

NORTHSTAR CIVIC INSTITUTE

Research Series | 2026

Policy Briefs: Advancing Equity in the Athletic Economy

*Five Evidence-Based Frameworks for Policymakers, Educational Institutions, and
Community Organizations*

About the Northstar Civic Institute

The Northstar Civic Institute is a research think tank dedicated to advancing economic mobility and equitable opportunity across the sports ecosystem. We examine the critical intersections of sports infrastructure, athletic labor markets, and economic policy to understand and mitigate their impact on marginalized communities. By synthesizing rigorous analysis into data-driven policy briefs and practical administrative toolkits, the Northstar Civic Institute equips policymakers, educational institutions, and community organizations with the frameworks necessary to foster systemic equity.

BRIEFS IN THIS SERIES

Brief 1	Beyond the “Multiplier Effect”: Public Subsidies and Neighborhood Displacement
Brief 2	The New Labor Frontier: Equity and Agency in the NIL Era
Brief 3	Invisible Foundations: Protecting the Stadium Gig Workforce
Brief 4	The Financial Barrier: Restoring Civic Access to Youth Sports
Brief 5	Enforcement and Accountability: The Future of Community Benefit Agreements

BRIEF 1 Beyond the “Multiplier Effect”: Public Subsidies and Neighborhood Displacement

Executive Summary

Public investment in stadium infrastructure is routinely justified by projections of broad-based economic revitalization—job creation, tourism revenue, and the stimulation of surrounding commercial corridors. However, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship challenges these narratives and repositions subsidized stadium development as a mechanism of regressive wealth transfer that disproportionately harms the very communities it purports to serve.

This brief draws on urban economics, public finance theory, and recent Michigan legislative activity to interrogate the evidence behind stadium subsidy policy. It argues that without rigorous, community-centered accountability mechanisms, public investment in sports infrastructure primarily benefits private franchise owners and real estate developers while accelerating the displacement of low-income and minority residents from gentrifying neighborhoods.

Key Finding

Independent economic research consistently demonstrates that public spending on sports stadiums does not generate net new economic activity, but instead redistributes existing local entertainment spending away from neighborhood businesses to corporate-owned venues.

Scholarly Context

The conceptual foundation of most stadium subsidy arguments is the “multiplier effect”—an economic theory positing that each dollar of public investment generates cascading rounds of private spending throughout the local economy. Proponents argue that a new arena or stadium anchors mixed-use developments, drives hotel occupancy, and fills neighborhood restaurants on game days.

Decades of sports economics research have systematically dismantled this claim. Andrew Zimbalist, one of the field’s foremost scholars, has documented through extensive comparative analysis that stadium-related economic activity is largely substitutional rather than additive: fans who spend money at a game would have spent comparable sums at other local entertainment venues had the stadium not existed. The result is a reshuffling of existing consumer dollars rather than an infusion of new wealth.

Urban economists further note that stadiums tend to create “cold zones” on non-event days—large footprint facilities that sit underutilized, generating no economic activity while suppressing surrounding land values through traffic planning decisions and infrastructure prioritization that privileges commuting suburbanites over resident pedestrians. The “stadium effect” documented in cities from Cleveland to Atlanta has been consistent: rising property values in adjacent ZIP codes drive up rents, pushing out long-tenured residents and small businesses that defined a neighborhood’s commercial character.

Critical urban planning scholarship additionally frames these projects within a broader pattern of “sports-led gentrification,” wherein municipal governments deploy the cultural cachet of professional sports as a catalyst for high-income residential and commercial development. This process

systematically de-prioritizes the needs of incumbent communities and concentrates public benefits among new, wealthier entrants.

Michigan Legislative Intersection

Detroit's 2025 authorization of over \$5.6 million in tax incentives for two new sports facilities—the Detroit City FC (DCFC) stadium and a WNBA practice facility—offers a proximate and instructive case study. These incentives, structured as tax increment financing (TIF) captures, divert a portion of anticipated future property tax revenues from public coffers to subsidize private development costs.

This mechanism creates a direct tension with Michigan's General Property Tax Act, which establishes parameters for the permissible diversion of captured tax revenue and places particular scrutiny on the degree to which TIF arrangements can reduce the tax base available for essential public services, most notably public school funding. In a state where Detroit Public Schools Community District continues to navigate chronic underfunding, questions about the opportunity costs of tax diversions are not merely academic—they carry concrete consequences for students and families.

