

Community Engagement

prepared for The California Endowment

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One of the primary reasons why past foundation-sponsored efforts to achieve comprehensive community change have fallen short of expectations is their inability to effectively and meaningfully engage community residents over time. Much has been learned about this challenge, although there are no easy answers or simple formulas for success. What follows is a brief synthesis of the lessons learned by a number of experienced grantmakers and observers of the field over the past fifteen years of foundation place-based initiatives. I am grateful to the interviewees (listed at the end of this memo) for their generosity in sharing their insights on this complex question.

Foundations are used to dealing with elected officials and leaders of non-profits and government agencies as proxy spokespersons for the communities they serve. We tend to speak the same language and to see the world in somewhat similar ways. But that is not the same thing as deep, authentic engagement with community residents. That is a much more difficult proposition. Many residents of low-income communities have been involved in earlier foundation and government-sponsored programs and have come away from those experiences disappointed, if not cynical, about the possibility of real change. They tend to be distrustful of the motives of any new groups coming into their neighborhoods and difficult to persuade that this time things will be different. And who can blame them?

Beginnings are critical. How the foundation engages and treats residents in the initial stages of a grantmaking program will set the tone for the entire enterprise. That's not to say that other place-based initiatives have not had false starts; however we can also benefit from their experience. It's essential to not rush into those conversations, and to be very thoughtful and deliberate about how the challenge of community engagement will be approached.

Some key initial questions

Before a foundation sets out to initiate that conversation, it needs to invest in critical internal dialogue to be absolutely clear on what it means by community engagement and what it hopes to accomplish by reaching out directly to local residents. What are the boundaries of engagement? What are the non-negotiables? How much control is the foundation really willing to cede to the community? It is important to come to terms internally with those tough questions before those external conversations begin. Most foundations have not spent the time to clarify their intentions up front, and have lived to regret that oversight.

The first question for a foundation to ask is **“what do we mean by community engagement?”** There is no single definition of community engagement. One could sketch out a continuum of resident involvement from “civic participation” at one end (e.g. increased awareness of issues, attending public meetings, voting) and “movement

building” at the other (where the agenda and key strategy decisions are driven by community leadership). In between those two poles are a variety of other models of engagement, including public health campaigns (which aim to educate local residents and engage them in behavior change) and strategic alliances among parties from within and outside the community to achieve common goals (where residents are at the table and have an authentic voice but do not control the agenda). The differences among those approaches to resident involvement may seem subtle on the surface, but they have important implications for the role of the foundation and how it approaches the challenge of engaging the community.

The next question for a foundation to ask is “**where does community engagement fit in our theory of change?**” If a foundation’s ultimate goal is system reform (i.e. the redesign and reorganization of public systems) to better improve the health of the community, the need to directly engage residents may be minimal. Residents might be surveyed to get their views on local agencies and recommendations for improvements, but the real interventions will take place with agency leaders and staff. There are a number of models for undertaking that kind of change (e.g. the breakthrough collaborative approach pioneered by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement as well as other proven ways of developing the leaders of public agencies).

At the other end of the spectrum, if a foundation sees movement building as the preferred route to healthier communities, it needs to ask itself “**how much control are we willing to cede to the community?**” The foundation may enter a neighborhood with a specific change agenda in mind (e.g. the prisoner reentry process and its multiple implications for community health). That priority may not only flow directly from data about the neighborhood but also fit squarely within the current philanthropic zeitgeist. But what if local residents argue instead to focus all the foundation’s resources on school completion or on food security as its number one priority? Do local residents who have been encouraged to form a movement to improve local conditions have “veto power” over the foundation’s well thought-out plans? On the other hand, can a foundation legitimately lead (or even advise) a true community movement?

In other words, “**whose agenda is it?**” This is perhaps the central dilemma of community engagement. To succeed, a community change initiative must have local buy-in and ownership, but that is an extremely delicate thing. It’s also virtually impossible if the initiative is perceived to be controlled somewhere else. While the foundation logically has certain outcomes that it wants to achieve, it must skillfully build a bridge between those goals and what local residents want. If the foundation is determined to be rigid about its agenda, it shouldn’t pretend to be interested in real community input. The challenge for those who are staffing the initiative on the ground is to navigate the compromises that come with real power sharing with equanimity and without defensiveness.

