

**Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network  
Evaluation Summary**

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## **Background on the Resident Engagement Community Leadership Network**

### **Program goals**

This report presents the major findings of an evaluation on the effectiveness of the CFLeads Community Leadership Network (CLN), which focused on resident engagement for the first time. In 2013-2014, the CLN brought together eight community foundations from around the country to help them advance their resident engagement practice. Specifically, the overarching objective of this CLN was to build the understanding, motivation, capacity and practice of participating organizations to engage residents in community foundations' work on critical community issues.

This evaluation report focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the CLN process, highlighting what worked and what could change or improve. It is one of three reports assessing and summarizing the work of this CLN. The two additional reports are available on the CFLeads website and describe the lessons learned and on-the-ground work of the participants in more detail — *Powerful Partners: Lessons from Community Foundations about Resident Engagement* and *Community Foundations and Resident Engagement: Stories from the Field*.

This Resident Engagement CLN was developed by CFLeads in partnership with the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation. It was designed in response to a *Call to Action* issued in 2013 by the CFLeads Cultivating Community Engagement Panel, which urged community foundations to “directly engage residents as partners in change” to strengthen community impact. The Panel asserted that community foundations with strong resident engagement have been able to build long-term, fruitful, trusting relationships and have helped bring about sustainable solutions to the complex challenges communities face.

### **Program elements**

The basis of the CLN is the *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*. The National Task Force on Community Leadership (NTF) created the Framework in 2008 to define community leadership and its building blocks. The Cultivating Community Engagement Panel updated the Framework in 2013 to include more emphasis on resident engagement.

Each community foundation was represented in the CLN by a required core team comprising the CEO, at least one board member, at least one staff person, and a representative from a community partner organization. The team was asked to attend all meetings and activities. However, each team had the option of engaging more staff and board members. Over the course of the CLN, several teams expanded as they saw the benefits of engaging more people from throughout their foundations in the CLN process.

The CLN took place over the course of a year, beginning with the application process through completion of three two-day, in-person meetings (August 2013, February 2014, and May 2014) that were structured to help each team work through a particular resident engagement challenge it faced. The format of the in-person meetings included presentations by participant community foundations, structured peer advising, informal time for networking, team action planning, updates from community foundation teams on action plan progress, input from resident engagement experts, and creative and constructive space sessions designed and led by community foundation participants and the CFLeads/Aspen resource team.

## **Evaluation methods and sample**

There were 42 attendees from eight community foundations — Amarillo Area Foundation, Baltimore Community Foundation, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, The Denver Foundation, Foundation for the Mid South, Fremont Area Community Foundation, Humboldt Area Foundation, and The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County. These eight foundations were purposefully diverse in a number of ways — in geographic location, asset size, board size, staff size, participant race and ethnicity, etc. — to add richness to the process. In October 2014, six months after the final in-person meeting, an online survey was sent to the 42 individuals who made up the foundation teams. Each community foundation was asked to ensure that at least two members of its team responded to the survey. There was a 100% response rate, with all eight of the community foundations providing two or more respondents each, including an executive staff person. In total, 24 of the 42 community foundation attendees responded to the survey — a 57% overall response rate, which is well above average for online surveys. In addition, observations of the in-person meetings, results from post-meeting surveys, and interviews with each team were used to collect data for this evaluation.

## **Evaluation Findings**

### **Satisfaction with the CLN process**

*Extremely positive survey data consistently indicate that the CLN provided participants with a valuable and unique opportunity that resulted in tangible, positive changes in the foundations' capacity to practice resident engagement.*

- All respondents (100%) said that the CLN process was equally or more beneficial when compared with other skill development opportunities (seminars, conferences, etc.) that were most beneficial to their organization. Seventy-four percent (74%) reported that the CLN was more beneficial and the remainder said that the CLN was equally beneficial. This is a notable indication that despite significant commitments of time, dollars, and energy, the process was worth those investments.
- The vast majority of respondents also reported that their CLN experience was positive, with 96% reporting that they would take part in the CLN again and 4% reporting that they would not.
- Looking back at the entire year, 100% of survey participants rated the CLN experience as excellent (65%) or good (35%) overall. None of the respondents rated the CLN as fair or poor.
- Ninety-two percent (92%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “the CLN, as currently designed, is an effective strategy for helping community foundations at different points in their community leadership development to build capacity to practice effective resident engagement.”
- Overall, 96% of respondents agreed (29%) or strongly agreed (67%) that “Community Leadership Networks like the CLN would be a worthwhile, ongoing investment for the community foundation field.” Four percent (4%) of respondents did not agree or disagree with the statement. None of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

