

Powerful Partners:

Lessons from Community Foundations about Resident Engagement

By Leila Fiester and Deborah Ellwood



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About CFLeads

CFLeads is the hub and go-to resource for community foundations seeking to make more impact in their communities through community leadership. As a national network, CFLeads supports and connects hundreds of community foundations across the country as they take on new roles, push their practices, and learn from the experiences of their peers.

Mission

CFLeads helps community foundations advance their community leadership practice to build thriving communities.

Vision

Community foundations take on challenging issues, engage residents, pursue cross-sector solutions to community problems, and marshal the needed resources to improve their communities and provide opportunity for all.

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About the Authors

This report was written by Leila Fiester, with editorial direction provided by Deborah Ellwood.

Leila is an author and researcher based in Frederick, Maryland, who helps foundations, research institutes, and other organizations plan, describe, and assess strategies; analyze practices and outcomes; distill lessons and implications; and share their stories. Deborah is the executive director of CFLeads, a former community foundation board and staff leader, and an experienced advocate, grantmaker, fundraiser, and community builder.

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Foreword

It is our pleasure to share with you this report that tracks the practice of resident engagement among community foundations. It is an approach being adopted by community foundations across the country that believe that incorporating the ideas, resources and leadership of community members is crucial to tackling the deep and complex challenges facing us today.

The lessons highlighted in this document come from the trials and errors of eight community foundations that participated in a year-long learning network hosted by CFLeads in 2013-14. They also build on the findings of a discussion by the CFLeads Cultivating Community Engagement Panel in 2012-13, which determined that resident engagement is a critical element of a community foundation's work—and called on more community foundations to incorporate it into their community leadership strategies.

The foundations' commitment to this work is driven by a deep faith in the people in their communities and by an unwavering belief in the democratic process. As they have pushed beyond their walls, the community foundations involved in this project have found that working more closely with residents is inspiring to board members and energizing to staff, and, over time, creates greater community impact. Together with other important community leadership roles community foundations play—convening collaboratives, sharing research, influencing public policy, and marshaling resources to meet community needs—resident engagement helps ensure that community foundations are vital partners in building healthy, vibrant places to live.

We hope the lessons from these on-the-ground experiences provide you with the inspiration and vision that you need to take this journey with your community. CFLeads' *Stories from the Field* and *Resident Engagement Guidebook* serve as additional resources to aid you in identifying practices you may want to adopt.

We hope you find this work as rewarding and worthwhile as the community foundations that have fully embraced it.



Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker
Chair, CCE Panel



Deborah A. Ellwood
Executive Director

Acknowledgments

The lessons accumulated for this document came from the eight community foundation teams that participated in the CFLeads Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network (CLN) in 2013-14. We are grateful for their willingness to share what they learned with the broader community foundation field.

Amarillo Area Foundation
Baltimore Community Foundation
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County
The Denver Foundation
Foundation for the Mid South
Fremont Area Community Foundation
Humboldt Area Foundation

The rich learning environment of the Resident Engagement CLN would not have been possible without the facilitation provided by Janet Topolsky and Kristin Feierabend of the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group and the guidance provided by special advisors and Cultivating Community Engagement Panel members Roque Barros and Garland Yates. We were also supported by additional resource team members who helped manage the CLN meetings and served as team coaches: René Bryce-Laporte, Bryce-Laporte Information & Consulting; Marisa Bueno; Michael M. Howe, RP Group; Wendy Merrick, West Central Initiative; and Christopher Goett and Ericka Plater-Turner, who participated on behalf of the Council on Foundations. Thanks also to Doug Wilhelm, an independent writer who participated in the CLN meetings and collected stories to illustrate the lessons in this report.

We are also grateful to the CFLeads Cultivating Community Engagement Panel and its report, *Beyond the Brink: Engaging Residents. A New Call to Action for Community Foundations*, which served as a starting point for the journey taken by Resident Engagement CLN participants. (Panel Members are listed on the following page, and the Call to Action can be found at <http://www.cfleads.org/community-engagement/call-to-action.php>.) We are also indebted to Peter Pennekamp, Senior Advisor, The Giving Practice at Philanthropy Northwest, who helped lead the Panel and shape this report.

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CFLeads Cultivating Community Engagement Panel

(Affiliations as of July 2013)

Carolyn Abdullah

Director of Community Assistance, Everyday Democracy

Ivy Allen

President, Foundation for the Mid South

Kathy Annette

President & CEO, Blandin Foundation

Derek Barker

Program Officer, Kettering Foundation

Roque Barros

Community Advisor/Consultant

Ian Bautista

President, United Neighborhood Centers of America

Lucy Bernholz

*Visiting Scholar, Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society
Stanford University*

Lauren Casteel

*Vice President, Philanthropic Partnerships,
The Denver Foundation*

Steve Clift

Executive Director, E-DEMOCRACY

Dudley Cocke

Artistic Director, Roadside Theater at Appalshop

Stuart Comstock-Gay

President & CEO, Vermont Community Foundation

Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker (Panel Chair)

President & CEO, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

Nick Deychakiwsky

Program Officer, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Paula Ellis

*Consultant, recently retired from the
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*

Janis Foster Richardson

Executive Director, Grassroots Grantmakers

Christopher Gates

*Executive Director, PACE —
Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement*