A fifth, related, question is “**what role will the foundation’s staff play in the community engagement process?**” In addition to being clear and centered about the answers to the previous questions, it requires real sensitivity and political savvy to successfully navigate the turbulent waters of community engagement. It is not a job for amateurs. Yet foundations typically insist on deploying their own staff to take on those functions, with mixed results. Understandably, foundations want to maintain close connections with the work taking place on the ground. It’s one thing for staff to be present to observe progress and lend help when necessary; but it’s quite another to

have them function as project advisors or coordinators of technical assistance. It's too easy for foundation staff to forget how their presence in a meeting or any interaction invariably changes the nature of the conversation. Frankly, most foundation staff members are also simply not equipped to do this job the way it needs to be done.

These are not abstract questions. A foundation's answers to them will establish the rules of engagement for working with community residents. The more time that is spent up front in discussion, role-playing and coming to consensus on those answers will definitely pay off in a much more consistent and coherent approach to community engagement. It will also help the foundation be clear on the qualities it should look for in those individuals who will be staffing the program on the ground. Given the distrust that foundations will confront in most high-need communities, the degree to which they are able to honestly and transparently communicate their intentions, the better it will be for everyone.

It's hard work to do it well

Assuming a foundation has grappled with these initial questions and decided to commit to a process of community engagement, what else does it need to know? First, as Garland Yates observes, it's important to recognize that this kind of activity goes against the grain of conventional community development practice. Government systems and their non-profit contractors are funded by categorical, problem-specific funding streams, and there is little incentive for cross-silo collaboration. Indeed, experienced agency hands are likely to see efforts to achieve integrated solutions to community health issues as a potential threat to their traditional authority and funding.

Likewise, elected officials and other traditional gatekeepers who are used to calling the shots about resource allocation in a community (even the "good guys") are likely to feel threatened by any community mobilization that potentially challenges their judgment and their authority. From the viewpoint of the power structure, if community engagement efforts cannot be co-opted, they are likely to be seen as a problem rather than an asset.

So, any community engagement effort needs to understand and acknowledge the ways in which power operates in the neighborhood. It must also engage the self interest of key parties, whenever possible. A formal power analysis is one way to help residents articulate and better understand those dynamics (e.g. Pateriya & Castellanos, 2003). As new leadership emerges in these efforts, it is likely to be ostracized by long-time self-appointed spokespersons for the neighborhood, including agency staff. There is often a price to be paid for going against the existing local power structure, and that is part of the cost of real change.

Communities can also be polarized and paralyzed by long-standing differences among local factions. Transformation cannot be achieved by consensus in most cases. Only certain elements of the community may agree to common ground rules for participation. Consequently, it's also important to engage stakeholders from outside the neighborhood as allies in support of community engagement. That may seem paradoxical, but it has often been a missing element in such efforts. Resident engagement is not just about building capacity but also about building power. To do that, strong relationships need to be built not only within the community but also with the right external forces. The

foundation is an obvious external ally, and it can utilize its connections and influence to help residents build additional mutually-beneficial alliances.

To support that work, the foundation needs to help build and sustain a local infrastructure to keep engaging people over time. That may not necessarily involve the creation of a new organization. It will be up to the community to decide what structure(s) or lead agencies might best support its work. But it involves support for a set of ongoing relationships among key individuals, guided by a set of agreed-on ground rules for engagement. It should also underwrite a set of activities to continually reach out to new residents and keep expanding the circle of involvement, recognizing that there need to be opportunities for different levels of individual engagement.