## **Impact of the CLN process**

*The vast majority of survey respondents reported changes that reflect capacity building in line with the goals of both the CLN and the individual community foundations. The respondents reported growth in understanding of resident engagement and in commitment by the staff and board to practice resident engagement. In addition, most organizations made tangible adjustments in staffing, finances, programming, and/or processes. These changes were apparent within six months of the CLN's completion.*

- Eighty-three percent (83%) of survey respondents believed that the CLN process helped their community foundation to build organizational capacity to practice effective resident engagement. Another 13% neither agreed nor disagreed. Only one person disagreed that the CLN process facilitated the building of organizational capacity.
- In addition, 79% of respondents agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (46%) that their community foundation is currently better prepared to engage residents than before the CLN. Approximately 17% neither agreed nor disagreed and 3% responded N/A.
- Overall, 79% of survey participants reported that their resident engagement work had become deeper and more sustainable over the course of the CLN.
- Overall, just six months after the final CLN meeting, 63% of CLN survey respondents indicated that their foundation had increased resources (staff time and/or finances) devoted to growing resident engagement capacity in their organization (50%), or planned to in the coming year (13%). Thirteen percent (13%) of respondents said they had not and did not plan to make changes because finding resources was a challenge or because they believed their commitment of resources was already strong. And 25% said that they did not know if they were going to make changes in resources.
- CLN survey participants cited specific types of internal changes that they made, including:
  - Increased dollars committed to resident engagement;
  - Increased outreach to previously untapped segments of the community;
  - Altered the approach and direction of existing program activities to make resident engagement a focus; and
  - Increased board and cross-departmental cooperation and capacity.
- Survey participants reported increases in almost all resident outreach activities. The largest increases were seen in the deep engagement activities (e.g., partnering with residents to set agendas and drive community change, community organizing, direct resident representation on the community foundation board). These increases suggest that the CLN had a direct impact on the amount and ways participants engaged residents.

## **Meeting the objectives of the CLN**

### *Building understanding of resident engagement*

The CLN aimed to build understanding of what resident engagement is, what it can look like in the community foundation context, and why it is important and relevant.

These objectives for growth in understanding and perspective-shifting were met by the CLN.

- Ninety-one percent (91%) of respondents stated that the CLN was pretty effective (39%) or very effective (52%) at clarifying what resident engagement means.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents stated that the CLN was pretty effective (17%) or very effective (70%) at helping participants explore the organizational roles of charity and transformational change agent and how resident engagement relates to each.
- Ninety-two percent (92%) agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (71%) that their organization's resident engagement work helps/will help them to engage a broader portion of the community.
- Ninety-two percent (92%) of the respondents agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (71%) that their organization's resident engagement work makes/will make their organization more effective.
- And, ultimately, 100% of respondents demonstrated their belief in the efficacy of the approach saying that engaging residents positions their organizations for greater community impact.

#### *Building commitment to practice resident engagement*

According to the *Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation*, an essential part of community leadership practice is regularly examining and developing the organizational values, culture, and will to engage residents. The data offer evidence that the CLN process affected attitudes toward the importance and potential impact of practicing resident engagement and helped to strengthen the commitment to practice resident engagement. The data show that for the CLN participants, the belief in resident engagement has been ingrained in their internal culture, beliefs, and practices. The commitment to resident engagement appears to have been strengthened in core elements of the organizations.

- Ninety-two percent (92%) of respondents agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (54%) that their staff members are committed to engaging in community leadership activities. The other two respondents neither agreed nor disagreed.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents reported that their boards are more committed to growing their resident engagement activities as a result of work done in conjunction with the CLN.
- All respondents (100%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed that their resident engagement work guides/will guide their staff and board development. The data validate that both staff and board beliefs have been affected by the CLN in ways that translate into organizational change.