The legislative framework also intersects with Detroit's Community Benefits Ordinance (CBO), examined at length in Brief 5, which was triggered by the stadium development and secured a set of community commitments. While the CBO represents meaningful progress, this brief argues that its community-facing provisions—including free ticket allocations and a youth soccer pitch—do not constitute a sufficiently robust offset to the scale of public subsidy provided and the displacement risk associated with the development corridor.

Michigan Context

Detroit's \$5.6M in 2025 tax incentives for sports facilities must be weighed against the city's ongoing public school funding constraints under the General Property Tax Act. This tension demands a more structured, independently verified accounting of public costs and community benefits.

Implementation Pathway

Translating a Social ROI framework into actionable legislative and municipal policy requires a phased approach:

- Phase 1 – Legislative Authorization: The Michigan Legislature should amend the Local Development Financing Act or equivalent enabling statutes to require any municipality seeking TIF captures for sports-related infrastructure to conduct a pre-authorization Social ROI assessment.
- Phase 2 – Independent Audit Commission: Each assessment must be conducted by a qualified independent auditor, with membership drawn from certified public accountants, community development finance experts, and a representative from the affected neighborhood's community organization.
- Phase 3 – Metric Standards: Assessments should measure direct community employment (by ZIP code), small business revenue impact, anti-displacement housing commitments, and long-term tax base implications for school funding.
- Phase 4 – Public Reporting: All Social ROI findings must be published in accessible, plain-language formats and subject to a mandatory 30-day public comment period before legislative or municipal approval is granted.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Establish a “Social ROI” framework for Michigan municipalities, requiring that any proposed sports-facility tax incentive undergo an independent, community-level audit before legislative approval. This framework should prioritize neighborhood-level wealth retention, anti-displacement housing metrics, and school-funding impact over aggregate city-wide GDP projections. Findings should be published for mandatory public comment prior to final authorization.

BRIEF 2 The New Labor Frontier: Equity and Agency in the NIL Era

Executive Summary

The 2021 Supreme Court decision in *NCAA v. Alston*, combined with a wave of state-level legislative action, dismantled decades of amateurism doctrine and opened a new economic frontier for college athletes through Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) rights. While this transformation represents a genuine expansion of economic agency for many athletes, its benefits have accrued unevenly. Without structural protections, the NIL economy risks replicating—and in some dimensions amplifying—the systemic inequities that have historically characterized college athletics.

This brief examines the legal, labor-economic, and equity dimensions of NIL policy in Michigan, with particular attention to high school athletes now entering the landscape. It offers a framework for ensuring that marginalized athletes, including women in non-revenue sports, first-generation students, and athletes from low-income communities, are equipped to participate as informed and empowered economic actors rather than as vulnerable targets for exploitative intermediaries.

Key Finding

Without institutional oversight and financial education mandates, NIL collectives and third-party agents have disproportionate leverage over athletes who lack family resources, legal expertise, or institutional support networks—mirroring patterns of exploitation that characterize other precarious labor markets.

Scholarly Context

Labor economics frames NIL as a partial correction of a monopsony labor market—one in which a single buyer (the NCAA) historically suppressed wages by prohibiting athlete compensation beyond scholarship value. The elimination of NIL restrictions partially restores market-clearing conditions. However, the current NIL ecosystem is far from a free and efficient market. Information asymmetries, legal complexity, and the institutional power held by universities, collectives, and agents create conditions ripe for exploitation.

Title IX scholarship raises particular concerns about gender equity in the NIL landscape. Men's revenue sports—primarily football and basketball—attract exponentially greater collective funding and brand partnership opportunities, while women's sport athletes in high-profile programs must actively cultivate audience followings to monetize comparable skill levels. Research suggests that NIL income for women athletes is correlated far more strongly with social media following than with athletic achievement or sport prestige, a dynamic that imposes additional labor burdens on female athletes and creates perverse incentive structures.

Antitrust law scholarship cautions that NIL collectives—nonprofit entities formed by boosters to pool and distribute NIL payments—may functionally constitute pay-for-play arrangements that circumvent the spirit, if not the letter, of Title IX and NCAA regulations. The absence of standardized disclosure requirements for collective operations creates opacity that disadvantages both regulators and athletes seeking to understand their options.