A classic foundation error is to “anoint” local leaders (even if inadvertently) or to dictate a particular governance structure before the resident engagement effort has a chance to find its footing. The overriding goal should be to encourage the broadest participation by residents, families, community groups, and service agencies and to cultivate collective leadership from every sector of the neighborhood. As Garland Yates has observed, “it’s easy to forget that most change in the world has resulted not from just positive motivation or effective persuasion but from steady pressure for change.” The challenge for the foundation is to support the source of that steady pressure.

Some basic principles

First and foremost, foundations need to recognize that **residents are experts** on their communities. Long-time residents are the holders of local history and know how the neighborhood has changed over time. They also have the most direct understanding of how their neighbors feel about certain issues and where the points of tension are located. Residents know who’s who and who can be trusted and who can not. They have first hand knowledge of local assets critical for health promotion, including informal networks that may be “beneath the radar” of any external observer. They know what has been tried before, and what worked and what didn’t, and why. That knowledge may not be easy to tap, but it is essential if the foundation’s new program is to learn from (and not repeat) the mistakes of the past.

It can be very difficult for foundation staff and their consultants – who view themselves as experts on health promotion – to genuinely engage community residents as experts. There is a built-in tension between funders who see their role as bringing innovative ideas to a neighborhood (e.g. “best practices”) and the dynamics of community knowledge and resident mobilization. But the most brilliant theory of change is useless absent local buy-in for implementation and a direct understanding of efforts that are already on the ground. Residents are also understandably sensitive about being patronized by newcomers to their neighborhood, no matter how noble their intentions. Observing this seemingly simple principle respectfully and consistently can make a tremendous difference to the success of any change effort.

Engage young people. They not only have the energy and enthusiasm to mobilize others, but they are also less likely to be caught up in the politics of current funding streams and power structures. The most successful foundation initiatives have cultivated youth leadership, and they have literally grown up with the program. Many have gone on to careers in public service, some right in the neighborhoods in which they grew up.

Young people are prime assets for any effort to build healthy communities, and by hiring them, training them and building their skills, both the foundation and the neighborhood will reap multiple benefits.

Build local capacity for community organizing. Organizing alone is not sufficient to create healthy communities. Campaigns may achieve short-term goals but are typically difficult to sustain over the long haul. But community organizing presents one of the most potent ways to engage local residents and build their leadership skills around issues that matter to them. In conjunction with these other elements of infrastructure for resident engagement, it can play a critical role.

Utilize small grants for tangible short-term wins. The surest way to energize local residents and to sustain their interest is to provide them with small amounts of money to accomplish concrete projects that they have identified. While foundation professionals may have the patience to endure months of meetings in the preparation of a plan, residents are more action-oriented. Such a grantmaking program can also be structured to build maximum local accountability by putting residents in charge of the decision making and grant monitoring. They are likely to be much tougher on their neighbors to fulfill their commitments than any outsider could be.

Help residents learn how to collect and use data. One of the signal successes of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative has been in building the capacity of local residents to assess what data they need, how to access it and/or how to create it. Community Learning Networks have been created to help local residents take charge of their own data collection and interpretation, and the results have been very powerful. "New understanding comes from people's ability to grow their own understanding."

Invest in documentation of the process. Another unique aspect of the Making Connections Initiative is long-term support for the Diarist Project, which has assigned skilled writers to each site to capture its story as it has unfolded. The result is a wealth of written information on the dynamics of community change. Other methods can also be utilized to help residents visualize and analyze their progress. The Grove International's process of graphic facilitation is one example of how complex change processes can be captured in dynamic visual form. Residents can also be directly involved in documenting their work, via YouTube-type videos, digital storytelling, websites, blogs, and audio diaries. Local artists can also be engaged to work with young people and other residents to capture the richness of the community change process. These products can be featured at public meetings to celebrate successes as they occur...an important element of the ongoing engagement process.

A few thoughts about tactics

Those who have the most experience with place-based initiatives believe that it takes between a year and eighteen months of intensive involvement to fully understand a community and to properly lay the groundwork for a long-term investment strategy. It takes that amount of time to build relationships, establish trust, cultivate local leadership, develop shared goals and to fully appreciate the diverse array of local assets that can serve as the building blocks for the initiative.

