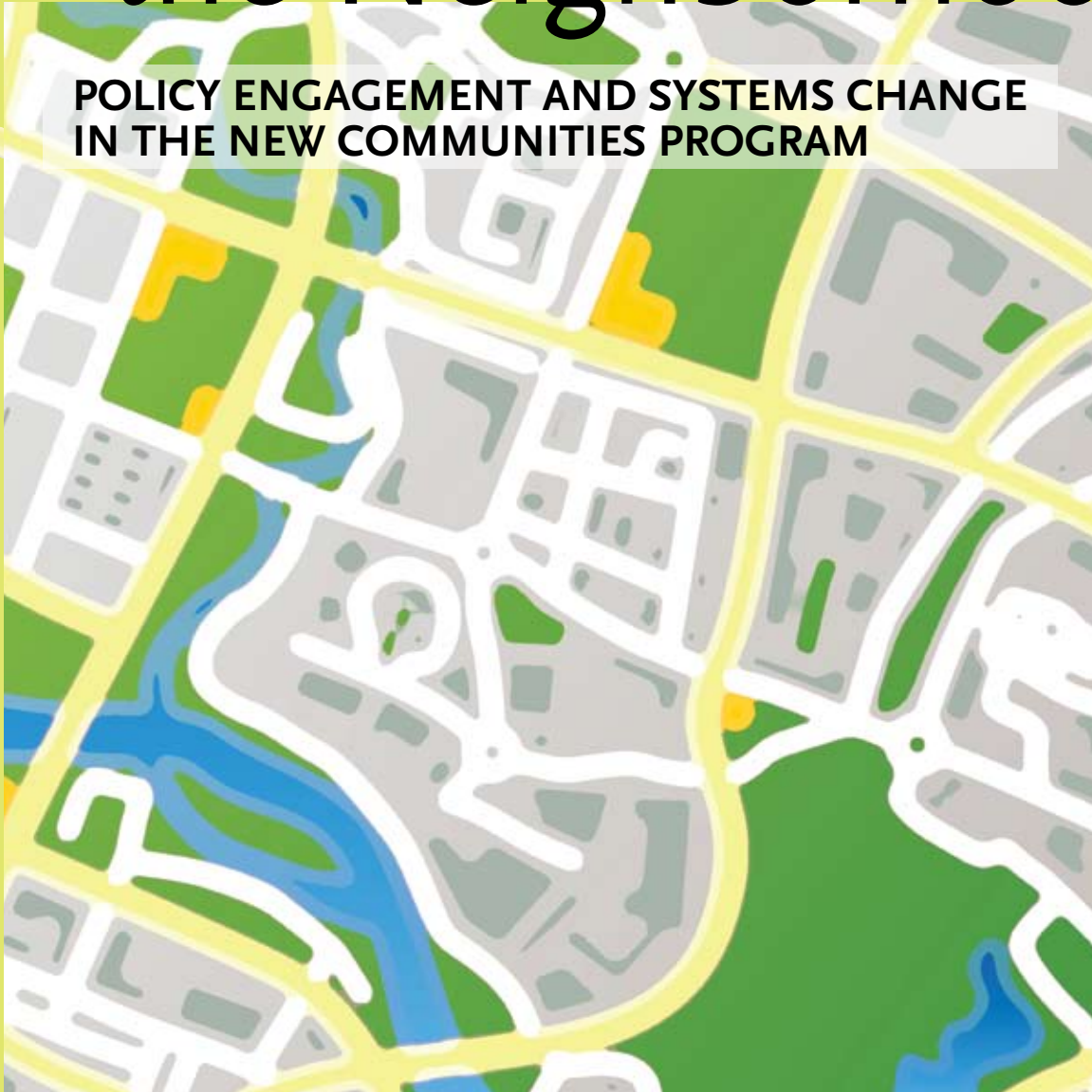


# Beyond the Neighborhood

**POLICY ENGAGEMENT AND SYSTEMS CHANGE  
IN THE NEW COMMUNITIES PROGRAM**



Robert J. Chaskin  
Mikael Karlström

JUNE 2012

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE  
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



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**New Communities Program**

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## Overview

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) emerged in the late 1980s to address the needs of disadvantaged neighborhoods through community development, collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs), and community participation. Most CCIs have pursued neighborhood-level activities rather than promoting changes in the policies and systems that shape neighborhoods' broader prospects for success. While there have been growing calls for CCIs to pursue policy and systems change more actively, their capacity and propensity to do so have yet to be carefully examined. This report explores policy and systems-change efforts and orientations in the New Communities Program (NCP), a 10-year, \$47 million MacArthur Foundation initiative developed and managed by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago). NCP operates in 16 Chicago neighborhoods through 14 local community organizations designated as "lead agencies" that work with other CBOs in their respective neighborhoods. The report is based on qualitative research that was conducted between 2009 and 2011 as part of a larger evaluation of NCP being conducted by MDRC in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and other researchers.

The report presents case studies of four lead agencies conducting policy and systems-change efforts to improve, respectively, state budget policy, mass-transit planning, commercial development, and bank foreclosure practices. It also examines LISC/Chicago's approach to policy and systems change and explores whether and how NCP could work more actively and intentionally in this arena.

## Key Findings

- Key organizational and environmental factors influenced the agendas presented in the case studies, and strong alliances with elected officials and others were critical to moving them forward. The four lead agencies consistently preferred persuasion and collaboration over confrontation. Even when their agendas were modest, considerable perseverance and agility were needed to make progress. Yet, even when they did not achieve their initial aims, these efforts often generated unexpected benefits, such as new relationships with influential individuals and entities.
- LISC/Chicago has developed considerable capacity to broker resources such as funding and technical support on behalf of NCP community efforts by cultivating key relationships in the public and private spheres. It avoids traditional advocacy and rejects contentious tactics. It has built trust with influential actors and institutions by being useful to them rather than making requests or demands, and has generated opportunities to collaborate on developing policies and programs from the "inside," most notably in its relationship with city government.
- The MacArthur Foundation and some lead agencies have urged LISC/Chicago to develop a stronger policy posture and help orchestrate an initiative-wide policy platform that can leverage the potential combined influence of the NCP neighborhoods. This prospect raises questions about how to identify shared agendas, how to pursue collective action, and whether to form alliances with organizations that are more oriented toward an advocacy and systems-change role.

The NCP evaluation will end in 2013. Additional reports are planned on NCP's adaptation to the changing economic climate, its longer-term role in supporting neighborhood improvements, and trajectories in NCP neighborhood quality-of-life indicators.



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## Preface

The economic downturn that began in 2007 has placed new pressures on low-income households. It has also strained the neighborhoods in which many of those households are located — where foreclosures lead to increased housing abandonment, where already challenged schools contend with budget cuts, and where local businesses may be forced to close.

Because these problems are often concentrated within particular communities, neighborhoods may also inform policy responses to them. Under this country's system of federalism, states are sometimes called the "laboratories of democracy," in that they may experiment with bold, innovative policy solutions to social problems. Communities themselves may create additional "lab space," as neighborhood strategies to combat foreclosure, support schools, and increase economic development build a wealth of experiences from which to draw upon at the city and state levels. At the federal level, the Obama administration's Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods programs reflect this bottom-up approach to neighborhood change.

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) like the New Communities Program (NCP) — a large and ambitious CCI in Chicago, operated by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and funded by the MacArthur Foundation — are neighborhood-based interventions of growing preeminence in the United States. CCIs, which emerged in the late 1980s, have traditionally addressed the needs of disadvantaged neighborhoods through community development, collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs), and community participation. Recognizing that the policy, regulatory, and resource contexts play a useful, even definitive, role in the success of CCI efforts, community development experts have increasingly encouraged local groups to form connections not just with each other but also with government — to increase community participation in policy discussions in a way that brings residents' needs to the forefront and facilitates coordination between community-level activities and city and statewide initiatives. But how this vital work can occur — how to coordinate and collaborate with institutions beyond the neighborhood — is not always clear.

This qualitative report attempts to fill the void by presenting four case studies that illustrate how local community groups worked to inform and change policies and systems in a variety of domains: foreclosures, commercial development, transportation, and state budget allocations. The neighborhoods examined in this study are all participants in the New Communities Program, which serves as an ideal reference point to examine CCIs' engagement with larger systems, and to offer new perspectives on what it takes to realize the promise of bottom-up policy solutions to some of this country's most intractable and pressing social problems. A final report, planned for 2013, will round out the evaluation of NCP and contribute to the dialogue about how community-based organizations can improve the quality of life in the neighborhoods they serve.

Gordon Berlin  
President, MDRC



## Acknowledgments

This report has benefited from hard work and thoughtful contributions from funders, practitioners, reviewers, partners, and MDRC staff. Our funders at the MacArthur Foundation — Julia Stasch, Vice President of the Program on Human and Community Development; Craig Howard, Director of Community and Economic Development; and Alaina Harkness, Program Officer in Community and Economic Development — provided substantive guidance, rooted in their experience as researchers and urban policymakers. Community development practitioners and resident leaders from around Chicago gave us and our fellow researchers hours of their time and provided critical insights about their practice. We especially thank the staff from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) for their candid information and insights about the initiative. Andrew J. Mooney, LISC/Chicago’s former Executive Director; Susana Vasquez, its new Executive Director and former Program Director of the New Communities Program (NCP); and Joel Bookman, LISC/Chicago’s Director of Programs, all emphasize a culture of learning within NCP. We have valued the opportunity to think with them about NCP. Executive directors, NCP project directors, and NCP organizers at the 14 lead agencies were generous to share with us the many lessons they learned in the field. Without their openness about their work and communities, we could not have written this report, and we are grateful to have learned from them.

Beyond their critical role in designing and managing the research that forms the basis of this report, the rest of the evaluation team — Nandita Verma, David Greenberg, Marcia Festen, Alexandra Brown, and Hortencia Rodriguez — and other colleagues at MDRC, particularly Jim Riccio, John Hutchins, and Alice Tufel, provided critical guidance on the intent and shape of this report and insightful comments on earlier drafts. Hortencia Rodriguez served as report coordinator, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors



## Executive Summary

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) developed in the late 1980s as an alternative to the community improvement model that had predominated since the emergence of community development corporations (CDCs) in the 1960s. By the 1990s, most CDCs had narrowed their focus from a comprehensive orientation that emphasized a multitude of neighborhood services to one that focused on housing and commercial real estate. CCIs, by contrast, sought to help disadvantaged neighborhoods by attending to a broader range of community needs, promoting resident participation and planning, and coordinating the work of community-based organizations (CBOs), including CDCs, which often play a central role. In practice, CCIs have tended to focus primarily on neighborhood-level planning, projects, and services, yet they are well aware of the powerful impact that policies, institutions, and market forces beyond the neighborhood have on their prospects for success. Many also recognize the importance of exerting influence in these spheres, although few have made this a central focus of their work. In recent years, there has been a growing call in the field for CCIs to engage more assertively and systematically in larger-scale policy and systems-change efforts, accompanied by a growing awareness that their capacity for such engagement is poorly understood.

The New Communities Program (NCP) provides a valuable opportunity to explore the policy and systems-change activities of a major CCI.<sup>1</sup> NCP is one of the largest contemporary CCIs in the United States, operating in 14 neighborhoods in the city of Chicago and funded by the MacArthur Foundation at \$47 million over 10 years (2002-2012).<sup>2</sup> This report explores, through the lens of efforts at the initiative level and through case studies of four NCP neighborhoods, the ways in which NCP engages with policy issues and influential actors and institutions in pursuit of both neighborhood change and broader systems-change goals. It investigates the extent to which NCP at the community and initiative levels seeks to engage with powerful individuals and institutions beyond the NCP neighborhoods in order to inform policy and help

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<sup>1</sup>“Policy and systems change” is defined in this context as action geared to address issues that are relevant at the community level and that are strongly affected by the decisions or practices by city, state, or regional government as well as by private corporate actors. It may include, for example, efforts to inform *legislative policy*, influence the *flow of resources* and encourage public or private investment, or sway the *behavior of external actors* in the context of action moving forward.

<sup>2</sup>NCP is often described as serving 16 Chicago communities. However, these communities are located in 14 areas for the purposes of the initiative’s planning and implementation. Therefore, for simplicity’s sake, this report refers to these areas as NCP’s 14 neighborhoods. For more detail on the structure of the initiative and findings from its early implementation phase, see David Greenberg, Nandita Verma, Keri-Nicole Dillman, and Robert Chaskin, *Creating a Platform for Sustained Neighborhood Improvement: Interim Findings from Chicago’s New Communities Program* (New York: MDCR, 2010).

reform systems, the principal strategies it embraces in doing so, the obstacles and challenges it has faced, and the results achieved by those efforts to date. The report is based on qualitative research conducted between 2009 and 2011, which involved in-depth interviews with NCP staff and their community partners and influential allies in the four case-study communities. Interviews were also conducted with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) — the community development support organization that shaped, supports, and manages NCP — and with the MacArthur Foundation, leaders of neighborhood or citywide nonprofit organizations, public agencies, corporations, and elected officials or their key staff. This study is part of a larger evaluation of NCP conducted by MDRC (a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization) in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (a social policy research center) and other researchers.

## **The Initiative-Level Context for Policy and Systems Change in the New Communities Program**

Most CCIs have focused their efforts on planning, development, and service provision inside the community rather than on trying to influence institutions and policymakers beyond the community. However, these actors and systems can play substantial roles in neighborhood change, often beyond the reach of any one CCI. For example, city government can shape policing strategies, enforce housing and building codes, and support small business improvement programs. State government is often a major funder of social service initiatives and makes important decisions about income support programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Among many other roles, the federal government creates guidelines for banking investments and influences how banks have responded to the foreclosure crisis. In the private sector, large housing and commercial retail developers can often transform neighborhood landscapes, and local hospitals and industry can make decisions about employing local residents.

To the extent that CCIs have focused on engagement with such larger systems, they have worked mostly to attract resources (funding, technical assistance, and so forth) to community efforts rather than focusing on broader policy change or systems reform. This tendency arises partly from the sorts of organizations that drive CCI action on the ground, which are primarily development- or service-oriented nonprofits rather than social movement or advocacy organizations, and partly from structural constraints such as shrinking resources, dependence on project-based funding, and the proclivities and preferences of the funders that support CCIs.

The New Communities Program is unique among CCIs primarily because of the central role that intermediary organizations play in carrying out its mission at both the neighborhood and initiative levels. Within each NCP neighborhood, a community organization that is desig-



nated as a “lead agency” has been responsible for developing an initial “quality-of-life” plan with broad community input and for implementing the plan and coordinating community partners to that end. At the initiative level, LISC/Chicago serves as a “managing” intermediary organization that has played a central role in shaping the initiative overall and in supporting and guiding its ongoing implementation.<sup>3</sup>

Although LISC/Chicago’s functions are in many ways typical of those served by most community development intermediaries, its role is significantly more expansive with regard to initiative management, oversight, and resource provision, as well as in mediating between neighborhood efforts and systems-level actors and institutions. Since adopting a comprehensive approach to community development in the late 1990s, LISC/Chicago has sought to change the way community development is done in Chicago — to improve the way relevant individuals, agencies, and organizations are aligned and interconnected and to change the orientation of major institutions from a top-down development approach to one that emphasizes community planning and priorities in shaping policies and interventions. In this sense, LISC/Chicago has pursued a certain kind of systems-change agenda, though rarely advocating for particular policy positions or pushing specific systems-change goals. In the service of this agenda, its approach to engaging with and changing policies and systems has been intensively focused on relationship- and trust-building with influential leaders and decision-makers, prioritizing consensus and collaboration, and rejecting more assertive postures and contentious tactics as counterproductive. Its preferred mode of policy influence is to operate from the “inside,” by taking what it calls “opportunistic” advantage of situations in which it can work with its allies in the broader system to secure resources for the community. Such “collaborative resource brokering,” as LISC/Chicago calls it, can then provide the opportunity to contribute to and help shape the ways in which policies and programs are developed and implemented at the systems level — by, for example, city government or major philanthropies — in order to benefit the neighborhoods with which it works. Beyond this, LISC/Chicago provides a range of supports (such as funding, technical assistance, and relationship brokering) to individual NCP lead agencies in their pursuit of policy and systems-change agendas as these may arise out of community planning processes — including those lead agencies that target specific policy agendas and embrace confrontational advocacy tactics — so long as the community remains in the vanguard of those efforts.

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<sup>3</sup>Founded in 1979, LISC is a national organization with 30 urban offices and one rural office that seeks to build sustainable communities by expanding investment in real estate, increasing family income and wealth, stimulating economic development, improving access to high-quality education, and supporting healthful environments and lifestyles. See [www.lisc.org](http://www.lisc.org).

## **The Case Studies: Neighborhood-Level Efforts to Influence Policy and Systems Change**

The four case studies in this report focus on the NCP neighborhoods of Chicago Southwest, Auburn Gresham, Quad Communities, and Humboldt Park. The selection of these neighborhoods is based on the variation they represent along a few key dimensions, including their strategic orientation to policy and systems change, their neighborhood contexts, the organizational capacity of the lead agencies, and how they engage in relationships with other community organizations and players.

*Chicago Southwest* is an ethnically diverse area on the southwest side of the city, with significant Hispanic, African-American, and white populations. The Chicago Southwest NCP is co-led by the Greater Southwest Development Corporation (GSDC) and the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). These are large, well-established community organizations that have collaborated since the 1980s. The focus in this report is on SWOP, a community organizing group that is atypical of CCI vehicles in having a strong background in policy and advocacy, particularly in housing and mortgage-lending issues; it also has strong allies among elected officials and has informed legislative policy accordingly. Of the four case studies, this NCP agency has been by far the most active in the policy arena, with the most ambitious agenda. Beginning in 2007, SWOP has tried to stem the tide of local home foreclosures by pressuring mortgage-holding banks to adopt more accommodating loan-modification practices — a daunting challenge given that the consolidation of the financial sector left large national and global banks like JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America holding the bulk of such obligations. Although SWOP is capable of confrontational tactics, it has pursued this effort primarily by trying to partner with the banks to develop a local pilot venture aimed at helping residents who are threatened with foreclosure. An initially promising process with Bank of America in 2009-2010 — the focus of this case study — was ultimately frustrated by a combination of constraints imposed by federal legislation and the bank's own systemic dysfunctions. After a tactical shift, a new opportunity developed with Citibank in early 2011. Although these efforts have yet to bear direct fruit, they have helped SWOP to forge important new alliances and gain new prominence in the ongoing search for solutions to the foreclosure crisis.

*Auburn Gresham* is a small, predominantly African-American neighborhood on the southwest side of the city. The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) is a small organization that was founded shortly before NCP was established. While its work has been generally neighborhood-focused, it has also pursued a long-running campaign to persuade Metra, the region's largest commuter rail carrier, to open a station on the rail line running through Auburn Gresham — a seemingly unlikely prospect given Metra's historic focus on suburban ridership. It did so with the backing and assistance of several politically prominent allies. While meetings with Metra proved unproductive, one of GADC's allies — the area's

state senator — eventually helped it shift its focus from lobbying Metra directly to working with the Illinois Department of Transportation. In 2010, this approach paid off with \$20 million in state funding commitments, a victory won partly through persistence and partly because of longer-term shifts in national and regional transit policy toward providing better urban services. This is the only one of the four neighborhood-level efforts that (as of early 2012) has achieved its original policy aims, although the others have had some results that may bear fruit over time.

*Quad Communities* is an overwhelmingly African-American area on the near south side of Chicago, comprising the eastern half of the city’s historically black Bronzeville district. Bronzeville has recently experienced both incipient gentrification and the displacement of large numbers of low-income residents under the city’s Plan for Transformation of public housing,<sup>4</sup> which razed high-rise, low-income housing complexes, redeveloping them as mixed-income developments and relocating thousands of families to these developments, to subsidized housing in the private market, or to other public housing properties, primarily through housing choice vouchers. The Quad Communities Development Corporation (QCDC) was created to serve as the NCP lead agency in Chicago’s Fourth Ward, operating within its boundaries, working out of the local alderman’s office and forming close alliances with local elected officials.<sup>5</sup> Its primary focus has been on commercial retail development, and in early 2010 it began to craft a coordinated development plan for a retail corridor running through the Fourth Ward and its neighboring Third Ward, to support the city’s public housing plan. Its strategy focused on gaining support from elected officials, particularly that of the Third Ward alderman, whose stamp of approval was needed for the geographical expansion beyond QCDC’s original Fourth Ward boundaries. Commercial real estate development proved to be a contentious issue in the Third Ward, and QCDC ultimately changed course to collaborate with the Bronzeville Alliance, a newly formed community planning group, where it is serving as the commercial development specialist in a broader effort to revitalize the area’s three main retail corridors.

*Humboldt Park* is a large west side neighborhood in Chicago consisting of a longstanding Puerto Rican community to the east and a predominantly African-American population to the west. The NCP lead agency is the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, a large, well-established CDC with a housing and economic development focus, but the Humboldt Park NCP functions largely as an organizational collaborative — a “taskforce” with over 70 member organizations, mostly in the social and health service fields. The group was focused primarily

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<sup>4</sup>See [www.thecha.org/pages/the\\_plan\\_for\\_transformation/22.php](http://www.thecha.org/pages/the_plan_for_transformation/22.php).

<sup>5</sup>The Chicago City Council consists of 50 aldermen, one elected from each of 50 wards to serve four-year terms. Wards are periodically redistricted in response to population changes, and they overlap unevenly (and are never coterminous) with the 77 Community Areas that are used for planning purposes by the City of Chicago and upon which the NCP neighborhoods were largely based. Most NCP neighborhoods are therefore represented by more than one alderman.

on community-level activities until the 2007 financial downturn caused a state budget crisis, with delayed payments to service agencies and budget cuts that taskforce members experienced as a threat to the viability of the entire NCP enterprise. Via well-placed political allies, they were able to present their arguments for the value of Humboldt Park service agencies to the new Illinois Secretary of Human Services, who was particularly interested in their collaborative structure and actively helped them develop their argument. While the secretary had little leeway to tailor funding decisions to a particular neighborhood, the effort helped taskforce members to build new alliances at the state level and left them, collectively, with a new commitment to pursue policy and advocacy and a greater confidence in their ability to do so.

