



FICAS PILOT STUDY • UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

Study Information, Partnership Guide and Application Requirements

From shared priorities to coordinated action.

Applications open October 1, 2026 • Applications due November 23, 2026

Seeking up to three community partnerships in the United States and Canada

Feasibility of Interventions for the Adoption of Evidence-Informed Strategies

ficasstudy.com • ClinicalTrials.gov: NCT07804550

Community partnerships already hold the knowledge, relationships, and momentum. FICAS creates structured space to use them differently.

Community groups often know what needs to change. The harder questions are how to build a shared understanding of the problem, decide where collective action can matter most, connect local knowledge with relevant evidence, and move from promising ideas to action.

FICAS is designed around those questions. Rather than asking a community to implement a predetermined program, the partnership helps group members understand the system they are working in, identify leverage points, review evidence-informed options, select locally relevant action, and begin implementation. The group remains the decision-maker about the action it pursues.

Why spend the time to apply?

Because this is intended to be a working partnership, not simply a request for data. Selected groups receive facilitated time, technical support, structured tools, and resources to help turn shared priorities into a concrete path toward action. Your group also helps shape an approach that may be used with other community partnerships in the future.

What participation can offer your group

A clearer picture of the system Use facilitated group model building to surface the forces, relationships, feedback loops, and leverage points shaping the issue your group wants to address.	Focused time for collective strategy Create space for members to move beyond day-to-day coordination and work together on priorities, tradeoffs, and a feasible path forward.
Support moving from ideas to action Receive technical assistance as the group narrows possible strategies, makes decisions, plans implementation, troubleshoots barriers, and sustains momentum.	Resources for group-selected action Up to \$10,000 USD in seed funding may support an approved group-selected action, helping the group move beyond planning and begin implementation.
Stronger use of relationships and evidence Depending on study assignment, FICAS adds structured ways to use group network information, engage influential people, review evidence, and compare options.	A voice in what comes next Your experience will help the study team understand what is feasible, useful, and appropriate in real group settings and refine the approach for future work.

A substantial collaboration in every study condition

Study condition changes the timing and type of support a group receives. Every selected group ultimately receives Catalyzing Communities. One group is assigned to receive Catalyzing Communities plus the five additional FICAS activities. The delayed-start group first completes an observation period and then begins Catalyzing Communities.

Catalyzing Communities: the shared foundation

Catalyzing Communities is the base intervention platform. It is designed to strengthen shared systems understanding, group participation, coordinated planning, and movement toward action.

1 Convene and sustain a core group	Work with the study team to bring together a stable, multisector group for systems thinking, decision-making, and action. The target is generally about 10–15 active members, while allowing purposeful changes when needed.
2 Group model building	Participate in facilitated systems-thinking sessions that help the group develop and refine a shared representation of the local system, identify leverage points, generate action ideas, and move toward priorities.
3 Technical assistance	Receive proactive and responsive support for planning, coordination, troubleshooting, resource navigation, implementation planning, and sustainability while preserving group ownership of decisions.
4 Seed funding for action	After the group selects an evidence-informed strategy and develops a viable action plan, up to approximately \$10,000 USD may support justified implementation needs, subject to study and university requirements.

What FICAS adds in the augmented condition

The FICAS augmentation adds five structured activities designed to strengthen how relationships and evidence inform group decisions. Group members still identify their priorities and select the action they want to pursue.

1. Data-informed participation

Use network and representation information to identify gaps and opportunities in who is involved, then make purposeful decisions about participation as priorities and implementation needs evolve.

2. Opinion leader engagement

Identify and activate well-connected or strategically positioned people who can help evidence, feedback, and ideas travel through the group and reach relevant decision environments.

3. Structured evidence review

Bring community knowledge, local information, practitioner experience, and research evidence into the GMB process, then develop comparable profiles of a manageable set of possible strategies.

4. Decision support

Compare possible strategies using agreed-upon criteria, independent appraisal, collective deliberation, feasibility and economic considerations, and a transparent decision process.

5. Network learning

Use repeated network data and selected interactive views to understand how group relationships are changing and where there may be opportunities to strengthen connection, diffusion, or implementation support.

Three study conditions

Assignment is random. Each condition plays an important role in helping us understand what support is feasible and useful for groups.

Catalyzing Communities	Begins with the shared Catalyzing Communities platform. Helps us understand what the established community-engaged platform can support on its own.
Catalyzing Communities + FICAS	Begins with Catalyzing Communities plus the five additional FICAS activities. Helps us understand whether the added network- and evidence-informed activities are feasible and useful alongside the base platform.
Delayed start	Completes an observation period first, then begins Catalyzing Communities. Helps us understand group conditions and activity before intervention exposure, followed by experience with the base platform.

