

# Local Coalition Strategies for Navigating Financial Institution Partnerships and Account Certification

Designed in consultation with Bank On leaders, financial institutions, consumer advocates, and federal regulators, the Bank On National Account Standards set an ambitious yet achievable benchmark for safe, affordable consumer transaction accounts. Within the initial months of the Cities for Financial Empowerment Fund's (CFE Fund's) new national certification program, almost a dozen banks and credit unions (ranging from the country's 5 largest to one with just 4 branches) successfully have had accounts certified and become available in tens of thousands of branches across nearly every state in the country. Every month, other financial institutions reach out to work with the CFE Fund in active transition toward their own product certification success.

Local Bank On coalitions play a crucial role in celebrating the availability of such certified accounts to their local populations – and they also play a crucial role in encouraging other financial institutions in their communities to identify or create their own Bank On certified account. What are successful coalition strategies for helping more bank and credit union partners in their community get there? And how are coalitions working in the meantime with financial institutions who do not yet have certified Bank On accounts?

Most coalition leaders are actively, privately encouraging their financial institution partners to work with the CFE Fund to get a certified account. They have brought the CFE Fund team directly into these conversations through phone calls and roundtable events, or made referral connections through email.

Many coalition leaders are also using public communications as a successful encouragement strategy. Generally speaking, Bank On coalitions have employed a range of these more public approaches, including:



### Coalitions that only partner with financial institutions with certified accounts.

This approach can be quite uncomfortable for existing Bank On coalitions, most of whom have long and warm partnerships (programmatically, philanthropically, and personally) with financial institutions that don't yet have certified accounts. Transitioning from several years of no or only a loose account standard to an "in or out" approach to specific national standards, even with plenty of notice, can be both unrealistic and self-defeating. That having been said, this approach can work well for coalitions that are newly starting; they can set clear expectations from the beginning to ensure that confidence in account recommendations and provides the most direct incentive for local and regional financial institution partners to offer a certified account locally. In addition, some existing coalitions have found that the National Account Standards and certification process can offer them an opportune moment to take a stand on the types of accounts they will promote, and can use the national consensus reflected in the CFE Fund certification process to underscore the momentum around these accounts and shift the decision point to the CFE Fund. Even then, this approach is not without difficulty—it can take some time for a financial institution without a compliant account to tweak or create one capable of certification, and some financial institution representatives are unable or unwilling to consider account terms in relation to community partnerships. Also of note, some financial institutions believe that an account "that comes close" is good enough, and can become alienated by failing to gain national certification they thought they nonetheless merited.



**Coalitions that allow all financial institutions with or without certified accounts to partner equally.**

In this model of participation, financial institutions often meet other coalition participation requirements, but do not all offer accounts that meet Bank On Standards. Some noncertified accounts are closer than others, perhaps meeting all but one or two core features of the National Standards. While this approach is most inclusive, local coalitions often report several key challenges. First and foremost, these coalitions can generate confusion for local residents about which accounts are recommended and appropriate. Second, financial institutions that do have accounts certified as meeting the National Standards become frustrated by the lack of recognition for their effort and accomplishment. And, finally, this approach largely removes critical local incentives for institutions without an approved account to make changes to meet the Standards' benchmarks for safe, affordable, and functional products generally recognized as best for those outside the mainstream banking system.



**Coalitions that allow all financial institutions with or without certified accounts to partner, but make key public distinctions between the two.**

Increasingly, Bank On coalition leaders are employing versions of this middle approach, mindful of the challenges of the two more extreme approaches discussed above. This approach encourages participation, emphasizes the importance of certified accounts, and provides a strong and public incentive to financial institution partners to bring a certified product on board for local residents. This approach has taken several forms:

- Some coalitions graphically highlight and distinguish between certified and non-certified accounts in their communications and marketing materials, such as through separate financial institution or account lists, “preferred as nationally certified” denotations (including by using the national certification logo image), or through product feature grids that highlight key missing/noncompliant items for noncertified accounts;
- Some coalitions distinguish in their communications and marketing materials between “account partners” and “other coalition partners,” with only financial institutions with nationally certified accounts recognized in the former category;
- Some coalitions host financial institution roundtables or similar public events to discuss the importance of the Standards and how to meet them, only inviting those financial institutions with certified accounts to speak publicly about their account; and
- Some coalitions highlight roles for financial institution partners without certified accounts that do not involve promoting these accounts, including financial education, event sponsorship, and volunteering.

Local coalitions, as well as their financial institution partners, can look to our [chapter on Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the validation and certification process for more detail on what it takes to meet the National Account Standards. The CFE Fund also encourages partners to reach out with other ideas and experiences, and for other ideas and assistance in working towards designing and offering accounts that meet Bank On National Account Standards.