



Invest in Community 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.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY

April 2022

Community members grow their individual agency and capacity for collective action, supported by institutional investments in connectedness, learning, leadership, and existing community strengths.

Position Community to Take the Lead

Foster community members' self-efficacy

Initiatives we reviewed and discussed cited individual self-efficacy as key to community member involvement in decision making and system change. Community members and stakeholders were more likely to play a leading role in efforts when they believed in their own ability to speak up and be genuinely heard. Institutional partners in the Men on the Move initiative observed, "For community members that don't know the value of their voice, sometimes you see them not wanting to speak loud so they are heard, when it's so important that they speak loud. So that the university partner, you could say, hears them" (Devia et al., 2017, p. 9). In light of this, Men on the Move modeled their partnership structure to promote individual efficacy by using democratic decision making in partnership meetings.

Self-efficacy is also a cornerstone of Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) work with parents in Illinois. After training together, COFI parents identify shared goals, partake in positive visioning, and look for solutions. In these ways, parents gain a

sense of their own power, which facilitates advocacy within government and systems (COFI, 2012). The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections initiative also structured individual leadership and facilitation training sessions with self-efficacy at the forefront. The Center for the Study of Social Policy reported: “All of the residents interviewed. . . stressed how important it was to not only build their confidence and ability to lead and facilitate meetings but also to help them see themselves as leaders and to be able to do the same for others” (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 23).

All of the residents interviewed. . . stressed how important it was to not only build their confidence and ability to lead and facilitate meetings but also to help them see themselves as leaders and to be able to do the same for others.

(Hebert & Gallion, 2016)

Create opportunities to build social capital and collective efficacy

Collective efficacy, or the ability to come together to address shared challenges, is built on a foundation of strong relationships and trust—what is sometimes called social capital. To this end, many efforts intentionally incorporated community building into partnership activities. In an action–research partnership between an urban, underserved neighborhood and a health disparities research group, strong community relationships were both a goal for the effort and something partners felt was necessary to make progress on other priorities. Bateman et al. (2017) write:

The coalition felt the community could not tackle the list of concerns if there was not a sense of social cohesion and connectedness within the community. Based on the [community action plan] and the prioritized needs, the first community-building project implemented by the coalition was a “Get to Know Your Neighbor Day,” which promoted community cohesion.

Similarly, an early evaluation report from the Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project described the positive impacts of relationship-based community organizing on self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and, ultimately, on community growth. At first, community participants in the initiative’s Neighborhood Action Councils doubted their ability to create change. However, they ultimately saw the power of community connectedness and collectively working toward shared goals (McCroskey et al., 2009).

Community storytelling and critical consciousness can also play a role in building collective efficacy. For example, Ferré et al. (2010) reported on the value of having community members participate in “witnessing” the African American experience in Los Angeles as part of the Healthy African American Families effort: “Witnessing allowed community perspectives, stories, concerns, needs, and successes to be voiced, acknowledged, and documented. These activities then helped mobilize community members for further action and inquiry” (Ferre et al., 2010, p. 6). Sharing experiences can shift focus away from individual behavior, helping to mobilize community members toward collective action to address systemic inequality.



Recognize and Cultivate Community Strengths and Skills

Start from existing community expertise and assets, and build from there

Many projects emphasized the importance of recognizing and drawing on community members' expertise, skillsets, and the innate assets of the community.

Many projects emphasized the importance of recognizing and drawing on community members' expertise, skillsets, and the innate assets of the community. Some efforts created space to recognize the existing skills and resources within Black and Brown communities as a basis for further growth and learning.

For example, in a report on the Healthy African American Families (HAAF) initiative the authors emphasize: "The HAAF [community-based participatory research] process builds on already-existing community resiliency and resources, and on centuries of self-help, problem solving, cooperative action, and community activism within the African American community. This commitment to caring for neighbors is an African American cultural strength. This is a radically different perspective of African American communities, which have previously been viewed as deficient." (Ferre et al., 2010, p. 9). Similarly, in the Making Connections initiative, resident training workshops were designed around a belief in residents' capacity to learn and apply new skills (Hebert & Gallion, 2016). Strengths-based perspectives should push us beyond asking community members to recount their experiences or trauma. Although these stories can build the critical consciousness of institutional actors, systems efforts should provide community members the chance to contribute their dreams, ideas, and expertise in the process of codeveloping solutions.