## **Initiative-Level Policy and Systems Engagement**

Although LISC/Chicago does not engage in conventional issue advocacy or pressure tactics, it does seek to influence policymakers and institutions through more collaborative means. When the collaborations and partnerships that LISC/Chicago has developed with systems-level actors and institutions give rise to opportunities to shape policies and programs from the inside, it exercises this influence to make those actors and institutions more favorable toward its community partners and responsive to their development priorities. This approach has been particularly salient in LISC/Chicago's relationship with Chicago city government, which has deepened over the course of the initiative. From the outset, the city was highly receptive to NCP as a vehicle for community planning, with then-Mayor Daley instructing relevant departments to meet with NCP lead agencies and provide city supports. Subsequent program-oriented collaborations have strengthened the relationship. In 2007-2008, LISC/Chicago helped the city, on very short notice, to develop a set of neighborhood-focused plans as part of its bid for the 2016 Olympics. After being asked to implement a city-funded summer youth employment program in one NCP neighborhood in response to high-profile youth violence in 2007, LISC/Chicago gained the city's trust by implementing successively larger programs in multiple neighborhoods in subsequent years. The organization was directly involved in helping the city prepare its application for stimulus funds under the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program, a program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that was formed to help stabilize communities that have experienced foreclosures and abandonment. And after working with the city's Department of Information Technology to develop demonstration projects for increasing Internet access in NCP neighborhoods, the city asked LISC/Chicago to take the lead in developing and writing the city's application under a 2009 federal broadband initiative for underserved communities.

These developments illustrate LISC/Chicago's favored means of exercising policy influence through building direct relationships with and fostering access to policymaking and implementation at the source. By helping the city secure new funding streams, it has brought resources to NCP communities and strengthened its ties to the city, responding consistently to

the city's needs and requests while studiously avoiding requests or demands of its own. Without directly or primarily aspiring to influence policy, its increasingly intimate partnership with city agencies has enabled it to exert a measure of influence on specific policies and initiatives. LISC/Chicago describes this approach as policy influence "from the inside out" — by being directly engaged in the planning and implementation of these city proposals and initiatives it has been able to exercise a quietly formative influence over them. Its principal objective in doing so has been the promotion of specific community priorities and of community-driven agenda setting in general.

A second mode of engagement in policy influence that is congruent with LISC/Chicago's basic orientation is to support policy agendas that originate with community groups by providing resources and brokering relationships. Of the four case studies presented in this report, it has played this role more actively in the Auburn Gresham and Chicago Southwest efforts than in Humboldt Park and Quad Communities. Where such efforts have led to conflicts between NCP community organizations and LISC/Chicago's systems-level allies, it has tried to improve communication and promote consensus, but steered well clear of being implicated in more assertive or confrontational advocacy tactics. Beyond such single-neighborhood efforts, LISC/Chicago has also supported a few multi-neighborhood projects with policy or systems-change dimensions where these have arisen within particular areas of initiative activity. But with regard to developing initiativewide policy objectives, it has expressed general skepticism as to the prospects for unanimity, and has generally not sought to mobilize cross-site activity toward such ends.

The question of whether LISC/Chicago's strategic orientation to policy and systems change is optimal or adequate for NCP at this stage of its evolution has recently emerged as a question of debate within the initiative. The MacArthur Foundation and some lead agencies have urged LISC/Chicago to develop a stronger policy posture and help orchestrate an initiativewide policy platform that — with the experience of a large constellation of neighborhoods behind it — can promise more substantial reform. LISC/Chicago has recently shown some willingness to make policy and advocacy a more integral part of the initiative if this is a priority for lead agencies. In response to Chicago's transition in 2011 to its first new mayor in 25 years, it also experimented with developing an initiativewide issue agenda. Yet it continues to signal significant reluctance to adopt a more assertive role with regard to policy issues and systems change.

## **Conclusions**

At the community level, the case studies that are documented and analyzed in this report exhibit some broadly shared features, illuminating the general pattern of policy and systems engagement by CCIs on the ground:

- **Organizational characteristics and features of neighborhood context are key background factors in determining whether, where, and how NCP lead agencies will develop a policy agenda, while more contingent events often play a pivotal role in setting such efforts in motion.** For example, the economic downturn and concomitant threats to social service funding provided an unlooked-for catalyst for advocacy efforts in Humboldt Park.
- **Strong alliances with policy-level actors have proved crucial in providing the initial access that is necessary to launch such efforts, and sometimes to generating the leverage that is necessary to succeed.** QCDC's strong relationship with the local alderman, for example, provided critical access to other political decision-makers, and GADC's political allies were instrumental in securing state funding for the Auburn Gresham transit station.
- **The organizations studied have tended to pursue nonconfrontational tactics that are oriented toward persuading powerful actors to accommodate their concerns.** Even Chicago Southwest, for example, while willing to engage in confrontation as needed, used such tactics as a last resort when more collaborative approaches faltered.
- **Although the NCP lead agencies' ambitions tend to be modest, the odds against succeeding in these efforts are significant; perseverance and agility are necessary but by no means sufficient conditions for success.** This can be seen, for example, in Metra's rejection of GADC's transit advocacy, or in the difference in size and clout between a community organization like SWOP and the national and global banks that they targeted.
- **Even when they are unsuccessful in their initial aims, however, these efforts can often generate important unexpected benefits.** Such benefits take the form of new relationships and alliances, as well as enhanced confidence in the organization's capacity to operate in this arena, as was the case in Chicago Southwest and Humboldt Park.

Although at the initiative level LISC/Chicago has been more consistently systems-oriented than most of its predecessor CCIs, the primary focus has been on community-level activity and the development of projects and programs in response to particular community needs and priorities. This is an orientation that is, in many ways, hard-wired into the structure of CCIs and the institutional contexts that frame action within them.

Three key questions and issues can be posed with regard to the recent debate within the initiative as to whether LISC/Chicago's approach to policy and systems engagement makes full use of NCP's potential:

- **Issue identification.** Despite their differences, NCP neighborhoods face some similar challenges and are affected by many of the same political and institutional forces. These challenges (with, for example, public education, public transportation, affordable housing, unemployment, and safety) may provide an opportunity for collective planning and for shaping a cross-community change agenda. Being more intentional about identifying collective issues may require support for a set of particular inputs (such as information and data analysis), processes (such as cross-site planning), and capacities (such as dedicated staff in lead agencies at the initiative level) that are currently not in place.
- **Cross-community organizing.** Because NCP, unlike many CCIs, has the advantage of significant scale and citywide scope, there is a significant potential to move beyond cross-site issue identification and assessment to collective action. This potential raises strategic and tactical questions about the choice of key actors, allies, roles, and targets, and to what extent (and in what combination) to pursue mobilization or negotiation, collaboration or contention, insider or outsider approaches. Leveraging the potential collective influence of NCP neighborhoods acting on behalf of a sizeable constituency around policy or systems-level issues requires careful planning, and raises questions about how best to catalyze, organize, and enact a collective agenda. Such cross-site organizing is unlikely to get done without dedicated capacity to pursue it.
- **Broader alliances and division of labor.** Not all organizations are well positioned to do direct advocacy work or to be equally effective at the tactics it may require. At the same time, NCP may have unrealized opportunities to craft broader strategic alliances with organizations that are engaged in policy advocacy and systems-change work regarding initiative-wide concerns, allowing for a productive division of labor among organizations. For example, a number of organizations in Chicago take community mobilization and policy advocacy aimed at particular areas — such as housing, education, and transportation — as a central part of their mission and are connected to broader coalitions operating at different levels to try to effect policy change and shape systems reform. LISC/Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation, or some broader combination of NCP leaders may benefit from engaging more

intentionally with these actors. They could, for example, play a more direct role in some of these coalitions, participating in their meetings and contributing to their campaigns. Or they could remain more distant but seek to intentionally support, inform, or otherwise connect to the lines of work in which they are engaged. In these ways, they may be able to reinforce the effect of these organizations' and coalitions' independent advocacy in ways that may have important impacts on NCP communities.

The implications of these considerations have relevance beyond NCP to CCIs and community-building initiatives more broadly. Particularly in the context of multisite initiatives, they suggest ways in which it may be possible to leverage initiative structure and reach toward greater impact through cross-neighborhood alliances and advocacy on behalf of a broader constituency than that of a single neighborhood. But even in the context of a single community effort, they suggest the importance of intentionality in framing community-building efforts more explicitly with reference to the structural conditions, higher-order actors, and processes that promote or constrain communities' ability to effect change. They also suggest the value of considering broadly the range of tactics (including assertive and contentious ones) that are available to them, and of framing responses in the context of a broader set of relationships and alliance building.

The evaluation of NCP will continue through 2013, and additional reports are planned on NCP's adaptation to the changing economic climate and its longer-term role in supporting neighborhood improvements. Future reports will also present quantitative and qualitative research and will compare trajectories in NCP neighborhood quality-of-life indicators with each other and with those in similar neighborhoods that are not part of this initiative.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

Beginning in the late 1980s and building on a long history of place-based anti-poverty efforts, a number of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) were launched to address the needs of poor urban neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> CCIs were sponsored largely by philanthropies across the United States, but some of their core principles — a comprehensive orientation to neighborhood development and a focus on “community building” by promoting collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs) and an emphasis on community participation — are also reflected in public policies at both the national and local levels.<sup>2</sup> While CCIs focus primarily on local planning and coordinated service provision, many CCIs also recognize the need to inform policies, institutions, and the decisions of market actors (such as elected officials, civic and business leaders, policymakers, and philanthropies) that have an effect on the neighborhoods in which they work.

These actors and systems can play substantial roles in neighborhood change, often beyond the reach of any one CCI. For example, city government can shape policing strategies, enforce housing and building codes, and support small business improvement programs. State government is often a major funder of social service initiatives and makes important decisions about income support programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Among many other roles, the federal government creates guidelines for banking investments and influences how banks have responded to the foreclosure crisis. In the private sector, large housing and commercial retail developers can often transform neighborhood landscapes, and local hospitals and industry can make decisions about employing local residents.

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<sup>1</sup>The principal scholarly catalyst for the renewed focus on neighborhoods and urban poverty is widely recognized as William Julius Wilson’s (1987) seminal book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which was highly influential in spawning both significant new research on neighborhood poverty and garnered substantial policy attention to the issue.

<sup>2</sup>At the national level, for example, the Empowerment Zone legislation under the Clinton administration and the Department of Justice’s Weed and Seed programs incorporated notions of comprehensive development and community engagement, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s HOPE VI program (and its successor under the Obama administration, Choice Neighborhoods) and the federal Promise Neighborhoods (explicitly modeled after the Harlem Children’s Zone, an ambitious neighborhood-based effort to break the cycle of poverty through a focus on improving children’s education) similarly reflect some of the key principles and orientations of CCIs.

Few CCIs, however, have made policy and systems change a central focus of their efforts.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which CCIs are well positioned to connect target communities to broader systems and resources and how they might best influence change at these higher levels are of central concern to the field.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, relatively little is known about the ways in which CCIs approach the task of engaging in policy issues and social action, address the broader challenge of systems change, or connect those agendas to their core work of community building and neighborhood development. In light of this gap in knowledge, the question of the relationship between CCI action and policy or systems change is an important and growing interest.

The New Communities Program (NCP) provides a powerful opportunity to explore this question. NCP is one of the largest contemporary CCIs in the United States, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation at the level of \$47 million over 10 years and operating in 14 neighborhoods in the city of Chicago (shown in Figure 1.1).<sup>5</sup> The implementation of NCP, which began in 2002, is managed by the Chicago office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC/Chicago), a national community development intermediary.<sup>6</sup> LISC/Chicago's leadership in the national LISC network has allowed NCP to serve as the template for the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative, a major effort by LISC to develop CCIs in sites around the country. As a multisite initiative operating within a single city, NCP provides a unique opportunity to explore, in considerable detail, both individual, neighborhood-level efforts to change policy or systems and the possibilities provided by leveraging cross-neighborhood activities or engaging in initiative-level work beyond what is being done in individual neighborhoods.

In each NCP neighborhood, one or two community-based nonprofit organizations serve as "lead agencies" to organize individual CBOs to build a broader "platform" to promote community change. These lead agencies leverage local capacities and concentrate resources to respond to local needs and shape particular kinds of neighborhood change. Action at the local level is guided by a "quality-of-life plan" that was developed for each neighborhood in the first

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<sup>3</sup>Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, and Dewar (2010). On CCIs generally, see, for example, Kubisch et al. (1997, 2002); Brown (1996); and Kingsley, McNeely, and Gibson (1997).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Kubisch et al. (2002); Briggs (2007); DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2006); and Traynor (1995).

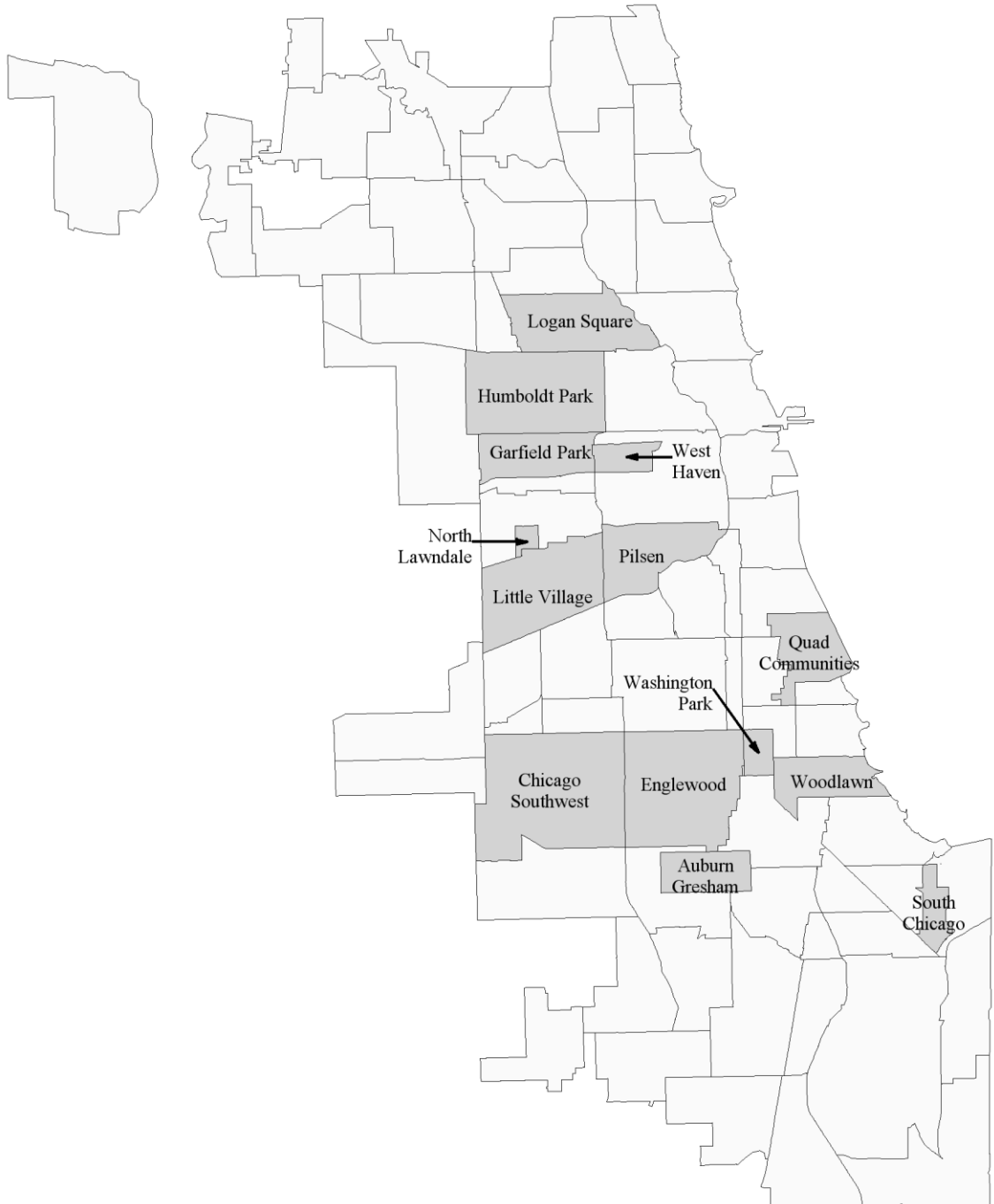
<sup>5</sup>NCP is often described as serving 16 Chicago communities. However, these communities are located in 14 areas for the purposes of the initiative's planning and implementation. Therefore, for simplicity's sake, this report refers to these areas as NCP's 14 neighborhoods.

<sup>6</sup>Founded in 1979, LISC is a national organization with 30 urban offices and one rural office that seeks to build sustainable communities by expanding investment in real estate, increasing family income and wealth, stimulating economic development, improving access to high-quality education, and supporting healthful environments and lifestyles. See [www.lisc.org](http://www.lisc.org).

# The New Communities Program

## Figure 1.1

### NCP Neighborhoods and the City of Chicago



NOTES: Map displays the Chicago municipal area within Cook County divided into the 80 neighborhoods defined for the NCP analysis. The 14 NCP neighborhoods are labeled and shaded.

phase of the initiative, with input from a broad range of local stakeholders — from residents to community-based organizations to local businesses. The notion of an NCP “platform” can also be seen to operate at the initiative level, in which the development of capacity and relationships within and across neighborhoods provides a ready-made framework for attracting and leveraging resources and an operational foundation that provides the initiative with the ability to respond nimbly to emerging opportunities. Early findings from the first phase of research on NCP noted that, like many CCIs, the initiative has focused relatively little effort on activities related to broader policy engagement and systems change compared with its emphasis on local project development and implementation, and that some participants were concerned about the relative lack of engagement with (and access to) policy actors, especially at the city level.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the “Great Recession” that began in late 2007 and its significant impact on the economy (jobs, investment, public resources), housing (foreclosures, access to credit), and policy (retrenchment and budget crises), the challenge of engaging in policy and systems-change work is all the more critical. Indeed, the initiative has given rise to some efforts connected with “policy” or “systems change” — brokering connections, negotiating resource allocation, catalyzing public debate, mobilizing constituencies, and seeking to influence institutional decision-making. These efforts have been driven by intermediary organizations operating at both the neighborhood level (principally the lead agencies) and at the initiative level (largely through the work of LISC/Chicago). The extent to which such activity happens, how it happens, and what lessons can be learned from the experience to date is the subject of this report.

The report explores the ways in which NCP engages with policy issues and influential individuals and institutions in pursuit of neighborhood change and broader systems-change goals. The terms “policy” and “systems change” are used broadly in this context to include action geared to address issues that are relevant at the community level and that are strongly affected by the decisions or practices by city, state, or regional government (elected or appointed officials, public agencies like schools or transportation authorities) as well as by private corporate actors (like businesses, developers, and funders). It may include, for example, efforts to inform *legislative policy* (for example, to establish neighborhood catchment areas for charter school attendance, or to create Tax Increment Financing districts,<sup>8</sup> or to revise regulations governing mortgage foreclosure processes); efforts to direct greater *resources* to neighborhoods and encourage public or private investments (for example, for schools, or community development, or social service provision); or efforts to influence the *behavior of external actors* in the

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<sup>7</sup>Greenberg, Verma, Dillman, and Chaskin (2010).

<sup>8</sup>Tax Increment Financing districts allow for the use of “new” property tax dollars (from the development of new properties or tax increases on existing properties) to be set aside for neighborhood improvement activities.

context of action moving forward (for example, to ensure hiring of neighborhood residents or low-income housing set-asides in the context of development projects).

As an initiative, NCP operates at two levels. At the initiative level, LISC/Chicago serves as a managing intermediary, allocating initiative resources to select projects, facilitating identification of and access to additional resources, promoting cross-site communication and collaboration, brokering connections to influential leaders at the city level and beyond, and providing a broad range of technical support to lead agencies. At the local level, lead agencies in each NCP neighborhood spearheaded the planning processes that led to the quality-of-life plans and continue to serve as local intermediaries for ongoing planning, mobilization, resource allocation, project implementation, and brokering external relations. In exploring the questions that guide this investigation, this report focuses on both initiative and neighborhood levels of action. In doing so, it uses “NCP” to refer to action at the initiative level or across sites, and refers specifically to local sites’ or lead agency actions by name. “NCP actors” thus refers to both local (lead agencies, community partners) and initiative-level (LISC/Chicago, MacArthur) actors.

The report focuses in particular on the following questions:

- To what extent do NCP actors at the local and initiative levels seek to influence powerful actors and institutions beyond the NCP neighborhoods around what they perceive to be the key issues affecting their communities — either more specifically focused on neighborhood concerns or more broadly targeted at addressing fundamental conditions?
- What are the principal strategies they embrace, for what reasons, and to what effect?
- What obstacles and challenges have these efforts faced and what achievements and benefits have they yielded to date?
- To what extent does NCP as an initiative develop a policy “platform” to support the priorities of NCP neighborhoods?