What every selected group can expect

- The group's priorities remain central. FICAS does not assign a predetermined policy, program, or strategy for the group to implement.
- Every selected group ultimately receives Catalyzing Communities; the timing differs for the delayed-start condition.
- Individual research participation remains voluntary, and group-selected action is developed collaboratively rather than prescribed by the study team.

We are looking for active groups ready for sustained, locally led work

FICAS welcomes different kinds of groups. You do not need to be formally called a food policy council, and you do not need to focus exclusively on children. We are especially interested in groups engaged in food systems work and seeking to influence policies, systems, institutions, or other structural conditions.

You may be a strong fit if your group...

- ✓ is based in the United States or Canada;
- ✓ is active and able to convene members;
- ✓ has at least one current or planned area of work that meaningfully affects children or families;
- ✓ works with or seeks to benefit children or families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage;
- ✓ has active participation from at least three sectors;
- ✓ has someone who could serve as a primary group partner or changemaker;
- ✓ is willing to consider policy, systems, environmental, institutional, organizational, or other structural strategies;
- ✓ has a feasible way to move a selected strategy forward, even if final authority sits with another organization or governing body; and
- ✓ is willing to accept random assignment and the study participation expectations.

Food systems are an area of special interest, not a narrow label requirement

We especially encourage applications from food policy councils and groups working on food access, nutrition security, school food, procurement, food retail, agriculture and local food systems, land use, food justice, institutional food systems, or related issues. A group may also address food systems as one part of a broader community or child-health agenda.

What counts as a meaningful connection to children and families?

The connection does not need to be the group's only focus, but it should be more than incidental. Examples could include current or planned work on school food, nutrition security, healthy food access, family economic conditions, safe and healthy environments, health care access, or other social and structural conditions that shape children's health and well-being.

What do we mean by socioeconomic disadvantage?

Applicants will describe the population and geography they serve and the socioeconomic or structural challenges that matter locally. You will not be asked to calculate a poverty threshold or determine your own eligibility. The study team will use prespecified community indicators after submission to verify this criterion.

A sustained partnership, with individual choice

FICAS asks groups to make a meaningful organizational commitment while preserving each individual member's choice about research participation. Group selection does not enroll any person in research. Individual adults will receive separate information and decide for themselves whether to participate.

Time horizon

The main active-intervention period is approximately 12 months. Planning and baseline activities happen before active delivery. The delayed-start group also completes an observation period first. Depending on condition and follow-up, total involvement may extend to approximately 21–24 months.

Group meetings

Approximately 10–12 study-facilitated meetings across the active intervention, with timing concentrated during more intensive phases and adjusted to group needs where possible.

Surveys and interviews

Four longer assessment surveys, brief monthly network surveys during relevant study periods, and optional interviews. Exact activities vary by role and study condition.

Core participation

Groups should be able to engage a relatively stable core group of about 10–15 people in study-facilitated activities, recognizing that purposeful membership changes may occur.

Primary group partner

At least one person should be able to coordinate with the study team, provide local strategic knowledge, support participation, and help keep group-side activities moving.

Random assignment

Selected groups must be willing to accept any of the three study conditions. Group preference cannot determine assignment.

Voluntary individual participation

Group leaders may help with communication and scheduling, but individual adults choose separately whether to join surveys, meetings, interviews, or other research activities.

How applications will be reviewed

1	Application	We review the information you provide about your group, community, work, structure, and study readiness.
2	Context review	The study team may review relevant public information and community-level indicators to verify or supplement application information.
3	Follow-up conversation	Some applicants will be invited to a conversation to clarify information, answer questions, and learn more about fit and readiness.
4	Eligibility and matching	The study team determines eligibility, then considers comparability across eligible groups on community context, group size, policy/PSE engagement, budget, and staffing.
5	Selection and assignment	Up to three groups are selected. Study-condition assignment occurs at random.

Recruitment timeline

OCT 1	Applications open
OCT 15	Information webinar • 3 p.m. Eastern / noon Pacific
OCT 28	Information webinar • 7 p.m. Eastern / 4 p.m. Pacific
NOV 23	Applications due
NOV 24–DEC 15	Follow-up conversations with selected applicants
BY Jan 14	Groups notified
Feb 2027	Partnership planning, orientation, and baseline activities begin

A note about matching: Matching is considered only after a group is found eligible. It helps the study team identify a set of reasonably comparable partners; it is not a separate hurdle that an applicant is expected to solve.

What to know before you apply

Don't screen your group out too early

Limited policy experience, an incomplete roster, staffing transitions, technology or accessibility needs, or reliance on an outside decision-maker do not necessarily make a group ineligible. Tell us what is real. The follow-up process is designed to help us understand context and support needs.

