



# 2020 Impact Report

 ETF@JFFLABS

# A Letter From Our Managing Director

---



**Yigal Kerszenbaum**

Managing Director,  
ETF@JFF Labs

The Employment Technology Fund, also known as ETF@JFF Labs (ETF), was launched in 2017 to fund early-stage technology companies that create opportunities and pathways to quality jobs for low- and middle-income adults living in the United States. Now, four years into the fund creation, our mission to increase economic advancement for all is more pressing than ever. We believe creating equitable economic recovery in the wake of recent catastrophes requires acknowledging that the current approach does not work for the most vulnerable populations. As a result, ETF is increasing its efforts to serve people, particularly those who historically have been the most underserved.

2020 was a time of unprecedented insecurity and socioeconomic suffering across the globe. COVID-19 shined a light on the deficiencies in our labor market, forcing us to further examine and reimagine our education and workforce systems.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly 45 million jobs were lost in the first six months of the pandemic, many of them frontline and essential roles that are disproportionately held by women, people of color, and recent immigrants. The effects of the pandemic have been further compounded by systemic racism and violence. Higher rates of illness and death in communities of color are tied directly to job insecurity. For example, a lack of safety nets and a wider support system makes it impossible to opt to stay home, despite the prevalence of unsafe working conditions. Overall, the pandemic has revealed our collective failure to acknowledge and address the structural problems that have consistently left millions behind.

This past year, ETF deepened our efforts to leverage JFF's networks, expertise, infrastructure, and scale to support the growth and development of our portfolio companies. Those efforts included, but were not limited to, the following steps:

1. We connected our companies with new growth opportunities across JFF
2. We helped retool go-to-market strategies to meet COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing guidelines
3. We launched pilots with Fortune 300 corporations

**Our portfolios have served millions of workers and learners during this time of high need.**

As ETF prepares for the next year and beyond, we anticipate a sustained need for investment in education and economic and workforce development. ETF is playing, and will continue to play, a leading role in maximizing impact, rigor, and investment in companies that serve underserved workers and learners. We invite funds and investors new to this space to amplify our collective impact through coinvestment, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.

To all of our readers: We are humbled to share the lessons we learned and the insights we gained in the past year. We hope this public report helps to inspire people and create transparency in the field of impact investing.

Thank you to our investors, network partners, and collaborators. And thank you to the ETF portfolio company founders and leaders for your vision and tenacity. We are privileged to support you as you redesign the education and workforce development systems and address the needs of a rapidly changing economy.

# Contents

**04** \_\_\_\_\_

Our Trends and Takeaways

**14** \_\_\_\_\_

Portfolio Companies

**07** \_\_\_\_\_

About ETF

**29** \_\_\_\_\_

Case Studies



# Our Trends and Takeaways

# Our Trends and Takeaways

## A Growing Field

*The pandemic-induced dislocation of millions of workers amplified the need for acute upskilling, reskilling, and holistic interventions*

The sobering events of 2020 set the tone for the entire field of impact investing. This past year, the number of funds, first-time fund managers, and dollars funneled into solutions that promote opportunity for adults working in low- and middle-wage jobs increased. Our mission to serve these workers, many of whom are women, people of color, and recent immigrants, has taken on added urgency. We have been thrilled to see more collaboration across funds in the past year, and we continue to monitor opportunities for partnership to widen our reach and equip the country's most vulnerable populations with tools and services they need to learn, earn, and advance.

Despite an initial slowdown and caution at the start of the year, the ETF pipeline of social entrepreneurs and innovators focused on the workforce has been growing exponentially. Studies suggest that economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19 will remain slow and uneven, even as vaccination rates rise. As a result, millions of workers will require acute upskilling, reskilling, and holistic interventions.

## Wanted: An Appetite for Uncertainty

*The field of impact investing needs more investors willing to take early risks to accelerate innovation*

As the pandemic increased attention on employment-related technologies and tools designed to help workers build in-demand skills, a number of related startups have emerged, many founded by first-time entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, there is still hesitance to invest in early-stage workforce innovations.

The field needs more investors who are willing to take early risks so that impactful innovation can become enterprise-ready. Although more impact funds and philanthropic investors are making early-stage investments, more catalytic capital is needed to truly innovate for systemic change. Catalytic capital as [defined by the MacArthur Foundation](#) includes “investments that accept disproportionate risk and/or concessionary returns relative to a conventional investment in order to generate positive impact and enable third-party investment that otherwise would not be possible.” ETF believes that creative solutions for the shortage of funds can and should arise to support emerging enterprises. Funding for impact measurement, relevant research, and case studies to demonstrate how a company's impact can align with return on investment for its customers, end beneficiaries, workers, and investors can be the key to unlocking future capital.

## Near- and Long-Term Solutions

*Philanthropic and catalytic capital is needed to fund and invest in solutions aimed to create systems-level change*

The crises of 2020 exacerbated existing problems and highlighted the need to invest in immediate relief and systems change simultaneously. The acute challenges people face at this time make it difficult to look beyond near-term solutions. The current crises have made it clear that we must embark on efforts to bring about wider, systems-level change to address societal inequities in meaningful and lasting ways. To this end, ETF is looking for opportunities to incubate, innovate, and invest in wider workforce systems change and to devise solutions that tackle structural paradigms, not just specific symptoms. This is another area where we believe philanthropic and catalytic capital can and should engage, and we welcome partnerships that will make a difference.



# About ETF

# About ETF

[ETF@JFFLabs](#) is the only specialized early-stage impact investment fund that partners with a diverse group of entrepreneurs who are building technology solutions that help adults currently working in low- and middle-wage occupations find, prepare for, and secure jobs that lead to economic advancement.

ETF@JFFLabs operates in tandem with JFF to pursue the same mission: to build a society in which everyone has the skills, resources, and credentials they need to achieve economic advancement.

ETF benefits from the expertise, networks, and infrastructure of a nationally recognized workforce development organization, fueling wider reach and higher commitment to impact.



# Impact Approach

ETF’s intentionally narrow focus on underserved workers and our partnership with JFF enable us to tackle both specific and systemic challenges. We are guided by four key objectives that support our mission of helping underserved workers, at scale, access opportunity.

<b>GOALS</b>	<p><b>ADVANCE</b> Adult Learners and Jobseekers</p>	<p><b>INVEST</b> in Scalable Early-Stage Technology Solutions</p>	<p><b>SUPPORT</b> Entrepreneurs From Diverse Backgrounds</p>	<p><b>CATALYZE</b> Diverse Sources of Capital</p>
<b>STRATEGY</b>	<p>Support and scale business models that meet the needs of people overlooked by traditional education and workforce systems, solutions, and players.</p>	<p>Back pre-seed through Series A entrepreneurs building companies with the potential for scaled, sustainable impact.</p>	<p>Advance the ecosystem of entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds who have the lived experience to be best positioned for workforce impact.</p>	<p>Partner with and catalyze traditional and nontraditional sources of aligned capital to build toward scaled impact.</p>

# Our Impact Areas

ETF focuses on four impact areas that have the potential to help people with low to middle incomes gain the education, skills, and support they need for jobs that offer opportunities for economic mobility.

## Learning & Training



- Adult education
- Alternative education
- Career and technical education
- Corporate learning

## Assessment & Matching



- Competency-based, non-cognitive, and behavioral assessments
- Interest inventory and basic skills

## Job Search & Placement



- Labor market information services
- Workforce alignment
- Job search
- Career navigation

## Wraparound Services



- Connection and coaching services
- Mentorship
- Communication and life management tools



# Impact Methodology

ETF embeds impact assessment into all stages of due diligence, portfolio management, and exit strategy. Using our proprietary impact screening criteria, we assess the mission alignment of a company's products, business model, team, and likely impact on beneficiaries. The ETF team and the investee work together to define an impact framework that maps the impact of the company, from its social mission and goals to the clear impact metrics the investee will use and report on to track its progress toward those goals.