## **Methods, Data, and Contexts**

The analysis in this report is based on in-depth interviews with initiative participants (LISC/Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation, and NCP staff at the lead agencies and at community partner organizations in the four case-study sites) and with a set of key informants in the case-study neighborhoods and in the city who have some external relationship with NCP actors as allies, influential players, or targets of action. These key informants include leaders of neighborhood or citywide nonprofit organizations, public agencies, corporations, and elected

officials or their key staff who have a grounded perspective on the policy and systems-change work of the initiative, either because of relationships or interactions with LISC/Chicago or with key NCP participants at the neighborhood level. Fifty interviews were conducted. Key informant interviewees were selected based initially on discussions with lead agency, community partner, LISC/Chicago, and MacArthur Foundation staff; available information about relevant strands of initiative activity (for example, progress reports and meeting summaries); and field observations of relevant meetings and events. All interviews were digitally recorded and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program, based on a coding scheme focusing on initiative actors' orientations to policy and systems change; the factors that contribute to issue identification, framing, and targeting; the strategies, tactics, and relationships engaged; and reflections on benefits, challenges, and trade-offs in engaging in this work. Where possible and relevant, interview data have been supplemented with observations of community or planning meetings and public documents pertaining to the policy-relevant work of NCP actors from NCP and lead agency Web sites and local press coverage. Above all, there has been a systematic pursuit, with regard to each of the four case studies, and to LISC/Chicago at the initiative level, of the widest possible range of perspectives on the policy and systems-change efforts relevant to that case — key NCP actors, their close allies, the targets of their efforts, and knowledgeable observers at the community and citywide or system levels. The triangulation of data from these various perspectives provides particular leverage for understanding the complexities, possibilities, and challenges that have been encountered.

### **The Case Study Sites**

Although interviews were conducted with staff at all 14 lead agencies, and interviews with LISC/Chicago, MacArthur, and some city-level informants addressed policy and systems change work in NCP more broadly, the analysis here focuses primarily on the work of LISC/Chicago at both the initiative level and with particular neighborhoods, and at the neighborhood level in the four case study sites (described in Table 1.1): Chicago Southwest, Auburn Gresham, Quad Communities, and Humboldt Park.

#### *Chicago Southwest*

Chicago Southwest is an ethnically diverse area on the southwest side of the city, comprising two community areas (Chicago Lawn and West Chicago Lawn) and portions of two others (West Elsdon and Gage Park), with a total population of roughly 119,000.<sup>9</sup> It has a

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<sup>9</sup>Demographic data are from the American Community Survey, 2005 to 2009. See [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).

**The New Communities Program**

**Table 1.1**

**Neighborhood Context, NCP Platform, and Policy and Systems-Change Orientation in NCP Case Study Sites**

Site (Lead Agency)	Neighborhood Context	NCP “Platform” Characteristics	Orientation to Policy and Systems Change
Auburn Gresham (GADC)	African-American population; ongoing loss of younger residents; sparse organizational infrastructure	Small, young lead agency with resident-engagement and civic-revival orientation; broad community-change goals but particular focus on revitalizing retail and transit corridor	Lead agency with limited policy-relevant experience and resources; oriented toward insider lobbying via key influential allies
Chicago Southwest (SWOP, GSDC)	Mixed ethnic/racial population (Hispanic, black, white); dense but cooperative organizational infrastructure	Large, established co-lead agencies with community organizing and mobilization focus; broad community change goals with housing and home-ownership issues prominent	Lead agency with extensive policy and advocacy experience and insider policymaking partnerships with influential allies; relationship-building orientation with recourse to both “inside” and “outside” tactics
Humboldt Park (Bickerdike, NCP taskforce)	Geographically divided between Puerto Rican and black populations; dense and somewhat contentious organizational infrastructure	Collaborative NCP structure consisting predominantly of service organizations; large, established lead agency playing a facilitating role; broad community-change goals	Participating organizations with range of policy orientations and experience; lead agency with significant advocacy experience
Quad Communities (QCDC)	African-American population; recent gentrification and displacement of public housing population; dense, contentious organizational infrastructure	Small lead agency created for NCP implementation in partnership with local alderman; lead agency focusing on commercial development and education in context of public housing “transformation”	Lead agency with minor policy engagement experience, but close alliances with elected officials; strongly oriented toward “insider” partnering with political actors

NOTE: GADC = Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation; SWOP = Southwest Organizing Project; GSDC = Greater Southwest Development Corporation; QCDC = Quad Communities Development Corporation.

large Latino population as well as sizeable populations of African-Americans and whites. It has experienced significant population change over the decades following the historic march of Dr. Martin Luther King, in 1966, through the area of the community near Marquette Park. The conflict that followed, along with escalating disinvestment in subsequent years, ultimately led to the creation of the Greater Southwest Development Corporation (GSDC) in 1974, which serves as the lead agency for NCP, acting in partnership with the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), a community organizing group focusing largely on community mobilization and advocacy.

### *Auburn Gresham*

Auburn Gresham is a small, predominantly African-American neighborhood on the southwest side of the city, consisting mostly of modest but well-kept, single-family homes. It has seen a steadily shrinking population in recent decades (and is currently home to about 25,000 residents), particularly involving a loss of younger residents, and, until recently, a rapidly declining retail corridor along 79th Street.<sup>10</sup> The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) was formed in 2001 under the impetus of major community stakeholders, including the local alderman and the Catholic parish of St. Sabina, with the purpose of reversing this decline by supporting and coordinating new development and investment in the neighborhood.

### *Quad Communities*

Quad Communities is a predominantly African-American area on the near south side of the city, so named (for NCP) because it comprises the parts of four community areas — Douglas, Grand Boulevard, North Kenwood, and Oakland — contained within the city's Fourth Aldermanic Ward. It is a high-poverty neighborhood that has experienced population decline over the past few decades (its current population stands at about 21,000)<sup>11</sup> and is a major site targeted by the city's Plan for Transformation of public housing, under which three large public housing complexes have been demolished in the community and are being replaced by mixed-income developments.<sup>12</sup> Significant development activities are under way as part of a broader effort to revitalize historic Bronzeville (much of which is located within Quad Communities).

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<sup>10</sup>Demographic data are from the American Community Survey, 2005 to 2009. See [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).

<sup>11</sup>Demographic data are from the American Community Survey, 2005 to 2009. See [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).

<sup>12</sup>Chicago's Plan for Transformation involves the renovation of a portion of the existing public housing stock (including family developments, scattered-site, and senior housing); the demolition of the largest and most distressed public housing complexes in the city; the construction of new, mixed-income developments on the footprint of demolished complexes; the expansion of housing vouchers to allow relocation to subsidized units in the private market; and the relocation of more than 56,000 public housing residents. See Chicago Housing Authority (2000).



Quad Communities Development Corporation (QCDC) is a new organization created to act as the lead agency for NCP. At its inception, QCDC was tightly connected with the alderman's office and was established as a "broker" organization to catalyze collaborative relations and convene community organizations as part of the NCP initiative.

### *Humboldt Park*

Humboldt Park is a West Side neighborhood with large Latino and African-American populations, the latter mainly concentrated in the western part of the neighborhood and home to nearly 86,000 residents all-told.<sup>13</sup> The neighborhood has been relatively stable in terms of income and population diversity over the last 40 years, although residents express concerns about increasing population mobility and the dangers of gentrification. The lead agency for NCP is Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, which is a well-established CDC that has a long history of housing and economic development, but has also engaged in some community organizing, leadership development, and advocacy activities over the years.

### *Summary*

The selection of these four neighborhoods for in-depth investigation is based on the variation they represent along a few key dimensions, as summarized in Table 1.1. One dimension concerns the strategic orientation to policy and systems change they represent and variations in the ways they are "embedded" in networks with influential political connections. A second dimension focuses on differences in the context in which they work, including the impact of the economic crisis that began in 2007, the nature and extent of neighborhood organizational infrastructure, and the particular policy priorities identified by each. A third dimension concerns the nature of the "platform" built in each site, including the organizational capacity of lead agencies, the substantive thrust of initiative activities, and the ways in which they have organized themselves vis-à-vis other community actors. The relevance of these dimensions as they play out in the context of policy and systems change activities is explored in the following chapters.

## **Organization of This Report**

The report begins with a brief discussion of CCIs in Chapter 2, outlining their principal orientations to community change and providing a brief review of CCI experience and the relative focus of CCI activities and orientations to policy and systems change. Next, it situates NCP within this context as a contemporary example of CCI practice. It outlines some of the key

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<sup>13</sup>Demographic data are from the American Community Survey, 2005 to 2009. See [www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs).

characteristics of the effort and highlights the ways in which NCP adheres to or diverges from the orientations and strategies of other CCIs. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide the empirical heart of the report, presenting a detailed analysis of the initiative's stance and orientations toward policy and systems change; the key issues around which this work is organized; and the strategies, tactics, and actors involved. The discussion begins with an examination of the initiative's general orientation toward policy and systems change as shaped by LISC/Chicago, and moves on to explore how lead agencies and their allies in the four case-study communities orient themselves to this work and develop strategies around it. Chapter 6 focuses on the nature of initiative-level or citywide engagement in such issues, with particular attention to the role of LISC/Chicago. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by teasing out some of the key issues and questions raised by the initiative's engagement in policy and systems change work to date.

## Chapter 2

# Community and Systems Change: Comprehensive Community Initiatives and the New Communities Program

At the time that the earliest comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) were developing, the community development field in the United States was dominated by the work of community development corporations (CDCs). The history and evolution of CDCs informed, in important ways, the intent of and approach to community change that CCIs adopted. CDCs developed beginning in the early 1960s as community-based nonprofit organizations focused on both community development and community empowerment.<sup>1</sup> They were intended to be controlled by the community (largely through majority resident representation on their boards of directors), to effect comprehensive community change (through housing, economic development, social service provision, and advocacy), and to benefit the community as a whole and pursue collective goals identified by community residents.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the early CDCs grew out of local community organizing efforts, advocacy organizations, and coalitions, several of which were led by leaders from African-American churches. CDCs' work often began with targeted community organizing and direct action campaigns — boycotts, marches, landlord-tenant battles — to address racial segregation and discrimination, disinvestment, and the concentration of poverty in their communities. However, leaders of what would become the first CDCs soon began to create community development projects focused on capital development, housing, and economic development. Although most CDCs began with the intent to address community needs holistically, shifts in funding availability, the greater profitability of housing development, and the maturing and professionalization of the community development field — including the emergence of strong intermediary organizations like the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to support it — led many

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<sup>1</sup>“Community” means many things to many people, and the challenges of defining community and establishing its importance as a sociological construct and as a unit of action have generated a large literature; see Chaskin (1997) and Sampson (1999) for reviews. Although community may or may not be defined as place-based, in the context of community development in general and CDCs and CCIs in particular, action is invariably organized around spatially defined communities, most often neighborhoods (variously defined) in cities; see Chaskin (1998). In these cases, neighborhoods are seen as more than simply spatial constructs, however; they are the local areas in which important social, functional, and cultural dimensions of community life and connection are organized. “Community” and “neighborhood” are used interchangeably in this report.

<sup>2</sup>On community development corporations generally, see, for example, Faux (1971), Berndt (1977), Pierce and Steinbach (1987), Vidal (1992), and Stoutland (1999).

CDCs to narrow their focus over time and to specialize increasingly in housing and, to some degree, economic development.<sup>3</sup>

## **The Evolution of Comprehensive Community Initiatives**

The earliest CCIs were launched in the late 1980s in response to two aspects of this trajectory in the CDC movement: (1) the separation of much housing and economic development from human service provision and the social aspects of community building, and (2) the relative lack of progress on this “softer” services side (especially compared with the successes in developing low-income housing). CCIs thus sought both to revisit and to refine community development practice based, in part, on the lessons learned from CDC experience up to that time. They combined a “comprehensive” focus on community needs and circumstances (that is, one that recognizes that multiple forces shape communities and the need to draw on multiple strategies to achieve community development) with attention to processes of “community building” by supporting the involvement of residents and collaboration among local organizations.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, CCIs supported and extended local efforts that had begun to come together through indigenous neighborhood action; in others, CCIs attempted to build on local assets by either supporting “lead agencies” (often CDCs) in their efforts to govern initiative action or by creating new organizations or collaboratives under which initiative action would take place. For example, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in the Dorchester neighborhood in Boston arose out of an indigenous community organizing effort to address illegal dumping in the neighborhood; the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Project in the South Bronx (on which NCP is most directly modeled) supported local CDCs’ efforts to engage community partners and expand their activities to focus on comprehensive community change; and the Neighborhood and Family Initiative established, under the auspices of community foundations in four cities, neighborhood collaboratives comprising residents, local community organizations, and other stakeholders in the broader community (for example, city officials and corporate representatives) to craft comprehensive plans for neighborhood development and governing initiative action.<sup>5</sup>

Like CDCs, CCIs grew from a worldview emphasizing self-determination, community asset development, and local empowerment. Also like CDCs (and a number of other efforts that came before them), they began with an assumption that to make significant change in poor communities, neighborhood needs and circumstances must be addressed holistically, and that planning and implementation of community-change efforts should be grounded in the interests

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<sup>3</sup>NCCED (1995); Stoutland (1999).

<sup>4</sup>Kubisch et al. (1997).

<sup>5</sup>Medoff and Sklar (1994); Miller and Burns (2006); Chaskin, Dansokho, and Toler (2000).

and priorities of community members. In addition, CCIs recognized that neighborhoods are not self-contained, but are nested within complex social, economic, and political systems and, as such, are influenced by changes happening at different spatial scales (that is, from those at the broader metropolitan region to national and global dynamics), and are affected by the decisions and actions of a range of players beyond their boundaries.

Both of these orientations — toward neighborhoods as units of action and toward neighborhoods as parts of broader systems — are central to the ideas behind CCIs. Thus, CCIs have sought both to build the capacity of communities to plan, act, and catalyze change at the neighborhood level and to better connect neighborhoods to the systems, institutions, and actors that have an impact on them. In spite of this dual orientation, however, most CCIs have tended to focus more on community building than on systems change; the lion’s share of their efforts has been internal and project-oriented, and they have been less effective at linking such efforts to higher levels of action, as described in Chapter 1.<sup>6</sup>

### **CCIs and the Larger Systems That Affect Neighborhoods**

Efforts to engage and influence outside systems can take different forms, for different strategic reasons. Some efforts will be oriented more toward “outsider” strategies, relying, for example, on some combination of mobilization, pressure, protest, and public information campaigns to convince influential leaders to make decisions and shape their actions in line with neighborhood priorities as they see them. Others will rely more on “insider” strategies, leveraging key relationships with influential players to inform their actions and contribute to decisions in more private, informal, or collaborative ways. These two orientations represent the opposite ends of a continuum; many efforts will use some combination of these, at different points in time, with different interlocutors, and around different issues, moving back and forth between conflict and consensus, direct action and informal negotiation, independent action and coproduction.<sup>7</sup>

Many CCIs explicitly take into account their relationships to broader systems and recognize the influence of policy decisions, such as welfare reform; resource flows, such as changes in investment patterns by government and corporations; and power dynamics, both political and economic, beyond the neighborhood. Although generally a less central focus for CCIs, many have also sought to engage these systems and actors, responding strategically to challenges and opportunities in the broader ecology — policy shifts, demographic changes, fluctuations in market dynamics and the structure of economic opportunity — as they arise,

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<sup>6</sup>Kubisch et al. (2002).

<sup>7</sup>Mosley (2009); Andrews and Edwards (2004); Edwards and Foley (2003); McCarthy and Castelli (2002); Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (2001).

including efforts to influence outside agents (for example, public officials, corporate leaders, developers) whose decisions and actions may be central to meeting (or thwarting) neighborhood development goals. Most CCIs that have sought to engage these actors have oriented themselves to the task by strongly emphasizing collaboration among community organizations and connecting them to “partners” in positions of power who have access to resources beyond the neighborhood. This is an orientation that seeks to maximize “external alignment”<sup>8</sup> between community goals and outside interests and resources — for example, aligning the profit potential of establishing a new supermarket in a poor neighborhood with the community benefits of employment set-asides and access to healthful food, or the relationship between support for physical revitalization and reductions in crime. And it is an orientation that tends to privilege persuasion and consensus over contention or conflict as the means for influencing powerful interests.

In this way, CCIs have focused, for the most part, more on organization, in the sense of negotiating partnerships and collaborative agreements, than on organizing, in the sense of mobilizing community action toward a particular goal, such as a shift in power relationships or specific concessions from powerful policymakers and institutions. While many of the early CDCs grew out of organizing campaigns in the context of broader social movements of the 1960s, CCIs, by contrast, emerged at a time of intense political debate about traditional anti-poverty efforts and a shift away from state assistance to voluntary-sector provision. Other determinants no doubt also contributed to the development and general orientation of CCIs, but most of them have focused more of their community change efforts on development activities and service provision inside the community than on influencing relevant action beyond the community. Thus, despite the conceptual emphasis on both marshaling and enhancing community change capacities and reconnecting poor communities to the external resources, systems, and opportunities from which they have become isolated, the practical emphasis of CCIs has largely been on the former. Strategies and actions to address the structural dimensions and determinants of poverty beyond the community have often been absent in CCIs, or at least secondary to their more urgent focus on implementing projects and programs on the ground.

A number of factors shape these realities in CCI practice and in community building efforts more generally, including those spearheaded by CDCs (in spite of their community organizing roots). These factors are based in part on CCIs’ basic orientations, in part on their organizational constraints and proclivities, and in part on the broader social, economic, and political context. In terms of orientation, although there is nothing inherently contradictory about a focus on community building (or capacity building, or social capital) and a focus on structural conditions, systems change, or political mobilization and advocacy, the tendency of

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<sup>8</sup>Dewar (2010).

these orientations in practice — toward consensus, collaboration, cohesion, and participation — has been to focus on internal community needs and assets and targeting resources toward specific development objectives.<sup>9</sup> This tendency exists in part because the organizations engaged in CCIs tend to be primarily development- or service-oriented nonprofits rather than social movement or advocacy organizations. That is, although they may sometimes engage in advocacy, they tend overwhelmingly to focus on production, development, or service provision and steer away from, or are ill-suited to effectively engage in, organizing, advocacy, or contentious political action.<sup>10</sup> These tendencies are influenced by the broader realities of funding and policymaking. Organizations that are at the core of CCI activities (for the most part, neighborhood-based nonprofits) operate in a context of shrinking public and philanthropic resources. They are largely dependent for survival on project-specific funding and the need to demonstrate project-specific outcomes, and they work under funders' increasing emphasis on performance monitoring, on the one hand, and broader scrutiny regarding the accountability and role of nonprofits, on the other. Although increasing resource dependency and scrutiny regarding political activity may not keep nonprofits from engaging in advocacy, it can have an important influence on the extent and nature of their advocacy activities.<sup>11</sup> For example, recent research on nonprofits' perspective on advocacy engagement shows that they tend to greatly overestimate the legal barriers to such activity.<sup>12</sup>

Given these circumstances, how might CCIs engage effectively to take into account the broader structural conditions, policy responses, and the behavior of political, institutional, and market actors that shape community circumstances and the possibilities for community change?

## **The New Communities Program: An Overview**

As described in Chapter 1, the New Communities Program is a multineighborhood CCI funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. NCP seeks to revitalize urban neighborhoods in Chicago by building the capacity of local organizations and interorganizational networks to plan and implement community change strategies. Like other CCIs, NCP takes a comprehensive — or holistic — view of community development, recognizing the interrelationship of needs and circumstances facing neighborhoods and the necessity for integrated strategies to address them. Community change goals are thus wide-ranging across NCP's 14

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<sup>9</sup>Briggs (2007); Chaskin Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (2001); DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2006); Sites, Chaskin, and Parks (2007).

<sup>10</sup>Stoecker (1997); DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge (2006).

<sup>11</sup>Smith and Lipsky (1993); Gronjberg and Salamon (2002); Mosley (2009); Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz (2004); Salamon (2006).

<sup>12</sup>Bass, Arons, Guinane, and Carter (2007).

sites, and efforts to achieve those goals have included a broad range of activities focused on housing, economic development, youth development, education, safety, public space, and social service provision. Also like other CCIs, NCP is concerned with the processes and capacities that enable local communities to manage, shape, and promote positive neighborhood change. Toward that end, a broad range of neighborhood stakeholders in each NCP site were brought together in a structured planning process to identify neighborhood priorities and community change goals. In order to realize its community capacity-building goals, NCP has focused on organizational development — both within its lead agencies and with reference to its community partners — and on expanding and supporting effective interorganizational relationships.

### **NCP Structure**

At its core, NCP is distinguished from other CCIs (beyond the differences in scope and scale of investment, which are also significant) by its particular orientation to the role of intermediary organizations and by its evolving orientation to community capacity building as the creation of “a ‘platform’ of relationships, skills, and methods”<sup>13</sup> to facilitate initiative action. Intermediaries help to organize and guide NCP planning and action at both the local and initiative levels.

#### *Intermediaries at the Local Level: Lead Agencies*

At the local level, a community organization acting as an intermediary in each NCP neighborhood serves as the lead agency for the initiative locally. The lead agency spearheads the planning process (including organizing participation of community stakeholders and managing their contributions to the development of its quality-of-life plan) and takes primary responsibility for facilitating initiative action (including playing a central role in ongoing planning, communication, resource allocation, project implementation, and relationship brokering) during the implementation phase. Although all are neighborhood-based nonprofits, the NCP lead agencies across sites vary in some important ways. Some are CDCs that, prior to NCP, focused largely on the development and management of low-income housing in their neighborhoods with, in some cases, varying emphases on economic development, social service delivery, and organizing and advocacy. Others are community organizations that have been historically more focused on facilitating community planning processes and on mobilizing community organizing campaigns to advocate for policy changes or specific actions on the part of government or market actors than they have been on production and management of neighborhood assets or service provision. Lead agencies also vary with regard to the neighborhood contexts in which they work, organizational size, and longevity. (Box 2.1 provides brief

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<sup>13</sup>LISC/Chicago (2007).



## Box 2.1

### The NCP Neighborhoods

**Auburn Gresham:** Though buffeted by “white flight,” real estate redlining, and gang activities, this mostly African-American community has a strong housing stock and more home owners than renters. Planners are looking for residential investments and retail growth.

**Chicago Lawn:** Despite growing poverty and a changing racial/ethnic dynamic in this neighborhood, planners hope to build on such pluses as Midway Airport and affordable bungalows.