Most of my interviewees have stressed that foundation staff should not be the ones to do the initial baseline data gathering and collecting of stories. No matter how skilled or sensitive they may be to community dynamics, they represent funding. No matter how they enter the neighborhood, foundation staff members inevitably arouse expectations that will cause people to act in ways that are counterproductive to the real goal of collecting information. Instead, teams of researchers, journalists and artists could be engaged to work with local residents and young people to capture the story of their communities. There are also numerous skilled consulting firms in California who could design and implement customized processes for developing a multi-dimensional “portrait” of each of the communities selected. Six months could easily be devoted to doing this right.

Those multi-media portraits could then be publicly shared in each community as a way of kicking off the formal community engagement process. Past initiatives have discovered that communities do not typically know how to do cross-sector planning. They may be skilled in preparing grant proposals, but that’s a different kind of process. Skilled intermediaries could be utilized to walk communities through a year-long planning process that will energize and mobilize residents, agencies and potential allies from outside the community. It should be coupled with the kind of small grants process described above and could also be combined with a variety of data collection, leadership and capacity building activities (including face-to-face exchanges among the participating communities).

The culmination of the planning process would be a series of neighborhood summits (including some separate youth summits) to share visions and craft workable goals for the implementation phase. Part of the goal setting will be to identify mechanisms for governance and key infrastructure (e.g. lead agencies) and the qualities and skills that will be needed in key staff to carry the initiative forward. There are a number of established tools that could be used to guide this process (e.g. California Healthy Cities’ Community Compass; Future Search; the Charrette process) or the participants could design their own process for achieving those ends.

Some final thoughts

This has been a very brief introduction to a complicated topic, and I would be happy to elaborate further on any of the ideas mentioned above. Every community is different, and one challenge that confronts the foundation is to respect the uniqueness of each setting as it decides how best to engage local residents. At the same time, the foundation will have the task of looking for commonalities across the sites that can inform and enrich the work of each individual project. That’s a unique role for the foundation staff since they alone are likely to have an overview of the whole enterprise.

The California Endowment is well positioned to benefit from the lessons learned by colleagues with many years’ experience in place-based work. Your new strategic direction will give the Foundation the opportunity to engage in deep, multi-year partnerships with residents in the selected communities in a way that typical grantmaking does not allow. You can set the stage to ensure that community residents have sufficient leverage to be effective players in that process. It is up to you to see that residents’ views are heard, that they are able to meaningfully participate in decision making and evaluation and that the initiative reflects their priorities. When you engage

local residents with respect and integrity, you have the opportunity to truly realize the potential of place-based grantmaking to foster healthy communities.

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Garland Yates

This analysis draws heavily on the experience and writings of Garland Yates, who probably knows as much about this challenge as anyone. He can be reached at garland@mobilizingcommunities.org

I highly recommend the following resources on community engagement:

Hyman, J.B. *Not Quite Chaos: Toward a More Disciplined Approach to Community Building*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002.

Pateriya, D. & Castellanos, P. *Power Tools: A Manual for Organizing Fighting for Justice*. Los Angeles: Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education, 2003.

Saasta, T. *A New Way to Give It Away: How a small grants program has engaged Residents and achieved quick successes in Boston*. Gaithersburg, MD: The Diarist Project, n.d.

Traynor, B. *Reflections on Community Organizing and Resident Engagement in The Rebuilding Communities Initiative*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002.

VeneKlasen, L. & Miller, V. *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*. Oklahoma City: World Neighbors, 2002

Yates, G. & Saastra, T. *Community Mobilization and Action for Results: A New Approach to Building Local Movements To Strengthen Families and Transform Neighborhoods*. Gaithersburg, MD: The Diarist Project, 2004

Yates, G. & Saastra, T. *Journey to Engagement: A first-person reflection on how To engage residents*. Gaithersburg, MD: The Diarist Project, 2007.

For examples of other materials on the Making Connections Initiative from The Diarist Project, see www.DiaristProject.org