The fund assesses the growth of a portfolio company's impact by tracking metrics related to overall market reach, solution, and employment outcomes. End beneficiary demographic data are gathered when accessible. Ongoing impact monitoring occurs throughout the life of the investment and is designed to support each portfolio company as it focuses on improving its impact on underserved workers.



# Impact Methodology

Sample metrics are illustrated below:

 Overall Market Reach	 Target Audience Breakdown	 Retention/Completion	 Employment Outcomes
Total users/participants	% of low-income users/participants	Program completion rate	% of job-conversion for participants/users
# of new jobs gained by users/participants	% of users/participants of color	Program retention rate at standard time point	Average salary increase for participants/users, at standard time frame after completion/use
Additional workplace-valued credentials gained by users/participants	% of women users/participants		Return on investment to employers
# of organizations (i.e., companies, nonprofits, community organizations) engaged	% of immigrant users/participants		
	% of parent users/participants		

ETF also tracks the fund's broader and systemic impact. We hold ourselves accountable to supporting our portfolio companies and to diversifying the field of early-stage impact investing with the following metrics:

 Ability to Attract Capital	 Diversity and Inclusion
Additional outside investment dollars generated by candidate following funding from ETF (e.g., capital leveraged)	% of female founders
	% of founders of color
	Geographic diversity

# Our Portfolio

ETF closed seven new investments in 2020 (outlined in black), disbursing \$1,450,000 in new capital into high-impact companies, and we had successful exits in two existing portfolio companies (outlined in green).

## Learning & Training

 <b>CareAcademy™</b>	Mobile learning to upskill and certify adults for in-demand careers in home health
 <b>CELL-ED</b>	Mobile platform that teaches literacy, language, and job skills, via three-minute lessons
 <b>embodied labs</b>	SaaS solution creating embodied, virtual reality patient experience labs for health care trainees and professionals
 <b>nepris</b>	Web-based platform offering schools virtual connections to industry experts to prepare learners for the future of work
 <b>nextstep</b>	Mobile-first and tuition-free training and job placement solution for certified nursing assistants

## Job Search & Placement

 <b>SkillSmart</b>	Skill-matching platform that connects jobseekers, employers, and educators
 <b>Upswing</b>	Virtual assistance and student services platform to encourage persistence among nontraditional students
 <b>Provider Pool</b>	Provider-focused labor marketplace for per-diem nursing professionals
 <b>FACTORYFIX</b>	Online staffing and recruitment platform for skilled manufacturing trades

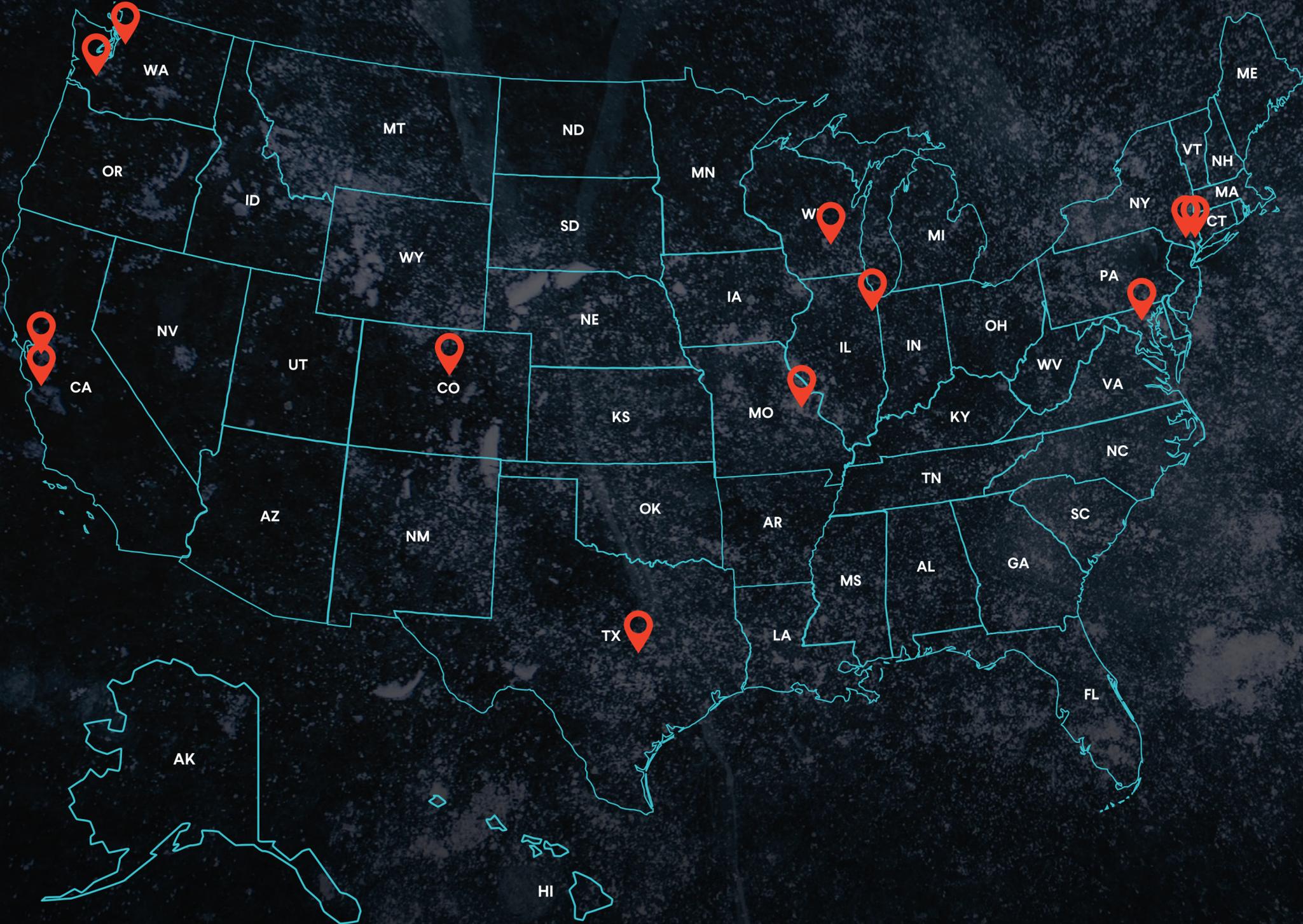
## Assessment & Matching

 <b>PAIRIN</b>	Online suite of soft-skill assessment, development, and employment tools for people who face barriers to employment
---	---

## Wraparound Services

 <b>SignalVine</b>	Enterprise text messaging solution nudging people toward better behaviors and outcomes
 <b>climb</b>	Technology-driven lender that provides loans to people from underserved communities for career-focused education
 <b>edquity</b>	Basic needs and emergency aid platform for college students, including one-stop hub for social services referrals
 <b>LEVEL</b>	Flexible, affordable credit for gig workers building microbusinesses

# Our Impact



**14 companies**

**9 states**

**\$3.1 million**

invested or granted

**12+ million**

lives reached

**\$13 for every \$1**

in new investment catalyzed by ETF

**60%** of investments and grants made to companies founded or led by women and/or people of color

# Portfolio Companies



Learning & Training



Assessment & Matching



Job Search & Placement



Wraparound Services



**231,340**  
Unique Users in 2020



**468,290**  
Certificates Issued in 2020



**205%**  
Increased in Credentials Issued Since 2019



“One of our proudest moments last year was when the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY) selected CareAcademy as their vendor of choice.”