**East Garfield Park:** Hit hard by the riots of 1968, this community has seen a decline in population and has about 1,750 vacant lots. But powered by the rising visibility of the Garfield Park Conservatory, Chicago Transportation Authority (CTA) improvements, and interest in historic gravestones, planners hope to spur a turnaround.

**Englewood:** This area has struggled for decades to reverse a declining population and job base. Residents will focus on job creation, promoting healthy lifestyles, and finding uses for 3,500 vacant lots.

**Humboldt Park:** The community is responding to encroaching gentrification by staking a claim for longtime residents. Strategies include developing affordable housing and improving education and health care.

**Little Village:** *La Villita* is considered the capital of the Mexican Midwest. With half the residents under age 25, challenges revolve around investing in youth. Planners want to focus on better schools, violence prevention, and improved health and social services.

**Logan Square:** Gentrification is issue Number 1 in this neighborhood of sturdy homes and boulevards. Strategies revolve around preserving diversity and affordable housing, expanding community school programs, and revitalizing Armitage Avenue.

**North Lawndale:** After decades of job loss and population decline, North Lawndale has seen a resurgence with a new shopping center, improvements on Ogden Avenue, and 1,200 housing units planned or under construction. But the challenges of poverty and high unemployment top the list for planners.

**Pilsen:** This heavily Mexican-American community started in the New Communities Initiative (NCI) pilot program in 1998.\* It already has developed affordable housing, set up a \$300,000 revolving loan fund for minority contractors, and worked with local schools. Efforts in those areas are ongoing.

**Quad Communities:** These four communities (Douglas, Grand Boulevard, North Kenwood, and Oakland) are undergoing a transformation. Mixed-income developments are replacing Chicago Housing Authority projects; schools are being overhauled; and developers are snapping up homes. Strategies revolve around managing those changes and enhancing retail opportunities and activities for children.

(continued)

**Box 2.1 (continued)**

**South Chicago:** This community, hurt by the loss of steel makers, started in the NCI pilot program in 1998. It already has set up a home owners and tenants association and has helped start an after-school program.

**Washington Park:** Planners are focused on creating an employment center, supporting a market for mixed-income housing, and setting up a welcoming program for new residents.

**West Haven:** This community started in the NCI pilot program in 2000. It is undergoing a rapid influx of housing and retail development. Residents have helped shepherd that development, improved a park, and set up a support program for Chicago Housing Authority residents.

**Woodlawn:** The population has stabilized, and new construction is starting to fill in 1,700 vacant lots. Planners are focused on housing for a mix of incomes, improving schools, beautification of 63rd Street, and retail projects.

SOURCE: LISC/Chicago (2005).

\*The New Communities Initiative was the precursor to NCP in Pilsen, South Chicago, and West Haven.

descriptions of the 14 NCP neighborhoods.) While many are well-established organizations that have been in existence for years or even decades, some were established much more recently, including a few that were launched specifically to serve as an NCP lead agency.

Similarly, lead agencies vary in the way they approach their intermediary roles. In some cases, lead agencies act primarily as brokers, funneling resources and opportunities to other community organizations and facilitating project implementation through the varied auspices of a range of partners. In other cases, lead agencies focus more on facilitating coordination among such partners toward the elaboration and implementation of collaborative projects and activities. In yet other cases, lead agencies take on the lion's share of implementation directly. Many lead agencies combine these strategies, with different relative emphases on each.<sup>14</sup> As explored below, some of these differences in organizational history, capacity, and intermediary stance have important implications for how lead agencies orient themselves to policy and systems change, and for the kinds of strategies and relationships on which they draw.

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<sup>14</sup>For more detail on the overall structure and initial findings regarding implementation of NCP during its first years after the quality-of-life plans were completed, see Greenberg, Verma, Dillman, and Chaskin (2010).

### *Intermediary at the Initiative Level: LISC/Chicago*

At the initiative level, LISC/Chicago serves as a “managing” intermediary that has played the central role in shaping the initiative overall and in supporting and guiding its ongoing implementation. NCP was developed as a partnership between the MacArthur Foundation and LISC/Chicago. In addition to playing a critical role in initiative “start-up,” along with the Foundation — framing conceptual assumptions, shaping initiative structure, selecting (and, in some cases, helping to create) lead agencies to act as neighborhood intermediaries — LISC/Chicago has performed a range of critical functions designed to promote the model to initiative participants, disseminate it to larger audiences, and manage initiative progress. These activities include developing orientation and training materials, organizing NCP events, and promoting both cross-site communication and broader information dissemination about NCP. Most centrally, LISC/Chicago also provides a range of direct supports to lead agencies and their community partners, providing seed grants, loans, and technical assistance, and supporting or catalyzing strategic partnerships and alliances.

Although LISC/Chicago serves a set of functions that are in many ways typical of those served by most community development intermediaries,<sup>15</sup> it plays a significantly more expansive role in initiative management and oversight and in the provision of technical assistance and resources to sites through seed grants and loans. It also brokers relations with funders and government agencies and provides timely access to sources of information that are critical to carrying out specific NCP strategies. LISC/Chicago’s role as dedicated system liaison and interlocutor has made NCP a more consistently systems-oriented CCI than most of its predecessors. However, because of the degree of access LISC/Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation both have, as well as the potential weight of an initiative operating at this scale, questions have been raised both inside and outside the initiative about whether NCP could take a more active or intentional approach to changing policy or reforming systems for the benefit of communities, and where the capacity for such action might best reside. The chapters that follow explore these dynamics in detail, with a specific focus on the role of LISC/Chicago at the initiative level and on neighborhood-level action in four case-study sites.

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<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Keyes, Schwartz, Vidal, and Bratt (1996); Stoutland (1999).



## Chapter 3

# The Initiative-Level Context for Policy and Systems Change

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) plays an expansive role as the managing intermediary for the New Communities Program (NCP). As a result, its general orientation and actions have been central in setting the initiative-wide tone and context regarding policy and systems-change engagement. This chapter explores LISC/Chicago's approach at two levels — with regard to LISC/Chicago's own activity and with regard to the activities of community-level NCP actors. It also examines the influence of the MacArthur Foundation in relation to issues of policy and systems change.

## LISC/Chicago's Orientation to Systems and Policy Change

The conceptual origins of NCP lie in an effort to develop an alternative path for community development in Chicago in the late 1990s, at a time when existing approaches and organizations increasingly appeared to be in crisis. The Futures Committee, a gathering of civic and neighborhood leaders convened by LISC/Chicago, issued a 1997 report, *Changing the Way We Do Things*,<sup>1</sup> that charted a new course for the organization and set the stage for the development of the New Communities Initiative (NCI), the precursor to NCP in three Chicago neighborhoods. Reflecting the argument behind the emerging field of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), the report stressed the need for a more comprehensive approach to community development, with a particular emphasis on community planning and self-governance and the need to coordinate disparate neighborhood actors and organizations with development and community change roles. It also highlighted the distinctive and untapped potential of community development corporations (CDCs) to carry out such a coordinating function, and the need for more intentional engagement with the larger economic, political, and policy spheres and forces beyond the community itself.

LISC/Chicago wholeheartedly embraced the report's recommendations and began to develop its capacity to support comprehensive community development. Building on the model developed by one of the first CCIs, the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP) in New York City's South Bronx, it launched the NCI demonstration program, with three local development organizations coordinating community-level planning and implementa-

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<sup>1</sup>Mooney (1997); see Mooney (2004) on the formative role of the 1997 report in the development of NCP.

tion in three Chicago neighborhoods. It guided and supported the local organizations through planning methodology, technical assistance, channeling outside resources, and brokering systems-level relationships. It elaborated a conception of neighborhoods as “webs of relationships, both internal and external,” and of the role of community development organizations as “connect[ing] the dots,” increasing “the tensile strength of the web both within and to the larger ecosystem to which it is connected.”<sup>2</sup> It was along these lines that NCI was subsequently expanded to 14 neighborhoods under the New Communities Program.

The new mission of LISC/Chicago was to change the way community development was done in Chicago and the way relevant actors, agencies, and organizations were aligned and interconnected — that is, to change and improve the city’s “community development system.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it sought to promote better coordination and collaboration among these stakeholders, the shared pursuit of common interests, and improved resource flows to community efforts. These are the sorts of “resource brokering” and “external alignment” activities that were discussed in Chapter 2 as central to most CCIs’ systems-engagement efforts. Beyond this, LISC/Chicago also sought to reorient major institutional players toward community-driven development planning as a key influence in shaping their policies and interventions. In place of the top-down community development orientation often taken by city government and philanthropies, it sought to make these actors responsive to community priorities. From this perspective, as a LISC/Chicago staff member put it, “the development of the NCP platform was and is in itself a systems change. . . . For the first time on any scale, Chicago’s mayor and its planning department were turning to neighborhood-initiated plans for guidance, projects, and investment decisions.”

In shifting from a conventional “bricks-and-mortar” orientation to a comprehensive approach, LISC/Chicago also broke with what it viewed as the long-dominant conception of community development as an “empowerment” project aiming to “shift power from malevolent elites to ‘the people.’”<sup>4</sup> It also left behind associated “asset-based development” theories, according to which disempowered communities are best served by identifying and developing their intrinsic assets, relying, in LISC’s view, “wholly on themselves. . . to develop self-sufficient communities that would be more just and more prosperous,” rather than engaging with larger systems.<sup>5</sup> Such conceptions had revealed their limitations both by leading in practice to an increasingly narrow focus on tangible asset development (housing and commercial real estate)

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<sup>2</sup>Mooney (2004), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>See, also, Ferguson and Stoutland (1999) for a definition of the community development system.

<sup>4</sup>Mooney (2004), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Mooney (2004), p. 2.

and by ignoring the fact that “no thriving neighborhood or community can be self-sufficient.”<sup>6</sup> Replacing these ideas with a “web-like” conception of neighborhoods, as described earlier, LISC/Chicago emphasizes instead community networks and interconnections, while placing less emphasis on issues of inequity, power, and exclusion. The role of community development organizations was framed in primarily managerial terms, as hinging on “the deft planning and management of the various forces and agents that are at work in communities.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while shifting attention to the importance of engagement with systems-level actors and institutions, the organization also largely steered away from conceptions of community development that emphasize collective action against systemic inequities and embrace more contentious forms of community organizing and mobilization — tactics that have often been used to hold systems leaders accountable or demand changes in policy or the behavior of government, developers, or market actors. It sought instead to create alliances with powerful players in the broader community development system that could be leveraged toward the realization of neighborhood development goals. As one staff member put it,

We’ve never been an advocacy organization except in the fundamental sense of if we have a project we’re advocating for, a project or a program... We’re not out to change the world. We work with others who are trying to change the world and we collaborate with them in a variety of ways, but that’s not us.

LISC/Chicago’s approach to systems and policy change has accordingly been intentionally selective, restrained, and noncontentious. Its systems-engagement strategy has been intensively focused on relationship- and trust-building with influential individuals and agencies, prioritizing consensus and collaboration, and rejecting assertive postures and confrontational tactics as counterproductive. It has predominantly refrained from adopting positions regarding particular policy or systems issues, on the grounds that this would contradict its commitment to community-driven agenda setting and undermine its intermediary role. It has occasionally engaged in selective advocacy efforts, but only when it could point to broad support among NCP communities and when doing so involved minimal risk of alienating influential allies or other community players. And it has seldom orchestrated common policy positions across NCP communities. This orientation has constituted an internally coherent and consistent strategic approach to its intermediary role, the advantages and limitations of which are discussed later in this report. What it has enabled LISC/Chicago to do in the policy and systems arena is to exercise a measure of “inside” policy influence, taking what it calls “opportunistic” advantage of situations in which it can broker resources and provide direct input into the way particular

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<sup>6</sup>Mooney (2004), pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup>Mooney (2004), p. 4.

policies and programs are developed and implemented by systems-level actors such as city government and major philanthropies.

The prominence of relationship-building in LISC/Chicago's systems-engagement approach is hardly unusual among CCIs, but the organization was particularly intentional about developing this strategy in building on the Futures Committee report. One staff member described the organization's orientation from the outset as:

. . . a conscious effort to organize up as well as organize down and to integrate and to be a valuable resource to those folks and to do it throughout everything that we're doing. . . . If you don't organize up as well as organize down, you have all these folks who are organized and energized and have all these great plans on the table and then the folks in positions of power don't get it. They don't appreciate it or they don't understand it.

To this end, LISC/Chicago conducted early mapping exercises to identify the influential entities and individuals it needed to develop relationships with, and extended this into what a staff member describes as an "iterative" process, where, "as you learn more, you become more intentional about other folks you don't know or institutions you don't know or have a relationship with." Staff members were expected to develop "a body of relationships" as a central tool of their work. And the organization has institutionalized some key relationships by creating board positions for planning and housing commissioners at the city and state levels, as well as for senior managers at local utility companies and several major banks.

LISC/Chicago staff argue that, with selective exceptions, advocating for specific policy changes would jeopardize the relations of trust and collaboration that they have built, particularly those with city officials and departments, and would compromise their effectiveness as an intermediary:

LISC is seen in many quarters — especially by public officials — as an honest broker, supporting the "political center." As LISC moves to support causes that are less commonly accepted, it risks being seen as just another advocacy organization with an axe to grind. It is no longer in the role of intermediary. Rather than [mediating] differences between neighborhood and public sector actors, it will be seen as "the other side" by many of the same officials who now see it as a mediating force.

A strategic focus on relationship-building with influential actors generally carries with it a strong preference for persuasion and consensus over more assertive and contentious tactics — an orientation that is, again, widely prevalent among CCIs. LISC/Chicago's style of engagement with these actors has been to make itself "the go-to group," as one staff member put it, by striving to "be a resource and to be valuable to policymakers and to funders and to city officials. . . . We try never to surprise our friends in the public sector or in the foundation



sector.” LISC/Chicago staff argue that they have been able to be far more effective with this “diplomatic” approach: “Our experience has led us to see the limitations of traditional policy and advocacy work. Our role as intermediary, we believe, requires a more deft hand in making systems change.”

Finally, LISC/Chicago believes that a selective and restrained approach to policy and systems change best comports with its primary institutional mission of supporting community-level development efforts. This is partly because of the diversity among NCP neighborhoods and the corresponding diversity of their policy interests:

NCP organizations are not monolithic in their views. Their economic, political, and social situations differ. Priorities vary across communities. An aggressive advocacy approach may serve to alienate some of the same organizations and individuals whose good work and leadership are needed to implement neighborhood plans.

More fundamentally, LISC/Chicago believes that a policy agenda that it establishes at the initiative level would risk imposing priorities from the top down. As a staff member put it:

We really start more from neighborhoods as systems and try and identify through those local actors what matters to them in that system. And then policy does need to change to improve it at a systemic level but that change starts locally and capacity builds locally and the right policies to change will grow out of that as opposed to from the outside in these lofty goals of “we need to change policy.”

## **LISC/Chicago’s Approach to Community-Level Systems Change and Policy Engagement**

As befits the priority it places on community-led agenda setting, LISC/Chicago aims to provide support for community efforts that aspire to change policy and systems, just as it does for programmatic activities at the neighborhood level. It is also amenable to NCP lead agencies deploying a range of tactics, including the more contentious forms of community organizing or policy advocacy that it rejects on its own account. As a senior staff member explained:

We’re not going to do a direct action on the mayor to demand that he do [something], . . . because that’s not who LISC is. That may be who some of our partners are and how they operate . . . . They may do direct action on people or have [a] wide range of other strategies that they engage in.

As illustrated in the case studies in Chapters 4 and 5, LISC/Chicago has in fact provided resources and leveraged relationships in support of community-level activities and agendas that are unmistakably oriented toward policy and systems change. Perhaps inevitably, however, elements of LISC/Chicago’s own strategic orientation toward policy and systems change have

also been conveyed to NCP lead agencies, transmitting a sense that community efforts in this arena, if not necessarily unwelcome, were not particularly encouraged either. For example, a “Planning Handbook” that guided lead agencies in the quality-of-life planning process is heavily focused on converting community aspirations into programs and projects that have clear implementation criteria and are suitable for delegating to or collaborating with community organizations.<sup>8</sup> While such systems-level areas as education and transportation are touched upon as potential priorities, they are treated solely as targets for community-level improvement efforts. The prospect of conflict and contention appears only as internal threats to harmonious community planning. As one NCP director put it in retrospect, “The original charge to the NCP communities really wasn’t around advocacy — it was around program development, coalition building, and so forth.” Moreover, there were relatively few projects and limited funding focused on policy and organizing activities during the early years of the initiative.<sup>9</sup>

The variable influence of these orientations to policy- and systems-change work with regard to community-driven policy- and systems-change activities among NCP lead agencies is suggested by the work of the four lead agencies that had substantive track records of policy engagement, community organizing, and assertive advocacy tactics prior to joining NCP. Two of these — the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) in Chicago Southwest and the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation in Humboldt Park — are among the case studies presented in this report. The others are The Resurrection Project (TRP) in Pilsen and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA). These four organizations have taken two distinct paths with regard to continuing community organizing and policy advocacy under the NCP umbrella. SWOP and LSNA have evidently viewed it as unproblematic — both are well aware that most NCP lead agencies do not have this dimension, but being NCP lead agencies has not caused them to restrict their own activities. Bickerdike and TRP, however, have essentially segregated their organizing and policy work from their role as NCP lead agencies, focusing the latter more narrowly on organizational convening and collaboration, resource mobilization, and project management, in accordance with what they have understood to be the basic emphasis of the initiative.

## **The Role of the MacArthur Foundation**

The other major institutional actor with significant influence on NCP’s orientation toward policy and systems change is the MacArthur Foundation. Although ceding responsibility for day-to-day operations and overall management of the initiative to LISC/Chicago in its intermediary role, MacArthur worked in partnership with LISC/Chicago to frame the initiative and

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<sup>8</sup>New Communities Program (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup>Greenberg, Verma, Dillman, and Chaskin (2010).

make the critical initial choices that shaped the “givens” of the initiative, and it continues to be involved with LISC/Chicago in monitoring initiative progress, reviewing its assumptions, and framing responses to changing circumstances.

MacArthur has become increasingly interested in a heightened focus on a policy and systems change agenda for NCP. It has also become increasingly concerned that the local orientation toward neighborhood change and the development of community capacity through building local “platforms” and increasing the “tensile strength” of neighborhoods will be insufficient to promote significant neighborhood change given the substantial influence of circumstances generated at higher levels, particularly in a poor economic climate. While recognizing the value of LISC/Chicago’s approach to policy change and resource brokering, MacArthur has begun to ask whether a broader, more intentional policy agenda is needed, and whether the focus on “platform” development should not be more fundamentally oriented to the initiative level and the leverage that 14 neighborhood efforts under the umbrella of a single initiative might provide. This does not, from MacArthur’s perspective, necessarily require engaging in contentious advocacy or grassroots political mobilization, but does suggest both intentionality in framing initiative action toward particular policy- or systems-change targets (for example, foreclosures, responses to youth violence, infrastructure investments) and in leveraging the scale of the initiative, the access it provides, and the strength of its constituencies across neighborhoods to do so.

For its own part, the MacArthur Foundation has played a similar role to that played by LISC in this regard — brokering relations with influential people and organizations and working to gain recognition for NCP neighborhoods and the initiative as a whole, providing funding and support to particular policy initiatives (such as around foreclosure response and information technology in poor neighborhoods), and, to some extent, supporting organizations outside of NCP that work on particular related policy issues through advocacy, such as around fair lending.



## Chapter 4

# Neighborhood-Level Orientation and Impetus Toward Policy and Systems Change

The report now turns to an exploration of how issues related to policy and systems change emerge and are addressed in the New Communities Program (NCP) by focusing on the community-level specifics and dynamics of four case-study sites. This chapter examines sources and motives: What structural features and orientations of the lead agencies in the analysis conditioned the likelihood that they would embark on policy-relevant efforts? How did these background elements interact with specific contingencies (such as the economic crisis) to motivate engagement around a particular policy- or systems-change issue? The various analytical dimensions of what they actually did — their aims and targets, strategies and tactics, challenges and responses, and the provisional outcomes of these efforts — are examined in the next chapter.

The four case studies that are presented here provide considerable detail on a range of questions about how community-driven policy- and systems-change efforts can arise and the directions in which they can develop. This case study approach differs from most of the existing literature on advocacy and policy engagement by nonprofit organizations, which has generally used survey methodology to document the range and frequency of specific activities (writing letters, contacting officials, staging protests) or types and levels of resource use (staff, financial) to classify organizations and test hypotheses about causal and inhibiting factors such as organizational size and environmental features.<sup>1</sup> The focus here is rather on identifying each NCP lead agency's most sustained and intentional policy-relevant effort and exploring that effort as fully as possible. It is in the emergence and development of these efforts over time, as well as the salient characteristics and operating contexts of these agencies, that the dynamics of impetus and capacity, opportunity and constraint, strategy and outcomes, and the role of contingency can best be understood.

The characteristics (size, history, and orientation) of the lead agencies in the four case studies vary considerably, as do issue priorities, implementation strategies, orientation toward engagement with policy and systems issues beyond the community, and the broader organizational infrastructure in which lead agencies operate (shown in Table 1.1 in Chapter 1). Chicago Southwest and Humboldt Park have large and well-established NCP lead agencies, while Auburn Gresham and Quad Communities have small and recently established ones. Auburn

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<sup>1</sup>Donaldson (2007); Bass, Arons, Guinane, and Carter (2007); Mosley (2009); Child and Grønbjerg (2007).

Gresham has relatively few community organizations, while the other three communities have more robust organizational ecosystems. Their implementation approaches also differ in a number of ways. The lead agencies in Chicago Southwest and Auburn Gresham are centrally oriented toward resident engagement, while those in Humboldt Park and Quad Communities are more focused on organization-centered strategies. The Chicago Southwest NCP stands apart quite markedly from the others in the depth of its orientation toward policy influence and experience with advocacy, but each of the other three has some relevant resources, primarily in the form of key alliances in the policy and political domain.