Antonia Hernández

President & CEO, California Community Foundation

Joseph Hoereth

*Director, Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE)
College of Urban Planning & Public Affairs
University of Illinois-Chicago*

Mike Huggins

Retired City Manager, Eau Claire, WI

Matt Leighninger

Executive Director, Deliberative Democracy Consortium

Darryl Lester

Founding Partner, Community Investment Network

John McKnight

*Professor of Education and Social Policy
Co-Director, Asset-Based Community Development Institute
Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University*

Linda Nguyen

Director, Civic Engagement, Alliance for Children and Families

Peter Peterson

Executive Director, Davenport Institute, Pepperdine University

Carleen Rhodes

*President & CEO, The Saint Paul Foundation and
Minnesota Community Foundation*

Gloria Rubio-Cortes

President, National Civic League

Kelly Ryan

President & CEO, Encourage Community Foundation

Nancy Van Milligen

President & CEO, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

Sandra Vargas

President & CEO, The Minneapolis Foundation

Alandra Washington

Deputy Director, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

Grace Cainoy Weltman

*Associate Director of Policy and Planning,
City of Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority*

Garland Yates

Interim Executive Director, Neighborhood Funders Group

Jeffrey Yost

President & CEO, Nebraska Community Foundation

Introduction

The future is now for community foundations," a status report declared in 2005. "In the coming years, community foundations will face a far greater challenge than [ever before] to define and act on their distinctive value to their communities." The report commissioned by the Charles Stewart Mott and Ford foundations, *On the Brink of New Promise: The Future of U.S. Community Foundations*,¹ urged foundation leaders to "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."²

On the Brink's recommendation was a wake-up call for hundreds of community foundations across the United States, and it sparked a period of intense self-scrutiny and

learning. In 2007, CFLeads (a national organization formed to help community foundations respond to the challenges outlined in the report) and the Council on Foundations' Community Foundations Leadership Team convened a 30-member national task force to explore and define the community leadership role that was recommended. The charge for the National Task Force on Community Leadership was to outline a clear structure for community leadership by community foundations that defined a path to greater impact while also leaving individual foundations sufficient leeway to find a leadership style that worked in local contexts. The resulting *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*, released in 2008 by CFLeads, the Council on Foundations, and the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, identified several essential building blocks for effective leadership.

Terms and Perspective

The practice of helping residents work and learn together to identify and address shared problems in order to achieve better outcomes goes by many names: "resident engagement," "community engagement," "community empowerment," "community democracy," and more. All terms share a sense that real and lasting improvements in the lives of individuals and the places where they live require hands-on participation, leadership, and contributions by the people most intimately affected: the residents. CFLeads posits that **resident engagement** is an integral part of community leadership by a community foundation, in which the goal is community transformation. CFLeads defines resident engagement as an approach that centers on helping community members identify the changes they want to see and then supporting them in pursuing their goals. The community foundation and/or its partners ensure that community change is accomplished by working with residents, rather than doing things for them or to them.

By **community leadership**, we mean that the foundation acts as "a community partner that creates a better future for all by: pursuing the community's greatest opportunities and addressing the most critical challenges; inclusively uniting people, institutions, and resources from throughout the community; and producing significant, widely shared, and lasting results" (<http://www.cfleads.org/community-engagement/CFLeads-Framework.pdf>). For CFLeads, community leadership has four key elements: engaging residents; tackling tough issues that are relevant to the community; seeking cross-sector solutions; and marshalling diverse resources to strengthen communities and improve opportunities for everyone.

By **transformation**, we mean that community conditions, opportunities, and resources are improved in significant, instrumental, and enduring ways. (See page 7 for more on transformation.)

Many community foundation leaders embraced the *Framework's* recommendations, expanding their practices to partner more broadly with other local leaders and engaging more actively in policy reforms. Over time, however, some also recognized an opportunity to provide deeper discussion and clearer guidance on resident engagement, a key element of community leadership. In response, CFLeads convened the Cultivating Community Engagement Panel to capture the practices of community foundations that were involved in this aspect of leadership. The panel included 34 philanthropic leaders, researchers, government officials, and people from neighborhood and community groups who worked closely with residents.

In 2013, the Panel issued *Beyond the Brink: Engaging Residents. A New Call to Action for Community Foundations*, which urged community foundations to directly engage residents as partners in change. *Beyond the Brink* framed resident engagement as a core component of the foundations' community leadership approach. It recognized the vital role that community foundations can play in involving residents. And it urged more community foundations to connect with residents because it leads to "longer-term, broader community impact" on issues that are too complex for one sector to solve on its own, a clearer understanding of how communities function, greater trust between neighborhood residents and public institutions, and stronger connections among people of different backgrounds and perspectives.³

A big question remained, however: How can community foundations apply these ideals in their communities? Foundation leaders needed more guidance on how to connect with the community residents they sought to support, especially those residents who are most vulnerable.

CFLeads responded by creating a Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network (CLN) that helped teams of three to six participants from eight community foundations "build knowledge, abilities, and connections...to advance their resident engagement readiness, role, proficiency, and culture."⁴ The teams represented a range of organizational sizes, cultures, and communities. Some had worked closely with residents for many years, while others were new to the approach. Some worked directly with residents, while others reached residents by working through other community partners. Team members included foundation CEOs, senior staff, board members, and community representatives. During

this year-long program, the CLN gave participants courage to take reasonable risks, support to work through difficult issues, and permission to learn even if it meant making a few mistakes.