**Helen Adeosun**  
CEO and Founder, CareAcademy

CEO and Founder: <b>Helen Adeosun</b>		Website: <b>careacademy.com</b>	
Year Founded: <b>2012</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2018</b>	Year Exited: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Boston, Massachusetts</b>

### The Company

CareAcademy creates digital tools that train and certify senior caregivers and home health aides, opening access to in-demand roles.

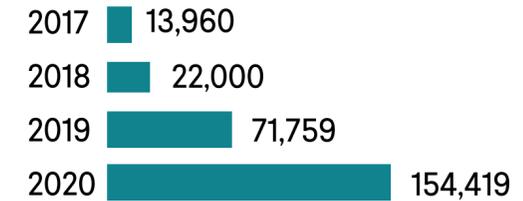
### Theory of Change

CareAcademy seeks to help caregivers provide older adults with the support, guidance, and compassion needed to improve their quality of life. The company’s goal is to make it easy for caregivers to learn new skills and continue their educations to better serve clients and advance their careers, while supplying home care and home health agencies with skilled professionals who are able to deliver better care, with better outcomes for clients.

The team works with thousands of agencies, franchisers, and caregivers nationwide to accomplish this goal every day.

### Cumulative Metrics

#### Learners on Platform (Cumulative)



#### Credentials Issued (Cumulative)



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

ETF provided catalytic capital at a critical time in CareAcademy’s trajectory. As a board observer, ETF made introductions to later-stage investment funds, several of which invested in CareAcademy’s Series A round. CareAcademy has been featured prominently at JFF’s national Horizons summit and in JFF market scan reports.





**242,222**

Learners Using the Platform in 2020



**10,360**

Credentials Issued in 2020



**272%**

Enrollment Increase

“One in five adults in the U.S. cannot read at a time when interpreting life-saving health announcements and applying for a job in the most competitive employment market in generations depend on it. I am profoundly grateful to our literacy-leading partners for enabling Cell-Ed to launch this challenge to reach, teach, and support 1 million always-striving adult learners.”



**Jessica Rothenberg-Aalami**  
CEO and Founder, Cell-Ed

CEO and Founder: <b>Jessica Rothenberg-Aalami</b>		Website: <b>cell-ed.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2014</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2017</b>	Headquarters: <b>Palo Alto, California</b>

### The Company

Cell-Ed provides adults with foundational skills training through three-minute micro-lessons delivered on mobile devices. As the company says, it’s literacy, language, and job readiness in the palm of the hand.

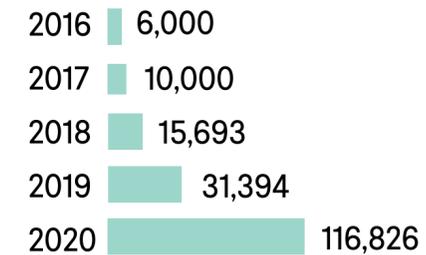
### Theory of Change

Cell-Ed is tackling the opportunity gap prevalent in today’s labor market by offering a universally accessible platform that does not require a smartphone or internet connection to provide training opportunities to adults who work in low-wage jobs, have low English-language proficiency, and have limited in-demand skills—a population that includes a large percentage of immigrants and women.

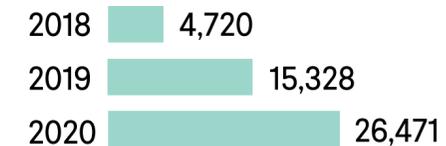
Cell-Ed provides mobile, foundational education as a pathway to achieving secondary and postsecondary degrees, work credentials, and essential language skills to ensure access to better jobs and economic livelihood.

### Cumulative Metrics

#### Learners on Platform (Cumulative)



#### Credentials Issued (Cumulative)



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As Cell-Ed’s first institutional investor and an early board observer, ETF has offered hands-on support in the areas of finance, governance, and marketing as the company has successfully pursued subsequent seed funding and bridge rounds. Cell-Ed has been featured prominently across various bodies of work at JFF.





 **8,454**  
Completed Training Modules

 **33,478**  
Completed Distance Learning Sessions

 **75%**  
of Customers Completed Pre/post Assessments

“My proudest moment this year was on August 20, when Embodied Labs was featured in the *New York Times* business section’s Fast Forward series, which examines technological, economic, social, and cultural shifts that happen as businesses evolve. There we were cutting through the unrest around the election and pandemic as our story... communicated the importance of shared immersive experiences to accelerate the way we provide care and service to others.”



**Carrie Shaw**  
CEO and Founder, Embodied Labs

CEO and Founder: <b>Carrie Shaw</b>		Website: <b>embodiedlabs.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2016</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Los Angeles, California</b>

### The Company

Embodied Labs offers an immersive training platform for caregivers. Through virtual reality (VR) experiences, caregivers can experience the perspectives and conditions of people receiving care, gaining an understanding they can’t get from traditional training tools.

### Theory of Change

“It is our goal,” the company says, “that the tools we develop will lead to a deeper understanding of the human condition, contributing to a more compassionate world.”

### Measuring Outcomes

In addition to collecting data on the use of Embodied Labs’ platform in-person and remote VR training modules, the team administers pre- and post-assessment surveys to capture their impact. These surveys capture information on what is learned, how what is learned improves job performance, how training labs create insight and eliminate blind spots, what is learned about people of different ages, races, or genders as it relates to the customer experience, and how training impacts confidence and the way trainees view the value of their jobs. Data from these surveys are being aggregated and anonymized for publishing in 2021.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As an active board observer, ETF has helped to make company introductions and developed an immersive learning technology market map, relevant to and showcasing Embodied Labs.





**42,370**

Professionals in Nepris Network in 2020



**163,865**

Students Using Nepris in 2020



**3,307**

Career Support Sessions Held in 2020

“Less than 2.2 percent of women-founded companies go on to raise Series A funding. In 2020, we were able to join this small group in reaching such an important milestone. This critical funding allows us to deliver student impact at scale, which means increased real-world relevance and career exposure for students across the country.”



**Sabari Raja**  
CEO and Founder, Nepris

Founders: <b>Sabari Raja and Binu Thayamkery</b>		Website: <b>nepris.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2013</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2018</b>	Headquarters: <b>Austin, Texas</b>

### The Company

A web-based platform that connects educators and learners with a network of professionals who can offer real-world advice and insights, Nepris helps users stay up to date on the latest trends in the labor market, providing them with access to firsthand information about what types of jobs are available and what skills are in demand.

### Theory of Change

Low-income and underserved students are disproportionately likely to drop out of school and unlikely to qualify for in-demand careers that can provide an economically sustainable wage. Research has shown that a lack of engagement in the classroom is a leading indicator that a student will drop out. The Nepris platform is intended to increase student engagement, expose students to a wide range of careers, and connect classwork to real-world careers.

### Measuring Outcomes

Nepris tracks outcomes that students and educators can expect in the short term related to relevance, engagement, and exposure. According to the company, students will establish connections with industry professionals; have greater career awareness, interest, and aspirations; gain awareness of classroom and real-world applications; gain content knowledge and soft skills; increase their social capital; and have greater career self-efficacy and continued occupational identity development.

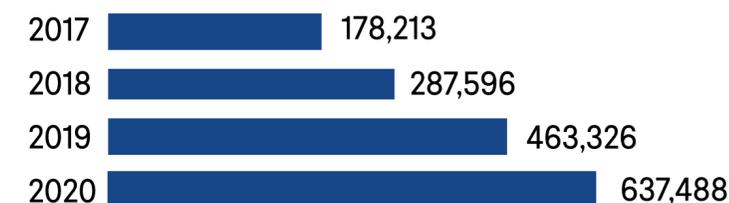
As for educators, the company says that they will see the benefits of providing authentic and real-world classroom experiences and, subsequently, will engage their classrooms in more authentic and real-world learning experiences.

