

BEYOND THE BRINK

ENGAGING RESIDENTS

*A New Call to Action
for Community Foundations*

JULY 2013

*Prepared by the CFLeads Cultivating
Community Engagement Panel*



RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT IS THE NEXT STEP IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

To fulfill their potential for impact, community foundations can reach beyond traditional leaders—such as policymakers, nonprofit executives, researchers and other funders—to directly engage residents as partners in change.

This call to action explains why, and how, to make it happen.

UPDATED FRAMEWORK



The *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation* has been updated to include resident engagement among the building blocks of success. Use it to help chart a path forward for your foundation.

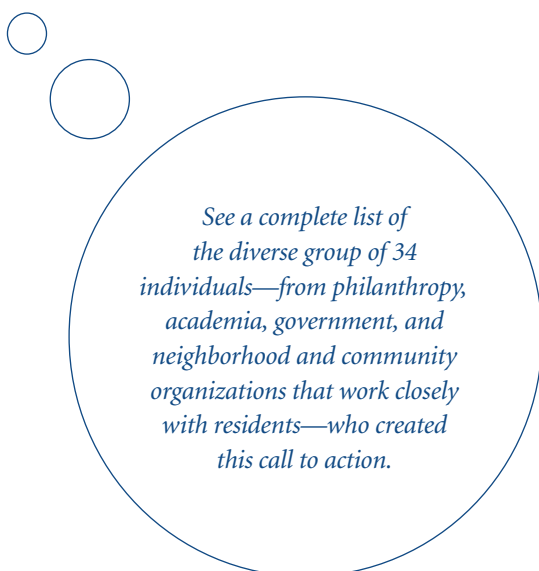
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Broad community engagement for the purpose of stronger democracy is an end unto itself.

Clotilde Dedecker,
President & CEO,
Community Foundation
for Greater Buffalo

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See a complete list of the diverse group of 34 individuals—from philanthropy, academia, government, and neighborhood and community organizations that work closely with residents—who created this call to action.

Context: *Moving beyond the brink*

Community foundations have enormous potential to build the common good. Operating in more than 700 places across the United States—large and mid-sized cities, small towns, suburban and rural areas, regions and entire states—community foundations vary greatly in their size, history, asset mix and expertise and in the social, political and economic contexts in which they work. But they also share a unique and valuable position in society. They are distinct from government and free from political cycles. They are not constrained by the corporate sector's profit imperative. They have a broader orientation than most not-for-profit institutions. These qualities, along with their independence, local roots, permanence, tax status, community ownership and community betterment mission, give community foundations not only the freedom to address a range of community concerns but also the time and opportunity to tackle especially tough, systemic problems and pursue cross-sector solutions.

The challenge for community foundations is to live up to their potential. In 2005, the seminal report *On the Brink of New Promise: The Future of Community Foundations* challenged community foundations to fulfill their promise. In a time when the philanthropic marketplace was becoming much more competitive and community foundations were focused on building financial assets, *On the Brink* argued that community foundations needed to position themselves more strategically or risk irrelevance. Community foundations, the authors urged, needed to go beyond their philanthropic banking function and capitalize on their unique advantages to better serve their communities.

Specifically, *On the Brink* recommended that community foundations shift their priorities from a focus on the institution to the community, from managing financial assets to long-term leadership, and from competitive independence to coordinated impact.

The report spurred new conversations in the community foundation field and accelerated learning and experimentation around these priorities. An important part of the response was the advancement of a **community leadership approach** as an organizing strategy for community foundations. In 2008, specific practices were articulated in the *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*. This *Framework*, developed by a 30-member national task force convened by CFLeads in partnership with the Council on Foundations Community Foundations Leadership Team and the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, now serves as a foundational document for the field.

Many community foundations now are experimenting with the changes recommended by *On the Brink* and outlined in the *Framework*. More community foundations than ever before see their role as broader than grantmaking. They commission research, convene decision-makers, advocate for solutions and use their networks to marshal resources that strengthen communities. They use their grants strategically, partnering with other leaders and working across sectors. Conversations and practices have moved from asset-building alone toward community leadership as a key strategy.

Today, more foundations recognize that community engagement is a core component of leadership, and many make it a vital part of what they do and how they work.

Residents represent new relevance

Often, however, a critical element—resident engagement—is largely missing from community foundation practices. Resident engagement is part of, but not the same as, community engagement: It involves active, meaningful participation by the people who live in the neighborhoods where change is occurring and whose lives are most affected by the policies, systems and structures that are targeted for change. Unfortunately, however, residents may not be involved in or represented by community engagement efforts unless change agents make a deliberate effort to include them.