#### *Overcoming past and present barriers*

Another objective of the CLN as a capacity-building effort was to actively aid the participants in overcoming challenges to resident engagement.

Survey participants were asked what, prior to the CLN, were the biggest obstacles to taking on resident engagement. Given the different levels of experience with resident engagement, the challenges to growing resident engagement practice varied across foundations and their projects. However, several obstacles to beginning/improving resident engagement practice were commonly cited. These included:

- Lack of staff knowledge/interest in resident engagement;
- Lack of full board understanding of what resident engagement is;
- Lack of staff time available;
- Lack of full board support for resident engagement;
- Lack of flexible resources to devote to resident engagement; and
- Traditional attitudes toward philanthropy — i.e., raising money/giving grants.

One hundred percent (100%) of respondents reported that the CLN process helped them to address/tackle some of these issues.

Specifically, the vast majority of participating foundations made progress on the most commonly cited pre-CLN issues — staff and board understanding and support. At least half of the organizations also were able to begin to address the issue of creating flexible financial resources. However, making staff time and financial resources available continued to be difficult particularly for those foundations with limited existing internal capacity. Some organizations continued to struggle with communicating about their resident engagement work and measuring its impact.

#### *Telling a compelling story about resident engagement*

Ninety-six percent (96%) of respondents said that the CLN was very effective (22%) or pretty effective (74%) at helping them learn how to develop better messages for key audiences to advance resident engagement action and impact.

#### *Gauging success of process and impact*

The CLN sought to help participants clarify what aspects of resident engagement practice and impact they want to measure. This was one area where the CLN was less successful at fully providing what the participating foundations needed. Still, 57% of respondents said that the CLN was pretty effective or very effective at clarifying measurement goals. The remaining 43% said the CLN was somewhat effective. None of the respondents reported that the CLN was ineffective in this area.

#### *Developing long-term resources and supports (peer network)*

Another objective of the CLN was to create a peer network to serve as an ongoing resource for participants. Participants reported that the CLN was successful at helping the teams get to know each other's approaches, strengths, and aspirations and building a peer network they could draw on for resources.

- Ninety-six percent (96%) reported that the CLN was pretty effective (22%) or very effective (74%) at helping the teams get to know each other.

- Seventy-eight percent (78%) reported that the CLN was pretty effective (22%) or very effective (56%) at providing enough familiarity with CLN colleagues that they could pick up the phone and call each other. The other 22% said that the CLN was only somewhat effective at creating this level of familiarity and comfort.
- When asked directly about whether their foundation had gained a stronger peer network through the CLN that could serve as a long-term resource, 96% agreed (41%) or strongly agreed (55%), demonstrating that the CLN was largely successful in facilitating productive social ties between foundations.
- Fifty percent (50%) of respondents said they had been in contact with peers via phone, e-mail, or in person since the final CLN meeting.

### **Key attributes of the CLN process**

*The elements that make the CLN a unique professional development and organizational capacity-building process are the same elements that survey respondents cited as the most essential pieces of the CLN process. These include: face-to-face peer learning, involvement of board and a variety of staff, a focus on applied learning, time with their own teams, expert support, informal time networking and socializing, a long-term multi-meeting process, and mutual accountability for progress. The data suggest that these elements, which were called out as individually strong, are strongest when used in combination with one another.*

#### *Peer learning*

One hundred percent (100%) of respondents agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (79%) that the face-to-face time with peers provided by the CLN is essential for building trust and strengthens the potential for future communication and cooperation among community foundations. With the help of community foundation peers and supportive experts, the facilitated face-to-face meetings provided a safe place for participants to explore critical issues within their organizations and their communities. Essential to the success of these meetings was the inclusion of peers who understand the issues firsthand to push, cajole, hold up a mirror, ask important questions, hold groups accountable, provide tools and advice, share ideas and resources, and otherwise guide development.

#### *Board participation*

The data also overwhelmingly revealed that board participation (along with CEO participation) was an essential element of the CLN's success. Both board and CEO participation are required elements of the CLN.