Ultimately, says Nepris, after intermediate outcomes are achieved, students will evidence several long-term outcomes. Specifically, high school dropout rates will decline, and high

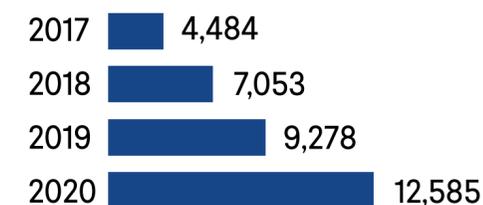
school graduates will enter the workforce with career and technical education (CTE) credentials and industry certifications, pursue postsecondary pathways, and complete postsecondary pathways in two to four years. All outcomes will culminate in a greater number of adults in STEM and technical careers and a prepared STEM workforce.

### Cumulative Metrics

#### Learners on Platform (Cumulative)



#### Career Support Sessions Held (Cumulative)



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As a board observer, ETF has made strategic introductions and worked closely with the founders to scale with key corporate clients.





**189**

Graduates in Tuition-Free Program



**97%**

of Graduates Placed in Jobs



**\$3,922**

Average Increase in Annual Wages from Last Employer

**“The past year has been difficult for everyone, but especially trying for brave nursing assistants directly helping the most vulnerable: the elderly in nursing homes. We’re proud at NextStep to recruit, train, and place the next generation of frontline health care workers where they are most needed, creating meaningful career opportunities for them, while we help solve the caregiver crisis in this country.”**



**Chris Hedrick**  
Founder, NextStep

Founders: <b>Charissa Raynor and Chris Hedrick</b>		Website: <b>nextstep.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2018</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Seattle, Washington</b>

### The Company

NextStep works in partnership with health care facilities to offer free technology-enabled training and placement for professionals with certified nursing assistant (CNA) credentials.

### Theory of Change

NextStep aims to create opportunities for people who are out of work or in low-wage jobs to begin careers in frontline health care roles and to address the severe caregiver shortage in the United States.

NextStep’s technology platform, curriculum, and student support system are designed to reduce the financial, logistical, and learning model friction that has prevented many low-income workers from pursuing the CNA credential, which can be the first step in a nursing or caregiving career path. Progress is measured over the short run by the number of students who graduate from the tuition-free program and successfully place into jobs with NextStep’s employer partners. NextStep aims to bridge what has been a growing gap between the limited supply and the enormous demand for these crucial frontline workers by expanding the pipeline of skilled, credentialed caregivers.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

ETF invested in NextStep and joined the company’s board as an observer in late 2020. We are particularly excited about the opportunity to support NextStep’s expansion and advocacy, including through connections to JFF’s Financing the Future initiative, which is focused on alternative ways to finance education and training.





**234**

Training Hours Delivered in 2020



**231,770**

Surveys Taken in 2020



**23,640,540**

Attributes Measured

“When COVID closures hit the country March 10 of 2020, our team did not freeze. We sprang into action to help our clients respond to the pandemic with custom content and accelerated delivery schedules to help those who had been displaced and needed help to get back on their feet. We also hired several people instead of holding expenses, which was a risk, but the right thing to do.”



**Michael Simpson**  
CEO and Founder, Pairin

CEO and Founder: <b>Michael Simpson</b>		Website: <b>pairin.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2012</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Denver, Colorado</b>

### The Company

Pairin’s technology unifies disparate workforce systems and data to help people make better decisions and connect with the resources and services needed to achieve their education and career goals.

### Theory of Change

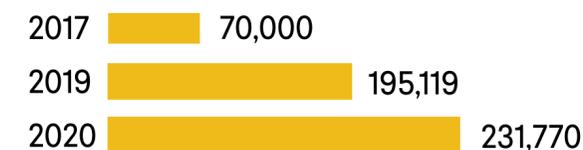
The Pairin platform unifies and modernizes regional and national workforce ecosystems, including K-12, postsecondary, adult workforce, and the disparate data sets that underpin them all. The personalized and visualized data enable organizations to more effectively deliver career guidance, skill development, and tailored community services, ultimately helping to match individuals to jobs.

### Measuring Outcomes

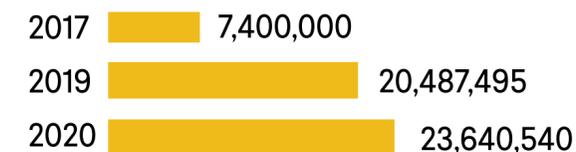
Pairin is developing a more robust impact measurement framework that examines user engagement with its My Journey workforce development software. Its recent acquisition of CommunityPro Suite, which provides coordination and reporting among federal workforce development boards, educational institutions, and other related programs, is meant to help with this effort.

### Cumulative Measures

#### Surveys Taken (Cumulative)



#### Attributes Measured (Cumulative)



### ETF@JFF Labs Contribution

ETF has supported Pairin as a board observer in several ways, including by securing financing from the Open Road Alliance and making key introductions to Series A investors. Pairin has also been featured across JFF’s networks, including at the annual Horizons conference, and featured in JFF’s Career Navigation Market scan.





**2,250**

Professionals Using the Platform



**\$21.50**

Average Wage of New Hires



**72%**

Average Job Retention

**“I’m incredibly proud of how many people we helped during the pandemic by finding them a great job within the manufacturing industry.”**

**Patrick O’Rahilly**  
CEO and Founder, FactoryFix



CEO and Founder: <b>Patrick O’Rahilly</b>		Website: <b>factoryfix.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2015</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Chicago, Illinois</b>

### The Company

The largest online network of manufacturing professionals, FactoryFix helps manufacturers fill job openings by connecting them with candidates who have been vetted and screened to ensure they have the exact skills and experience needed.

### Theory of Change

FactoryFix is dedicated to being a place where manufacturing professionals can find a great job today, learn skills for tomorrow, and get personalized career coaching along the way. The company intends to help do something about the labor shortage in manufacturing by providing a more attractive and accessible way to pursue careers in the industry.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As a board observer, ETF has helped FactoryFix brainstorm and plan for the introduction of training and career development opportunities for the workers who use the FactoryFix platform. The fund has introduced FactoryFix leaders to training providers that they can partner with, provided feedback on the platform’s career navigation resources, and connected FactoryFix to JFF manufacturing experts and opportunities related to increasing the diversity of the advanced manufacturing workforce.





**737**

Unique Users Registered



**\$22/hour**

Average Wage for Certified Nursing Assistant Shifts Booked on the Platform

“Over 400,000 nurses have walked away from nursing completely [because they felt] overworked, undercompensated, and underappreciated. During a time when nurses were needed most, I’m so proud to say that Provider Pool served those on the front lines of COVID-19 in a way that made them feel valued and adequately compensated for the incredible work they’ve done every single day of the pandemic.”



**Janna Westbrook**  
CEO and Founder, Provider Pool

CEO and Founder: <b>Janna Westbrook</b>		Website: <b>providerpool.co</b>
Year Founded: <b>2019</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>St. Louis, Missouri</b>

### The Company

Provider Pool offers an online marketplace that connects health care organizations to health care professionals. The company’s mission is to streamline health care staffing by providing a cost-effective tech-enabled self-service platform that automates hiring and recruiting processes by offering employers direct access to a vetted community of professionals.