Such organizational and contextual factors have played a significant role in shaping the likelihood that each of these NCP entities would engage in policy- and systems-change efforts beyond the community level; in determining the issues pursued; and in their choices of aims, targets, and strategies. Like most comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), however, these NCP entities (with the exception of the Chicago Southwest NCP) were overwhelmingly community-focused in their work, and seem unlikely to have embarked on policy-level efforts without the additional impetus of some fairly contingent circumstances or impulses. Generally speaking, however, those contingencies had catalytic effects because of the way they intersected with elements of each lead agency's basic organizational orientation.

## **Chicago Southwest**

The Chicago Southwest NCP is unusual in several ways. It is constituted as a partnership between two large, well-established community organizations: the Greater Southwest Development Corporation (GSDC), a traditional community development corporation (CDC) founded in 1974, with 29 staff members, and the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), a community organizing group dating to 1988 that now has 29 member churches and other institutions and a staff of 11.<sup>2</sup> Chicago Southwest is home to numerous community organizations, and GSDC and SWOP, which are longtime allies, had the stature and relationships to work productively from the outset of NCP with numerous community partners to develop and oversee the implementation of a broad set of quality-of-life goals. These goals have been articulated with a significant community-organizing inflection: the lead agencies in Chicago Southwest frame NCP as an effort to mobilize residents and local institutions to act collectively to preserve the social fabric of their community and combat the forces that threaten it.

It is SWOP, with its history of community organizing and advocacy, that has pursued the policy and systems dimension of the Chicago Southwest NCP agenda. SWOP's principal

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<sup>2</sup>SWOP began as an informal group, the Southwest Catholic Cluster, and was formally established in 1996. On the character of SWOP and GADC's longstanding collaboration, see Capraro (2004).

strategic orientation is toward “relational organizing.” It seeks to build enduring organizing entities by grounding them in existing community institutions such as religious congregations, and emphasizing shared beliefs and values as a deeper source of mobilization than particular issue grievances. Its resources and capacities for policy engagement through community organizing and mobilization are considerable. It has a deliberately articulated approach to the development of priority issues through resident engagement, to the selection of strategies and targets in the policy arena, and to the use of a broad range of advocacy tactics ranging from partnership to confrontation. It has the capacity to mobilize residents in support of such efforts and has close relationships with other Chicago organizations involved in policy advocacy. It has built strong alliances in the state legislature and has a considerable record of successful legislative advocacy. Since 2008, it has held an annual “legislative action day” in Springfield, bringing local resident and institutional leaders to speak to lawmakers on issues of safety, immigration, housing, and education.

SWOP’s experience and strengths in the policy arena set the Chicago Southwest NCP apart from the NCP entities described in the other three case studies, and from most CCIs, where policy engagement tends to be secondary to community-level work. SWOP was heavily engaged in policy advocacy prior to NCP, and naturally continued with this effort under the NCP structure. Unsurprisingly, SWOP’s policy aims have also been both better defined and qualitatively more ambitious than those in the other three NCP sites under consideration. The effort discussed in this report — a campaign to stem the wave of home foreclosures, primarily by pressuring large national banks like JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America to adopt an aggressive model of proactive loan modification — builds directly on one of SWOP’s most successful past advocacy efforts. In the mid-1990s, SWOP began a campaign against predatory and subprime mortgage lending in the community that attracted the support of key state lawmakers and achieved several legislative victories involving new regulation of mortgage lenders early in the new century. The state representative for the area, Michael Madigan, a major state power broker who had been House Speaker nearly continuously since 1982, and the state senator, Jacqueline Collins, became close allies in this process. This work was still ongoing when the housing market began to collapse in 2006, making predatory lending a less urgent concern than local homeowners losing their homes to foreclosure.

SWOP’s decision to shift its attention from predatory lending to foreclosures was based on both the local urgency of this issue — the community areas that make up Chicago Southwest were particularly hard-hit by the foreclosure wave — and on SWOP’s organizational strengths and alliances in this area. In retrospect, SWOP staff cite these factors as pivotal, but also emphasize additional elements: that member organizations and resident “leaders” were enthusi-

astic about tackling this issue; that there was considerable expertise in the area among key SWOP allies GSDC and the Chicago Lawn/Gage Park office of Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS),<sup>3</sup> which had already begun addressing the issue through outreach and counseling; and that LISC/Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation indicated their willingness to support these efforts. SWOP staff also noted that when they decided to launch this campaign before the economic downturn became a crisis in late 2008, it did not seem quite the herculean task that it subsequently turned out to be: “At the time we took on the foreclosure issue,” said one SWOP staff member, “we thought we could win it.” Thus, while the worsening economic environment posed a new threat to Chicago Southwest residents, it also seemed to open a new opportunity that SWOP, with its general approach to policy influence and specific organizational strengths, was particularly well suited to take advantage of.

## **Humboldt Park**

The Humboldt Park NCP is also structurally unusual within NCP. Although its lead agency, the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, is one of Chicago’s largest and most well-established CDCs, this NCP functions essentially as a collaborative composed of local organizations rather than a lead agency with community partnerships.<sup>4</sup> (Thus, the report refers generally to the “Humboldt Park NCP” rather than to the lead agency, as in the three other case studies.) This arrangement has worked well in a challenging organizational context and geographically divided community. Humboldt Park has numerous established community organizations and a degree of rivalry and contentiousness among them, and the neighborhood consists of a longstanding Puerto Rican community in East Humboldt Park and a predominantly African-American population in West Humboldt Park. As NCP lead agency, Bickerdike has played a primarily convening and coordinating function, thereby creating a broad coalition and calming local organizational rivalries. The Humboldt Park NCP defines itself as an “NCP taskforce” consisting of more than 70 participating (predominantly human service) organizations, with “action teams” focused on specific issues and goals. Consistent with these arrangements, it focuses on strengthening member organizations and their capacity to achieve these goals by creating a solid collaborative infrastructure and promoting collaborative planning and implementation.

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<sup>3</sup>Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago is a nonprofit organization, established in 1975, that promotes homeownership and affordable housing and provides homebuyer education, low-interest loans, property rehabilitation services, and foreclosure prevention services. NHS has eight neighborhood offices in and around Chicago.

<sup>4</sup>The NCP effort in the Pilsen neighborhood is structurally similar, although the lead agency, the Resurrection Project, takes a greater leadership and implementation role.



Until recently, this structure was overwhelmingly focused on community-level development, with little apparent impetus to tackle policy or systems-level issues. Indeed, both NCP staff and most taskforce members believe that NCP was intended as a community-focused undertaking. Yet this structure also had latent resources and capacities for moving beyond programs and engaging in broader policy and systems-change goals. Bickerdike itself has often engaged in policy advocacy in relation to affordable housing issues, sometimes with assertive tactics, and participates in several advocacy coalitions. Several of the larger and more established taskforce member organizations have also had significant experience with policy engagement and advocacy, as well as potentially useful alliances with policy-level actors at the city and state levels.

Like Chicago Southwest's foreclosure campaign, the Humboldt Park NCP's first foray into policy and advocacy was triggered by the economic downturn, but its effects were transmitted through a rather different channel — the collaborative NCP structure and the prominence of human services agencies within it. The state of Illinois had been moving toward a budget crisis as early as 2007, but this deterioration accelerated as the downturn worsened. By 2009, the state had begun to cut funding for social and health services and was increasingly and systematically delaying payment to community-based service providers.

Beyond the financial threat to the viability of individual organizations in the NCP taskforce (many of which relied substantially on state funding), these developments began to threaten their collective ability to implement the community plans developed within the NCP structure. Participants in one of the NCP action teams began discussing this threat in mid-2009. As one member recalls:

The strategic planning as it had been laid out, many of us felt that all of those activities were going to be [or] were already in jeopardy, as a result of our own fiscal health... So we began talking to all the other NCP members about the need to begin to have this discussion outside of what the strategic planning was devoted to, and specific to fiscal health.

They raised the matter at one of the full quarterly taskforce meetings, proposing that interested members participate in an ad hoc fiscal advocacy group that would represent the taskforce as a whole and seek informational meetings with relevant state policymakers. This attracted the participation of several agencies with significant policy experience and some with strong ambitions. Several high-level initial meetings were arranged through existing political alliances. The success of these meetings led to the formation of a state budget advocacy team that developed an advocacy strategy to persuade policymakers of the need to sustain Humboldt Park service agencies, emphasizing the collaborative NCP structure as a unique neighborhood strength. The Humboldt Park NCP's first real foray into policy advocacy was thus a direct

outgrowth of its distinctive structure and was an effort to defend that structure by articulating a persuasive message about its value.

## **Auburn Gresham**

The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) shares a certain affinity with the Chicago Southwest NCP lead agencies (SWOP and GCDC) in orientation, but with a very different organizational history, capacity, and implementation style. Like the lead agencies in Chicago Southwest, GADC has a commitment to continuous resident engagement and relationship building. By contrast, however, GADC barely predates NCP, having been founded in 2001, and has nothing akin to GSDC's longstanding alliance with a strong community-organizing group like SWOP. Auburn Gresham, a smaller, predominantly African-American and historically middle-class community of single-family homes, also lacks the robust organizational landscape of Chicago Southwest.

By its own account, GADC was founded as a “classic CDC,” but the resident-oriented character of its work has moved it toward what a staff member described as “that quasi-advocate community organizing role” and “being able to rally a group of voices together to empower the folks that haven't seen that they have that power.” In practice, however, their resident engagement has been oriented less toward organizing and policy advocacy than toward what might be characterized as civic revivalism — a focus on community connection and engagement. A staff member describes this focus as

repairing civic association and getting people connected to one another again. . . .  
That's why we spend a lot of time grassroots style, revival, festival style, doing things in the area to raise awareness. Block clubs.

While GADC has not generally pursued policy and systems-level issues, the organization does have an important policy-relevant resource — a set of unusually strong community and political allies, which GADC's director calls “my power base.” Most of these individuals were involved in starting the organization and have remained closely connected since then: the local alderman, a prominent activist pastor of the neighborhood's Catholic parish, a former alderman and subsequent head of the Chicago Housing Authority, and the area's state senator (who also represented the Chicago Southwest community areas). These allies have provided critical support in the one area of advocacy that GADC has pursued — persuading Metra, the region's largest commuter rail carrier, to open a station on the rail line running through Auburn Gresham. This effort is the longest running of the four case-study efforts, having begun during the quality-of-life planning process in 2005. It was not generated by any external contingency, but by the longstanding personal interest in commuter transit and transit-oriented development (TOD) of GADC's director, a mechanical engineer who took the position in 2003 without prior

professional experience in community development.<sup>5</sup> As a young man, he recalls, “I would see this Rock Island train that goes right over 79th Street ... and I always wondered what that train was, where it came from, where it went.” He later developed a fascination with rail transit and learned that Metra had closed most of its inner-city stations in favor of suburban expansion. Reversing Metra policy on this matter “has been a personal drive of mine for many years,” he says. “I took over this organization [GADC] and that was one of my priorities ... [to get] a stop here on 79th Street.”

This case is idiosyncratic in one sense, since it was neither generated by external forces such as the economic downturn nor driven by resident priorities. But it suggests that an element of personal determination may sometimes be what it takes for a small, community-oriented CCI to pursue a sustained advocacy campaign — at least one that, on the face of it, seemed an uphill battle from the beginning.<sup>6</sup> The effort does, however, have a fundamental congruence with GADC’s broader civic revivalism, without which it seems unlikely to have gotten such whole-hearted support from GADC’s prominent allies. For one of the main tenets of that revivalism is a “new urbanist” vision of a revitalized 79th Street, with the new Metra station as the anchor for a TOD plan, including a bus/rail transit hub, a new “town square,” and new commercial and high-density residential development.<sup>7</sup> And although the Metra advocacy campaign involved no resident engagement, GADC is currently leading a TOD planning process, funded by the Illinois Department of Transportation, that emphasizes outreach to existing community groups and networks in an effort to reintegrate it with the organization’s community-development orientation and operating principles.

## Quad Communities

The Quad Communities Development Corporation (QCDC), like GADC in Auburn Gresham, is a small organization with a brief history. It was formed in 2003 with the substantial support of the local alderman as a vehicle for NCP implementation within the boundaries of Chicago’s Fourth Ward. In its basic community-development orientation, QCDC has developed in a different direction from most NCP lead agencies. Although it began by spearheading an

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<sup>5</sup>Transit-oriented development involves mixed-use urban or suburban planning designed to maximize access to and use of public transportation.

<sup>6</sup>Survey research has shown that organizational size is a primary predictor of advocacy involvement among nonprofits, suggesting that small organizations face intrinsic barriers (Bass, Arons, Guinane, and Carter, 2007; Donaldson, 2007).

<sup>7</sup>New urbanism, with sources in the 1960s critique of modernist planning by Jane Jacobs and others, emerged in the 1990s as an urban design movement promoting compact, walkable, mixed-use, and mixed-income development as the key to livable urban communities and the renewal of local civic life, with public transit and light rail replacing the reliance on automobiles.

inclusive planning process that led to the development of a wide-ranging quality-of-life plan, it soon came to focus more tightly on key areas where existing community organizations were least active — above all, commercial development.<sup>8</sup>

QCDC's development was shaped in part by its organizational environment. Like Humboldt Park, the Quad Communities area has a fairly dense population of community organizations with sometimes contentious relations. Encroachment by a new entity was viewed with some suspicion — “They think QCDC is annoying and keeps them from getting money,” said a QCDC staff member at the time — and the close aldermanic affiliation exacerbated this reaction in some quarters. Initially, QCDC was therefore careful to take a primarily convening role, like Bickerdike in Humboldt Park. But as a fledgling organization, unlike Bickerdike, it had trouble generating resources on that basis alone. Commercial development, however, was a major and widely acknowledged local need that no existing organization was meeting, and thus an area where QCDC could engage directly without arousing territoriality. This narrower, task-oriented niche within the existing organizational division of labor proved more manageable and rewarding, as the same staffer remarked: “This helps me fundraise because if you're a convener, no funder understands . . . why they should give you money for that.”

Along with this functional specialization, QCDC underwent two other developments. First, it built on its original affiliation with the alderman, achieving an insider status vis-à-vis a range of policy actors — local elected officials, staff and leadership at the city's Department of Community Development, Chicago Housing Authority, Chicago Public Schools, and the University of Chicago<sup>9</sup> — beyond what the other three case-study NCP entities seem to enjoy. Second, it found its original convening function increasingly difficult to sustain. As a consequence, QCDC differs from the other case-study agencies in no longer serving primarily as a vehicle for developing general community capacity or coordinating and articulating community will.

This organizational history has shaped QCDC's orientation toward policy and systems change. Its insider access provides considerable potential leverage in the policy arena, yet the scope of its policy- and systems-change aspirations is restricted to its primary issue areas. And while QCDC's leadership is acutely aware of the policy and systems failures that affect their neighborhood, they have a distinctly technocratic orientation toward policy influence, develop-

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<sup>8</sup>Education became a second area of focus when Reavis Elementary School was selected for participation in the Atlantic Philanthropies Elev8 initiative. (See Chapter 6.)

<sup>9</sup>The University of Chicago is the largest employer on the south side of Chicago, located just south of Quad Communities.

ing small-bore pragmatic solutions to specific challenges and presenting them to political and administrative allies.<sup>10</sup> “You have to be solution-oriented,” a staff member emphasized:

What we do is we try to lay out a plan that can be presented, so that they really don’t have to do any work or think about it. They can tweak it, but they certainly didn’t have to orchestrate it. . . . And that seems to work really well in our community and with our elected officials.

And QCDC views elected officials as the key to change: “I could have all the ideas in the world,” says a staff member, “but if I don’t get that buy-in at the very beginning from the elected officials, it’s just not going anywhere.”

The policy-relevant issue at the top of QCDC’s agenda in 2010 was a commercial development plan to address what it considers to be policymakers’ failure to establish the necessary preconditions for success for Chicago’s ongoing “transformation” of public housing — a policy initiative that disproportionately affects the Fourth Ward (Quad Communities) and the Third Ward that neighbors it to the west. As a QCDC staff member describes it, “The story for me, and the bottom line, [is] if the city and the state, if somebody doesn’t get on the same page about economic development in these communities where there’s public housing transformation, it will fail.”

QCDC’s intended solution was to bring the relevant elected officials together to formulate a comprehensive development plan for the 47th Street corridor, a partially blighted, 20-block retail artery running through the two wards. “If that whole corridor can be redeveloped,” said a staff member, “it will support five of the ten Transformation sites.” As a chosen priority, this clearly reflects QCDC’s focus on commercial development, and its primary strategy of convening elected officials illustrates both the organization’s ease of access to politicians and policymakers and the priority it places on working with them.

The plan involved a further motive, however, and hinged upon a pivotal contingency. By extending QCDC’s operations beyond its Fourth Ward boundaries and well into the Third Ward, it addressed a widely shared local concern — the absence of a commercial development entity in the adjacent portions of the historically black Bronzeville district of the near South Side. “The people who live west of Cottage Grove were looking at the Fourth Ward [as] what we want to replicate,” said one Third Ward resident. And QCDC reports that “in the very beginning, even the businesses, just everybody, was [saying], ‘Can you please come and work with us?’ And [we] couldn’t!” Until recently, however, there was a major obstacle to such

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<sup>10</sup>In one instance, for example, QCDC sought to remedy the paucity of commercial lending to small businesses by designing a revolving community loan fund, drawing on public and aldermanic financing, to be administered by QCDC on a 20-year path to permanent self-sustainability.

cross-ward cooperation, in the form of an aldermanic rivalry. The contingency that had made QCDC's 47th Street effort seem viable was the election of a more cooperative Third Ward alderman in 2007 and her cordial relations with the alderman in the Fourth Ward.

## Summary

In each of these four cases, a formative role was played by organizational history, context, resources, and orientation toward advocacy and NCP work, although these factors varied in relative importance and configuration. Organizational orientation and past policy engagement played a large role in shaping the target and nature of SWOP's policy advocacy work in Chicago Southwest. The Humboldt Park NCP's engagement in policy advocacy to prevent state funding cuts developed directly out of its distinctive organizational structure and its primary constituency of human service organizations. In Quad Communities, QCDC's unusual intimacy with elected and city officials can be considered a style of policy engagement in its own right, born of the agency's organizational history and aldermanic "conception." The specific effort to generate a 47th Street corridor retail development plan by convening elected officials reflects this same orientation and the organization's implementation focus on commercial development. GADC's Metra advocacy campaign in Auburn Gresham diverges from these general patterns of determination, being driven by the director's personal passion for transit issues and vision of community revitalization anchored by a new 79th Street Metra station. Still, this vision has become a central component of the organization's civic revivalism, and the transit-planning process is being implemented in accord with GADC's stated commitment to resident engagement.

With the exception of Chicago Southwest, as noted, these case studies are broadly representative of CCIs in general: their work has been overwhelmingly community-focused, and none had a basic orientation that predisposed it toward policy engagement. Each had latent resources, primarily in the form of strategic relationships and alliances, but also, in the case of Humboldt Park, the experience and capacities of particular NCP taskforce members. None of these orientations and structures — GADC's civic revivalism, QCDC's insider orientation and niche focus, the Humboldt Park taskforce's organization-centered structure and approach — seems likely to have generated the necessary impetus for policy-level exertions without some additional force or factor. Indeed, each of these NCP actors was drawn into such activity by fairly contingent circumstances or impulses, whether external or internal. Yet those circumstances and impulses had the effects they did because of the way they resonated with elements of organizational orientation, structure, and context.

## Chapter 5

# Policy and Systems Change in Practice at the Neighborhood Level

This chapter traces the development of the principal policy and systems-change efforts in each of the four case study sites in the New Communities Program (NCP) — state budget advocacy in Humboldt Park, creating a new public transportation option in Auburn Gresham, changing banks' foreclosure practices in Chicago Southwest, and holistic retail planning in Quad Communities. Broadly speaking, these efforts developed in response to, and made use of, many of the same factors, resources, and tactics that have been identified in the scholarly literature as driving policy advocacy and social movement organizations in general<sup>1</sup> — acting upon the shifting alignments of political forces and actors that emerge out of unfolding events and processes (or “political opportunity structures”), building and deploying relationships with key constituencies and allies (“mobilizing structures”), and marshaling allies and persuading decision-makers through strategic framing of issues (“framing processes”).<sup>2</sup> The chapter tracks the four policy efforts across a series of analytical and comparative themes, as shown in Table 5.1: orientation toward strategic and tactical options for effecting change, policy aims and the selection of individuals or organizations to persuade or pressure (“targets”), framing of core issues to recruit key audiences to their cause, strategies and tactics deployed in practice, obstacles encountered and some outcomes of these efforts, and the pivotal role played by strong alliances in the policy arena.

## Strategic and Tactical Orientations

A range of general approaches toward policy-oriented strategies and tactics is represented among these four NCP entities, although that range extends only a small way toward the confrontational end of the continuum. Interestingly, while the Quad Communities Development Corporation (QCDC) and the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) are at opposite ends of this range with regard to their willingness to use confrontational tactics, they are also the two NCP entities that are most familiar and comfortable with an “insider” role in the policy process — that is, with actively collaborating with policymakers in the development of policy.

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<sup>1</sup>This is not to suggest that these lead agencies should in any way be characterized as social movement organizations; with the exception of the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), they are not.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Tilly (1978); Zald and McCarthy (1987); McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996); Snow, Rochford, Worder, and Benford (1986).