For high school athletes, the equity risks are compounded. These are minors—often without independent legal counsel, financial literacy, or experienced parental guidance—being invited into

contract relationships with commercial entities and agents whose incentives are not aligned with long-term athlete wellbeing.

Michigan Legislative Intersection

Michigan has been an active jurisdiction in NIL legislation. House Bill 5217 (2020) positioned the state as an early mover in collegiate NIL legalization, and House Bill 4643 (2025) has refined the framework, addressing new questions raised by the post-Alston environment including collective operations and institutional permissibility.

Most recently and significantly, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) extended NIL opportunities to high school athletes, establishing the category of “Personal Branding Activity” (PBA). The MHSAA framework explicitly prohibits “pay-for-play” arrangements, seeking to preserve competitive integrity while enabling student-athletes to monetize their personal brands. However, the definitional line between permissible PBA and prohibited pay-for-play is still being interpreted at the institutional level, creating compliance uncertainty that sophisticated commercial actors may exploit.

The absence of a statewide educational mandate accompanying these legislative changes means that thousands of newly rights-eligible high school athletes are entering commercial markets with no standardized preparation. Schools vary enormously in their capacity and willingness to provide NIL guidance, creating equity disparities that track pre-existing socioeconomic divides between districts.

Michigan Context

The MHSAA’s extension of NIL to high school athletes creates a significant opportunity, but without mandatory financial literacy and contract-review resources, the gap between well-resourced athletes and their under-resourced peers will likely widen.

Implementation Pathway

- **Curriculum Development:** In partnership with the State Bar of Michigan and the Michigan Council on Economic Education, develop a standardized NIL Financial Literacy Toolkit tailored for both collegiate and high school contexts.
- **Institutional Mandate:** Require Michigan universities and the MHSAA to integrate NIL education into athletic onboarding processes, ensuring every athlete receives foundational instruction before engaging in any commercial NIL activity.
- **Contract Review Resource:** Establish a low-cost or subsidized contract review program—modeled on legal aid clinic structures—to provide athletes without family legal resources access to qualified review before signing NIL agreements.
- **Collective Transparency Standards:** Mandate that NIL collectives operating in Michigan register with a state authority, disclose fee structures, and publish annual impact reports disaggregated by sport and athlete demographic.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Mandate that all Michigan educational institutions—both collegiate and secondary—provide comprehensive financial literacy and contract-evaluation toolkits to all rights-eligible student-athletes before they engage in NIL commercial activity. Supplement this with a publicly funded contract-review resource and collective transparency registration

requirements to protect athletes, particularly those from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds, from predatory representation.

BRIEF 3 Invisible Foundations: Protecting the Stadium Gig Workforce

Executive Summary

The economic narrative around professional sports stadiums consistently centers on the franchise, the athletes, and the broader regional economic “multiplier.” Largely absent from this narrative are the tens of thousands of workers who make the spectacle possible: concessionaires, security staff, parking attendants, janitorial crews, and event-day service workers who labor in conditions defined by seasonality, precarity, and exclusion from standard labor protections.

This brief argues that public investment in stadium infrastructure implicitly endorses the labor models that stadiums sustain. If public resources underwrite stadium development, public policy must also govern the labor standards that development creates. Michigan’s recent progress—including minimum wage increases and community-negotiated wage floors in Detroit stadium agreements—provides a foundation, but structural change requires statewide policy that conditions public subsidies on enforceable, living-wage employment.

Key Finding

Stadium workers represent a textbook case of “ghost labor”—workers who are economically essential to billion-dollar enterprises but structurally invisible in compensation, benefits, and labor protection frameworks. Their precarity is not incidental but structural.

Scholarly Context

Sociological scholarship on mega-events has developed the concept of “mega-event precarity” to describe the labor conditions typical of large-scale sports and entertainment infrastructure. Within this framework, stadium labor is classified as “ghost work”: work that is essential to enterprise function but rendered invisible through subcontracting arrangements, gig-economy classification, and seasonal employment structures that deny workers access to unemployment insurance, health benefits, retirement contributions, and union membership.