If the residents and institutions in a community aren't actively part of the process and own it, then no matter how many resources or fancy their process is, it won't be sustainable.

Ian Bautista, President, United Neighborhood Centers of America

Foundations that engage residents find that they can achieve longer-term, broader community impact by reaching beyond the traditional leaders and experts that are the current focus of many community foundations to include a wider range of voices in community decision-making. Some engage with residents to address specific community issues. Others integrate residents into all that they do and position the community foundation as a vehicle for building community; some of these describe their work as establishing a “community commons” or serving as a “staging ground” for public concerns. The result has been more involved communities and a high level of satisfaction with both the process and the outcome of public decision-making.

To better understand and capture the role residents play in community leadership, in 2012-2013, CFLeads convened a national Cultivating Community Engagement (CCE) Panel. The Panel set two goals for itself: (1) Make the case as to why community foundations are well-placed to work with people from throughout the community, including those who are most affected by local programs and public policies, to shape the well-being of the community; and (2) Use the wisdom and expertise of Panel members to recommend specific strategies and practices that community foundations can adopt to promote active engagement of residents in building healthy, thriving places to live.

We've found we get better outcomes when we engage the community because people are participating in their own solutions.

Sandra Vargas, President and CEO, The Minneapolis Foundation

Supported by funding from the Charles Stewart Mott and W.K. Kellogg foundations, the Panel encompassed a diverse group of 34 individuals from philanthropy, academia, government, and neighborhood and community organizations that work closely with residents.

After nearly a year of deliberation, the CCE Panel concluded that, too often, community foundations engage with communities by working with “grasstops” and traditional community leaders and miss the perspectives of the wider community, in particular, the residents who are directly affected by community leaders' decisions. It urged community foundations to do more.

Panel *perspective*

Specifically, the Cultivating Community Engagement Panel agreed that:

Residents are a crucial part of community engagement and must be at the core of community foundations' community engagement work.

Community foundations are well-positioned to play an important role in engaging residents and communities, and they can contribute resources to that effort that go beyond money.

Community foundations can and should do more than they currently do to engage with residents. This will require interacting with a broader range of people in the community, beyond the traditional community leaders and constituency groups.

Effective community engagement on the part of community foundations should be expanded to involve significant resident engagement principles and practices. These practices, which are now included in the updated *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*, enable community foundations to promote and support resident engagement as an essential part of community leadership.

AS THE PANEL NOTED IN ITS DELIBERATIONS:

There is growing awareness among some community foundation leaders who are experimenting with or have adopted community leadership approaches that an essential... element of that approach is the proactive, intensive engagement of ordinary people in all aspects of community building and civic life.... It is intentionally focused on seeing residents—representing diverse parts of the population—as actors in all facets of planning, implementing, assessing and developing efforts to strengthen communities. It is an approach that melds “top down” and “bottom up” strategies for decision making.

And it is an approach that is inherently democratic.

This new call to action briefly summarizes the Panel's perspective and recommendations on those findings. It is drawn from individual interviews with the Panelists, a framing paper that summarizes the thinking behind the Panel's findings on resident and community engagement, and the records of two full Panel meetings and numerous task team meetings.

Residents are vital to community engagement; *community foundations are positioned to make it happen*

The Panel recognized that many community foundations are expanding their work beyond grantmaking to achieve greater impact and to be more relevant to their communities. The Panel applauded these efforts and expressed hope that community foundations will continue on this journey by actively integrating residents' voices and ideas into their efforts to strengthen communities.

Community foundations are owned by the community. They're not a bank—they're keepers of funds and a public endowment from thousands of people who see us as a place they can trust.

Lauren Casteel, Vice President of Philanthropic Partnerships, The Denver Foundation

Several community foundation members of the Panel have already embraced resident engagement through their community leadership experiences (see box on next page). For them, resident engagement has produced a clearer understanding of how their communities function, including the complex and changing ways in which residents, public institutions and local decisionmakers interact. Learning from others who have a longer history of working with residents, these community foundations see large-scale resident engagement as essential to rebuilding trust between people and public institutions and strengthening connections among residents of different backgrounds, ethnicities and ideologies.

Community foundations that engage residents have found that the approach attracts attention and interest from donors, just as their forays beyond grantmaking as a single strategy have done, because donors can see first-hand the power it has to achieve long-term, measurable impact.

