a strong foundation of prior relationships and each of the partners was ideally situated to contribute to project success: WISER’s expertise with financial education and LMI audiences, MountainHeart and CentralApp’s deep wells of knowledge and trust with independent workers, and Catch’s turnkey technology and customer service expertise. Still, there were ups and downs. Regulatory and compliance activities took time. Bandwidth issues emerged as the fintech partner experienced rapid growth. Regardless, it was an ideal fintech product for this project and top leadership remained committed to the project goals. Looming over it all was the pandemic, which disrupted many planned activities. Fortunately, project partners were well positioned to change tack and adjust their activities in response to changing conditions. The long-term prospects for continuing this work are promising as well; each of the project partners is firmly dedicated to the goal of expanding independent workers’ financial security and believes in WISER’s approach to affecting change.

Conclusion

WISER is grateful to the Financial Health Network for the grant to explore the role that fintech can play in helping to address the needs of independent, small business and the gig worker-force. This opportunity provided through the Financial Solutions Lab Exchange has raised WISER's profile as an organization working to address independent worker needs and their lack of access to benefits. Specifically, it has expanded WISER's expertise and experience of working at a grassroots level on issues and solutions impacting low-income and independent workers. The project has also helped us to develop strong relationships with independent work sectors in West Virginia and amplified the challenges and barriers these workers face when it comes to taking action towards a more financially secure future.

What the *Building Portable Benefits* project and WISER's previous experience demonstrates is that knowledge and planning can improve financial situations. When provided with a basic financial education and an immediate way to take action, workers without access to benefits can better their situations. Even a minimal amount of savings beyond Social Security benefits will improve a person's retirement security by helping them live independently with less reliance on government programs. With trusted guidance, workers can become better consumers about what they need to know and they can be guided to opportunities to improve their lives by becoming emergency-fund savers, and then eventually moving on to open a retirement-savings account, such as a Roth IRA. The success of these programs show that interested people and organizations can help them. In fact, most of the workers enrolled in WISER's savings programs have proven to be eager to learn how to better their finances and have been responsive to guidance. They have started saving – and then continued to save.

"Our goal is to help workers build their own financial safety net with opportunities and options that meet them where they are in life."

— Diane L. Browning, Project Manager, WISER Rural Retirement Project

Looking ahead, WISER aims to continue our work to connect more independent workers with opportunities to access benefits and strengthen their long-term financial security, including:

- * Work with partners MountainHeart and CentralApp to educate their workers and incorporate financial education and the fintech platform into their ongoing trainings and service offerings. These partner organizations are now very engaged and there is great potential to reach large numbers of independent workers through their outreach, especially as in-person events are starting back up.
- * Refine strategies and develop best practices for promoting savings and building a financial safety net through the use of a fintech tool.

- * Explore opportunities to work with other independent work sectors and nonprofit organizations. WISER widely shares outcomes from our projects and programs and seeks additional opportunities for collaborations where possible. Several national organizations have expressed interest in learning more about how to adapt and implement a fintech platform and financial education program into their work, as have additional agencies and organizations in West Virginia representing farm and agricultural sector workers.

Project Promotion

Highlights

The *Building Portable Benefits* project attracted media coverage in West Virginia outlets. In January 2021, West Virginia Public Radio interviewed Diane Browning, WISER's Rural Retirement Project Manager about the project in a segment titled, "Southern W.Va. Program Teaches New Tax Solutions for Independent Workers, Businesses." West Virginia Public Broadcasting is also planning additional segments including interviews with project savers. West Virginia Public Broadcasting reaches more than 2.6 million in listeners and through their digital social media audience. The project was also featured in the Financial Solutions Lab blog, *Getting "WISER" on Addressing Unmet Needs Among Independent Workers* (February 2021). The project will also be highlighted through West Virginia University's Vantage Ventures, an initiative focused on building and strengthening West Virginia's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Sharing Project Outcomes

Project outcomes are shared through WISER's extensive partner network that includes: 22 national and local organizations formally partnered with WISER through the National Resource Center on Women and Retirement; WISER's Business Advisory Council which is comprised of financial and retirement industry leaders representing more than 15 companies; and WISER's more than 15,000 e-newsletter subscribers. Projects are also shared at local and national conferences and events which reach more 10,000 participants each year.

Diane L. Browning, Benefit U Project Manager, WISER Rural Retirement Project

The *Building Portable Benefits Project* built on more than seventeen years of work by WISER's West Virginia-based Rural Retirement Project focusing on the self-employed, low-wage rural worker. A lack of benefits created severe challenges for independent workers. As Project Manager, Diane Browning has worked to increase the opportunities for retirement savings for low-wage workers in rural Appalachia. She has focused on building financial assets for working people, particularly women, through entrepreneurship, savings opportunities and public policy advocacy. Diane and her husband live in Lewisburg, West Virginia on a family cattle farm.



Special Thanks:

WISER offers grateful acknowledgement to the Administration for Community Living and the U.S. Administration on Aging for its support of the National Resource Center on Women & Retirement.



National Resource Center on Women and Retirement

Financial security is critical to a high quality of life for older adults. The Administration on Aging works to improve financial peace of mind through the National Resource Center on Women and Retirement (the Center), a program funded by the Older Americans Act and operated by the Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER) to reach women most at-risk for poverty in old age and help them achieve a more financially secure future. The Center serves as a one-stop gateway, providing user-friendly financial education and retirement planning tools targeting traditionally hard-to-reach women with planning information and resources that focus on retirement, health, and long-term care planning.

For twenty-three years, the core of the Center's work has been conducting over 20,000 workshops and trainings, and developing model programs, print and electronic materials, website and social media that reaches women throughout the country. This work is accomplished through strategic partnerships and coalitions. Partners include national and local women's organizations, local government agencies, representatives of the business and financial sectors, and the National Network on Aging. Information and training are offered through model programs, workshops, and materials tailored to meet women's needs and help them build long-term financial security.

The Center specializes in helping women who are most at-risk for financial insecurity. This includes older women, women of color, lower- to moderate-income women, caregivers, and women impacted by divorce and widowhood. The Center's approach is to bring retirement and financial education back to the basics to help women and families improve their financial health and avoid financial exploitation. The goal: help women make the best decisions they can with whatever resources they have available.

Visit wiserwomen.org to learn more about the National Resource Center on Women and Retirement and to access WISER's publications, tools and resources, including our recent award-winning *Going it Alone: A Guide for Widows – 5 Steps for Navigating the Financial Challenges*.

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*The Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement
(WISER) is dedicated to improving the
long-term financial security of all women
through education and advocacy.*