### Theory of Change

The United States has a chronic nursing shortage and the majority of the profession’s attrition takes place among nursing students and professionals of color. Provider Pool aims to address that situation by building pathways to quality health care jobs for nondegreed health care workers and people from populations that have historically faced barriers to jobs that pay well and offer opportunities for economic advancement. The company provides access to educational and vocational training opportunities for health care workers, improves cultural competence in career advising, and creates a community of peers who provide one another with support in the form of motivation and accountability.

### Measuring Outcomes

Metrics used to track the success of Provider Pool’s offerings include the number of unique registered users and average wage for certified nursing assistant shifts booked on the platform. In the long term, Provider Pool aims to help solve the nursing shortage by levelling the playing field for all qualified candidates, improving caregiver satisfaction, and reducing the attrition rates of minority nursing students.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As a board observer, ETF has introduced Provider Pool to potential Series A investors, working capital providers, and organizations the company could partner with on business development opportunities, including assisted living facilities in Minnesota. ETF has also offered general support and mentorship to first-time founder Janna Westbrook.





**41,000**  
Workers on Platform



**3,400**  
Contractors on the Platform



**39%**  
of Workers on Platform Reside in  
an Economically Disadvantaged Area

“In the first full year of rolling out our InSight platform for tracking, reporting and managing diversity and inclusion on construction and economic development projects, we anticipated that we would face the same challenges confronting other small businesses during the pandemic. Instead, we saw organizations began to recognize that increasing diversity and inclusion isn’t just a compliance box to be checked, but a way to improve lives and communities. We doubled the number of projects we were supporting from 22 to 48, doubled our head count from 10 to 20, and doubled down on our mission to build strong communities and clear paths to economic success. We’re looking forward to working with our clients 2021 to make diversity and inclusion objectives more accessible, achievable, transparent and accountable.”



**Michael Knapp**  
Founder, SkillSmart

Founders: <b>Jason Green and Michael Knapp</b>		Website: <b>skillsmart.us</b>
Year Founded: <b>2013</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2017</b>	Headquarters: <b>Germantown, Maryland</b>

### The Company

SkillSmart provides tools to track, retain, and grow the employers and workforces that make communities thrive. The company offers two primary solutions: Seeker, a skills-matching platform that’s designed to increase transparency in career development and job search activities, particularly in the construction industry, and Insight, a platform designed to streamline tracking of project data, including workforce, wage, and compliance data, to help companies stay in compliance with labor laws and other regulations.

### Theory of Change

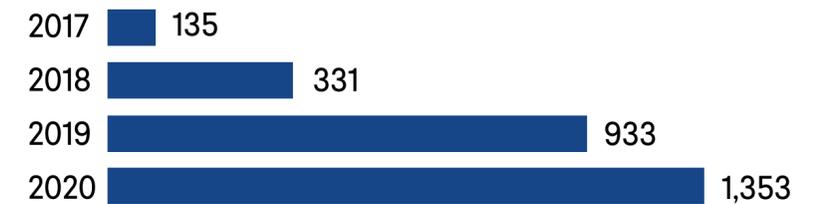
SkillSmart offers construction compliance, reporting, and tracking tools. Communities everywhere are seeking to grow and become stronger by providing opportunities for all residents and businesses. Driven by the belief that strong and thriving communities matter, SkillSmart provides solutions that organizations can use to track, measure, report and act upon all participation levels.

### Cumulative Metrics

#### Assessments Taken\* (Cumulative)



#### Number of Insight Users (Contractors Engaged)



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

SkillSmart was featured in ETF’s field test study in partnership with the EdTech Center of World Education, resulting in key lessons learned for SkillSmart and the broader employment technology field.

\*2020 calculations were not available at the time of publishing this report





**64,011**  
Students Reached



**80%**  
Students Identify as People of Color



**59%**  
Students Over the Age of 24



“There were a few accomplishments that stood out in 2020. First, being critical in our college and university partners’ ability to quickly pivot to being purely online. Some of the schools that used Upswing were able to make the change in about a week. Second, we were very honored to be recognized in Fortune’s Impact 20 list alongside much larger, and well-established companies like Guild Education.”

**Melvin Hines**  
Founder, Upswing

Founders: <b>Melvin Hines and Alex Pritchett</b>		Website: <b>upswing.io</b>
Year Founded: <b>2013</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Austin, Texas</b>

### The Company

Upswing provides solutions, including a virtual assistant called Ana, that educators can use to reach, relate to, and retain nontraditional learners by scaling student services, supporting 24/7 online tutoring, optimizing engagement, and utilizing insightful data to identify and support students who may face challenges that make it difficult to complete their educations.

### Theory of Change

Nontraditional students leave college before completing their programs at twice the rate of their peers, often because they do not have strong levels of engagement with or connections to key faculty and staff members, including tutors, counselors, advisors, and professors. Colleges believe that investing in faculty and staff is critical to the goal of increasing student persistence, but problems arise when nontraditional students—who pay as much to attend college as their peers—do not feel they have equitable access to support from those professionals. Upswing’s goal is to not only provide tools that enable and facilitate those connections, but also proactively engage students to further ensure that the connections occur.

### Measuring Outcomes

In 2021, Upswing plans to launch a randomized controlled trial with one or more of its partner institutions to assess the impact that its Ana virtual assistant has on student outcomes. This study will determine how much impact Upswing is having on student engagement and retention, and it will provide data that makes it possible to more accurately articulate the impact that Upswing’s services have on institutional metrics like enrollment and prevention of tuition loss.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

ETF provided catalytic capital that allowed Upswing to penetrate more deeply into key markets such as community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities. Additionally, ETF introduced Upswing leaders to several potential Series A investors.





**27,077**

Number of Unique Students Who Have Received Climb Financing



**11,165**

Borrowers to Date With No Credit or a Credit Score Below 650



**\$9,871**

Average Loan Size for Borrowers With no Credit or Credit Score Below 650

“My proudest moment of the year was when Climb instrumented a deferral benefit—with no accrued interest—during the first few months of the pandemic. We knew that our learners may have lost wages at that time, and the entire team came together, along with our supportive investors, to put this benefit in place.”



**Angela Ceresnie**  
CEO, Climb Credit

Founders: <b>Amit Sinha, Raza Munir, Vishal Garg, and Zander Rafael</b>		Website: <b>climbcredit.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2014</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2019</b>	Headquarters: <b>New York, New York</b>

### The Company

Climb Credit is a technology-driven lender providing loans for training programs with high return on investment for students, increasing access to stable, high-wage, meaningful work.

### Theory of Change

Climb’s founding principle is that education needs to have meaningful results for learners—and those results should correlate with cost. It says that the U.S. higher education system has left millions of people in debt with no way to pay, partly because the cost of education programs is not effectively tied to the outcomes and results of that education. Climb’s operating assumption is that placing limits on education costs correlated with expected career results can help create better outcomes for learners and reduce burdensome student debt in our country. At its partner schools, graduation rates are consistently at 94 percent, job placement rates are above 80 percent, and salary increases after graduation are above 70 percent.

### Cumulative Metrics

**Percentage of Borrowers with no credit or a credit score below 650 (Cumulative)**



**Borrowers with no access to credit other than Climb**



**Average increase in pretraining income**



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

ETF has served as a trusted advisor and board observer, directly advising Climb’s CEO and team on advocacy for alternative financing for education, including through JFF’s Financing the Future initiative. ETF made several introductions to potential investors to support Series B funding.





**\$11,983,427**

Total Amount of Funding Deployed to Students for Education Financing or Assistance



**13,816**

Active Users Who Are Student Parents



**19%**

Students Who Have Experienced Homelessness in the Past 12 Months

“In many ways, we were pushed to grow perhaps faster than we were prepared to. When the pandemic struck, we were serving a single partner, having processed 1,000 applications and having administered about \$200,000. Overnight, we were being asked to move millions of dollars. Scaling in just a few weeks to meet the needs of our second partner, Western Governors University, and its 100,000 students was a daunting task, but seeing our team meet the moment to successfully administer \$2 million in about a week—with 8,000 applications processed on a single day—was an unbelievably gratifying experience.”