**The New Communities Program**

**Table 5.1**

**Key Dimensions of Chicago NCP Case Study Narratives**

Dimension	Auburn Gresham (GADC)	Chicago Southwest (SWOP and GSDC)	Humboldt Park (Bickerdike and NCP Taskforce)	Quad Communities (QCDC)
Aims	Build a Metra commuter rail station at 79th Street with transit-oriented development	Stem foreclosures by pressuring banks to adopt loan-modification procedures	Prevent Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) funding cuts and stop late payment to Humboldt Park agencies	Commercial development plan for 47th Street retail corridor
Strategic orientation and tactics	Direct lobbying with influential allies; no history of confrontation	Relationship-building and partnering, with available recourse to mobilization and confrontation	Direct advocacy with help from allies; need for taskforce consensus makes confrontation unavailable	Gain backing of all relevant elected officials (Fourth and Third wards); confrontation ruled out
Allies and resources	State senator, alderman, former alderman, local activist pastor	State legislators, Illinois senator	Former alderman, state senator	Fourth (home) Ward elected officials
Targets	Metra executive director	National and international mortgage-holding banks	Governor, IDHS, and new IDHS secretary	Third (neighboring) Ward elected officials
Obstacles	Metra's historic suburban orientation	Loan modification plan conflicted with federal HAMP legislation; <sup>a</sup> Bank of America's inability to process loan modifications	Severity of budget deficit; secretary's limited capacity to influence neighborhood-level funding; election year	Cross-ward tensions; tensions around retail development in neighboring ward

(continued)



**Table 5.1 (continued)**

Dimension	Auburn Gresham (GADC)	Chicago Southwest (SWOP and GSDC)	Humboldt Park (Bickerdike and NCP Taskforce)	Quad Communities (QCDC)
Responses	Changed target to Illinois Department of Transportation	Did not change aim or targets: continued to pressure banks while pursuing other avenues	Suspended advocacy effort	Alternate route via community process in Bronzeville area
Achieved aims	Good prospects: funding secured for station and transit-oriented development planning	Has not achieved aims, but continues to pursue several avenues	Not significantly	Good prospects: planning process under way with support from both aldermen
Unanticipated benefits	NA	New relationships at federal level and raised stature in foreclosure policy	New cooperative relations with IDHS; gained experience and confidence with policy advocacy	Expanded community legitimation

NOTES: GADC = Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation; SWOP = Southwest Organizing Project; GSDC = Greater Southwest Development Corporation; QCDC = Quad Communities Development Corporation.

<sup>a</sup>HAMP is the U.S. Departments of the Treasury and Housing and Urban Development’s “Home Affordable Modification Program,” the federal government’s effort to help homeowners avoid foreclosure.

QCDC is emphatically committed to an “inside” strategy of partnering with policymakers, as discussed in Chapter 4 with regard to its “solution-focused” approach. Indeed, QCDC staff assert that in Chicago this is the only viable approach — “You can’t get anything done in Chicago unless you go through the political route.” Confrontational tactics are thus out of the question. QCDC is also aware, however, that its posture derives in part from its organizational history and context. As one staff member observed:

I think [it] has a lot to do with the vision of our elected officials. We’re all on the same page. And that’s not true in a lot of other communities. . . . A lot of it, I think, too, is that . . . in our case, obviously the organization was formed through a partnership with our elected officials.

SWOP also has a strongly articulated strategic orientation and approach to tactical options. With regard to strategy, SWOP gives priority to relationships. It is intentional about building relationships with decision-makers that can be sustained over time, that are not reducible to one-time transactions or single-issue alliances, and that involve ongoing reciprocity and mutual accountability. Indeed, much of its success in the housing area prior to the foreclosure campaign can be credited to strong alliances with state legislators who view SWOP as a partner in policy analysis and developing legislation. One ally described SWOP as

having sort of equal parts in terms of community organization, advocacy, and relationship building. . . . They’ve really gone pretty far in terms of developing their relationships with corporate, with government. I think that’s what makes them so successful.

Tactically, while SWOP views confrontation as part of its arsenal, it is a last resort, as described by one of its staff members: “Confrontation is around evoking a reaction, trying to move your issue when it’s stymied. Why do it if you don’t need to?” And it finds it useful only *within* a relational context, not *in place of* one. But confrontation can also be used to support political allies; as one of those allies puts it, “the confrontation has always been a complement . . . in terms of knowing [we have] backup. It’s totally beneficial.”

The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) and the Humboldt Park NCP do not have strongly articulated strategic and tactical orientations in quite the sense that SWOP and QCDC do. While GADC’s “power base” includes some politically influential figures with whom it has a sort of “partner” relationship with regard to community issues, these do not seem to confer an “insider” policymaking status to GADC — perhaps, in part, because GADC has not aspired to one. And while GADC, as noted, describes itself as having shifted in the direction of a “quasi-advocate community organizing role,” one of its staff members also explained, “You won’t see us out there necessarily protesting.” If more confrontational tactics

were called for, GADC would leave that to “a couple of strong community partners who are very well known for doing that,” said another staff member.

The Humboldt Park NCP, as a collaborative, consists of participants with a range of strategic and tactical orientations. Some of the more politically engaged members have often joined protest actions in the past, and Bickerdike itself does not shy away from confrontation, while other members cite conservative or corporate board members as a reason to avoid controversy. This diversity creates the potential for tension, but since the budget advocacy effort was the first such venture by the Humboldt Park NCP as a whole, there has been little occasion for it. Whether they are most comfortable picketing or joining advocacy coalitions, however, even those NCP members with the widest policy experience seem to occupy a broadly “outsider” advocacy position in relation to policymakers.

## **Aims and Targets**

There are also differences among these cases with regard to the aims they originally envisaged and the institutions and actors they initially targeted as the best means to achieve those aims. To a significant extent, of course, the targets were a function of the aims — although the subsequent evolution of some of these efforts would show that alternative targets may have been more fruitful. The aims varied somewhat in clarity of definition at the outset. The targets varied in accessibility, responsiveness, and relational “distance.” In each case, NCP representatives approached their targets more or less from the “outside” — that is, without the sort of prior relationships that would give them the status of partners in policymaking. For SWOP and QCDC, however, in accord with the orientations discussed above, the effort involved either an aspiration to such an “insider” partnership status (for SWOP) or an assumption that it would be achieved (for QCDC).

GADC had perhaps the clearest aim and most obvious target from the outset. With the goal of getting a Metra station in its neighborhood, GADC naturally targeted Metra itself; more specifically, the GADC director believed it would be necessary to sway Metra’s powerful executive director. Metra, however, which was founded as a suburban commuter rail carrier, has long been known for its focus on suburban ridership. As a long-time official at another transit agency put it, “Metra’s not known generally for putting in stations in the city. Even though a third of their system is in the city, Metra always worries about the two-thirds, not so much the one-third.” Targeting Metra thus involved altering longstanding policy on the part of a very large public agency, and doing so from a considerable relational distance, since GADC and its allies had neither significant inside connections with this agency nor significant means of exerting influence over it.

The Humboldt Park budget group started with a clear aim as well:

We wanted no further cuts to social services. We wanted all unpaid payments to be received, because there were all these late payments. And we wanted to be part of a continuing conversation around the social service budget. . . . We accepted the fact that cuts were inevitable in this particular budget, but we wanted to have those conversations so that they could minimize impact and also so we could have a heads up so we could know how to respond and be adaptable as organizations.

Although the group cast its net wide at first, and hoped to meet with the governor, they soon settled on his newly appointed Secretary of Human Services as the optimal target after meeting with their state senator, who advised them to “get her attention and . . . get in her head now, before others do.”

Thus, while the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) is also a public agency of considerable size and limited past public responsiveness,<sup>3</sup> an institutional contingency provided the Humboldt Park NCP with a considerably better opening than GADC had with Metra — an opportunity that improved further when the new secretary demonstrated a desire to improve the department’s responsiveness. The Humboldt Park NCP also seemed to have better access and leverage than GADC had with Metra, since a former alderman whose ward included Humboldt Park and who is a close ally had recently joined the governor’s office.

In Chicago Southwest, SWOP was convinced that the solution to the neighborhood’s foreclosure problems was the proactive modification of loans for homeowners struggling to pay mortgages on homes that were no longer worth what they had borrowed in order to buy them. But while it had previously pursued its housing agenda through the state legislature, SWOP now chose instead to target the banks that held the mortgages — large national and global banks like JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America, HSBC, and Deutsche Bank. This decision was based on a core precept of community organizing power analysis — if you want to change something, target those who can make the change without having to ask permission. And, as a SWOP staff member put it, “The only folks we know who can modify mortgages without having to ask [permission] are the banks.” Targeting the banks, from SWOP’s perspective, also offered an opportunity for impact beyond Chicago Southwest, by allowing it to develop and pilot possible new solutions to the national foreclosure crisis:

When we first took on foreclosures, we . . . really thought that we maybe could be a great model for how to address it. We really wanted one of the big servicers, and still want [them], to partner or lead with us both locally and nationally.

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<sup>3</sup>This characterization was articulated by local service agencies and by an IDHS official.

As an advocacy target, however, these financial institutions were several orders of magnitude larger and more powerful than Metra, IDHS, or the Illinois state legislature, and were minimally responsive to public or political pressure of any sort. They also turned out to be even more difficult to gain access to than SWOP had anticipated. Efforts to leverage meetings with top regional bank executives through SWOP's legislative allies, and through the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago), proved fruitless.

QCDC's targets were clear from the outset. In order to help craft a commercial development plan for the 47th Street corridor, it sought a commitment from all of the relevant elected officials and, most critically, the backing it felt it needed from neighboring Third Ward officials to extend the scope of its work beyond its own Fourth Ward boundary. These targets were considerably less distant for QCDC than the targets in the other three cases. For QCDC, it seemed only a short stretch to extend its "insider" partnership with Fourth Ward political representatives to include their Third Ward counterparts, and QCDC was initially confident that the former could easily persuade the latter to cooperate. Interestingly, QCDC was the only one of the four NCP case studies to primarily target elected officials, even though its aims were not directly relevant to their legislative purview. What it primarily sought was the local legitimation that these figures commanded. Policy implications in the governmental or legislative sense were viewed as a potential outcome at a later stage:

What we're hoping from this is that there will then be collaboration among the elected officials, so that, for example, if there needs to be some infrastructure on 47th Street — suppose there needs to be new lighting, whatever — that the two aldermanic offices, who both hold menu purses, menu money, are spending for the same goal. Same thing with the state representatives. . . . Coordinate. If this [representative] is going down to Springfield to ask for money for something, make sure it has something to do with what we're trying to accomplish in the big picture.

## Issue Framing

The persuasive "framing" of policy issues has not played the sort of pivotal role in these cases that it often does for social movement organizations,<sup>4</sup> but in two of the four cases presented in this report it did play a significant role in mobilizing key constituencies. One of these was SWOP, which consciously reframed the foreclosure problem in order to mobilize the community and make claims that demanded action on the part of banks. The other was GADC, whose

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<sup>4</sup>The study of social movement organizations has devoted considerable attention to the role played by the framing of policy issues. See, for example, Snow, Rochford, Worder, and Benford (1986); McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996).

director's eloquent argument about transit issues converted his four influential allies to the cause. In addition, as discussed later, the Humboldt Park advocacy group's persuasive capacity became an important element of its evolving advocacy effort.

As SWOP began working on the foreclosure issue, it felt that the predominant perception of the crisis as a failure or affliction of individual families was a hindrance to generating the kind of collective energy needed for an organizing campaign. In the words of one staff member, SWOP wanted to “[move] it away from ‘it’s a problem of individuals’ into ‘it’s a problem [affecting] the community as a whole.’” One tool of persuasion that SWOP developed almost inadvertently, in the course of collecting data on the problem, was a map of foreclosures in the neighborhood, which showed several foreclosed homes on virtually every block. But this perceptual shift also required “safe” homeowners to identify with those who were threatened with foreclosure, and it was difficult to get the latter to tell their stories. As a SWOP organizer put it:

It's very hard to get people to stand up publicly and say, 'I can't even keep my family in a house.' . . . They were assuming it was their responsibility. Nobody would talk about it.

SWOP first concentrated its organizing efforts on one of its most engaged churches, where the pastor's response to the foreclosure map was that the decimation of his congregation was a threat to the viability of the church itself. Lay leaders also became involved, and a survey was eventually administered during mass. Out of 450 responses, 50 said they were behind with payments and over 100 feared falling behind in the near future. As it became increasingly clear that longtime neighbors and fellow congregants were threatened, the shift to viewing foreclosures as a collective crisis began to take place, and SWOP subsequently applied the same approach to several other member churches with similar results.

Somewhat similarly, the GADC director converted his four key allies to the Metra cause with an impassioned argument. As he tells it, “We had to make it a black and white issue — and not just a black and white, but socioeconomic, issue.” He pointed out that in predominantly white neighborhoods to the south, Metra's trains stop seven times, as little as four blocks apart. But in the predominantly black areas, there is one flag stop:

This train goes right through these low-income African-American communities, and the people in these communities, they work downtown with the same numbers as the folks who live in Beverly. . . . And so, we just really talked about the disparity, the socioeconomic disparity in transit opportunities, so that was key to really get their ear.

From this framing of the problem as a question of equity, his argument moved to economic efficiency and environmental concerns — replacing the high-frequency bus routes through the neighborhood with a cleaner and more efficient rail system, and addressing in-

creasing residential density and neighborhood walkability with a transit-oriented development (TOD) plan.

Persuasion directed at advocacy targets was of course also an important element of several of these efforts, as discussed below. GADC deployed the same basic rhetorical elements with Metra and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) as with their key allies. SWOP's ability to "tell the foreclosure story" with the help of both mapping and personal stories won it important allies. For the Humboldt Park advocacy group, the effectiveness of its effort ultimately hinged on the persuasiveness of its case, and elaborating that case to meet its primary audience's needs became the core of its strategy.

## **Actions, Obstacles, and Outcomes**

Despite the many differences among these four efforts with regard to issues and objectives, scale of targets, and organizational background and orientation of NCP entities, the ways in which they were pursued were — initially at least — more similar than divergent. All four began by relying on strategically positioned allies to gain access to decision-makers. These allies sometimes played a continuing role and sometimes merely an initiating one; likewise, at times they were relied upon to persuade others and at other times merely to gain access. All four set out, broadly speaking, to convince rather than pressure their targets to make desired changes, although elements of pressure were eventually brought to bear in some cases. The emergence of new opportunities for political or other relationships played a role in shaping strategy choices in most of these cases. SWOP was alone among the four agencies in deploying a degree of confrontation and mobilizing community residents to participate directly in its effort.

There are significant limitations to any attempt at assessing the efficacy and outcomes of these policy- and systems-engagement efforts. Most concretely, as of early 2012, all but one of them remains active and therefore have only provisional outcomes as yet. But there are more fundamental reasons arising from the nature of such efforts, their aims, prospects, and unpredictable pathways. They all faced steep odds against succeeding in the aims they initially set for themselves, and the ability to achieve those aims has often hinged at least as much on external contingencies as on any quality of the efforts themselves — a feature common to many advocacy campaigns. All four efforts were stymied at some point by intractable elements or changes in the environment they were trying to influence, causing, in most cases, adjustments in tactics or targeting, but not in aims. And while features or shifts in the policy environment created obstacles in each case, there were also shifts that, in two cases (Auburn Gresham and Humboldt Park) had decisively helpful consequences. Moreover, even efforts that run up against seemingly insuperable obstacles to their original aims and strategies may benefit along quite unexpected avenues, as Chicago Southwest's and Humboldt Park's can be said to have done. Thus, while the following discussion indicates some measure of achievement or benefit in each of these cas-

es, such assessments must be understood against a context wherein the criteria for “success” or “effectiveness” are rarely well defined from the outset.<sup>5</sup>

### **Auburn Gresham: Bringing Commuter Transit to an Underserved Neighborhood**

GADC’s campaign for a Metra station began soon after its quality-of-life planning process was completed, in 2004. The influential allies in its “power base” tried to leverage connections on the Metra board to arrange a meeting with the agency’s executive director, but did not succeed. A new opportunity arose in 2005, when Metra needed to connect two rail lines that ran nearly side-by-side through part of Auburn Gresham in order to comply with a new federal initiative to reduce congestion in major rail hubs. To do so, Metra would have to acquire a parcel of land occupied by a church and 40 residences, which required approval by the local alderman, one of GADC’s close allies. With this leverage, a meeting with Metra was secured, and GADC was accompanied by its four allies as well as a LISC/Chicago representative. This group presented the arguments discussed earlier, along with a preliminary TOD plan that LISC/Chicago had funded. Metra’s director, however, was unreceptive, telling them, as one participant at the meeting recalled:

Get real. Out in the suburbs if communities want a Metra station they pay for it. They build it and they pay for it. . . . So if anything happens to this it’s going to be something that you guys pay for.

A subsequent meeting was similarly unproductive. Neither of GADC’s main tactics — persuasive argumentation and the deployment of its allies’ political leverage — proved capable of swaying this intractable target. Eventually, however, GADC was led by one of its key allies, its state senator, to change targets. In 2009, the senator helped arrange several meetings with IDOT, and in 2010 she was instrumental in getting a \$10 million appropriation in the 2011 IDOT budget for capital expenditures toward a new 79th Street Metra station, with another \$10 million committed for 2012-2013. This would constitute roughly 20 percent of the total cost of the station, which is the state’s expected match according to a standard 80/20 formula for federal transportation funding.<sup>6</sup> Contingent upon this IDOT funding, Metra subsequently agreed to spend \$2 million on the project as well, although it preferred minimal renovation of a stop in disrepair at 75th Street and had minimal interest in transit-oriented development. As of fall 2011, the TOD planning was going forward, however, with a separate \$100,000 planning grant from IDOT. It began in the third quarter of 2010 and was expected to take a year and a half to

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<sup>5</sup>See Guthrie, Louie, David, and Foster (2005) on the challenges of evaluating policy and advocacy efforts.

<sup>6</sup>Despite the Illinois budget crisis, these funding commitments were considered quite solid by a source within the Illinois Department of Transportation as of late 2010, so that the construction of the new station is generally expected to go forward.



complete. As discussed above, GADC is taking pains to promote resident engagement and transparency in the TOD planning process. Once completed, implementing it will be a steeper climb, requiring additional renovation funds, the involvement of private businesses and residential developers, and the cooperation of several city agencies in realizing the bus/rail transit hub. Knowledgeable participants warn that exaggerated hopes are often placed on the ability of new commuter rail stations to generate economic revitalization, and that TOD plans generally take 10 to 15 years to come to fruition, taxing the patience of local residents.

Of the four policy efforts, this is the only one that, as of early 2012, can be broadly counted as a palpable success. In responding to the immovability of one target by switching to another, GADC's general strategy and tactics remained otherwise unchanged. Persistence paid off. GADC also seems to have benefited, however, from a shift in the relevant policy environment, for the region's transportation agencies and authorities had all been slowly moving — along with federal transport policy — toward a more urban orientation since the year 2000 or so. Although Metra had perhaps been slower to do so, shifts in its ridership market and declining opportunities for suburban expansion were moving it in this direction as well. Nonetheless, key allies who have and are willing to exercise strategic political or policy leverage were clearly critical to GADC's success in these advocacy efforts. Whatever improved receptivity the transit agencies may have developed to the sort of plan that GADC has advocated, a small community-based development organization would probably have been unable to identify or take advantage of them without support from such allies. The most important dynamic underlying GADC's success, therefore, seems to be its ability to convincingly frame this issue in mobilizing those allies, and, more broadly, to build alliances with influential actors that transcend particular issues and achieve a sort of partnership status.

### **Humboldt Park: Using the Power of Persuasion to Protect Social Services**

The Humboldt Park advocacy group sought a meeting directly with the new IDHS secretary in late 2009 to discuss the impact of the state budget crisis, but it was also able to follow up with a well-situated ally capable of securing this meeting — a former longtime alderman who had been intensively involved with the Humboldt Park NCP from its inception and had been brought into the governor's office as a senior adviser earlier that year. Ten members of the group met with this ally, the IDHS secretary, and the state budget director in December 2009.

Their strategy consisted of persuasion. They argued, first, for the cost-effectiveness of sustaining social service agencies in Humboldt Park versus the long-term cost of letting them go under or drastically cutting services, and second, that the NCP collaborative structure enhances the efficacy of social service funding in the area. The IDHS secretary “was so intrigued with the things that we were dealing with in Humboldt Park,” said a Bickerdike staff member, “that she said she wanted to have a one-on-one with us in the community. So we invited her.”

This second meeting, in early 2010, included several top IDHS staff and, on the community side, “about a dozen people who represented different agencies, funded by the different components of the state budget.” The secretary not only heard them out, but made a point of guiding them toward a stronger presentation of their case by encouraging them to quantify the impact of their work and to make a more “evidenced-based” argument — an emphasis in line with her efforts to overhaul her department’s contracting system and adopt a more data-oriented approach. According to a participant from the Humboldt Park NCP:

[A] real key issue when we met with [her] is that we have the evidence and the facts, that we do work as a collaborative, and that we have a strong sense of togetherness and we can bring that data, we can bring that information together, and it could be something that’s concrete.

The Humboldt Park group’s strategy thus met with an initial success that contrasts starkly with GADC’s years of frustration in lobbying Metra. It was able to dispense with the mediating role of key allies after the first meeting, and the relationship it quickly established with IDHS appeared to render alternate tactics unnecessary. Alone among the four advocacy efforts examined here, this one did not change either targets or tactics, but rather devoted a number of months to elaborating its means of persuasion to suit its receptive target audience — to “trying to figure out exactly, with data, what \$1.00 invested in each of our partner agencies, invested in prevention, what it means in terms of cost savings, in terms of reaction,” explained a Bickerdike staff member. This continued until the summer of 2010, when uncertainty as to the outcome of the upcoming gubernatorial election and the IDHS secretary’s move to serving as the governor’s chief of staff led the group to put the effort on hold.