Finally, facilitators need to create space to navigate trauma responses that might emerge for community members with lived experience as they engage in system change. For some, participation in this work may bring up negative emotions and memories related to racial oppression caused by the system. Systems should cultivate a trauma-informed approach to community partnership, including incorporating healing practices and resources into their work as engagements begin. This was described in one case study, The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative. Organizers heard from youth participants how adversity and trauma impacted their day-to-day lives and their participation in partnership efforts. In response, Building Healthy Communities partnered with local grantees to organize youth healing and leadership camps (The California Endowment, 2016).

Create opportunities for leadership and technical skill development

Though community members have inherent strengths, they also benefited in many cases from building skills and capacities critical to system and policy change. To that end, partnerships often invested in community leadership development, learning, and organizational capacity building in areas like leadership, research methods, data analysis, advocacy, community organizing, and strategic communication.

The Making Connections Local Learning Partnerships strengthened resident data use capacities, which put them on equal footing with officials, agencies, and service providers that often make decisions about their communities. An evaluation of the partnership reports:



Several resident leaders indicated that one of the most important skills that they acquired during Making Connections was learning how to use data more effectively. They spoke about the empowering and transformative process of developing expertise on how to access and understand different types of data and learning how to use data to highlight problems, suggest possible solutions and promote accountability by tracking progress and results (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 23).

However, support must be substantial and ongoing. For example, COFI's parent training program is a 3-year process that equips participants with policy advocacy knowledge and skills—public speaking, understanding the policy process, and working across racial and cultural divides (COFI, 2014, 2017).

Subject Matter Experts also noted the value of providing on-the-ground technical assistance to nonprofit community partners on hiring, grant writing, and navigating bureaucratic processes, among other key operational topics. These trainings were framed as a long-term investment so that grassroots community organizations could sustain themselves within and beyond a particular system partnership

“If you want to make something more equity centered—it’s pretty simple—you just help people build power and then you help them build the capacity to think and act and do for themselves.”

Subject Matter Expert

One discussant also described how opportunities that facilitate collaborative learning and relationship building are a key investment in community assets. These opportunities cause ripple effects within and beyond a partnership effort and disrupting otherwise siloed and competitive dynamics among under resourced community organizations. Another said simply: “If you want to make something more equity centered—it’s pretty simple—you just help people build power and then you help them build the capacity to think and act and do for themselves.”

Citation: VanMeeter, M., Kugley, S., Dierksheide, E. & McDaniel, M. (2022). *System transformation through community leadership: Findings and strategies from an integrated synthesis of literature and voices: Invest in community*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago





OTHER RESOURCES



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**



References

- Bateman, L. B., Fouad, M. N., Hawk, B., Osborne, T., Bae, S., Eady, S., Thompson, J., Brantley, W., Crawford, L., Heider, L., & Schoenberger, Y. M. (2017). Examining neighborhood social cohesion in the context of community-based participatory research: Descriptive findings from an academic-community partnership. *Ethnicity and Disease, 27*, 329–336. <https://doi.org/10.18865/ed.27.S1.329>
- The California Endowment. (2016). *A new power grid: Building healthy communities at year 5*. The California Endowment.
- COFI. (2012). *How we got Johnny, Jada, and José into preschool*. COFI. http://www.cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Briefings_complete_WEB3.pdf
- COFI. (2014). *Policy and systems change: The COFI way*. Community Organizing and Family Issues. <https://cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The-COFI-Way-Policy-Report-web.pdf>
- COFI. (2017). *Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI): Year three report on Illinois lessons learned*. Community Organizing and Family Issues. <https://cofionline.org/COFI/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Success-Story-COFI-Replication-and-Expansion-Evaluative-Paper-Fall-2017.pdf>
- Devia, C., Baker, E. A., Sanchez-Youngman, S., Barnidge, E., Golub, M., Motton, F., Muhammad, M., Ruddock, C., Vicuna, D., & Wallerstein, N. (2017). Advancing system and policy changes for social and racial justice: comparing a Rural and Urban Community-Based Participatory Research Partnership in the U.S. *International Journal for Equity Health, 16*(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-016-0509-3>
- Ferre, C. D., Jones, L., Norris, K. C., & Rowley, D. L. (2010). The Healthy African American Families (HAAF) Project: From community-based participatory research to community-partnered participatory research. *Ethnicity and Disease, 20*(1 Suppl 2), 1–8.
- Hebert, S., & Gallion, J. (2016). *The making connections experience with resident engagement and leadership*. Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- McCroskey, J., Christie, C. A., Lothridge, J., Chambers, R., Pecora, P. J., Azzam, T., Fleischer, D., Rosenthal, E., Weisbart, A., Custodio, C., Franke, T., Nunn, P., Carter, S., Yoo, J., Bowie, P., & Wold, C. (2009). *Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (PIDP) Year One Evaluation Summary report expanded executive summary*. Casey Family Programs.