The economic geography of stadium labor compounds these conditions. Workers who serve stadiums concentrated in urban cores often commute from surrounding neighborhoods where rents are being driven upward by the very gentrification that stadium development accelerates. The result is a cruel paradox: the workers who sustain the stadium economy are being priced out of the communities where they work.

Labor economists document that minimum wage floors, while necessary, are insufficient in high-cost urban labor markets. The concept of a “living wage”—a wage sufficient to cover baseline household expenses in a given geographic area—consistently exceeds statutory minimums in major metros by 20 to 40 percent. Requiring living wages as a condition of public subsidy constitutes a recognized best practice in community benefit literature and has been implemented with measurable success in cities including Denver and San Francisco.

Michigan Legislative Intersection

Michigan’s minimum wage increased to \$13.73 per hour effective January 1, 2026, a meaningful increase from prior levels. However, this floor remains inadequate for workers in Detroit’s urban

labor market, where household cost burdens—particularly rent—have risen significantly with recent development activity.

A model for improvement is already embedded in Detroit’s own recent history. Community Benefits Agreements negotiated in connection with Detroit sports facility developments have in several instances secured a \$17 per hour minimum wage for arena and stadium staff, along with union neutrality provisions that remove management opposition to collective bargaining efforts. These agreements demonstrate that living-wage provisions are practically achievable and politically viable in the Michigan context.

The challenge is institutionalization. As currently structured, these wage commitments are deal-specific, negotiated project-by-project through the CBO process, and subject to the enforcement limitations described in Brief 5. Without codification into statewide subsidy conditionality, their reach is limited to jurisdictions with active CBO ordinances and communities with sufficient organizing capacity to leverage them.

Michigan Context

The \$17/hr minimum wage secured through Detroit CBO negotiations demonstrates proof-of-concept for living-wage conditionality. The policy gap is the absence of a statewide mechanism that extends this standard to all stadium developments receiving public land or tax abatements.

Implementation Pathway

- Statewide Conditionality Legislation: Amend Michigan’s economic development statutes to require that any sports-related facility development receiving public land, tax increment financing, or other public subsidy must meet a “Living Wage Plus” standard for all direct and contracted employees.
- Living Wage Calculation: Establish an annual living wage determination process using the MIT Living Wage Calculator or equivalent, calculated by metro area, so that wage floors reflect actual local cost-of-living conditions rather than a statewide minimum.
- Subcontractor Coverage: Explicitly extend wage conditionality to subcontractors and gig-economy classifications to prevent reclassification as a cost-avoidance strategy.
- Union Neutrality: Include union neutrality provisions in all subsidy conditionality agreements, ensuring that workers’ rights to organize are not obstructed by management action funded by public investment.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Establish “Living Wage Plus” standards as a mandatory condition for any Michigan stadium or sports-facility development receiving public land, tax abatements, or other public subsidies. Living wages should be calculated annually at the metro-area level to reflect actual household cost burdens. Coverage must extend to subcontractors and gig-classified workers, and conditionality agreements should include union neutrality provisions to protect workers’ organizing rights.

BRIEF 4 The Financial Barrier: Restoring Civic Access to Youth Sports

Executive Summary

Participation in organized youth sports has long been understood as a pathway to physical health, social development, and, for some, professional athletic careers. What was once a broadly accessible civic activity—organized through public schools, municipal recreation departments, and community leagues—has been progressively privatized over the past three decades. The result is a tiered participation system in which access to athletic development is increasingly determined by household income rather than talent, interest, or commitment.

This brief documents the mechanisms and consequences of youth sports privatization, examines relevant Michigan legislative activity, and proposes a public-private partnership framework that leverages existing professional sports infrastructure to restore equitable access at the community level. It also addresses the secondary barrier of cashless payment systems, which have emerged as a modern but underappreciated exclusion mechanism in high school athletic programs.

Key Finding

The average cost of participation in a single organized youth sport in the United States now exceeds \$1,000 annually when registration fees, equipment, travel, and coaching costs are included—a figure that places sustained participation out of reach for families in the bottom two income quintiles.

Scholarly Context

Public health research has established a robust correlation between youth sports participation and long-term health outcomes, including lower rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, depression, and substance use disorder. Critically, these protective associations are strongest for sustained, multi-year participation—not incidental exposure—meaning that financial barriers that interrupt participation trajectories have compounding health consequences.