But while the Humboldt Park advocacy effort benefited from a receptive policy environment, it also encountered an unbending reality — the severity of the state budget crisis and the secretary’s limited ability to soften the impact of that crisis on specific agencies or a particular neighborhood. Most participants do not seem to think their efforts achieved this basic aim. Yet their efforts did result in significant benefits of a different and unexpected sort. The IDHS secretary not only guided the group toward sharpening its argument, she also openly welcomed the kind of ground-level information and data they were providing, both to inform her as the new department secretary and in support of her internal efforts to defend her department’s budget against cuts. By responding to the group’s request with a request of her own, she established a level of reciprocity and mutual respect that, according to one participant with long experience, ran sharply counter to the conduct of previous secretaries. Moreover, she involved several members of the advocacy group in her efforts to overhaul the department’s contracting system. Some participated with a small group of providers from around the state in a series of weekly meetings, aimed at revamping the department’s approach in particular service areas. One met repeatedly with the new Director of Program Evaluation and Research, who was interested in the organization’s innovative patient records system. As a consequence, there was an

evolution in the advocacy effort and its aims, as one participant described it, from merely seeking a hearing from state officials in order to “tell our story” to developing “more of a coalition-building and collaborative-building type of relationship,” helping state officials understand “how [you] can better manage your department so that it can then subcontract us to do the work that you want us to do.” Another participant described the aim of such relationship building as “trying to inform and educate people within government who can then work as advocates in those private meetings where they make the decisions, where we can’t be.”

Regardless of whether the Humboldt Park advocacy group achieved its initial aims, these unanticipated outcomes were significant and heartening to participants. Although it had been no part of the original objective, the group was granted a certain “inside” (if temporary) status as participants in the policy process, and new relationships in the policy arena — with potential for future growth — were initiated. Thus, although the budget group eventually decided not to renew its efforts after the 2010 elections, participants were sufficiently encouraged to decide later in the year, in a series of meetings to plan the transition to the next stage of the initiative, that a policy and advocacy component should be built into each of its major areas of work.<sup>7</sup> “In retrospect, that was our kind of Humboldt Park NCP first attempt to get our feet wet in doing any sort of direct advocacy work by using NCP as a platform,” said an NCP staff member. Recent involvement in a local school turnaround process and collaboration with their state senator to save a major federal funding stream served as examples of how “it allowed us to feel empowered to do something we might not have felt empowered to do prior to that.”

### **Chicago Southwest: Fighting Foreclosures by Targeting Banks**

SWOP’s foreclosure campaign began in 2007. Having decided to target the banks, SWOP identified those responsible for the bulk of foreclosures in Chicago Southwest, all major national or foreign financial institutions, and began trying to gain access to bank executives. At first this proved impossible, as its existing political allies did not have the leverage that SWOP expected with these institutions. In late 2008, however, a chance encounter between SWOP’s executive director and Senator Dick Durbin led them to discover shared views on the foreclosure issues, and to an offer of assistance from the senator via Bill Daley, then JP Morgan Chase’s Chicago vice president. After a mildly promising meeting, however, Chase soon proved unforthcoming, and SWOP had no further leverage over the bank.

This initial setback led SWOP to make a tactical shift. Feeling that Chase had been able to sidestep SWOP’s demands because the meeting had been private, SWOP decided to target a

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<sup>7</sup>In October 2010, LISC/Chicago asked each of the NCP lead agencies to conduct a planning exercise, narrowing its focus to three to five priority areas for the next phase of NCP funding.

bank with a branch office in one of the Chicago Southwest neighborhoods and some notable “vulnerabilities” — Bank of America, which had acquired the subprime lender Countrywide — and to approach the bank directly and publicly, requesting a meeting with the local branch manager and bringing 200 residents to wait outside while it took place. Although this was clearly a shift toward a more “outsider” strategy, SWOP also contacted an acquaintance inside the bank, an executive with responsibilities connected with community development and a good reputation among practitioners, to help facilitate matters behind the scenes.

After a successful first meeting, the bank agreed to send a national vice president for a second meeting to discuss SWOP’s substantive demands in July 2009. SWOP’s three “asks” were that all unaffordable mortgages (payments above 30 percent of income) be proactively modified, that foreclosed homes be rented back to their original owners, and that vacant homes be turned into community assets. Again, 200 residents were gathered outside the meeting locale. Both SWOP and its bank contact viewed this as only mildly confrontational — intentionally so, says SWOP, whose resident leaders, wanting to demonstrate “good faith,” resisted SWOP staff’s suggestion that they carry lawn signs prepared beforehand that accused the bank of “failing this neighborhood.” After some debate, the signs were stacked in a corner outside the meeting room as a gentle reminder of more hard-edged tactical options.

Meanwhile, however, the policy environment for SWOP’s effort had worsened dramatically since the near-collapse of the financial industry in late 2008. While the financial crisis put the mortgage and foreclosure crisis in the public spotlight, it also made it more intractable. And SWOP had the bad luck of starting negotiations with Bank of America soon after passage of the Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP),<sup>8</sup> the federal foreclosure prevention plan. From the bank’s perspective, HAMP made SWOP’s core demand for large-scale loan modifications impossible, because it established bank and investor liability protections only for modifications performed under the law’s more restrictive guidelines. The bank did eventually agree to a more modest “proactive loan modification program,” enabling SWOP to recruit applicants to the bank’s existing modification process through direct outreach to delinquent borrowers. While this seemed at least a minor victory at the time, and received some media attention, SWOP was ultimately frustrated with the results. Of 500 homes with delinquent mortgages, only 200 homeowners turned out to be eligible for modification, and only 99 of them applied. And while the bank eventually accepted more than 80 of those applications — a success from their perspective — few if any modifications were ultimately processed. SWOP and other involved parties concluded from this experience that Bank of America’s system for handling troubled mort-

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<sup>8</sup>HAMP, launched in 2009, established a loan modification process enabling borrowers who are in default, at imminent risk of default, or in foreclosure to have their loans modified to a monthly payment targeted at 31 percent of their monthly income.

gages was profoundly dysfunctional and fundamentally incapable of handling the nearly tenfold increase in problem loans generated by the housing crisis. “Our frustration eventually was [with] their internal inability to move things,” says a SWOP staff member. Given this outcome, SWOP effectively gave up on the collaboration with Bank of America in late 2010.

Yet, as with the Humboldt Park NCP, SWOP’s efforts generated some unforeseen benefits. A SWOP leader from Neighborhood Housing Services wrote a critique of HAMP that caught the attention of the U.S. Treasury Department, having been passed on via LISC/Chicago and mutual connections in the Obama administration, and this resulted in an invitation to meet with the Assistant Secretary for Financial Institutions. SWOP’s relationship with Senator Durbin also quickly deepened. Durbin was impressed with SWOP’s connection to the community, comprehensive data, persuasive foreclosure maps, and ability to “tell the foreclosure story” from a community perspective, according to one of his staff. He brought them to meet with Treasury officials, and invited them to testify at a Financial Services Subcommittee hearing on the foreclosure crisis in December 2009. As a Durbin aide describes it, this relationship has elements of a policymaking partnership: “We’ve really used SWOP as a resource, not only to tell the story, but to also provide what they’ve told us are the solutions, what they see and how this could be resolved.” Thus, although SWOP leaders acknowledge that fighting foreclosures by taking on some of the biggest institutions in the financial industry turned out to be a far more difficult battle than they had anticipated, they also emphasize that these new relationships and national exposure have dramatically increased SWOP’s prominence in the ongoing foreclosure debate and access to federal decision-makers. And SWOP is continuing its local campaign in several directions, conducting outreach work for a Cook County Circuit Court foreclosure mediation program and posting previously unused signs in front of SWOP leaders’ homes listing the major banks that have “failed” the community. The latter elicited a response from Citibank in late 2010, asking SWOP to partner with them on a local “loan-modification event.” They subsequently began negotiations on a pilot program much like what SWOP had hoped for from Bank of America, adjusted so as to avoid the latter’s objections based on HAMP.

Thus, while SWOP can hardly be considered successful at this point in its initial aim and strategy, neither has its effort by any means been fruitless. Despite setbacks, SWOP has doggedly persisted in its banks campaign, abandoning neither its initial aims nor targets, while experimenting with a variety of tactics and simultaneously responding to new opportunities with alacrity, broadening the scope of its efforts beyond the banks. Although it has yet to achieve the status of policy partner with any of the targeted financial institutions, it has at least begun to develop important access at the federal level, akin to what it has in the state legislature.

## **Quad Communities: Using Political Alliances to Expand Commercial Development Planning**

QCDC set out to use its existing political alliances to recruit elected officials in the Third Ward to its 47th Street corridor project, which, as described earlier, aimed to craft and implement a commercial development plan for the neighborhood in its own Fourth Ward and extending into the Third Ward. A staff member described the initial strategy as follows:

Certainly we started with the aldermen. And we're . . . targeting all of the elected officials who have constituents in that area. . . . What's helpful is, because we have such a strong relationship with our state rep and state senator. . . we think that they're able to bring their colleagues on the other side into the fold, because we don't have relationships with them, because they're outside of my area.

The critical factor was the Third Ward alderman, then entering her fourth year in office. At the outset, QCDC was confident of her cooperation: "She was a former executive director for an NCP organization on the Near West Side, so she understands." The involvement of other community members was viewed as a subsequent step in the process, if and as needed: "We'll see, once we [get] the politicians, who else they think needs to be at the table. . . . We're going to bring in some business associations, so we can hear from them what they are thinking." As one close ally articulated QCDC's approach, "Here's the plan, but we've got to make it to the elected officials and make it their effort because it's only coming from them that all these community groups are going to come from underneath."

But QCDC's strategy of targeting elected officials based on its successful experience in the Fourth Ward proved unexpectedly difficult to transplant to the Third Ward, where it ran up against the complexity of local political and community dynamics. Commercial development is a fraught issue in the Third Ward. The new alderman won office in 2007 by a narrow margin, after a vituperative campaign (and her second attempt) to defeat the 23-year incumbent. The election was widely seen as pitting longstanding residents, including those in the Third Ward's extensive public housing developments, against a growing population of newcomers who were impatient, among other things, with the absence of retail amenities in the neighborhood. Commercial real estate and business development had been tightly controlled by the previous alderman, and retail development in the ward is widely said to have stagnated for decades. Her challenger made this a central campaign theme, and has reportedly devoted much of her energy as alderman to retail attraction and revitalization efforts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>A number of community leaders expressed the views articulated in this paragraph and the next during interviews.

While the absence of a community development corporation with commercial-development expertise was widely lamented in the Third Ward, and some looked to QCDC to fill the gap, these issues evidently remained too fractious to enable a first-term alderman to single-handedly legitimize a process in which a Fourth Ward entity would take the lead role. “There are people in [the Third] Ward,” said one source, “that are still very upset about how QCDC was formed and the way the boundaries were formed” — the rationale for which had much to do with the perceived difficulty of working with the previous alderman. Another characterized the reaction in some quarters to QCDC’s initial efforts as “a lot of concern that QCDC is going to try to march their way down 47th Street. ‘They can’t do that. . . . This is our ward; they can’t just come in here.’”

Meanwhile, an informal group of community activists, organizations, and residents — the Bronzeville Alliance, which had gradually coalesced since 2007 — had begun to broach integrated community and development planning across the historic Bronzeville district, encompassing both wards. The Alliance envisioned an inclusive community process, described by one participant as closely akin to the initial planning stage of the NCP initiative, bridging internal divisions to generate a collective commitment to key community priorities. According to another participant:

The thing that’s unique about the Bronzeville Alliance is that it is inclusive. You have to opt out. If you live in Bronzeville, work in Bronzeville, have a business in Bronzeville, you’re in the Alliance. . . . [We] need to be inclusive because we’ve had many, many, many plans over the years in Bronzeville, and not a lot of execution, and a lot of that is based upon just the intergroup dynamics and conflict that occurs.

When approached by QCDC about a 47th Street planning process in mid-2010, the Third Ward alderman was reportedly receptive to its aims but not to its strategy. She therefore directed QCDC to collaborate with the Bronzeville Alliance, whose retail development process was still in the formative stage of convening a small group of relevant stakeholders. This collaboration broadened the scope of QCDC’s initial effort to include the area’s three main retail corridors: 43rd Street, 47th Street, and 51st Street. And while its role in the Fourth Ward provided a “template” — retail development with direct access to political influence and resource streams — QCDC is not leading the planning process. According to a participant from the Alliance:

This is taking the lessons [of QCDC] . . . It’s stretching, it’s taking, it’s broadening the impact out of the Fourth Ward, but it’s not driven by QCDC. It’s a harnessing of QCDC and a collaboration. . . . What [we’re] trying to do in leading this thing is listen to everybody, and help them move to motion.

By contrast with QCDC's preference for working directly with elected officials and presenting them with ready-made plans, the Alliance pursues a dual strategy, informing and involving elected officials on a regular basis but also consistently maintaining community engagement. In May 2011, the Alliance staged a community meeting about the area's "retail future" that attracted a range of residents, activists, and business owners who were given extensive opportunities to voice their concerns and get information via discussion and topical breakout groups. The Third and Fourth Ward aldermen attended the closing session and spoke at length in favor of the planning process. As of late 2011, following an additional round of stakeholder consultation, QCDC staff reported that their leadership in the 47th Street planning effort had full support from the Alliance, which would continue to provide "governance and oversight," and that the two aldermen would back a Special Services Area designation for the corridor — a critical future source of funds for the effort and for the organization.<sup>10</sup>

QCDC's effort to launch an integrated retail development process was thus rerouted and delayed, but not derailed. The detour is instructive insofar as it has, in a sense, led QCDC back through its own organizational history. For despite the Fourth Ward alderman's considerable role in the formation of QCDC, it was not the alderman alone who legitimized the organization. Rather, it was a broad and inclusive planning process involving hundreds of community voices and scores of open meetings. While the Bronzeville Alliance does not seem to aspire to quite such extensive community involvement, it reflects unambiguously a community-based planning process, whereas QCDC's organizational development had led it toward a direct and primary reliance on political and governmental actors. In this case, such actors were not in a position to engineer local legitimacy without prior community involvement.

## **Relationships and Alliances**

One of the themes that recurs throughout these cases is the critical importance of strong relationships and alliances with individuals, agencies, and organizations that have influence and access at the policy and systems levels. In many cases, such relationships have served as the necessary vehicle for gaining access to influential actors and institutions. In some cases, the participation of allies in the advocacy effort itself, and the political leverage they bring with them, has been significant. In some, new relationships of this sort have arisen as an outcome of the process.

If such relationships and alliances are critical to the ability of community organizations like these to engage fruitfully in policy and advocacy efforts, their character is of considerable interest. Although those relationships vary in origin, duration, and depth, a certain thematic co-

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<sup>10</sup>Special Service Areas are local tax districts that fund expanded services and programs through a localized property tax levy within contiguous areas.



herence emerged from the interviews with close NCP allies in positions of influence and political authority. What these key informants repeatedly express is the specific value that these relationships have in connecting them to community experiences, needs, and priorities that they cannot easily access directly themselves; in providing a vehicle for communication with a range of community participants; and in being able to orchestrate and articulate collective community will. Thus, what seems to enable NCP entities to form and sustain these strong alliances is the perception among possible allies of the depth of community connection that constitutes the basis for their work at the community level.

The value of NCP lead agencies and partners as reliable sources of information about community needs, views, and priorities was expressed repeatedly in interviews with their influential allies. One of GADC's political allies describes the agency as a reliable source of information about community organizations and leaders:

Even if it's something that they're not starting or facilitating, a lot of people come to them with their programs or with their initiatives, and in turn, they share that with us, which helps us to know, really, the pulse of the community. . . . They're a great lead agency in understanding just the real needs of constituents and their concerns.

Several cases suggest that for elected officials, the value of alliances with NCP entities lies in not only obtaining information but securing leverage or "testimony" that is useful to them in political and governmental arenas. This was seen in the relationship that developed between the Humboldt Park NCP and IDHS leadership with regard to the effort to avert state funding cuts. As one administrator put it:

It's important for the secretary and her executive staff to really understand what those cuts mean, or what that slow payment or nonpayment means for the agencies at the ground level. [It] equips us to be able to say, "If we cannot get payment to these agencies, this is what it's going to mean, and this is what it means in real-life terms."

This sort of community-level anchorage is perhaps even more useful to politicians and policymakers, like those at the state and federal levels, who operate at a greater remove from their constituents. This, in part, is how Senator Durbin's staff explains the value of his relationship with SWOP:

It's really been SWOP that has allowed Senator Durbin to put a face to the [foreclosure] problem. More often than not, when you hear Senator Durbin talking . . . at a speech, or to the president, or the secretary of the treasury, he's referring to SWOP when he talks about the foreclosure issue and visualizing it, because SWOP has allowed him to really see the problem firsthand. He doesn't have to imagine it; it's there.

It is also the ability of NCP lead agencies to aggregate and articulate community will that is valuable to their political allies. One NCP agency's aldermanic ally summarized the value of this partnership within city government this way:

I think it helps the administration see . . . that here you have a united force, that there's no animosity between the two, that everybody's in agreement. And so you're not just saying "no" to an alderman. Then you're also saying "no" to the community. So I think that that was one of the strengths of working together. And I don't think anybody could argue against any elected official standing up for his community and then having that community there to back them.

In some cases, these partnerships do more than inform elected or administrative officials, or provide them with persuasive empirical material — they can substantively expand the scope of their work or improve their ability to do it. As one alderman put it:

An alderman's office has a very limited staff, [and] you're getting something like close to 800 complaints a week. There is no way that a staff of four or five people could keep up with all of those, and at the same time move programs and deal with organizations and all these things. . . . So if you don't have those partnerships, it doesn't allow you to think about the bigger picture, about bringing in those resources into a community. It doesn't allow you to plan and put together a vision for housing, for health, for education. It doesn't allow you [the time] to put together those visions if you don't have a partnership.

A crucial feature of all these relationships and alliances seems to be their perceived reciprocal benefit. And this reciprocity is, in most instances, more than strictly transactional — that is, it does not involve discrete exchanges of support for community information or support, but rather an enduring reciprocal reliance on the availability of these benefits, based on relationships of trust built over time. Although there are limits to what they may produce, such relationships seem to be one of the most important resources that community organizations and networks like those in NCP communities can be endowed with if they are going to engage in efforts to reform policy or promote systems change beyond the scope of their community work.

## Chapter 6

# Initiative-Level Activity and Implications

The report now turns to focus on the way policy and systems-change issues have emerged and developed at the initiative level. As discussed earlier, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) has pursued a mode of engagement with systems and policy actors that is oriented largely toward resource and relationship brokering, with a strategically selective, consensus-oriented, “insider” approach to the pursuit of policy and systems change. This chapter presents three contexts in which LISC/Chicago has been able to inform policy and systems change within those parameters. First, it focuses on the opportunities for policy reform that arise by virtue of LISC/Chicago’s success in building relationships with policy-level actors and institutions, particularly with Chicago city government, and LISC/Chicago’s self-described “opportunistic” approach to such situations. Second, it looks at LISC/Chicago’s support for community-level policy and systems-change efforts, along with some of its limits and tensions. Finally, it presents a variety of contexts in which cross-community policy-level impulses and aspirations have arisen within the initiative, and the courses they have taken. The chapter concludes with an exploration of both supportive and critical views of LISC/Chicago’s policy orientation and conduct from the perspective of the New Communities Program (NCP) lead agencies, a range of knowledgeable interlocutors and observers, and MacArthur Foundation staff.

## City Relations and Policy Change

Despite its avoidance of “traditional” advocacy tactics and its restraint with regard to the direct pursuit of policy reform, LISC/Chicago has developed specific ways to exert such influence under certain circumstances and to certain ends. It does so selectively and, in its own characterization, “opportunistically.” When the organization’s collaborative work with influential allies gives rise to opportunities to shape policies and programs from the inside, LISC/Chicago attempts to make the formulation or implementation of those policies and programs more favorable to its community partners and responsive to their development priorities. Such situations allow LISC/Chicago to attempt to shape policy without resorting to public advocacy or articulating policy disagreements with its allies.

The relationship that LISC/Chicago has been most focused on developing is with Chicago city government, and this is also the relationship that has given rise to a number of opportunities for specific kinds of policy influence. This relationship developed at least in part by virtue of strong historical connections held by LISC/Chicago’s long-time executive director — formerly an executive director of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and a CHA board

member, and a coauthor of the Plan for Transformation that is at the center of the city’s housing policy — who left the organization to head the city’s Department of Housing and Economic Development in late 2010. The relationship with the city played a central role from the start of the NCP initiative, but it deepened further in subsequent years, specifically in connection with LISC/Chicago’s role as NCP intermediary. Not only did this relationship provide LISC/Chicago with a number of opportunities to make policy more responsive to neighborhoods, but the deepening of this relationship took place, in significant measure, *through* a series of such opportunities, which illustrate how LISC/Chicago’s approach plays out in practice as well as how it developed over time.

LISC/Chicago has long been oriented toward city government as a primary systems-level interlocutor, and it views its relationship-oriented approach to the role of intermediary as particularly well suited to the Chicago political context. The critical first step, remarked a senior staff member, was to stop trying to change the city and try to understand the way it works: “Rather than waste time on trying to get the city to change the way it works, to simply accept it for what it is.” And, this staffer explained, the way the city “works” is by building trust over time: “It’s Rakove’s old book, ‘We don’t want nobody nobody sent.’<sup>1</sup> If you’re a stranger in Chicago you’re going to have a hell of a time getting things done here.”

LISC/Chicago attributes its success in building trust with the city in part to its general effort to try to “be a resource” rather than a seeker of resources:

We positioned ourselves so that, until recently, we tried not to be [a] recipient of government funds. . . . We’re always at the door with our hand out to private industry, to the banks and to corporate America, but we would rarely if ever go to the city for funding. So we worked hard on a perception that we were trustworthy, but that we weren’t there with our hands out. We might be there to try to solve some problems, but not necessarily with our hands out.

In this way, the organization was able to change the way it was perceived. Said one staffer: “I think our persona over at the city was these are guys who are trying to make some things happen, and that was the message that we really started pushing very hard in the late ’90s and on.”