Community foundations have several attributes that make them well-suited for engaging with residents:

- They have a deep and rich history of building stronger communities; their historical roots are steeped in a geographic region and in its purpose and mission.
- They are boundary-spanning organizations that can facilitate collaboration among diverse groups of people and institutions in a community.
- They generally have a broad community betterment mission.
- Because of their physical permanence, they can take a long view and accommodate the slower pace needed to recruit, empower and mobilize residents as change agents.
- They are keepers of a community endowment. Unlike private foundations, they are “owned” by the community.
- They have significant financial resources and access to capital.
- They can contribute resources other than money, including connections, convening spaces, technical assistance, relationship brokering, networks, research and evaluation, personal ties, influence and social capital.
- They are independent—not part of government or the private for-profit sector—so they transcend partisan interests and the need for financial profits.
- They can sustain community engagement efforts beyond one-shot programs or initiatives to become a regular, embedded aspect of daily public life.
- They can use community engagement to attract and engage new donors and build the capacity of everyone to be a philanthropist—beyond just giving money.
- Community foundations in the United States and in other countries are getting solid results through community engagement approaches such as advocacy, public-sector monitoring, support for public participation in new democracies and promotion of a culture of giving within communities.

Community foundations *can do, and gain, more*

Community foundations come to resident engagement from different starting points, depending on their institutional history and local context. Although some have been deeply involved in resident engagement for a long time, and some have experimented with it to learn what does and doesn't work in their communities, others are just starting to explore the concept. What they share is the belief that community foundations are part of a larger ecosystem in which all residents and organizations should have a chance to participate in important decisions and take action to improve their communities.

Community foundations' interest in this topic clearly is growing: More than 220 community foundation representatives registered for a webinar on community engagement that CFLeads hosted in 2011. Hundreds more attended conference sessions on the topic in 2011 and 2012, and many individual community foundation staff have reached out to CFLeads for information on how to get more "resident voice."

WHAT DOES RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT BY COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS LOOK LIKE?

In Mississippi, the **Foundation for the Mid South** provided staff, research and funding to develop and roll out a community planning process in Leflore County. Residents gathered to identify and take action on four issues they agreed were important. One was development of a new community health center. The Foundation facilitated discussions between the residents' group and a local hospital—a collaboration that ultimately secured \$1.3 million to build the facility. The Foundation also provided \$30,000 for a feasibility study to help residents leverage an additional \$30 million, including \$19 million in state and federal funds, for a project to upgrade water and sewage systems.

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (IA) brought thousands of people together to brainstorm ideas to decide on priorities for moving the city forward. From boardrooms to living rooms, community members generated more than 2,300 ideas. Informed by resident voting and opinion surveys, a 21-member committee winnowed this list to the top 10, including a passenger train service, library expansion and public walking trail. Today, all priorities identified by the community have been achieved.

The Denver Foundation (CO) earmarks at least 25% of unrestricted dollars in all Community Impact areas for resident engagement, racial equity and capacity building. The Foundation has a leadership training series for residents and a project that helps nonprofits become more inclusive and equitable. The small grants program engages residents in surveying their surroundings, identifying strengths, brainstorming ideas to build on those strengths and implementing the ideas. An affiliated project helps emerging leaders learn how to plan and run projects, engage other volunteers and manage grants. With other partners, the Foundation established a collaborative that brings community organizers and funders together around ballot initiatives, community change campaigns and other efforts. As a result, specific resident-led changes are evident all over the city.

The Humboldt Area Foundation (CA) serves as a community convener, facilitator, mediator, grantmaker, trainer and organizer, and all Foundation staff members have at least some direct experience working with residents. Residents have influenced local and regional policymakers to: approve a controlled burn on tribal lands that reflected cultural preferences; establish recreation programs in a rural community inhabited by undocumented Latino families; expand access to broadband communications services and influence state policies governing the technology; adopt a more equitable school discipline policy in a community plagued by racial disparities; and create and implement a federal award-winning school reform plan in a county with some of the highest poverty and poorest health outcomes in the state.

The successes achieved by community foundations that do engage with residents suggest that more community foundations could benefit from doing more to mobilize, support and partner with communities in this way. The growing demand from the field for information on how to work well with residents indicates that more community foundations are ready to make this change. And the trends taking shape in many communities—from demographic shifts to technological ones—suggest it is more important than ever to ensure that all members of society are included and engaged and not isolated, ignored or marginalized.

Community foundations have to focus on providing public spaces that give people the chance to really hear different points of view and understand one another rather than shouting at people in meetings or on television. Why can't we help create these community commons?

