TRANSFORM SYSTEMS WITH COMMUNITY IN THE LEAD

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Communities drive and scale systems-level change through codesign and braided supports. Resources commensurate with shared aims flow directly to communities rather than through intermediaries.

Establish Community Ownership over System Responses and Resources

Create shared decision-making processes

Many community initiatives we reviewed emphasized the unique knowledge and expertise that community members and community organizations brought to system change. The underlying logic model driving Community Organizing for Family Issues' (COFI) work, for example, is that parents are best situated to know the impacts of policy as well as their potential. They argue that ensuring services meet the needs of families and children is only possible when parents are at the table (COFI, 2014). One of the Subject Matter Experts we collaborated with similarly felt that solutions will never come from institutions, because institutions lack the agility and flexibility to address individual and family needs in the ways that community can.

In practice, this means establishing decision-making processes where community representatives play central roles and can voice

Transform Systems with Community in the Lead 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.

disagreement. Sands et al. (2016) argued that across Food & Fitness Partnership sites, "when coalitions establish equitable governance structures and collaborative processes, they begin to 'change the narrative' of traditional power structures by providing ladders for community residents to voice, take action upon, and participate in change making and policy processes" (Sands et al., 2016, p. 92).

The Hope Zone project actively prioritized community members' voices in some decision-making: "[Resident] leaders retained the priority voting power to determine which community partners should be invited to participate in the [Community Research Team]" (Brown & Stalker, 2020).

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Every effort stated intentions to involve community in decision-making in some capacity, but a few also described the ways in which they have failed to live up to those intentions. Sands et al. (2016) discussed how a midcourse restructuring of the Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council undermined project goals, because it did not intentionally build community leadership into its governance structures. Similarly, within some of The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative sites, when state liaisons on the foundation's staff chose to respond quickly to emerging opportunities this was seen by the community as a way of short-circuiting local priorities (Preskill et al., 2013; The California Endowment, 2016).

Shift toward community leadership over time

Some partnerships relied on leadership and advocacy from people in positions of power, particularly when community members and grassroots organizations did not initially have the capacity to lead efforts. Lorthridge et al. (2012) note the key role of child welfare system leaders in the Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project: "Strong leaders in the Pomona [Department of Children and Family Services] office, ready and willing to ally with community partners, have helped to assure that there was a common vision around reducing disparate outcomes for African-American children" (Lorthridge et al., 2012, p. 287).

Although having buy-in and participation from institutional champions seems promising, a closer look warns against relying too much on system actors. For example, LaChance et al. (2018) report that in some Food & Fitness Community Partnerships, "When key champions are lost, those committed to the change must rebuild and convince new decision makers to sustain and expand food change efforts" (Lachance et al., 2018, p. 108s). This instability and discontinuity can set back progress. But at a more fundamental level, when communities relied on champions to shift systems from within, the status quo was perpetuated—the power to make decisions and advocate for change stayed within the institution.

A stronger way forward is to shift toward community leadership over time by investing in community partners' skills and growth. Brown and Stalker (2020) describe how the Hope Zone approached the transition to community leadership: "Over time and with capacity building, research, and leadership training, residents assumed incrementally increasing levels of leadership that eventually shifted the power dynamics from researcher guided to fully community-led" (Brown & Stalker, 2020, p. 215).

Move funding closer to community

Community contribution to decision-making was important to all efforts, but some found that authentic system change grew from ensuring that community partners had control over how resources were used. In some partnerships with community organizations, fiscal control was seated with nonprofit and grassroots groups close to the ground. For example, in an evaluation of the Food & Fitness initiatives, Quinn et al. (2018) describe:

> "[Community] ownership went beyond decision-making and included local financial ownership of resources … [Interview] participants went on to stress how important it was to have the partnership structure, particularly the fiscal agent, located within the community rather than housed in an outside agency or institution" (Quinn et al., 2018, p. 86s).

Lee and Navarro (2018), in an overview of the Food & Fitness funding effort, echoed these authors' reflections: "When the designated fiscal sponsor has little or no connection to the priority population, and when its staff does not reflect the makeup of the priority population, community participation, community voice, and trust can all be hampered" (Lee & Navarro, 2018, p. 30s).

Based on an analysis of two community research and system change partnerships, Devia et al. (2017) argue that "requirements to share funding with communities (or to base funding within community-based organizations and tribes as non-traditional grantees) can strengthen the potential of [community-based participatory research] partnerships to influence procedural justice and/or bolster other forms of social justice" (p. 12). A 2016 evaluation of The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative from the Center for the Social Study of Policy went further, arguing that, when possible, resources should be allocated to residents rather than organizations; for example, they propose providing "direct access to flexible funding so that they can decide how best to apply the funds (as opposed to others deciding for them)" (Hebert & Gallion, 2016, p. 28).