Write for people, not reviewers

This is not a grant competition. Plain language is welcome. We are trying to understand your group, not evaluate writing quality.

Describe what is real now

Tell us what your group is actually working on, including work still being developed. You do not need to present a finished intervention plan.

You do not need a seed-funding proposal

A detailed action plan or seed-funding budget is not required at the application stage. Group-selected action is developed later through the partnership.

Use your best estimates

For membership, active participation, budget, and staffing, reasonable estimates are sufficient if exact figures are not readily available.

Be candid about constraints

Limited staffing, transitions, policy constraints, technology needs, or uncertainty do not necessarily make a group ineligible. Knowing about them helps us understand fit and support needs.

Do not self-screen on socioeconomic data

Describe the community and its challenges. The study team will verify socioeconomic context using prespecified external indicators.

Expect a conversation, not just a score

Application responses may raise questions that are best understood through discussion. Some groups will be invited to a follow-up conversation before final decisions are made.

Questions groups may have before applying

Does our group need to be a food policy council?

No. FICAS welcomes organized groups and partnerships, including community groups, policy councils, movement-based coalitions or networks, and cross-sector partnerships. We are especially interested in groups engaged in food-systems work and structural change.

Does our group need to focus only on children?

No. At least one current or planned area of work must meaningfully affect children or families, but the group may have a broader mission.

Do we need experience passing policy?

No. Groups may be experienced or relatively new to policy and systems change. They must, however, be willing and able to consider structural strategies and have some feasible way to move a selected action forward.

What if another organization has final decision-making authority?

That is not automatically a problem. A group may advance an action by making recommendations, building partner commitments, developing proposals, beginning a pilot, or initiating an approval process with an authorized body.

What if we do not have a current member roster?

An incomplete or missing roster is a readiness issue, not automatically an exclusion. The application asks whether a roster exists or could be created with support.

Why apply if only one group receives the FICAS augmentation?

Catalyzing Communities is itself a substantial facilitated partnership, including group convening, group model building, technical assistance, and potential seed funding. Every selected group ultimately receives that platform; timing differs by study condition. The augmented condition receives the five additional FICAS activities.

Does applying commit individual members to research?

No. The group application is separate from individual research participation. If a group is selected, adults are invited and consented separately.

Have a question that is not answered here? Contact the FICAS team at trm250@pitt.edu. The information webinars will also include time for questions about fit, participation, and the application process.

What the application will ask about

Most of the application is quick-response.

Most items use multiple choice, checkboxes, dropdowns, contact fields, or brief numeric estimates. Five core prompts ask for short written responses, generally about 75–150 words. A few additional short-answer questions appear only when they are relevant to your group. You do not need to prepare a formal proposal or a seed-funding plan.

Helpful to have nearby: your service area, approximate membership, sectors involved, current priorities, one example of systems or policy change, approximate budget/staffing, and information about any similar outside initiative from the past year.

Application section	What we will ask about	How you will answer
About your group	Where you are based, the area you serve, what kind of group or partnership you are, and basic contact information.	Mostly dropdowns, multiple choice, and short fields.
Your group's work	Your current priorities, connection to children and families, food-systems work, and the kinds of policy, systems, institutional, or structural change you pursue.	Mostly checkboxes and multiple choice, plus two brief written descriptions; one additional short description appears only if relevant.
Your community	Who your group seeks to benefit and the socioeconomic or structural conditions that matter in the community.	One checkbox item and two brief written responses.
How your group works	Current operating status, meeting frequency, membership, sectors involved, coordinating capacity, roster readiness, budget, staffing, and approach to equity.	Mostly multiple choice, checkboxes, and brief numeric estimates; a short follow-up appears only if your group is in transition.
Fit with the study	Recent outside initiatives, openness to policy/systems/structural strategies, ways your group can move action forward, and ability to work within the study expectations.	Mostly multiple choice and checkboxes; one brief follow-up appears only if a potentially overlapping initiative is reported.
Interest and submission	Why the partnership is timely for your group, how you heard about FICAS, optional additional context, and final acknowledgments.	One brief written response, one optional comment box, and quick-response items.

READY TO EXPLORE THE PARTNERSHIP?

Bring the group you have. Build the next step together.

FICAS is looking for groups willing to examine complex problems together, learn from evidence and relationships, and move toward locally meaningful action. You do not need to arrive with a finished solution. The partnership is designed to create the structure, time, tools, and support to develop that path collaboratively.

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FICAS is led by Travis R. Moore, PhD, MS, at the University of Pittsburgh, in partnership with Yuilyn Chang Chusan at Tufts University. The work builds on Catalyzing Communities and is supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development through award HD109456.