The economics of youth sports privatization follow a well-documented pattern: as municipal recreation budgets contract, formal programming shifts to private clubs, travel teams, and specialized academies that generate revenue through registration fees. These fee structures are not incidentally exclusionary—they are structurally exclusionary, designed to recover program costs from participants rather than distributing them through tax-supported mechanisms.

Sociological research has identified the “concerted cultivation” dynamic, in which higher-income families invest in intensive extracurricular programming—including sports—as a mechanism of human capital and social network development. Lower-income families, who cannot afford equivalent investment, are systematically disadvantaged in the reproduction of social and economic mobility across generations. Youth sports exclusion is not merely a recreational concern—it is a mobility gap with multigenerational consequences.

The “pay-to-play” model in high school athletics represents a particularly acute institutional manifestation of these dynamics. Where districts charge activity fees for athletic participation, research consistently documents lower participation rates among students eligible for free and reduced lunch, effectively withdrawing a school-sponsored developmental resource from the students who most depend on it.

Michigan Legislative Intersection

Pending House Bill 4371 (2025) represents a meaningful legislative effort to establish administrative standards for youth sports programming in Michigan, including provisions that touch on equity of access. The Northstar Civic Institute monitors this legislation as a potential vehicle for the policy frameworks recommended below.

Senate Bill 0014 (2025) addresses a specific but underappreciated access barrier: the prohibition of cash payments at high school athletic events. As schools and athletic associations have increasingly adopted cashless ticketing systems—driven by administrative convenience and revenue management goals—families without bank accounts, debit cards, or smartphones have been effectively excluded from attending events. An estimated 22 percent of Michigan households are unbanked or underbanked, with these rates significantly higher in Detroit and other urban districts. SB 0014’s mandate to permit cash payment is a direct equity intervention that the Northstar Civic Institute strongly supports.

Michigan Context

Senate Bill 0014’s mandate to accept cash at high school athletic events targets a precise but impactful exclusion mechanism. Cashless systems have disproportionately shut out unbanked families—a population that is disproportionately Black, immigrant, and low-income—from participating in their children’s school communities.

Implementation Pathway

- **Field-Time Mandate:** Develop legislation or binding administrative guidance requiring professional franchises that receive public facility subsidies to donate a minimum percentage of non-event facility time to community use by municipal recreation leagues.
- **Public-Private Coordination Office:** Establish a Michigan Office of Youth Sports Access within the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs or equivalent, responsible for coordinating field-time scheduling, tracking compliance, and mediating between franchises and community organizations.
- **Scholarship and Fee-Waiver Registry:** Create a public, searchable registry of subsidized youth sports programming, fee waiver programs, and scholarship opportunities, accessible through a single state-managed platform.
- **Digital Equity in Athletic Access:** Pass SB 0014 and extend its principles through guidance prohibiting any MHSAA-affiliated program from exclusively using digital payment systems that disadvantage unbanked families.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Develop public-private partnership frameworks—codified in Michigan’s economic development and sports subsidy statutes—that mandate professional franchises donate a fixed percentage of facility field-time to local municipal youth leagues as a condition of public land use or tax incentives. Complement this with passage of SB 0014, a statewide youth sports scholarship registry, and guidance mandating cash-payment access at all publicly funded athletic events.

BRIEF 5 Enforcement and Accountability: The Future of Community Benefit Agreements

Executive Summary

Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) have emerged over the past two decades as one of the most promising tools available to communities seeking to shape the terms of large-scale development projects. At their best, CBAs are legally binding contracts between developers and community coalitions that secure enforceable commitments on affordable housing, local hiring, environmental standards, and community amenities as conditions of project approval or public subsidy. At their worst, they are aspirational documents—politically useful at the moment of project announcement—that fade into irrelevance as community organizing capacity dissipates and developers pursue their post-approval agenda.

This brief examines the structural conditions that distinguish effective CBAs from ineffective ones, with particular focus on the enforcement architecture necessary to translate CBA commitments into durable community benefit. It uses Detroit's Community Benefits Ordinance (CBO) as a primary case study and proposes a Michigan-wide institutional infrastructure—a CBA Clearinghouse—to extend the capacity for effective CBA negotiation and enforcement to smaller municipalities that currently lack it.