This report presents lessons and advice generated by the Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network that can

help other foundations meet the call to action on resident engagement. These are emerging lessons; some are more accurately lessons-in-the-making. They capture wisdom that will become even deeper as people continue to work through the process of adopting and refining a resident engagement culture and approach. Moreover, not every lesson is applicable to every community foundation's circumstances. However, by highlighting practical guidance on what makes resident engagement a feasible and effective part of community leadership, we hope to help others understand the approach and see how it can increase impact. We hope to motivate more community foundation leaders, board members, staffs, donors, and grantees to work closely with residents and other community-based partners. And we hope to inspire further reflection on the practices promoted by the *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*.

We emphasize 10 broad lessons here. For each, we provide insights and examples from the CLN members' experience. Some lessons have to do with building internal structures, cultures, practices, and capacities that a community foundation needs to implement and support a resident engagement strategy. Others address the external roles, relationships, and activities that make resident engagement feasible and effective. We conclude with reflections on key themes.

This report is part of a suite of products based on the CLN which also includes *Stories from the Field* and a *guidebook on working with residents to address local concerns*. See <http://www.cfleads.org>.

CLN Participants 2013-14

- Amarillo Area Foundation
- Baltimore Community Foundation
- Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
- The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County
- The Denver Foundation
- Foundation for the Mid South
- Fremont Area Community Foundation
- Humboldt Area Foundation

10 Lessons about Resident Engagement

- 1 Build a board that supports resident engagement.
- 2 Create common understanding of resident engagement and its importance.
- 3 Develop staff capacities for resident engagement.
- 4 Balance charitable and transformational activities.
- 5 Address race, equity, and power dynamics.
- 6 Establish trusting relationships with residents and community leaders.
- 7 Establish partnerships that involve more than money.
- 8 Connect residents to issues, allies, and opportunities.
- 9 Commit to a long-term and sometimes complex process.
- 10 Ensure sustainable support for resident engagement.

1

Build a Board that Supports Resident Engagement

For many community foundations, direct interaction with the people who live and work in communities has been the key to greater trust, more powerful relationships, broader accountability for results, and longer-lasting impact. Engaging with residents has helped foundation leaders and staff understand more clearly how community issues and opportunities affect individuals' lives. And it has inspired foundation trustees by giving them a stronger, more personal sense of connection to the community and its residents. Nonetheless, a resident engagement approach requires shifting the foundation's orientation to accommodate a longer time frame for achieving results, a new set of organizational capacities and expectations, and a process that is less predictable and controllable. To set this new tone, says Baltimore Community Foundation President/CEO Tom Wilcox, "You have to start at home. If you haven't created energy with the board and staff, you can't go anywhere."

The teams participating in the CLN found it useful to:

- **Establish board champions for resident engagement** and enlist their help educating peers. Supportive board members serve as bridge builders and cultural brokers as they take the lead in educating colleagues about resident engagement and keeping it on the agenda. All of the teams that joined the CLN included at least one board member who understood resident engagement and could make the case for it with colleagues. In Amarillo, for instance, foundation staff identified several champions on the board and enlisted them to host small-group

lunches, where they explained the concept to colleagues, invited questions, and elicited other perspectives on how the foundation might engage with residents. In Fremont, trustee Hendrick (Hank) Jones, who chaired the board's Poverty to Prosperity team during most of the CLN period, spoke passionately about resident engagement every time he gave a committee report, telling colleagues "it was a fundamentally different way of doing business that had potential to change how we were perceived in the community," President/CEO Carla Roberts recalls. (See *Stories from the Field* for more examples.)

- **Inform board members explicitly about the foundation's work in communities.** For example, The Denver Foundation holds board and committee orientations annually that address resident engagement, racial and economic equity, and philanthropic development. Staff at the Baltimore Community Foundation report on their neighborhood work at every board meeting, usually including at least one story that captures what staff have done to engage residents and what the engagement led to.
- **Hold a board retreat** that includes an explanation and discussion of resident engagement. Several CLN teams said this was a good way to start the conversation about what resident engagement entails, reflect on the community's composition and assets, and connect resident engagement to the foundation's larger agenda for community leadership and transformation.

2

Create Common Understanding of Resident Engagement and Its Importance

There are many ways to engage (or, more appropriately, engage *with*) residents, so how one views resident engagement has implications for the roles a foundation will play, how many resources can be leveraged and how they will be used, and what results can be achieved. But the definition of resident engagement, and how it is applied, varies from one community foundation to the next—and, sometimes, from one situation to the next. CLN participants developed a resident engagement spectrum depicting the range of definitions available for a given situation, from “resident consultation,” in which the community foundation informs residents about issues and/or solicits input from them, to “resident engagement,” in which residents advise the community foundation on decisions that affect them and/or partner with the foundation to set the agenda and drive community action.

“Some foundations do really well with *community* engagement if you mean involving chambers of commerce, business owners, and grasstops-type organizations,” notes Richard Garcia, a community activist and trustee of The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County. “But if you’re looking at *resident* engagement you want to focus on involving communities of color and low-income communities, and that’s a different type of engagement.”

CLN participants found it useful to:

- **Revisit and clarify the community foundation’s mission.** Does the foundation exist to advance specific community goals? Would these goals be further advanced through resident engagement? What do community members think the foundation is about? In what ways, and to what extent, can resident engagement elevate the mission?

