System Transformation Through Community Leadership
Findings and strategies from an integrative synthesis of literature and voices

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Change efforts are sustained through long-term funding streams, power-sharing infrastructure, and adaptations driven by a culture of continuous reflection.

Build Collaborative Infrastructure

Guarantee resources

Across our review of community engagement work, efforts recognized that system change and population-level impacts hinge on long-term commitments, including sustained resourcing for partnerships. Israel et al. (2005) list "providing long-term and sustainable resources to the community" as one of the guiding principles for a partnership in Salinas, California (Israel et al., 2005, p. 1469). Similarly, in the Center for the Social Study of Policy report on The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, the authors argue, "[Community partnership] requires a deeper-seated and longer-term commitment from local funders and, ideally, local government, to invest in the development of leaders and to ensure that there are real and consistent opportunities for leadership to be exercised" (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 7).

Time-limited funding streams made it difficult for some partnerships to plan and realize long-term change. When Quinn et al. (2018)

Embed Community Leadership highlights findings and strategies culled from an integrative synthesis of research papers, case studies, and experts from across the field.

The strategies are meant for public systems as they seek to collaboratively develop solutions, break down racist and stigmatizing narratives about Black and Brown communities, refocus on relationships and trust, and overcome the gaps between what individuals and families say they need and what systems deliver.

talked to Food & Fitness partnership sites, grant funding for the effort was ending, leading to broad concerns about sustained collaboration. They described the hopes of one partnering organization: "[Their] strategy had always been to set clear goals and stick with them, adding that just 'following the funding' doesn't work, rather, the goal is to have funding follow the partnership" (Quinn et al., 2018, p. 90s).

Establish permanent structures for community leadership

Collaborative infrastructure—policies, processes, communication channels, and formal roles—was critical for ensuring communities had a long-term seat at the table. Most of this infrastructure operated within the scope of the partnership effort, to facilitate formal community involvement. For example, in the Healthy African American Families initiative, a Community Action Board (CAB) instituted paid positions for community members and other stakeholders. The CAB acted as "community watchdog and active researchers involved in all aspects of the research cycle" (Ferre et al., 2010). The San Francisco Health Improvement Partnership set up working groups that brought together community members and other stakeholder groups, which operated alongside a steering committee. An evaluation of this effort found that formal structures for partnership and resources to support them were "critical" and contributed to consensus decision-making necessary for change (Grumbach et al., 2017).

> . . . invest in long term capacity to prepare for opening policy windows, seed grassroots organizations, [and] invest in a leadership pipeline including cultivating new organizations.
>
> (Farrow et al., 2020)

Most of the efforts did not discuss establishing permanent formal structures for community leadership outside of the partnership. However, a few perspectives highlight the importance of this approach. In an evaluation of the Food & Fitness Partnership, one respondent described how infrastructure contributed to long-term change: "[We] have definitely had a sustainability mindset the whole time. Our goal is to create systems and structures in our work that do sustain themselves after the project ends" (Quinn et al., 2018, p. 84s). A retrospective on The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative described the need to "invest in long term capacity to prepare for opening policy windows, seed grassroots organizations, [and] invest in a leadership pipeline including cultivating new organizations" as one of ten lessons for next generations' efforts towards advancing health equity and racial justice (Farrow et al., 2020). In other words, partnership efforts have an opportunity to imagine beyond the scope of their work and invest in community capacity to lead in the long term.

Commit to Continuous Learning and Evaluation

Apply CQI to community partnership and system change

Continuous quality improvement, or CQI, is a circular process of action, reflection, and adaptation. Evaluation can help contextualize impacts—intended and unintended—as they occur. Missteps and failures are inevitable in any effort, and circumstances change. In light of this, many collaborations reflected on the need to leave room for midcourse corrections and adaptations when obstacles and opportunities arise.

In our readings, CQI often began with a model for change, which was used to inform ongoing evaluation. Generally, efforts developed a model for the impacts they wanted to see in the community, but some also focused on effective community partnership as an input, process, or outcome. Several partnerships relied on existing collaborative models for change. For example, ThrYVE structured their work around the Institute of Medicine's model for

collaborative public health action in communities and Community Action to Fight Asthma initiative applied the Stages of Collaborative Development for System Change (Kreger et al., 2011; Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). These kinds of established CQI frameworks can be a useful starting point for collaboration and system change.

Ongoing reflection, measurement, and adaptation are also central to CQI. Regular meetings, progress updates, and status reports are not novel; however, they were fundamental to CQI for most efforts. For example, Lothridge et al. (2012) described how a Los Angeles County child welfare agency used monthly meetings to develop action items and small tests of change in support of a curriculum on Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity. Reflecting on the experiences of two Spreading Community Accelerators Through Learning and Evaluation (SCALE) community coalitions, one evaluation found that self-reflection, learning from failure, and methods to test system change were necessary to advance principles related to justice, equity, and collaboration (Reid et al., 2019).

Embrace reflexivity and reflection

Dominant power structures have a powerful gravity. In many partnerships, system actors were pulled back into patterns they initially hoped to disrupt, undermining community involvement and leadership. Sands et al. (2016) clearly outlined this dynamic in the Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council (HFFPC):

> [Without] continuous internal work on racial disparities, HFFPC alignment between partners broke down, and valued community members and nonprofit community groups stopped coming to be part of the process. Decision-making defaulted to a familiar top-down process, with little community input. The resulting impact on the organizing around school food was a lack of focus and traction.

This was not a unique story. The tendency to gravitate back toward old patterns echoed across initiatives. For instance, in the Building Healthy Communities initiative some local partners felt priorities were being imposed upon them by institutional partners, without adequately incorporating their perspectives (Preskill et al., 2013). It also came up in discussions among the research team, our Subject Matter Experts, and Chapin Hall colleagues.

Partnerships relied on constant learning, reflection, and accountability to avoid slipping back to business as usual. Reclaiming Futures is a notable example of long-term, institutional commitment to anti-racist learning. Their effort started with a one-time convening on an anti-oppressive practice framework, which was expanded into a longer training course. Even these longer trainings were seen by partners as insufficient, and local efforts continued to incorporate anti-racism dialogue into their work (Nissen & Curry-Stevens, 2012). The lead researchers eventually succeeded in institutionalizing anti-oppressive practice into the fabric of the organization, seeding reflexivity on an institutional level (Nissen & Curry-Stevens, 2012).

Disrupt system mindsets and habits: Reflect on the impact of racism, reinforce strength-based narratives, take the long-view when setting milestones.

Invest in communities: Position communities to take the lead and cultivate community strengths and skills.

Reimagine community engagement: Prioritize community relationships and trust, broaden the decision-making table, and create substantial engagement opportunities.

Transform systems with community in the lead: establish community ownership over system responses and resources and then scale up.

Embed community leadership and adapt over time: Build collaborative infrastructure and commit to continuous evaluation.

For methods, limitations, and acknowledgements:

System transformation through community leadership: Strategies for building effective partnerships with Black and Brown communities: Methods report.

Toolkit:

An array of highly actionable resources culled from the field to activate leadership in system change.

Contact Us:

For more information or to engage in this dialogue about system transformation, email us at: **CommunityLeadership @ChapinHall.org**

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