Key Finding

The most common failure mode for CBAs is not inadequate initial commitments, but inadequate enforcement mechanisms. Without independent monitoring bodies, defined legal remedies, and sustained community organizing capacity, even well-drafted CBAs experience “enforcement fatigue” as developers test the limits of accountability over time.

Scholarly Context

Urban planning and community development law scholarship has extensively catalogued the lifecycle of CBA effectiveness. Early-stage CBAs—negotiated in the politically charged atmosphere surrounding large project announcements—tend to generate ambitious commitments that capture media attention and community support. The enforcement phase, which begins after groundbreaking and extends across years of construction and operation, unfolds in a far less visible and politically salient context.

Researchers identify “enforcement fatigue” as the mechanism by which CBA commitments erode. Community organizations, often operating with limited staff and funding, struggle to maintain monitoring capacity across multi-year timelines. Developers with dedicated legal teams and deep financial resources are structurally advantaged in any dispute resolution process. Without an institutional home for enforcement support—whether a government body, a well-resourced nonprofit intermediary, or a designated ombudsperson—the community side of the CBA enforcement equation weakens over time.

A secondary challenge identified in the literature is the jurisdictional isolation of CBA capacity. Established cities with active housing and community development ecosystems—Detroit, Grand Rapids, Lansing—have developed institutional knowledge for CBA negotiation. Smaller cities and rural municipalities, which increasingly attract sports facility investment through regional sports tourism strategies, typically lack both the legal expertise and the organizational infrastructure to

negotiate effectively with sophisticated development interests. This creates systematic inequity in which community benefit is inversely correlated with community capacity.

Michigan Legislative Intersection

Detroit's Community Benefits Ordinance, enacted to govern development projects with a total value of \$75 million or more, represents Michigan's most developed CBA institutional framework. The ordinance establishes a community advisory body, mandates developer engagement with affected neighborhoods, and has produced binding commitments in connection with several major projects.

In the context of the 2025 Detroit City FC (DCFC) stadium development, the CBO process secured measurable community benefits: 3,000 free annual tickets for community distribution and the development of a youth soccer mini-pitch facility. These are genuine, if modest, victories that demonstrate the model's capacity to extract tangible benefit from large-scale sports development.

However, the DCFC CBO process also illustrates the limits of the current framework. The commitment to free ticket distribution and a youth soccer pitch, while welcome, is not proportionate to the scale of public subsidy authorized for the project, does not address displacement or housing affordability in the surrounding neighborhood, and does not include independent monitoring mechanisms with defined legal remedies for non-compliance. These gaps are not unique to this project—they reflect structural limitations of the current CBO model.

Michigan Context

Detroit's CBO secured 3,000 annual tickets and a youth soccer pitch from the DCFC stadium development. These commitments represent progress, but do not address displacement risk, lack independent monitoring, and are not proportionate to the public subsidy provided—illustrating both the potential and the current limits of Michigan's CBA architecture.

Implementation Pathway

- **CBA Clearinghouse Establishment:** Create a Michigan Community Benefits Clearinghouse, housed within an existing state agency or structured as an independent nonprofit with state funding, charged with providing legal and technical assistance to municipalities and community organizations engaged in CBA negotiations.
- **Model Agreement Library:** Develop and maintain a library of model CBA provisions—covering housing, hiring, wages, environmental standards, and community amenities—that small municipalities can adapt for local negotiations.
- **Independent Monitoring Standards:** Establish statewide standards for CBA monitoring, including requirements for annual compliance reporting, independent third-party audits, and publicly accessible enforcement records.
- **Legal Remedy Framework:** Codify defined legal remedies for material CBA non-compliance, including clawback provisions that allow municipalities to recapture a portion of public subsidy for documented failures to meet CBA commitments.
- **Threshold Expansion:** Work with the Michigan Legislature to explore extending CBO-style requirements to projects below the current \$75 million threshold in smaller municipalities where the relative community impact may be equally significant.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Establish a Michigan-wide “CBA Clearinghouse”—a state-funded institution providing legal, technical, and negotiation assistance to municipalities and community coalitions engaging with billion-dollar sports franchise developments. The Clearinghouse should maintain a model agreement library, set statewide monitoring standards, and provide legal support for enforcement actions. Complement this with codified legal remedy frameworks, including clawback provisions, to ensure that CBA commitments carry enforceable consequences for non-compliance.

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