- **Define what resident engagement means to the foundation.** A major question to be answered is whether engagement is primarily a way to reach residents (i.e., a delivery mechanism) or a way to drive change (i.e., a mode of transformation). In what ways, for what issues or topics, and to what extent will resident voices, opinions, and leadership affect priorities, goals, strategies, activities, and so on? How will resident engagement be used in different situations? Who are “the residents” to be engaged? Do we engage residents directly or through other community-based partners? Denver created a narrative explaining that resident engagement is important because economic disparities are growing in the neighborhoods to which the foundation is committed. In this context, resident engagement becomes a way to make the foundation more agile and competent.
- **Hold a staff retreat** to discuss what resident engagement is and why it’s important, envision how it can be supported by the whole foundation, and brainstorm new ways to support the commitment.

For the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo, resident engagement “melds the top-down approach that philanthropy has traditionally taken with a bottom-up strategy,” says President/CEO Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker.

“It means going beyond institutional structures. It acknowledges the benefit of having all hands on deck. It’s the proactive, intensive engagement of ordinary folks who are not part of any kind of institutional structure in all facets of community work: planning, implementing, assessing, and continuing to engage in strengthening communities.”

3

Develop Staff Capacities for Resident Engagement

The *Framework for Community Leadership* states that **community foundations should “access and develop the understanding and skills** to exercise community leadership,” including “skills to help residents and other stakeholders be involved in and drive community improvement efforts.” When community foundations adopt a transformative approach that emphasizes resident engagement, they need to align staff around this mission and help staff think and work in new ways.

To improve internal capacities, the teams participating in the CLN found it useful to:

- **Chart out how the foundation is organized and how it operates, and use the chart as a tool for discussion with board members and staff.** The Fremont Area Community Foundation developed an organizational chart that positions leadership staff along the two axes of a matrix rather than a straight line. This illustrates how the philanthropic services, community investment, administrative, and finance departments relate to and support each other. A technology team and an initiative team span all departments, illustrating relationships across and among areas of work. “The process of developing the chart was the most important part,” explains President/CEO Roberts. “People still sometimes ask why they are engaged with a particular activity, but things don’t fall through the cracks because everyone feels responsibility for total organizational results.”
- **Identify the competencies staff need** to engage with residents effectively and to serve as community leaders, and invest time and energy in developing them. Create incentives for staff to learn new ways of working, and build in time for people to reflect on what they are learning. In Fremont, staff received training in a facilitation method from the Institute of Cultural Affairs, to improve their ability to reach consensus and take action on shared priorities. At the Foundation for the Mid South, President/CEO Ivey Allen held discussions with her staff and observed them in the community to coach them on resident engagement. Allen’s guidance focused on making sure that “a broad cross-section of voices is heard” and that everyone needed to achieve results is at the table, including residents themselves. The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo hired a consultant to identify competencies needed to successfully implement the foundation’s strategy, including three that are now embedded in every job description: intellectual curiosity; the capacity to work on a team; and cultural acuity—an understanding, sensitivity, and respect for the values, practices, beliefs, and social experiences of diverse communities. The competencies drive professional development plans and performance reviews.
- **Teach grassroots organizing techniques to the foundation’s staff.** The Humboldt Area Foundation (HAF), which uses the PICO model of community organizing (a highly structured and disciplined approach based on principles and core values), used a grant from The California Endowment to train, coach, and support staff in organizing techniques. The training “heightened our concept of what community-led change is,” says Jen Rice, HAF’s director of community strategies. “Commonly, we see a nonprofit come in and say, ‘I think what needs to happen in the community is such and such.’ That’s very different from someone saying, ‘We talked to 100 people in our community and 85 said that such and such is the issue, and then we did research and found that this set of policies and prevention systems would be effective, and we’d like a little funding to spend on the proposed system.’”
- **Use a small-grant program to integrate the concept across departments within the foundation.** The committees that review applications for the Baltimore Community Foundation’s small-grants program include donors and staff from across the foundation as well as other local funders and community members.

4

Balance Charitable and Transformational Activities

Community foundations often serve a charitable mission, attracting resources and granting them to charities in their donors' areas of interest, often by funding services that address a basic need. This function, sometimes described as "transactional" philanthropy, supports many important cultural institutions and helps to ameliorate some immediate effects of social problems. However, community foundations can also play a transformational role by addressing systemic issues before they lead to problems; by helping communities and their residents become more empowered and resilient; and by seeking to deliver better outcomes for the greatest number of people instead of just a handful of individuals. One CLN participant described this as "working to *solve* rather than *serve*."

The goals of transformation and charity can lead to different organizational cultures and require different skills and strategies. These differences can cause tensions between donors who want to make purely charitable gifts (and the development staff who serve them) and program staff who seek a more complicated but potentially transformational outcome. The compartmentalized structure of many community foundations can exacerbate this lack of alignment.

CLN participants offered this advice about balancing charity and transformation:

- **Don't assume one must choose either charity or transformation;** both approaches can and do occur simultaneously. There are different ways to be transformational and different degrees to which a foundation may embrace the approach. Moreover, it's too simplistic to define donor-advised funds as "charitable" and unrestricted funds as "transformative." In fact, some donors make very transformational investments, and some unrestricted grants are largely transactional.
- **Discuss the foundation's mission with donors** and prioritize investments that support it. Is the goal to fix problems as they occur or prevent them from happening

in the first place? Remember that it's not just the goals or purpose of an investment that determine how transformational it is but also the strategy, amount, and timeline of a grant; the relationships and partnerships formed; the ideas exchanged; and the cultures altered.