**David Helene**  
CEO and Founder, Edquity

CEO and Founder: <b>David Helene</b>		Website: <b>edquity.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2016</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Brooklyn, New York</b>

### The Company

Edquity is an antipoverty company that helps colleges improve students’ financial security by increasing access to resources and emergency funding. The Edquity platform, provided for partners as a white-labeled mobile app and web platform that can be rebranded by the partners, allows students to apply for and receive emergency cash grants in less than 48 hours and find resources to help them meet their basic needs. Edquity arms institutions with the analytical tools to understand in real time where students’ needs are and track the efficacy of their institutional initiatives.

### Theory of Change

Edquity’s theory of change centers on narrowing equity gaps in educational outcomes and social determinants of health. In the short term, Edquity does this by streamlining access to critical emergency cash assistance to students in crisis in a manner that is equitable, fast, and high in impact. In the long term, Edquity will leverage its outcome and experiential data to advocate for more enlightened structural policies that increase the supply of resources for students where equity gaps currently exist.

### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

Immediately after ETF’s funding and during a crisis among low-income students brought on by the pandemic, ETF connected Edquity with JFF’s Student Success Center Network of community college success centers to introduce and roll out its solution to the learners most in need of emergency assistance.



# LEVEL



**\$2,000**

Average Loan Granted



**1.8x**

Multiple by which Level customers increased their income compared to their peers in the same marketplace and in the same time period



**86**

Net Promoter Score



“It has been incredibly satisfying to see our customers thrive through access to a Level Advance. ‘Edgar’ purchased a trailer and then a box truck and employed two people to work with him. ‘Raul’ was able to get back on the road with a new transmission and grow his moving business. And many other customers relied on Level to invest in and grow their businesses. Our customers inspire us and give us thousands of small but substantive reasons to be proud of Level!”

**David Edelstein**  
Founder, Level

Founders: <b>David Edelstein, Connor Adams, and Dylan Higgins</b>		Website: <b>levelgoals.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2019</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2020</b>	Headquarters: <b>Seattle, Washington</b>

## The Company

Level empowers people to build and grow microbusinesses by providing the portable financial benefits they need to prosper. Designed for micro-entrepreneurs who are building businesses, Level is a financial services platform powering a growing on-demand economy.

## Theory of Change

Level is redefining and delivering the portable financial benefits needed in the on-demand economy—empowering people to build and grow microbusinesses and putting micro-entrepreneurs in charge of how they work. Its first product, the Level Advance, provides flexible, transparent, and fair credit to enable people to invest in productive assets and access working capital. This creates a virtuous cycle as entrepreneurs grow their very small businesses, employ others to work with them, and access resources they need to get jobs done at a consistently increasing scale. Level says it is “unlocking the potential of microbusinesses and empowering them to grow and succeed.”

## ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

ETF was the first institutional funder to support Level’s lending platform. At the time of our funding, Level had made 120 advances, and our funding doubled the size of its debt facility. ETF’s funding of Level’s debt facility made it possible for Level to continue to offer its advances and demonstrate its business model and impact, allowing it to close on a \$1.5 million seed round within four months of ETF’s funding. ETF has also supported Level in introductions and in its planning for how to grow the debt facility with mission-aligned capital before it has access to institutional capital.





**7,027,190**  
Students Nudged in 2020



**11,703,283**  
Students Nudged Since 2015



“Since the beginning of COVID, we have touched [the lives of] more than 3.5 million students so they can get the institutional support necessary to continue their learning journey through such a difficult time. The business has experienced huge tailwinds as the need to engage students has become mission-critical for colleges and universities. While business accomplishments are an invigorating source of pride, our partnership with Active Minds to normalize the conversation around mental health during the COVID crisis culminated in a webinar for higher ed leaders which had 2,000-plus registrations eager to better understand how texting can be used to support their students’ mental health. That was probably our proudest moment.”

**Brian Kathman**  
CEO and Founder, SignalVine

CEO and Founder: <b>Brian Kathman</b>		Website: <b>signalvine.com</b>
Year Founded: <b>2013</b>	Year of Investment: <b>2017</b>	Headquarters: <b>Alexandria, Virginia</b>

### The Company

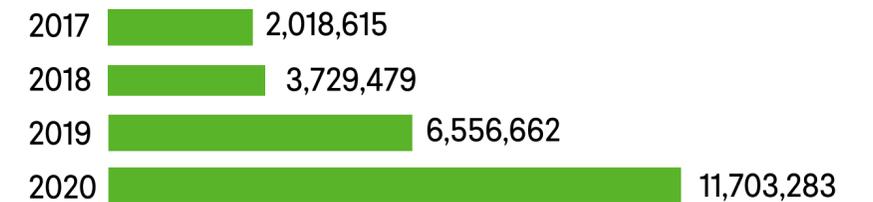
Educational institutions can use SignalVine’s two-way text messaging platform, powered by artificial intelligence, to engage students, staff, and employees. The system has proved to be an especially powerful tool when it is used to encourage—or “nudge”—adults to take action to develop new skills or pursue opportunities. SignalVine helps increase the impact of workforce development teams.

### Theory of Change

SignalVine has enabled institutions to better engage and support their students by better understanding who their students are and what they need, and then proactively providing the students with support and opportunities. Using student attributes, responses, and history of engagement, education leaders can target students with specific, individualized guidance for success. The resulting data inform decisions to scale the support for more students earning a credential and being set up for success in their careers and life.

### Cumulative Measures

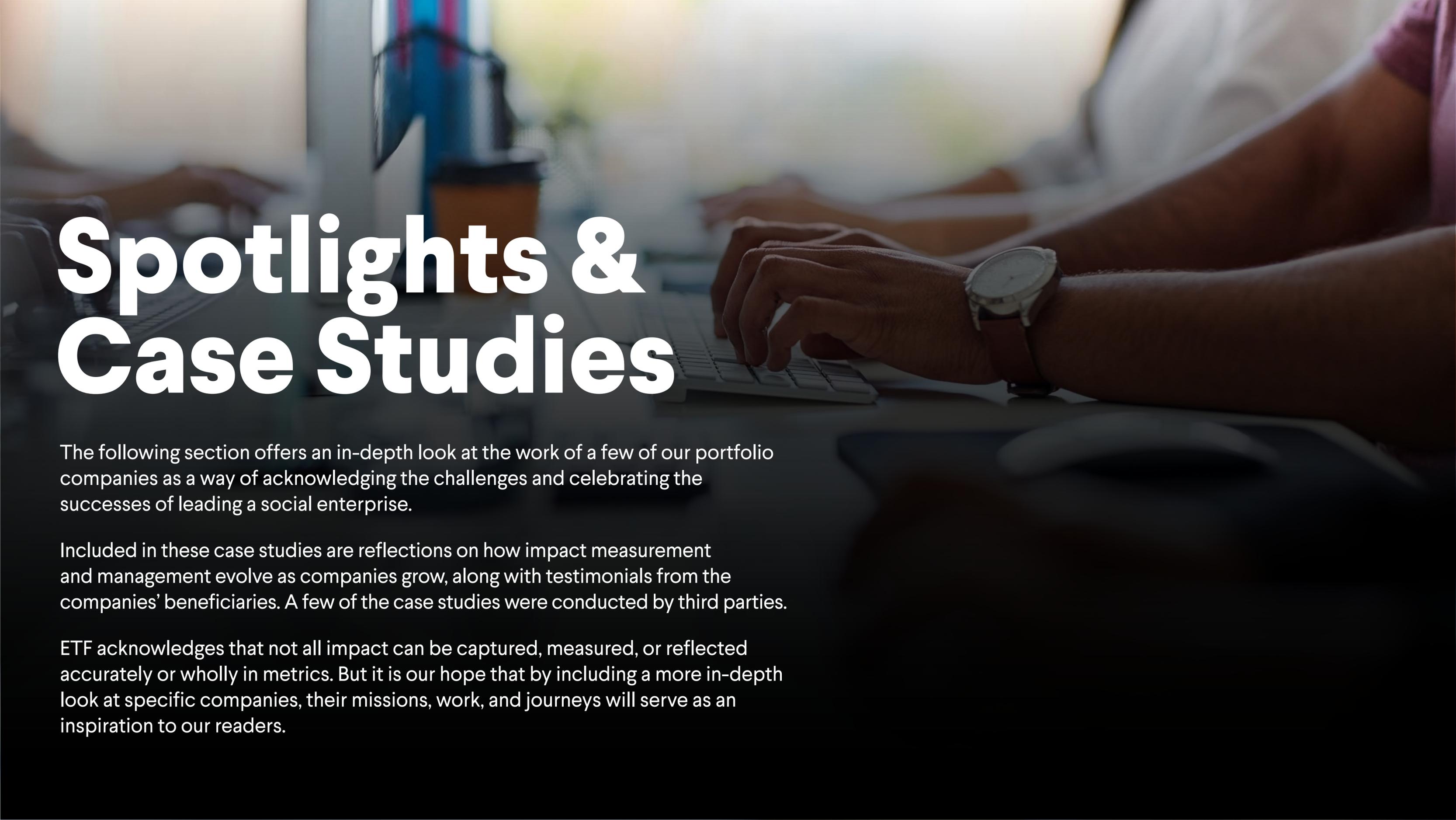
#### Students Nudged (Cumulative)