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Subject Matter Expert

Subject Matter Experts who participated in our effort also warned against the tendency for institutions and organizations to sequester resources rather than redistribute them within the community. They further reflected that research, technical assistance, and support organizations can easily absorb partnership funds, reducing the resources available. One expert argued that efforts must ". . . [work] the institution side to ensure money flows without barriers. . . because while we are strengthening the community it will all go for naught if the institution won't let the money go." One COFI publication similarly noted that though directing resources to nonprofit services can be framed as investing in community, focusing on nonprofits cuts parents and community members out of decision making (COFI, 2014).

LEVERAGE BRAIDED SUPPORTS TO TAKE A BROAD AND HOLISTIC VIEW

This synthesis focuses on strategies that institutional partners can take to partner with Black and Brown communities more effectively, but it is worth calling out service approaches that the field is pointing toward once systems and communities are engaged in trusted partnerships. These strategies are important to the long-term success of any effort that intends to put community in a leadership position; their absence in the past may have contributed to the minimal or modest gains we have witnessed throughout our review of the literature and case studies.

No single public agency has the resources or service array to meet family needs, especially in communities eroded by decades of disinvestment. Creating substantial change in communities will require cross-system, large-scale thinking. In Making Connections, evaluators noted that the limited capacity and infrastructure of nonprofits inhibited their power to act on partnership priorities, particularly at scale. Although public systems could have helped fill those gaps, they struggled to overcome silos and work in unison (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013).

We also saw evidence of this strategy in an effort to address racial disproportionality and inequity in the Texas child welfare system. James et al. (2008) describes: "[Child Protective Services (CPS)] forged a cultural shift using a cross-systems approach linking child welfare, juvenile justice, education, health and mental health, workforce, and other systems." Those involved in system partnership also felt it was necessary to communicate a message to the community that "the work is bigger than CPS (Child Protective Services)" (p. 290).

In the Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project initiative, organizers focused on three braided strategies, noting that when more than one strategy was used the outcomes were more successful. Strategies included publicizing the availability of earned income tax credits, working to bring in community members as cultural brokers and advocates with DCFS, and establishing faith-based parent child visitation centers that allowed parents working to regain custody of their children to meet in a home-like setting.

Community empowerment without parallel efforts across systems will simply repeat the past, feed mistrust, and sustain present-day inequities. To achieve population-level change, we must be willing to take full advantage of synergies between systems and bring to bear layered and multilevel supports that address everything families need. This will require expanded programmatic capacity and new pathways.

Scale Up and Share Out

Build robust communication channels

Connecting key stakeholders with intentional communication helped some efforts catalyze broader system change. Partnerships built information channels across stakeholder groups, from the local to the state level, and from community members to the system and government actors. For example, Building Healthy Communities created processes to capture and act on issues raised by the community, making sure key messages reached policymakers and government actors. In one instance, community members voiced concerns about the impact of school discipline policies on students. The initiative took up these concerns to the state level for advocacy (Preskill et al., 2013b).

Rely on community messengers

Stories from people with lived experience in systems played a key role in getting buy-in from system actors and mobilizing broad support. COFI has found that parent storytelling, when combined with solution-focused advocacy, has been an effective strategy for moving policymakers to action. This was also true for an Oregon effort to push for data disaggregation by race. One organizational partner reflected on the power of community member testimony: "The most powerful testimony is authentic and genuine. . . where you are able to make a connection emotionally and to change their hearts. To connect the story and the data through words. . . testifying to humanize the numbers." (Nguyen-Truong et al., 2018, p. 351). Similarly, for the Texas child welfare system change effort we reviewed, the experiences of those most impacted were central to change: "Critical is 'telling the story' through the media and voices of constituents—alumni, birth parents, kin caregivers, foster parents—who know disproportionality firsthand" (James et al., 2008, p. 290).

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> **(Nguyen-Truong et al., 2018)**

In designing and implementing strategic communication, professional communication experts brought in as part of the Building Healthy Communities initiative failed to coordinate with community on the ground. This led to messaging that was disconnected from community perspectives. Reflecting on this experience, they called out the value of building communications and advocacy plans with community (Ito et al., 2018).

Seed change across communities

Connection across organizations, sites, and statewide stakeholders helped partnerships learn, grow, and ultimately create change more effectively. The California Disproportionality Project, an offshoot of the Los Angeles Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project, brought together institutional and community stakeholders to address racial disparity in their child welfare system. Lorthridge et al. (2012) describe: "The aim of this project was to get exposure from other counties that have done work in this area, exchange ideas and talk about what types of results were achieved" (p. 285). In the Community Action to Fight Asthma Initiative, coalitions became a learning community. Kreger et al. (2011) observed: "This 'peer learning environment' allowed each coalition to develop as needed and at

its own pace. Younger coalitions benefited directly from more mature groups' knowledge and history, whereas older coalitions were able to expand their work and move further upstream" (p. s212).

Building Healthy Communities highlighted cross-site learning as an early missed opportunity (Farrow & Rogers, 2017). Specifically, some sites had more experience around "how to talk about policy, about systems change," that could have benefited the larger initiative and driven statewide change. However, in a later report, they highlight other kinds of cross-pollination that took place—original communities involved in the work reached out to bring new sites into the work, in a "natural spread of power building" (Farrow et al., 2020).

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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**

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