- **Find ways for charitable activities to build the relationships and trust** with residents that make transformation possible.
- **Improve alignment** by establishing teams that integrate donor services, program, and communications staff and expanding job descriptions to include integrating resident engagement with other activities. "It's about understanding that all of our work is done better when we don't have silos," a foundation executive said.
- **Don't expect transformation to occur overnight.** Transformation is a journey, which foundations begin from different starting points. The key is to be intentional about the end goal and alert to transformational opportunities. "Our job is to nurture the garden and be patient," a CLN participant said.

CLN Special Advisor Roque Barros held monthly Ethnic Nights to celebrate the food and culture of a neighborhood's many populations. "People at the foundation asked what that had to do with transformation," Barros recalls. "The important thing was, we were connecting cultural groups through these charitable activities."

Eventually, nine cultural groups and nine nonprofit organizations joined forces as Voice of the Community at All Levels (VOCAL) and played a significant role in updating the area's community plan. "Little did people know during the Ethnic Nights where this would lead," Barros observes.

Address Race, Equity, and Power Dynamics

Most community foundations fund efforts to improve the economic success of low-income populations and neighborhoods. Because some low-income Americans are people of color, resident engagement often raises issues of racism, socioeconomic disparities, and the historically unequal distribution of power and resources. As holders of money and power, community foundation leaders and staff encounter this dynamic as soon as they engage with neighborhood residents. It comes into play as resident engagement approaches are called on to shift power to residents, and traditional power-holders have to give up some authority. Engaged and organized residents may want to take a different path than the one followed by the funder, or they may flat-out oppose something the funder wants to do. The same dynamic can also exist within foundations in the form of embedded assumptions and hierarchies.

Foundations participating in the CLN found it useful to:

- **Be intentional about raising and addressing issues of race, equity, and power.** The Baltimore Community Foundation brought trustees and staff together to learn together about racial equity and inclusion. “Frankly, in the absence of that work we wouldn’t have been as successful in these [resident] engagements as we have been,” says foundation President/CEO Tom Wilcox. “This is complicated, tough stuff, [and] that was a linchpin.” Baltimore also used tools for identifying structural racism to educate new, white residents of a traditionally African-American community who believed there were no racial issues, just “a class problem.” The exercise “challenged them to see that class, in this case, is just a way of not talking about race,” says Program Officer Dion Cartwright.

- **Bring foundation board members, staff, and community members together frequently** for honest, direct communication about opportunities and concerns.
- **Create a culture in which it’s acceptable to disagree**, and hold everyone accountable by talking through problems when people disagree. “Declaring a space ‘safe’ doesn’t make it safe; acting on it does,” says CLN Special Advisor Garland Yates.
- **Reflect residents’ ethnicity, culture, and experience within the foundation staff.** Denver’s four-person Strengthening Neighborhoods team includes two staff who are bilingual and two who live in the communities designated for action. In addition, notes initiative Co-Manager LaDawn Sullivan, “Three of the four staff, including me, are people of color. There is something different that happens when you’re working in communities of color if you have staff who look like the people living there.”

Having honest conversations “gains us a trust we could not buy with money. Talking about our own failures first changed how people see us. ...Others are willing to expose their vulnerabilities and willingness to learn. Our resident engagement work has seeded that kind of feeling across the foundation.”

— LaDawn Sullivan, Denver

6

Establish Trusting Relationships with Residents and Community Leaders

Community foundations have a long and successful history of working with organizations and individuals who possess resources, power, and influence. Relationships with the “grasstops” are important because these people make program and policy decisions that affect vulnerable people. Resident engagement complements and enhances these relationships by forging a more direct connection to individual community members—the “grassroots.” When the grassroots are included, changes can be even more effective and long-lasting. Observes Buffalo’s Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, “Grasstops without grassroots get blown away in the wind. The sustenance comes from the roots.”

CLN participants learned these lessons about establishing constructive relationships with residents:

- **Don’t come in with all the answers. Ask residents to define the challenges and identify possible solutions,** focusing especially on populations that haven’t had a voice. The Humboldt Area Foundation undertook a listening campaign with high school youth and 100 area residents to ascertain the next frontier of leadership development in the region. In Boulder County, the foundation organized forums for Latino parents in three communities, attended by about 200 families, to discuss issues involving children, families, and communities. In Denver, “We seek to have the community lead and then we try to work with them, often from the rear, to facilitate whatever action they determine,” says Vice President for Philanthropic Partnerships Lauren Casteel.
- **Show respect by meeting residents where they are, but then help them acquire leadership and advocacy skills.** The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo paid for the young, new director of a grassroots environmental group to attend a leadership institute and then created a fellowship program to help other residents learn how to organize against a coke processing plant that was polluting the air. The grassroots effort resulted in a federal indictment and conviction of the company’s

environmental control manager, a consent order from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the reduction of benzene emissions by 86% in the area. The engagement was “a dramatic turnaround for a community that had felt powerless,” says foundation President Dedecker, and it established a relationship between the foundation and residents that continues as residents tackle other issues. Similarly, community organizers hired by the Humboldt Area Foundation coach and mentor residents to do the organizing rather than doing it themselves. Residents learn how to conduct a listening campaign, facilitate the selection of issues, and negotiate solutions.