### ETF@JFFLabs Contribution

As a board observer, ETF has helped SignalVine to assess impact and codify effective employment technology tools along with seven other portfolio investments. SignalVine has been featured prominently across various bodies of work at JFF, leading to some valuable commercial opportunities.



A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a watch on their left wrist. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be an office environment with a computer monitor and some papers. The overall lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an indoor workspace.

# Spotlights & Case Studies

The following section offers an in-depth look at the work of a few of our portfolio companies as a way of acknowledging the challenges and celebrating the successes of leading a social enterprise.

Included in these case studies are reflections on how impact measurement and management evolve as companies grow, along with testimonials from the companies' beneficiaries. A few of the case studies were conducted by third parties.

ETF acknowledges that not all impact can be captured, measured, or reflected accurately or wholly in metrics. But it is our hope that by including a more in-depth look at specific companies, their missions, work, and journeys will serve as an inspiration to our readers.

# Upswing



## Spotlight: Upswing's Evolution of Impact

Since 2013, Founders Melvin Hines and Alex Pritchett have been seeking to quantify the impact Upswing delivers for its student beneficiaries. ETF has been proud to support the company through its journey and to fund these entrepreneurs' drive to go beyond beneficiaries' short-term needs to address structural barriers that prevent them from thriving. We include the following case study to highlight that impact assessment is rarely a straight line, but once it has been unlocked, validation and efficacy can drive growth.

Upswing was founded with a mission to offer students the tutoring resources needed for success. The company began two pilot programs with higher education institutions, which in turn funded initial studies. The studies found that students who received Upswing tutoring had a 12 percent higher average GPA than those who did not. Validation fueled traction, and by its third year Upswing began using the platform for all student services: moving beyond tracking GPAs to focusing on student retention. The company then hired a data scientist to help lead an impact study focused on linking school and institutional data to the efficacy of Upswing's interventions.

In 2018, Upswing developed a classroom chatbot, Ana, to help teachers more easily reach their students. Pilot studies revealed that Ana's reminders about resources and sign-up deadlines, as well as the bot's encouragement, had a positive effect on student engagement linked to persistence in class. However, further data and resources were necessary to solidify the link between the Upswing platform and retention.

COO Alex Pritchett notes that measuring impact has not always been easy: "It's tough for a startup, because we know how important it is to verify that we are moving the needle. But it takes trust to get customers to share data that demonstrate rigor. Over time we've built relationships that have allowed us to do the type of analysis and have the rigor we want to have as a company."

In 2021 and 2022, Upswing will capitalize on the trust it has built and evaluate Ana's effectiveness in a randomized controlled trial (RCT), considered the gold standard for evaluating the

effectiveness of interventions. Whereas prior external studies focused on changes in GPA, this RCT will also study engagement with the platform and student sentiments. The company will track grade improvement and whether students feel more supported and whether that feeling, or sense of belonging, leads to greater retention. ETF is excited to support Upswing's next stage of evolution as it quantifies its impact and its ability to serve as a model to other startups, and as it demonstrates that the path to rigorous impact evaluation is possible with deep team commitment.





## Case Study:

# Dallas College uses Edquity platform to distribute more than \$5 million in CARES Act funding during COVID-19

The #RealCollege survey conducted by the Hope Center in 2019 revealed that 17 percent of student respondents reported being homeless at some point in the previous year, that 39 percent said they were food insecure, and that 46 percent faced some level of housing insecurity. ETF's funding of Edquity is in line with the fund's belief that simply having access to opportunity is not enough for chronically under-resourced individuals. ETF believes that, while college education can be a high-potential path for learners, people with low incomes struggle to meet basic needs even in the best of circumstances. This case study highlights how essential Edquity's intervention can be in times of high need, especially for the most underserved populations.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered businesses, closed schools, and sent classes online in March 2020, Edquity was already poised to support colleges and their students in crisis. In October 2019, ten tornadoes struck the Dallas area, causing more than \$2 billion in damage. Days after the twisters touched down, Dallas College launched a partnership with Edquity. Within the first hour, more than 100 students filed applications to receive emergency grants. Over the following weeks, nearly 1,000 Dallas College students were able to use Edquity to apply for and receive emergency funds in less than 48 hours.

Distributing hundreds of thousands of dollars during a natural disaster proved that Edquity was prepared to help schools during the pandemic. However, a new challenge emerged: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act bars higher education institutions from using any of its \$6.28 billion in relief funds to aid students not eligible for benefits under Title IV, thus excluding undocumented, international, and DACA students.

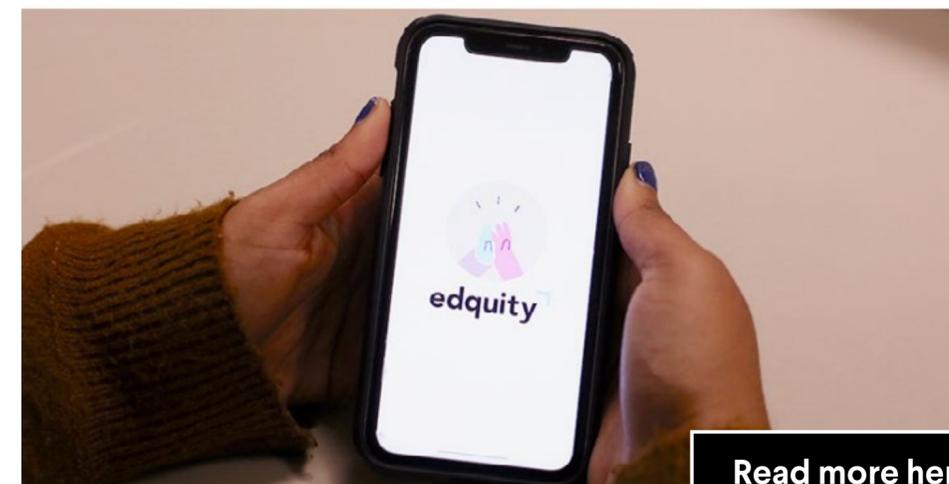
Edquity worked with Dallas College to process relief dollars from the CARES Act inclusively. Title IV-eligible students received CARES Act funds, and students not eligible for Title IV received emergency aid from a pool of funds privately raised by Dallas College through its foundation. The aid was indistinguishable to students, with applications taking only seven minutes to complete and with students receiving a decision within 24 hours, on average.

