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## Building Strong Communities by Engaging Residents: *National Civic Review* Examines Crucial Role for Philanthropy

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November 07, 2013—The Fall 2013 issue of the *National Civic Review*, “Philanthropy and Resident Engagement: The Promise of Democracy,” examines the vital role philanthropy can play in cultivating strong, connected communities where residents are actively engaged in shaping their community’s future.

“As our government grapples with the paralysis of partisanship and businesses seek to survive in a fragile economy, the role of philanthropy in helping communities addressing complex challenges has never been more important,” said Deborah Ellwood, executive director of CFLeads, which sponsored the issue.

“In particular, community foundations are uniquely positioned to address these challenges: they are local, their missions are broadly focused on the overall community, and as permanent endowments, they are there for the long haul,” she continued. “And they’ve been implementing new ways to provide support beyond grants. In 2005, the seminal report *On the Brink of New Promise: The Future of Community Foundations* urged community foundations to fully explore their potential. In response, CFLeads worked with the Council on Foundations and the Aspen Institute to develop a [Framework for Community Leadership](#), which led to greater engagement and dialogue with leaders in the community. Now, we believe that resident engagement—active, meaningful participation by the people in the neighborhoods whose lives are most affected by the policies, systems and structures that foundations seek to change—is the next step in creating healthy, vibrant places to live,” she concluded.

The idea for the issue emerged from the Cultivating Community Engagement (CCE) [Panel](#) of CFLeads. CFLeads convened the panel in 2012 and 2013 to better understand and capture the role residents can—and should—play in community leadership. For nearly a year, this diverse group of 34 distinguished individuals from philanthropy, academia, government and community and neighborhood organizations that work closely with residents engaged in a dynamic interchange, resulting in a *Call to Action*, an updated *Framework for Community Leadership*, and an outline of the rich material included in the issue.

“Philanthropy and Resident Engagement” opens with the panel’s [\*Call to Action\*](#), first published in July of 2013, which makes the case for more resident engagement by community foundations and provides specific principles to guide such efforts. Community foundations are urged to think in terms of working alongside residents to identify the most important challenges and build solutions together. In subsequent articles and case studies, contributors explore the critical interplay of philanthropy and residents of the community.

- Skillman Foundation CEO Tonya Allen talks frankly about restructuring the foundation’s approach in 2006 after 50 years of working to improve the lives of children in Detroit. “Central to the theory of change was the active, sustained involvement and leadership of residents and parents,” writes Allen.
- Garland Yates and Tim Saasta examine the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s efforts in Denver to change low-income neighborhoods and share lessons about *why* residents must be engaged and *how* to engage residents effectively. The solutions range from mechanisms that sustain resident engagement over time to a community-centered small grants program.
- Albert Ruesga, president & CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and Barry Knight, director of CENTRIS-UK, examine community engagement through a lens of power and conclude that “seeing families and communities as ends not just as means requires that those who have power share it with those who do not; through this lens, we understand why individuals might resist interventions that compromise their sense of agency or personhood.”
- John McKnight, co-director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, argues that as businesses, governments, and non-profits “pull back,” communities now have a chance to reclaim their traditional role as “producers of well-being” by focusing on seven critical functions, ranging from health to safety, security, and the environment.
- Silicon Valley Community Foundation CEO and President Emmett Carson discusses the limits of resident engagement, stating that, “the community *by itself* doesn’t always get it right.” He sees a targeted role for resident engagement, one where community foundations and residents focus on a specific topic that is of interest to both.
- Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium Matt Leighninger chronicles how The Denver Foundation began a shift to the community nearly 20 years ago in response to a report from the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy that charged the foundation with a “lack of connection to the community.” Since then, he writes, “the foundation has become a pioneer in community engagement, supporting Metro Denver residents in addressing a wide range of issues and decisions affecting their lives.”
- Peter H. Pennekamp, executive director emeritus of the Humboldt Area Foundation, and Anne Focke, senior adviser in the Giving Practice, examine philanthropy and the regeneration of community democracy through six stories, each containing “a moment when the tension between people with different experiences and beliefs is transformed into the source of creativity, becomes the motivator for action, and increases the chances for community improvement.”

- Anne C. Kubisch and colleagues discuss how to amplify resident voices, sharing strategies culled from a gathering convened by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change and the Jacobs Center for Neighborhood Innovation.
- Cynthia Gibson, independent consultant and senior fellow with The Philanthropic Initiative, describes the community-wide envisioning process the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque employed and shares the top ten lessons learned along the way, including the need to be truly inclusive and to not try to force pre-determined outcomes on the community.
- Gibson also examines how the Foundation for the Mid South, under President Ivey Allen, examined its efforts to improve the quality of life for communities in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi and realized that the effort required comprehensive community engagement.

“This attention to resident engagement comes at an important time, when problems facing communities are complex and interrelated, when trust in government is at an all-time low and when citizens are demanding more from their democracy and bringing more skills and technological know-how to the table,” said President and CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo Clotilde Dedecker, who chaired the CCE panel. “These conditions are compelling philanthropy to partner with residents to build strong communities that meet the needs of the broad citizenry. Now is the time to act, and philanthropy must lead the way,” she said.

Selected articles from the issue are available at <http://www.ncl.org>. For hardcopies of the journal, please contact Ellen Stoolmacher at [estoolmacher@cfleads.org](mailto:estoolmacher@cfleads.org) or 800-292-6149, x 615.

#### **About the National Civic Review**

The *National Civic Review*, the quarterly journal of the National Civic League, is one of the nation's oldest civic affairs journals. Now in its 99th year of publication, the Review features thoughtful essays on democratic governance and civic engagement.

#### **About CFLeads**

CFLeads is a national learning cooperative of community foundations that are committed to advancing the practice of community leadership in order to build strong communities.

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