Dudley Cocke,
Artistic Director,
Roadside Theater at Appalshop

Principles and practices *for success*

Positioning residents as a crucial part of community engagement deepens the vision outlined in the original *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation* by opening up new opportunities for action and by expanding the scope and power of the foundations' leadership role. The CCE Panel recommended a set of guiding principles (at right) to ensure that community foundations partner with residents effectively; some specific practices that community foundations can use to integrate resident engagement into community leadership, which have been incorporated into the updated *Framework*; and some guidance on evaluating resident and community engagement.

Community foundations (including those represented by CCE Panel members) differ widely in their position on the community engagement spectrum; each organization's work is distinctive. Nonetheless, the Panel added the following resident engagement practices to the original *Framework's* "building blocks" because they were deemed relevant for all community foundations.

1. The community foundation manifests the values, culture and will necessary to exercise community leadership and engagement

Community engagement—including the crucial component of resident engagement—doesn't just happen outside the foundation's doors. It is an ethos that can and should pervade internal operations, structures, priorities, policies and practices so that the foundation becomes, at its core, a community engagement institution—something that is "of, by and for" the community it serves. This process involves shifting the question from "What did we accomplish?" to "How do we work with others in the community as part of that community to strengthen it?"

Recommended resident engagement practices:

- **Participating with** residents in determining program strategies, priorities and/or grantmaking so that residents share ownership of community visions, solutions, and actions around common concerns
- **Selecting staff, committee and board members who are from the community**, understand it, have a passion for its well-being and can work comfortably within it

*How does a community foundation transition from informing a community about an issue to actually equipping people in that community with the skills and tools they need to do something about it? That's very different and requires a transformation of the institution itself. It reflects one of the arguments in *On the Brink: community foundations need to have relevance in the community. If they don't see community engagement as core to their added value in the community, they'll be irrelevant.**

Kelly Ryan, President and CEO, Encourage Community Foundation

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

Resident agency. All people have power; they have the capacity to relate to one another, understand public issues, make recommendations to public institutions and take action themselves to address public problems.

Inclusiveness. People from all parts of a community's population have the opportunity to be involved, contribute ideas and work to improve the community. It is not about simply bringing together the "enlightened" or educating the "unenlightened"; it is about intentionally bringing everyone's knowledge and experience to the table for community benefit.

Partnership, not directorship.

Organizations or individuals work with, rather than for or on behalf of, communities. The key is not to direct people but to connect them.

Reciprocity. Community foundations have as much to learn from other institutions, and from residents themselves, as they have to teach.

Contributions beyond grantmaking.

Grantmakers and non-grantmakers both have resources to bring to bear in strengthening communities.

Assets, not deficits. Engagement is most effective when residents and communities have the chance to identify, use and leverage assets such as time, talents, experiences, networks and others.

Everyone gives. Every community resident is a potential donor, no matter how much money he or she can contribute. Non-financial contributions can be as important as financial ones.

2. The community foundation continuously builds relationships to exercise community leadership and engagement

Community foundations exist to bring together the diverse stakeholders who comprise a community, whether it is part of a city, region or state. The act of bringing people together begins the process of building relationships across economic, racial, cultural, professional, educational and social divides. A community foundation is one of the few local institutions that can earn trust and bridge gaps between all stakeholders in their geographical area.

Recommended resident engagement practices:

- **Respecting** community assets—the knowledge, relationships, experience and capacities of residents and community partners—by seeking out, understanding and acknowledging the multiple viewpoints and perspectives that are present within communities
- **Engaging with all people**, paying careful attention to those who historically have been excluded or under-engaged, in examining issues, setting goals and finding solutions
- **Working with residents in places and at times** that are comfortable and convenient for them
- **Actively listening** to residents and other community members, creating opportunities for continuous feedback and following through on commitments over the long term

Money is important, but it doesn't necessarily solve problems. And it's not necessarily an indicator of success, which community foundations have tended to believe. Money's just a tool in the toolbox. People are what make change happen—and their leadership is where it begins and ends.

Jeff Yost, President and CEO, Nebraska Community Foundation

3. Accessing and developing the resources necessary to promote community leadership and engagement

Community foundations are not only a source of funding but also an important and often unique vehicle for connecting residents with other community stakeholders. Community foundations that engage with residents use a variety of resources that, collectively, can sustain and embed change in the community, including intellectual, political, reputational, cultural and financial capital.