- **Add a community leader to the foundation’s board,** as Boulder County did with the appointment of Richard Garcia. A longtime activist and advocate for Boulder County’s Latino population, Garcia has worked for decades to improve public education for children of color—directing the district’s bilingual education program, establishing a statewide coalition to help parents advocate for their children, and co-founding a training program for child care providers. His connections gave the foundation greater access to and credibility with community residents.
- **In thinking about engaging the grassroots and grasstops leaders, don’t forget the “grass shoots”**—the connectors or cultural brokers who have credibility at both levels. Relationships with these people are essential to make progress both on policy decisions and on day-to-day practices.

“For any type of work in a neighborhood to succeed you need buy in, and the only way to get that is to have people at the table having their voice and ideas heard, and then investing in those ideas.”

— Dion Cartwright, Baltimore

7

Establish Genuine Partnerships that Involve More than Money

The community leadership *Framework* calls for **community foundations to be “engaged and trusted community partners.”**⁶ Partnership is a powerful strategy for advancing and scaling up resident engagement, especially when community foundations reach outside their usual circle of grantees, colleagues, and intermediary organizations to partner with small neighborhood groups and resident-led organizations. In this type of partnership, the community foundation’s role involves much more than grant making. It involves bringing diverse stakeholders together, offering ideas and technical advice, creating a safe space for honest discussion, and encouraging and facilitating agreement.

Teams that participated in the CLN offered this advice about partnership:

- **Play an explicit role as convener and connector**, bringing together an inclusive array of competing interests and unlikely allies—not just the largest or most powerful organizations or grantees—to find common ground on an issue. (The community leadership *Framework* urges this approach when it calls for community foundations to “serve as a place for residents and other stakeholders to connect with intellectual, political, social, and financial capital.”)⁷ The Foundation for the Mid South connected community partners and residents with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, medical professionals, disaster relief officials, the mayor’s office, and the city council in a partnership to address obesity in low-income communities.
- **Don’t go in with all the answers; listen and learn** about the issue and how it affects the community. At the Fremont Area Community Foundation, which wants to lower the county’s poverty rate below the national average within 10 years, staff interviewed community partners to learn how they are engaging with the target population; convened community partners and residents to discuss how they would work together; and conducted phone interviews with local agencies to learn about current needs, resources, and gaps. “Because of listening directly to our residents together with other community leaders, we came up with a stronger version of our action plan,” says Program Officer Alyssa Curran. “We have a better sense of what is and is not available to our residents, and some things we might do together to move it forward.”
- **Create structure to improve clarity and alignment** among partners to avoid misunderstandings. Establish regularly scheduled check-ins among partners, articulate principles to which collaborators will adhere, and specify any non-negotiable values or positions.

“By not leading with money, we were able to do more listening than talking and create space for people to share the positive things happening in the community. Then we could build on that positive energy. Otherwise, we couldn’t get people in the mindset to change things themselves.”

— LaDawn Sullivan, Denver

8

Connect Residents to Issues, Allies, and Opportunities

Resident engagement doesn't occur in a vacuum. It happens as the people who live in communities turn their time, talent, and attention to issues they care about. With their extensive connections to the powers that manage public and private resources, community foundations can help neighborhood residents connect with the information and allies needed to advance an issue.

CLN participants learned these lessons about connecting residents with opportunities to address a specific issue:

- **Create opportunities for donors to interact with residents and learn about the neighborhood.** Hold neighborhood-based donor roundtables so community leaders can talk directly with donors about what they're working on and how the foundation's support makes a difference. Take donors on bus tours so they can meet and talk with community residents (see *Stories from the Field* for an example). Have program staff who work with residents accompany donor services staff when they talk to donors, so they can describe the process and the value of engaging with residents.
- **Use information from neighborhood outreach activities to create a case statement for action and a framework for addressing a specific issue.** The Boulder County community foundation elicited ideas for improving children's school readiness from 200 Latino parents who attended community forums. To overcome resistance within the pre-existing network of power and relationships, foundation staff also convened about 60 community leaders. "We asked, 'Who is organizing the Latino community right now? Who would be better able to organize it? What are the burning needs among Latino parents, and what is holding them back from finding solutions?'" The questions became our framework for moving forward," explains Chris Barge, director of the foundation's School Readiness Initiative.
- **Help residents use data to support their case for policy reform.** With help from a community organizer supported by the Humboldt Area Foundation, high school students in Del Norte County, California, compiled health data they used to persuade school officials to provide healthier lunches and exercise equipment (see *Stories from the Field*, published separately by CFLeads). Similarly, the Buffalo community foundation encouraged community activists, who were conducting air quality tests as part of their fight against pollution by the Tonawanda Coke plant. The high level of carcinogens revealed by the tests helped residents gain federal regulators' attention, leading to a criminal conviction, stiff fines, and reduced pollution.
- **Cultivate new civic leaders who view resident engagement as part of leadership.** Boulder County's community foundation operates a fellowship program that allows emerging leaders to explore the area's economic, civic, and cultural drivers and learn "transformational and inclusive leadership practices," including resident engagement. Within six months of completing the program, fellows are expected to join a local organization in a leadership capacity or run for elected office, and at least half of all graduates have done so. Since the program focuses on recruiting people of color, especially Latinos, and people who are not already part of the civic infrastructure, it is creating a pipeline through which residents gain a voice in policy decisions. Similarly, The Denver Foundation recruits and places interns at nonprofit organizations, supporting them with a curriculum that develops the interns' voices as community leaders and allies. Many alumni later serve as staff or board members of the organizations where they interned.