Since April 2020, Dallas College has processed more than 9,000 student aid applications and distributed more than \$5 million in CARES Act funds to its students. Hundreds of thousands of additional dollars have gone to students not eligible for federal emergency aid money. By partnering with Edquity, Dallas College was able to increase overall retention, despite the immense challenges and administrative hurdles created by the pandemic. Dallas College and Edquity's multiyear partnership demonstrates the potential impact that a streamlined, research-driven, equitable emergency aid platform can have on students and higher education institutions.

## DCCCD Teams Up With Edquity to Launch Emergency Aid Mobile App for Students

The tech is already proving effective with over \$70,000 distributed to DCCCD students affected by recent tornados through the app.

BY DAVID KIRKPATRICK • NOV 22, 2019



[Read more here](#)



## Case Study: Cell-Ed's State of California Partnership

To say that Jessica Rothenberg-Aalami, founder of micro-learning company Cell-Ed, is a powerhouse is an understatement. Since 2014, she has built a fully distributed, employee-owned public benefit corporation that serves more than 150,000 end users and 1 million indirect users in more than 50 countries and has created \$30 million in social capital in 2020, according to a third-party study. ETF invested in 2017, excited by Rothenberg-Aalami's dual tech and research approach to training adults in low-wage jobs, which she was able to leverage to deliver essential skills and services during COVID-19.

Cell-Ed works with 892 network partners and nine U.S. states. In the spring of 2020, Cell-Ed began partnering with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to provide its clients with work readiness and foundational skills, as well as COVID-19 guides through the platform.

The innovative partnership allows CDSS clients enrolled in CalFresh E&T, CalWORKs Welfare to Work, and Refugee Support Services to use Cell-Ed's scientifically proven remote learning solution to receive education and training to build countable participation hours while sheltering or caring for others at home. Countable hours can be used by learners to meet their public benefits requirements for each CDSS program. Through this partnership, Cell-Ed's mobile-first programs are available directly to all California counties free of charge.

County representatives have access to Cell-Ed's data and reporting to track client progress and countable hours toward education requirements for government benefit recipients. Case managers can communicate with Cell-Ed coaches to monitor progress.

Client testimonials and early stats on the program's efficacy (such as those below) show that it has great traction and reach, and that innovative approaches can meet peoples' needs during difficult times.

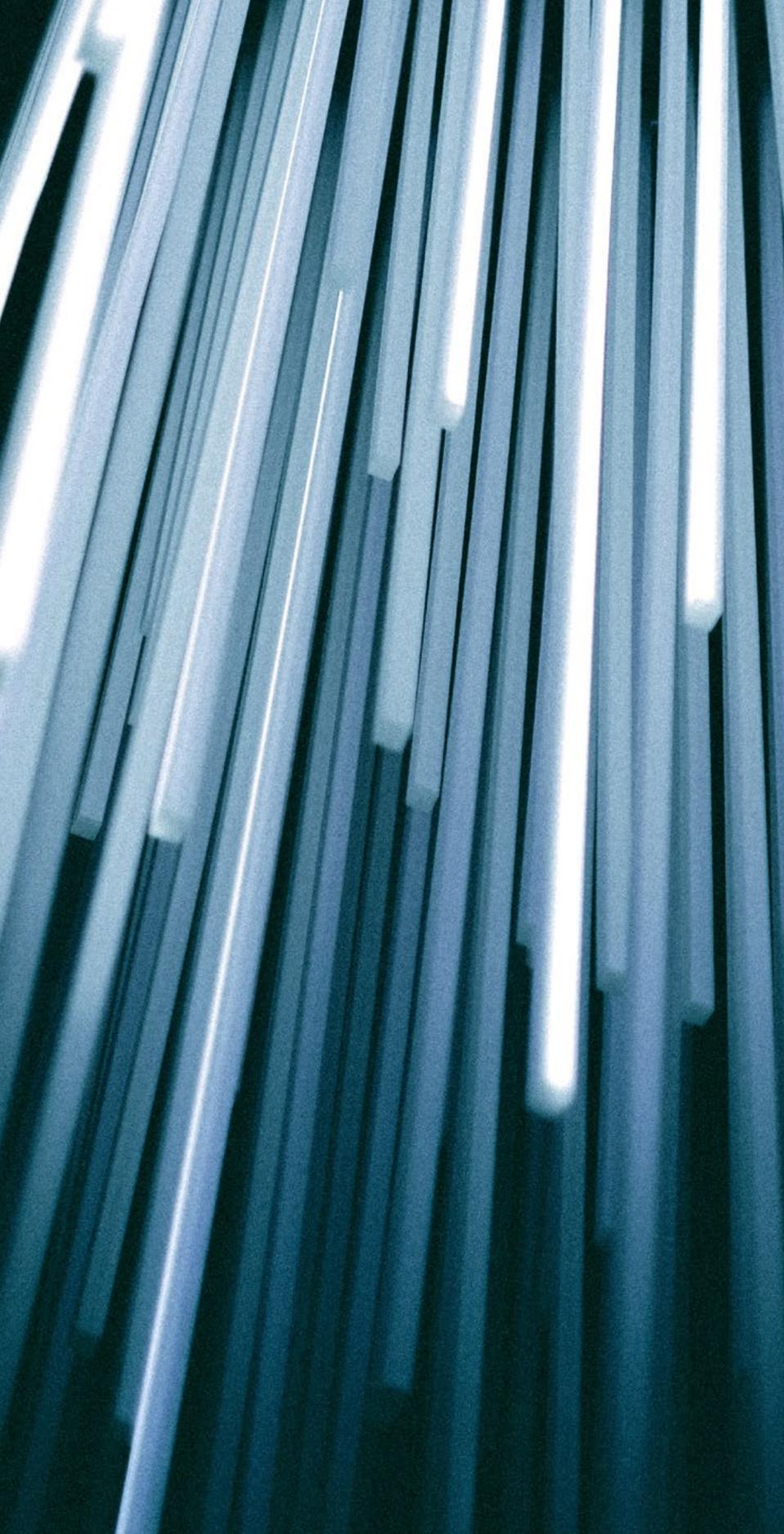
- **398 CDSS staff representatives from 48 counties** have signed up to administer the program, representing CalWORKs, CalFresh E&T, Refugee Support Services, and General Relief/General Assistance.
- Clients have gained an average of **207 skills (over 79,000 total)**, such as the ability to apply for a job or communicate with a boss.

**“I really love the program, and I wish more people would try it out—especially older people. It really helps refresh concepts. Whoever came up with the program is a genius. I have only positive things to say about this course.”**

*- Orange County client*

**“Cell-Ed is truly very innovative and a great remote learning solution.”**

*- Los Angeles County employee*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the contributors who helped this impact report come together and who provided ETF with wisdom and guidance. Your insight and support are invaluable.

---

## ABOUT JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)



**50 Milk St., 17th Floor, Boston, MA 02109**

122 C St., NW, Suite 280, Washington, DC 20001

505 14th St., Suite 340, Oakland, CA 94612

**TEL** 617.728.4446 **WEB** [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)