- One hundred percent (100%) of survey participants agreed (17%) or strongly agreed (83%) that board participation in the CLN was essential to the process having a lasting impact on their organization. More specifically, participants indicated that having at least one board member, along with a diverse team of foundation leadership and staff members, was critical to bridging gaps and getting team members on the same page.

- Board members also reported engaging more deeply in community leadership work as a result of participating in the CLN. The area of activity that the CLN appeared to affect the most was building board awareness and understanding of resident engagement, at least in part through informal conversations with fellow board members. While staff reported engaging in fundraising for resident engagement, board members did not report taking a major role.
- Overall, several things facilitated greater participation in resident engagement activities by board members. The CLN:
  - Improved communication between board and staff;
  - Created board champions who could speak to the importance of resident engagement work as an elemental approach to community foundation work;
  - Provided common language, examples, and understandings, and time to reflect and focus on common goals; and
  - Helped demonstrate to board members that resident engagement can be an effective approach for community impact.

#### *Applied skill building through a highly relevant, foundation-chosen project*

Ninety-six percent (96%) of respondents said that identifying and working on a specific resident engagement project/issue (Learning for Action Question) was an essential element to maintain in a CLN process and 4% thought that the element should be altered in some way. The hands-on nature of the CLN made resident engagement tangible. The process was structured so that each organization could make progress on a project of real-world relevance.

#### *Time with home teams*

About 96% of survey participants noted that time with their own team is an essential element of the CLN to maintain in the future. The remaining 4% would maintain it as an element with some changes. Interviews with participants further revealed that providing time for foundation leadership, grantmaking staff, board members, and staff from other departments to work together on resident engagement in a focused way helped to break down walls between departments and get everyone on the same page. Staff members believe that this breaking down of silos helps to ensure that resident engagement can become part of the community leadership DNA of a community foundation.

#### *Participation of expert support*

Support and encouragement provided by facilitators and diverse resident engagement experts on the resource team not only gave the process credibility but also provided a wealth of knowledge, experience, and insight that were highly valued components. Ninety-one percent (91%) of respondents reported that the participation of expert support was an essential element of the CLN that should be maintained if the process were done again. The other 9% of respondents stated that this element could have been altered in some way but was still essential.

#### *Informal networking*

In addition, 91% of survey participants believed that informal time for networking and socializing was an essential element of the design. If anything, participants wanted more time that was unscheduled and flexible for thinking and reflecting with others.



## Conclusion

Participants said that the Resident Engagement CLN:

- Is a powerful hands-on, peer-learning process that participants would engage in again.
- Provided valuable time with a diverse team from their own and from peer foundations.
- Successfully advanced practice for organizations of varying experience and capacity.
- Led to demonstrable changes in organizational structures, fundraising activities, and resident engagement practices.
- Created shifts in the mission and vision of participating foundations.
- Was not long enough — many participants wanted more.

Overall, the survey and interview data consistently show that the CLN process was highly successful in meeting its goals to strengthen and advance the resident engagement understanding, motivation, capacity, and practice of participating foundations.

While the full community-level impact of these changes cannot yet be gauged, the changes reported by the participating community foundations — in understanding and commitment, board engagement, funding, grantmaking, relationship building, breaking down of silos, etc. — are such that one could expect longer-term impact. For some of these foundations, their organizational orientation and philosophy shifted more solidly toward resident engagement, recognizing that this is a key role for community foundations striving to support transformational change in their communities.

The peer-learning process offered a unique learning experience for a diverse group of community foundations. It was an extended, multidimensional, face-to-face, and hands-on experience focused on identifying and overcoming internal and external challenges to strong resident engagement practice. The CLN effectively combined the use of “learning for action questions” with action planning to help the foundations make real-world progress. The hands-on project was an effective forum for testing out ideas, failing and overcoming, and producing concrete results.

Finally, the peer-learning network that was created has been successful in providing an ongoing resource for the participating foundations, as many have continued to draw on one another for advice, tools, and training. The survey and interview feedback speak to the quality of the process, content, and facilitation and the meaningful and substantive progress the participant foundations made.