9

Commit to a Long-Term and Sometimes Complex Process

Because community foundations have permanent endowments and thus some financial stability, they have an inherent ability to support processes like resident engagement that may have many moving parts, take time to fully develop, involve fewer financial resources, and require multiple partners. Early in a resident engagement process, the return on investment may come in the form of increased human capital rather than quantifiable outputs. The process may produce unexpected results, or residents who have been organized may push back on the foundation or its partners. Furthermore, the desire to support residents in transforming their lives and communities opens the door to a wide set of potential “asks.”

Participants in the CLN offered this advice:

- **Invest for the long haul and be prepared to advance in fits and starts.** It often takes repeated investment to produce measurable results from resident engagement. In fact, incremental changes often produce the confidence and skills needed to achieve future results. In Denver, a group of monolingual Spanish-speaking parents organized a walking school bus because unsafe traffic patterns around the school were preventing children from attending regularly. “Although parents considered this a huge victory, others did not,” a CLN team member says. “But over two more years, those parents got the city to change the traffic signals and install new lighting systems and paths so kids could walk to school safely. Sometimes the big wins just take longer.”

“Your \$5,000 grant isn’t going to change the world overnight, but it might be essential to achieve the long-term change you’re looking for.”

— CLN participant

“Change moves at the speed of trust.”

— CLN participant

- **Create space within the foundation for productive learning and dialogue on complex issues.** Denver created an internal community of practice, whose members (from all departments) meet quarterly to learn about and discuss topics of interest. A staff book club features racial and LGBT issues, and a film club hosts discussions about economic equity. An inclusiveness committee organizes trainings and serves as a source of culturally and racially diverse new leaders among staff.
- **Be open to unintended consequences.** Before undertaking major resident engagement activities, discuss with staff and board members the potential for unexpected developments. As activities unfold, revisit these discussions so that expectations stay aligned with realities. In particular, realize that the skills and knowledge produced by resident engagement may not stay in the neighborhood. “When you work in low-income communities, people move a lot. Some leaders we’ve supported did something incremental with us, and then we open the newspaper and see they’re leading education reform somewhere else,” observes Denver’s LaDawn Sullivan. “When you’re investing in people, you have to believe that what they’re learning is going to transcend the reach of the foundation.”
- **Set clear boundaries** for the resources the foundation will provide to residents and the circumstances under which they will be provided. Communicate the limits so they are widely known and understood.

10

Ensure Sustainable Support for Resident Engagement

As community foundations assume a more intentional and proactive role in transforming their communities, many foundation leaders are re-thinking their organizations' priorities and practices. Along with strategies to address other aspects of community leadership, they are looking for ways to sustain support for resident engagement over time. CLN participants offered these lessons about sustaining resident engagement:

- **Embed resident engagement in the community foundation's culture, values, and structure.** Help staff and board members see resident engagement's ongoing value by illustrating how it enhances and improves other activities and initiatives. Specify in the foundation's strategic plan that resident engagement will be integrated throughout all programming and grant making that involves discretionary dollars.
- **Build a solid base of knowledge and skills that residents can deploy to achieve results in the future.** In Baltimore, foundation leaders recruited a handful of community leaders to serve on program committees so they could become part of ongoing decision making. In Boulder County, the community foundation hired and trained four school readiness coordinators to organize Latino parents, identify and nurture emerging leaders, and connect families with resources that will help them prepare their children for school. The coordinators reflect the communities they serve: all are Latina single mothers who immigrated or had parents who immigrated to the United States from Mexico. "The whole purpose is to build a movement that we're calling Engaged Latino Parents Advancing School Outcomes, a structure that can advance other issues in the future," says Boulder County Trustee Richard Garcia. "That's how the masses will grow."
- **Build resident engagement into a business plan** that uses all of the foundation's tools to create community leadership and impact. The plan may include a discretionary endowment or field-of-interest fund to

support resident engagement and other community transformation efforts, but this should be framed as a way to accomplish donors' goals for the community as a whole. To ensure sufficient resources for resident engagement, raise money annually through a civic leadership fund but also consider directing a portion of all donor-advised funds to this purpose.

- **Quantify the costs and returns of resident engagement** to strengthen the case for this investment. Baltimore's model for neighborhood strengthening includes sustained investments in middle-market neighborhoods that have certain resources—a strong volunteer base, a staffed community organization—but are still "on the cusp of being really great or failing," Dion Cartwright says. The foundation's tools and activities, deployed over several years, support residents' ideas of what makes their neighborhood safe, clean, green, and vibrant. Foundation staff analyzed these investments to calculate what it costs to develop long-term, independent capacities in such communities and landed on an estimate of \$1.5 million spread over five years, according to CEO Tom Wilcox.
- **Seek "patient capital"**—long-term funding that supports the incremental progress that leads to ultimate improvements.

The Baltimore Community Foundation's Strengthening Neighborhoods grant review committees include neighborhood residents whose own applications were declined, so they can learn what funders look for in a grant. "We've had people who came back to us with a successful application" after participating in the decision-making process, Dion Cartwright says. "Some people come back year after year because they enjoy the process so much, and they take ideas back to their neighborhoods."