Recommended resident engagement practices:

- **Facilitating, creating, commissioning and sharing research, data, stories and metrics** about the community, in partnership with residents and other community stakeholders, to assist planning, advocacy and implementation efforts
- **Facilitating connections** among residents and government, corporate and non-profit decisionmakers and connecting people from different cultural, racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds
- **Leveraging all forms of capital** from residents, other funders and the public sector
- **Providing convening space** for residents and other community members, when needed

4. Accessing and developing the understanding and skills needed to exercise community leadership and engagement

Engaging with a community means making a commitment to listen and work with residents and other community partners. This requires having skills and knowledge to help residents drive and participate in improving their community.

Recommended resident engagement practices:

- **Understanding how race, class, culture and power** affect all aspects of the community and being able to facilitate ongoing dialogue about these issues
- **Understanding, supporting and participating in processes** that support resident involvement in community improvement, such as community organizing, public engagement and organizational development
- **Engaging with networks** of organizations, individuals and associations working to improve the community
- **Cultivating an understanding of systems** that provide services and shape the context for the community's health and well-being (e.g., education, public health, community economic development)
- **Coordinating and collaborating** with processes and systems that support community improvement and working to strengthen those systems

The hard part for community foundations is moving from being a 'thing with walls' to working with and engaging people outside those walls. It's hard for institutions to move beyond seeing themselves as separate from the community.

It needs to move from the mindset of 'we'll ask the community to come do this work' to 'we'll be in service to the community.' The institution should be getting invited to the community.

Lucy Bernholz,
Co-author,
On the Brink

MEASURING RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT BY COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

As more community foundations adopt resident engagement practices, it will be important to know whether their efforts are working—that is, whether residents and other community stakeholders are better able to identify and take action in ways that strengthen their communities. (This is what some people refer to as “civic capacity” or “social efficacy.”) Measuring the impact of resident engagement involves different measures of progress and achievement than community foundations have traditionally used, which have tended to focus on the quantity of assets, grants, programs and services rather than their quality, efficacy or impact. Moreover, given the diversity within communities and their residents, measuring resident engagement often involves measuring the outcomes of comprehensive plans for community participation rather than of isolated engagement strategies.

Although the CCE Panel did not discuss evaluation extensively, the Panel did note a few indicators of change that community foundations can use to gauge the progress and results of their resident engagement efforts. These include:

1. **Level of participation.** Measures for this indicator track the number and diversity of participants and the depth of their participation (e.g., number of hours spent per person in the activity; quantity of interactions among individual participants and among groups, such as residents, public officials, nonprofit and business leaders, and employees).
2. **Quality of the engagement experience.** Measures include level of participant satisfaction and the quality of deliberation within the process.
3. **Actions taken.** Measures include both the extent to which participants took some sort of public action (e.g., voting, volunteering, working with others to solve a public problem) and an increase in “successful” actions, as defined by residents.
4. **Participant outcomes.** These measures reflect residents’ broader opportunities for participation and changes in the political context surrounding the engagement. Examples include the effect on: (a) residents’ trust in government, community attachment, interest in public affairs, confidence in their capacity to effect change and openness to the views of others; and (b) trust in each other and in government, confidence in their capacity to effect change and openness to others’ views.
5. **Community outcomes.** Measures include specific changes to the health and wellness of the community, such as advancement in educational attainment, improvement in public health or the environment, and reduction in violence.

Takeaway thoughts

As community foundations celebrate 100 years of service, it is time to take stock of where we are and how far we and our communities have come. During the last decade, in particular—prompted by *On the Brink of New Promise* and guided by the *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*—a growing number of foundations have demonstrated the value of their leadership in mobilizing community members around important issues.

Looking ahead, the Panel is confident there is more that community foundations can do to fulfill their promise as powerful community leaders. In particular, it's time to deepen our understanding and use of resident engagement as a goal and/or strategy for positive community change and to drill down in our community engagement efforts to make sure we truly engage with residents as colleagues and partners.

The guidance provided by the Cultivating Community Engagement Panel—summarized here, in the Panel's call to action, and in the updated *Framework for Community Leadership*—and the support offered by CFLeads' national peer-to-peer learning exchange can help community foundations stay on course with this significant evolution in values, culture and practice.

It isn't easy to move from an institutional to a community focus, to work simultaneously at the grassroots and grasstops, or to fundamentally change the way traditional institutions operate with (and within) their communities. But it's a change we need to make if we truly want to strengthen the social fabric of our communities, remove the barriers that divide people and organizations, find more robust and comprehensive solutions to public problems, and make the best use of all the assets that exist in a community.

A commitment to engaging with residents is transformative, but it is not revolutionary. Rather, it reflects this country's intrinsic belief in a concept of democracy that will only be realized when people—all people—help to define their own opportunities and shape their own future.

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