Conclusions

The Community Leadership Network’s deep dive into resident engagement left participants feeling energized, enlightened, and eager to further pursue this crucial dimension of community leadership. Two overarching conclusions emerged from their experience:

- *The benefits of resident engagement far outweigh any risks or costs; and*
- *Given the many different forms that resident engagement can take, any community foundation can participate in this form of community leadership.*

The CLN also highlighted eight themes captured by this report:

- 1. When community foundations assume strong community leadership they take a transformative approach,** so that even simple transactions are designed to ultimately transform the way people and organizations interact and the outcomes they experience. A transformative approach amplifies the effect of what community foundations and their partners do, until the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.
- 2. The process of transforming how a community—or a community foundation—operates is a journey.** People and organizations begin at different starting points, and they progress in different ways. Thus, resident engagement can be a defining element of the foundation’s community leadership or just one piece of it. Moreover, the entire journey is transformative. Transformation doesn’t just occur suddenly at the end; opportunities to think and act in new ways exist all along the journey, even in activities that seem on the surface to be transactional.
- 3. Resident engagement is an important element of community leadership by community foundations, but it is only one element.** Although resident engagement was the focus of the CLN and hence this document, the bigger picture is that (a) community leadership is the key to community foundations’ future and (b) resident engagement is a key piece of successful community leadership.
- 4. Resident engagement underscores the fact that community leadership is about working in partnership—**sitting shoulder to shoulder with residents, public- and private-sector leaders, philanthropists, and others who are mutually committed to the community’s success—**and breaking down boundaries,** including the administrative and philosophical “silos” that divide organizations, agencies, and sectors and the cultural boundaries that separate groups of people within and across communities. Moreover, while other community leadership activities may force foundations to think through the problem of silos and align resources more directly with their mission, the resident engagement conversations seems especially useful at helping community foundations do just that.
- 5. Resident engagement alters the balance of power** between and among neighborhood residents, civic elites, and community institutions (including the community foundation). Through new roles, relationships, and practices, resident engagement gives voice, agency, and clout to individuals and communities that previously may have been marginalized. This is a positive change with potential to produce important results, but it can be a disruptive process and should be handled with care.
- 6. Engaging with residents can make community foundations more effective and capable.** Rising to the opportunity and challenge of helping residents tackle life-changing problems can vitalize, connect, and strengthen the foundation itself, leading to an organization that is more effective, inspired, and inspiring. Through resident engagement, community foundations are expanding their roles and widening their reach in service of communities. They are working not only with donors, nonprofit and public-sector leaders, and community organizations but also directly with neighborhood residents.

7. Resident engagement is multi-dimensional. Some CLN participants liken the process to dropping pebbles in a pond to create a set of concentric ripples that spread out from the point of impact. When several pebbles are dropped their ripples intersect, forming connections that alter the results and carry them in new directions that broaden both the sphere and the scope of the work.

8. Community foundations are uniquely positioned to bring diverse interests together and help people find common ground, build relationships, and mobilize all types of capital on behalf of a shared agenda. However, not all community foundations are prepared to do this right off the bat. It often takes some organizational learning and adjustment to be able to engage with all stakeholders in productive ways.

As community foundations enter the next century of work, their focus and roles are evolving. Some of this shift is driven by the changing face of the U.S. population and communities. The country is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse: In 2012, the Census Bureau predicted that by 2060 the United States will become “a plurality nation [in which] the non-Hispanic white population remains the largest single group but no group is in the majority.”⁸ The country is aging: By 2056, there will be more Americans age 65 or older than age 18 and under.⁹ The proportion of working-age Americans is expected to shrink, from about 63% to 57% of the population.¹⁰ The economic context also is changing: The income gap has widened across the entire population and within racial/ethnic groups,¹¹ the gap between black and white Americans persists,¹² and the richest fifth of Americans hold almost 89% of all wealth.¹³ As entities concerned with

people and places, community foundations must respond to the new opportunities and challenges these shifts entail in order to remain useful and relevant.

Changes in the field of philanthropy, particularly among funders who focus on making communities and neighborhoods more livable, also are causing community foundation leaders to refine their mission and approach. Over the past decade, the growth of “strategic,” “results-based,” and “outcome-oriented” philanthropy, which emphasize the achievement of clearly defined and measurable goals, drew attention to the importance of monitoring the success of philanthropic endeavors.¹⁴ New partnerships between philanthropy and government have demonstrated the role foundations can play in “public problem solving”¹⁵ by “put[ting] the problem rather than the organization at the center and actively engag[ing] with their grantees in designing and implementing strategies.”¹⁶ And the development of alternative philanthropic vehicles—commercial charitable funds, online giving, public and single-issue charities, giving circles, and federated giving programs¹⁷—has expanded options for community philanthropy.

In the changing environment, community foundations must find new ways to fulfill their promise. Engaging with residents is one such strategy: By empowering residents to emerge as leaders, foundations also become more powerful community leaders. It’s a journey that requires patience, commitment, and learning on all sides. But it also has unparalleled potential to solve persistent problems, achieve democratic ideals, heal long-standing social rifts—and, along the way, transform community foundations themselves.

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Community Foundations
Leading Change

1055 Broadway, Suite 130
Kansas City, MO 64105

(800) 292-6149
info@cflleads.org

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