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<sup>1</sup>The title of this book, *We Don’t Want Nobody Nobody Sent*, by Milton Rakove, is taken from an anecdote told by Abner Mikva, who went to volunteer at a local Democratic committee office in Chicago while at law school and was asked, “Who sent you?” Replying that nobody had sent him, he was told, “Well, we don’t want nobody that nobody sent.” The phrase has become a common shorthand characterization of Chicago politics.

As the NCP initiative developed, LISC/Chicago also took great pains to keep the city apprised of what was unfolding, an instance of trying “never to surprise our friends in the public sector.” As each quality-of-life plan was created, recounted one staff member:

Staff here met with the commissioner of planning every month . . . to say here’s what’s being talked about in the neighborhoods. What’s being talked about downtown? Are we in conflict? How do we work out any conflicts before they become something serious?

Whereas senior LISC/Chicago staff describe its posture toward the city at the outset of the NCP initiative as respectful and helpful — even somewhat deferential — they also maintained a distinct distance from the city. LISC/Chicago was not an “outsider” in orientation, but neither did it really have “insider” status. As one staff member described it:

If you look at the trajectory in NCP, at the start of the program we didn’t go to the city or ask permission on selecting neighborhoods. [The] philosophy has always been, make [ourselves] the go-to group, not having to go to the city for anything. [But] when the plans were done and we did the rollout and we presented them to Mayor Daley and he requested the meetings or whatnot, I think it started this impression that . . . this can be helpful to a city that doesn’t do its own plans like this anymore.

Indeed, as one former city commissioner described it, NCP developed “in the context of the City of Chicago being missing in action in terms of neighborhood planning. . . . It was as if the city had outsourced the neighborhood planning function without paying for it.” He recalled that Mayor Daley wholeheartedly embraced the initiative and instructed relevant departments to meet regularly with NCP lead agencies and provide city supports as needed: “We were under marching orders that, within the city, give these guys what they need.” LISC/Chicago adduces this development as a prime instance of the successful pursuit of its primary systems-change objective in the community development field: shifting the focus of major systems actors to respond to community priorities as they develop supports and interventions.

In the early implementation phase, the mayor took a sufficient interest in the initiative to conduct a series of one-on-one meetings with each NCP lead agency. One concrete outcome of those meetings was the creation of a mechanism for expediting NCP projects. So many of them were bogged down in city bureaucracy, and requests for the mayor’s help were so persistent, that LISC/Chicago, with the mayor’s approval and MacArthur Foundation support, worked to develop a “state-of-the-art model for coordinating city services and

neighborhood redevelopment.”<sup>2</sup> This resulted in the Expediting New Communities Initiatives (ENCI) unit within the 3-1-1 City Services Department, consisting of a group of project managers assigned specifically to shepherd NCP projects through various relevant city departments — an operational change, albeit small and narrowly targeted, to facilitate NCP access to government processes and actions that might otherwise stymie progress.

Being generally useful to the mayor, however, and even somewhat privileged with regard to the responsiveness of city agencies, did not automatically confer the sort of insider status that LISC/Chicago attained later. From LISC’s perspective, it achieved that position by gradually gaining the city’s trust through the execution of more specific, project-related functions.

LISC/Chicago staff members cite the organization’s role in helping prepare Chicago’s bid for the 2016 Olympics as an early step in deepening this relationship. As the city planning committee was developing this bid in 2007-2008, it asked LISC/Chicago to submit a planning document based on the recent community-level planning exercises for NCP in order to help establish neighborhood support for the plan. On a 45-day deadline, LISC/Chicago staff was able to bring leadership together from all the NCP neighborhoods, select relevant projects from the quality-of-life plans, solicit new project ideas that were appropriate to the context, and generate consensus around a set of proposals. In accomplishing this so quickly, says a LISC/Chicago staff member, “We really, I think, showed our value and how our speed to market works in those relationships and that infrastructure.” Had the bid succeeded, LISC/Chicago’s helpful involvement (which provides a clear example of how it views the NCP “platform” in action) in the planning stages would have channeled significant Olympics funds toward projects prioritized by several NCP communities.

LISC/Chicago also gained the city’s trust by implementing successively larger city-funded summer youth employment programs in 2007, 2008, and 2009. This began as a response to some high-profile violent incidents involving youth in the Englewood community, where the NCP lead agency was able to coordinate a successful employment program on short notice. In 2008, the city asked LISC/Chicago to expand the program to six NCP communities. And when federal stimulus funds became available to expand this program in 2009, the city again turned to LISC/Chicago to do so quickly across a number of NCP communities, with 800 youth slots. Similarly, in preparing the city’s second application for stimulus funds under the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP2), the Department of Community Development turned to LISC/Chicago to help target communities and census tracts. The funding Request for Proposals (RFP) was, according to one source in the city, a remarkably good fit for NCP, requiring public agencies to:

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<sup>2</sup>McCarron (2007).

[work] with a community that had a plan in place and that was moving towards making investments. . . . When we read HUD's criteria we [wondered], did they take the NCP criteria? Because there was just this natural overlap.

In its role helping the city respond to the RFP, LISC/Chicago was able to exert a degree of influence over the content of the application. As a LISC/Chicago staff member framed it: "It was the city's application, but it was informed [by us] and included almost all of our NCP neighborhoods and the census tracts in those neighborhoods where we knew it was meaningful to the locals."

The most intimate collaboration that LISC/Chicago has had with the city involves a broadband-access and digital-excellence demonstration project in several NCP neighborhoods. The city's Department of Information Technology (DOIT) developed a plan for digital demonstration projects in underserved communities, with MacArthur Foundation support and involvement, when the Daley administration was trying to create a citywide Wi-Fi network. After this effort failed, DOIT and the MacArthur Foundation looked for alternate solutions and, as a DOIT staff member recalled, "The message we heard from almost everyone we talked to was . . . to get working with NCP." In order for these demonstrations to be successful, the staff member said, "They need to be in places with existing program infrastructure. And we couldn't build that from scratch."

This consideration made the NCP platform an almost automatic choice for the project's implementation. And here again, LISC/Chicago was able to help shape its development. A DOIT staff member described their original thinking as "very sort of quantitatively top-down," involving analysis of existing technology infrastructure and detailed implementation mandates. But, he recalled:

[LISC/Chicago] pushed back, I think rightfully, and said, look, these things are legitimate because there is community buy-in; the community tells the public sector leadership what they need, rather than the other way around.

By the time a federal broadband initiative for underserved communities was announced in mid-2009, this collaboration had already developed to the point that LISC/Chicago's involvement in the application was taken for granted. As a LISC/Chicago staff member observed: "It wasn't even a question of where they would do it. The only place they could do it was where they had this infrastructure. And again, we took on the task of writing it and submitting it." DOIT staff confirm that "the program design, a lot of the details of the program design, the details of all of the staffing decisions and all of that work . . . has come from LISC," with the department responsible primarily for accountability and maintaining alignment with the mayor's office.

LISC/Chicago staff describes this, by comparison with previous collaborations, as “an even deeper partnership with the city. It’s not LISC’s Smart Communities Program, it’s we’re managing this demonstration on *behalf* of the city.” This level of intimacy, while it is a signal success at one level, also brings a degree of intimacy and potential dependency on the city with which LISC is perhaps not entirely comfortable: “This is the first time we have such a deep and a little bit confusing relationship [with the city].”

All of these developments instantiate LISC/Chicago’s “opportunistic” approach to contexts in which the potential for policy influence arises secondarily in the course of the relationship-building and collaboration through which it fulfills its primary mission of supporting community development. By helping the city secure these funding streams, LISC/Chicago brings resources to NCP communities and strengthens its own ties to the city. From this position as a privileged partner, LISC/Chicago may also influence the substance of the proposals. From LISC/Chicago’s perspective, this constitutes a distinctive “inside-out” approach to policy or systems change. One staff member explained:

If there are changes, it’s from the inside out. So, for example, when the city was putting the neighborhood stabilization program together, the commissioner asked me to work with a small group on trying to figure out the best way to put that new system in place. There were a variety of options, which a number of cities have taken. . . . We set up a system using \$150 million of public money . . . and then using LISC resources, we lent the first \$3 million to [the “system”] to give it some liquidity. So, we weren’t out there to create a whole new system, but we did. That’s the end impact.

## **Support for Community-Level Efforts**

Another form of policy engagement that is congruent with LISC/Chicago’s strategic orientation toward policy and systems change is when — as in the four case studies presented in this report — policy agendas arise from community groups and are primarily pursued by them, with LISC/Chicago serving a supporting intermediary function.

At one level, this involves strengthening community organizations and networks through NCP and giving them greater capacity to pursue their priorities, whether they be community-oriented and project-focused or oriented toward policy and systems change beyond the community. A staff member described LISC/Chicago’s role in relation to Chicago South-west’s foreclosure campaign:

We set in motion through the NCP methodology a series of opportunities to build relationships through planning, build capacity through supporting seed grants and projects that created a deeper platform for them and greater visibility and access to influential [actors], which has enabled them to do more around



foreclosure. . . . But it's not because LISC has a policy program that we asked them to submit an application for and get funded for to do policy. So we explicitly don't do policy but what we do has created the infrastructure for them to have deeper partnerships, more capacity, and more access to resources to do the policies they want to do.

At another level, however, LISC/Chicago does also provide direct support — both in the form of focused funding and in more informal ways — for community-driven policy efforts. In Auburn Gresham, LISC/Chicago provided the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) with a number of supports in the course of its extended transit campaign — a small planning grant for preliminary transit-oriented development planning after the issue emerged as a priority in the community's quality-of-life plan, participation in some key meetings with Metra, and funding for a ridership study that the transit agency required GADC to submit. LISC/Chicago's involvement with the Chicago Southwest foreclosure campaign has also been quite substantial. This has included some direct funding for this effort (along with parallel funding from the MacArthur Foundation), a good deal of concerted publicity and showcasing it in various forums, and some behind-the-scenes deployment of strategically placed contacts (via MacArthur) that brought this work to the attention of the Treasury Department. These efforts of LISC/Chicago were supportive rather than catalytic. As a LISC/Chicago staff member noted, "The fact that [lead agencies] are doing policy work, I wouldn't actually say that that's a result of NCP. They brought that into their plans; that's just part of the water they drink."

There is a potential tension involved in LISC's commitment, as described in Chapter 3, to "[working] with others who are trying to change the world" while assiduously trying "never to surprise our friends in the public sector." This tension has surfaced around a few community-generated issues, where LISC/Chicago has had to find a balance between supporting NCP community actors and sustaining their wholly collaborative orientation, particularly toward city government. In one instance, the NCP lead agency and community participants in the Little Village neighborhood were lobbying the city to create a park that would require tearing down an existing structure. "It was pretty clear," said a LISC/Chicago staff member, that "the mayor and the park district and the city administration were foursquare against it." The lead agency approached LISC/Chicago staff about supporting its advocacy but was told, "We can't solve that for you. We can help you build your organization and you can organize, but you also have to understand there's a cost to that."

In another case, the city Department of Housing refused to approve an affordable housing development that the Humboldt Park and Logan Square lead agencies were collaborating on. A LISC/Chicago staff member recalls contacting the commissioner of housing and asking, "What's the problem here? Is there something that we don't know about? Is there something that can be done?" But they were told, "Nothing you can do at this point. Stay out of it." When

the lead agencies demanded stronger support, saying “You guys should be fighting for us,” LISC/Chicago staff responded, “We can’t advocate. We can support affordable housing. We can support neighborhood plans, but we can’t be the ones to carry the flag in front.” Thus, LISC/Chicago’s support for community-driven agendas does not extend beyond the point where, in its perception, it would embroil the organization in contentious advocacy activities and generate unproductive conflict with key allies.

LISC/Chicago staff members also draw a distinction between policy efforts for which they are willing to provide funding, in support of community priorities, and those in which they are willing to get more deeply engaged by leveraging their relationships. Immigration policy, for instance, is an issue of concern to quite a few NCP neighborhoods, but not one in which LISC/Chicago feels competent to become substantively involved nor one where it sees a need for an intermediary. According to a LISC/Chicago staff member:

We might fund this or fund that to see whatever they want to do, but they don’t need an intermediary in that case. It’s also understanding when an intermediary is needed and when it is not. . . . The other way of looking at this is, where is the intermediary vacuum [on this issue]? I think we’ve played that appropriate role where there are vacuums.

In part, this is a matter of having long prioritized a particular sphere in which LISC/Chicago can work — city government — and having done so quite successfully:

I think our groups do know that. . . . I think that it’s understood at our city of Chicago governmental level that there is some sphere of influence there, and so I think that people have appropriately come and said we’re hitting our head against the wall on this. Is there anything you can do to help? And then we go in to small advocacy mode about some of those things.

In general, when LISC/Chicago seeks to “go into small advocacy mode,” it does so with the concrete goal of furthering implementation of projects or programs:

We’re driven by getting deals done. And so if something is a barrier to getting a deal done and it requires a policy change, then I think we will try to do what is necessary to change policy to get our deals done. And our deals are more or less defined by what neighborhoods said they wanted done, coupled with whatever opportunities and resources we can bring to get them done.

## **Cross-Community Efforts and Opportunities**

One response to the emergence of community-level policy and systems change efforts that LISC/Chicago has been wary of is the development of a policy agenda or policy “platform” *across* NCP communities, or for NCP as a whole. As noted earlier, LISC/Chicago is strongly averse to developing a policy agenda of its own. It is comfortable with policy influence when it

arises in specific ways out of particular opportunities, but according to its own principles the only way a substantive cross-community NCP policy platform could legitimately emerge would be from a convergence of community-driven agendas. There are not many instances of a convergence like this arising among NCP lead agencies, but this section examines one such instance — a multi-community recreational event called “Open Streets” — with policy relevance for issues of both health and the use of public space. It then looks at one circumstance in which LISC/Chicago itself has taken a more active policy role than it is generally wont to do — a community schools initiative called “Elev8,” funded by Atlantic Philanthropies.

### **The Open Streets Project**

The Open Streets project was an attempt to bring a Latin American recreational event with a focus on healthful activities and community participation to five adjacent NCP communities — Logan Square, Humboldt Park, East Garfield Park, North Lawndale, and Little Village. It involved closing major boulevards to traffic for a day, promoting bicycle and pedestrian use, and generating interaction across community boundaries. The original impetus came from the Active Transportation Alliance (ATA, formerly the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation) and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association’s (LSNA) Active Living initiative, as part of a range of strategies for addressing the rise in obesity rates. LSNA brought other NCP lead agencies into the planning process, since the proposed route would run through five of them. Although many Hispanic residents initially interpreted the project as elitist — for “bikers” or new, white residents in this gentrifying area — sentiment shifted once participating organizations used community outreach to convey the Latin American roots of the event .

Policy dimensions of the project included, as a participating NCP staff member said, “changes about what’s happening in the parks, creating complete streets in those neighborhoods, creating safer school routes, influencing how kids are living their lives, and snack choices.” This also involved some gentle pressure on city government to shift its open space and transportation policies in favor of bicycle and pedestrian routes, to make parks in low-income communities safer and more attractive, and, more tangibly, to support this project as a regularly recurring event.

The biggest hurdles faced by the project were permits and scheduling through the Mayor’s Office of Special Events (which was “super-nervous,” according to one organizer, because the event ran through “unsafe” neighborhoods) and obtaining adequate funding for what turned out to be an expensive undertaking, particularly because of the need for police and city traffic-control staffing. LISC was very supportive of the effort, facilitating an application to the Chicago Community Trust and providing the remainder of necessary funding itself — though it did not actively leverage its relationships with the city administration or seek to partner directly with relevant advocacy groups. After two successful pilots along portions of the

north-south route in October 2008 and a full-scale demonstration along eight miles of contiguous boulevards in August 2009, organizers felt they had demonstrated that such an event was feasible, safe, and popular. Their efforts to convince the city to help fund it, however, gained no traction. ATA continued working with the Trust on a sustainability plan, but for strategic reasons they intend to relocate the event to an “iconic” artery rather than returning to these west-side communities. Some of the participating NCP agencies have tried to arrange smaller events in its place.

In combining elements of community celebration with (limited) efforts at informing policy, this event epitomizes a type of hybrid collective action that has been identified as a neglected focus of research on civil society and social action.<sup>3</sup> Since it was driven by NCP lead agencies, it suited LISC/Chicago’s preference for supporting community agendas, as well as for noncontentious forms of engagement with policy and systems. While it cannot be said, as of late 2011, to have either failed or succeeded, its impact on participating NCP communities has not lived up to organizers’ expectations.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Elev8 Community Schools Initiative**

Two very different sorts of cross-community policy-shaping efforts have developed out of the “Elev8” community schools initiative funded by Atlantic Philanthropies in five schools, one in each of five NCP communities. LISC/Chicago is the citywide managing intermediary of this project and NCP lead agencies are responsible for local implementation, staffing, and oversight. One of these efforts — a successful attempt to change city regulations governing the construction of health clinics in schools — is highly congruent with LISC/Chicago’s approach to policy intervention. The other — partnership with an advocacy organization to generate funding for these schools — is decidedly not.

As part of the Elev8 grant, Atlantic Philanthropies stipulated a general policy component, and the foundation selected the Federation for Community Schools — a fairly small and untested Illinois organization — to carry out this component. “I think we struggled with [that] for a while,” says a LISC/Chicago staff member, “because that required a whole other partner. . . . Our position is that we don’t do policy but if they’re going to do it then we wanted them to do it the right way.” LISC/Chicago has thus partnered with the Federation somewhat reluctantly. The outcome has been a policy agenda aimed at securing funding for Elev8 schools, primarily focusing on establishing a line item in the state budget. While there is a community-engagement

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<sup>3</sup>Sampson, McAdam, MacIndoe, and Weffer (2005).

<sup>4</sup>However, LSNA and the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance built on this effort to obtain Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funding for a focus on making public parks more accessible and healthful for children and families.

component to the Federation’s strategy (bringing students and parents to meet with lawmakers in Springfield and Washington, D.C.), its policy aims and strategies are developed from the top, by the Federation. This has clearly put LISC/Chicago on unfamiliar terrain. Whereas its relationships with city government officials are ordinarily among its strongest, the narrow focus of this effort has rankled at the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), according to an administrator there; CPS has 150 community schools of its own that are far less resource-intensive (\$100,000 to \$250,000 per school per year, versus \$1 million for Elev8, according to the Federation):

[It’s] like I was dealing with a lobbyist who’s trying to convince us that there’s only one answer to anything we want to do around community schools. . . that we should redirect our funds just to the Elev8 schools.

By contrast, the issue of the health clinic fit more comfortably within the parameters of LISC/Chicago’s selective approach to policy change. Another of Atlantic Philanthropy’s grant stipulations was that students be provided with on-site health care services. In the process of constructing health clinics in the five schools, it was discovered that these were illegal under municipal law, an obstacle that could only be rectified through a city ordinance. LISC/Chicago was able to work quickly with a close ally in the city council to get the ordinance passed. A staff member emphasized that this was a policy change driven by on-the-ground realities, not by any policy position developed from above:

There is now a new policy in the City of Chicago that allows anyone after us to do a health clinic the way it should be done. . . . But we only realized we had to change that policy when it was a barrier to us doing something that we assumed we could get done.

Again, this scenario illustrates the way in which, where LISC/Chicago does pursue policy change, such efforts tend to be targeted and arise out of contexts in which it is pursuing programmatic and resource-brokering aims.

## **Inside and Outside Perspectives**

LISC/Chicago is strongly committed to its longstanding relationship-building approach to developing systems-level access and leverage in the public and private sectors and to its strategically restrained and selective orientation toward policy and systems change. The question of whether this approach is optimal or adequate for NCP at this stage of its evolution has emerged as a question of debate within the initiative. The MacArthur Foundation has expressed an increasingly strong desire to see NCP develop a more assertive policy posture — that is, one that is more intentional than “opportunistic” — and to see LISC/Chicago help orchestrate a cross-community policy platform. Initiative participants, interlocutors, and observers who were interviewed for this report — strategically positioned actors in the nonprof-

it, advocacy, corporate, and public spheres who have either worked with LISC/Chicago and NCP or have other points of contact with them at the initiative level — offer a range of perspectives on the question.

NCP lead agencies expressed a variety of views on LISC/Chicago’s approach to systems change and whether there is a need for an NCP-wide “policy platform.” They are generally aware and appreciative of LISC/Chicago’s ability to channel public and private resources, and to make strategic use of relationships with city government in particular. “LISC,” said one lead agency staff member, “has helped as a sort of advocate for the lead agencies when it comes to speaking on our behalf to other funders or other institutions, like city departments.” Another asserted that brokering city relationships is the best thing LISC/Chicago (and NCP more generally) has done for communities:

On the public official side, the biggest thing that NCP did for us was [that] all of our neighborhoods had the introduction to share their plans with the mayor . . . because that meant that the mayor now had firsthand knowledge, at ground level, of what we were doing in the community, and that, then, spearheaded this huge reinforced partnership, and so, to me, that’s what NCP did, it partnered the City of Chicago, and its staff, [with] the communities.

Some lead agencies are quite tentative toward policy engagement and see no particular need for LISC/Chicago to take a stronger or more systematic approach to policy and systems change. As one lead agency staff member framed it:

[Does the initiative] have articulated positions? No. But I think that’s a strategic decision of the organization within a very particular context. And I think also it’s something that has to come from the community level. . . . I don’t think there’s been a lot of push from the community for that.

On the other hand, some lead agencies express a desire for NCP to develop a shared policy agenda across all NCP neighborhoods and for LISC/Chicago to take a more vigorous role.<sup>5</sup> As one staff member explained:

There needs to be more of a focus on organizing and policy efficacy. . . . There was a recent meeting that LISC convened about how, as a group of lead agencies, we want to communicate priorities to the new mayor. Very good from a policy standpoint, right? Why didn’t we do that before? Or to the state? And not that it’s LISC’s responsibility to organize us, but they do have a level of influence. They are in a position to help organize us.

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<sup>5</sup>Such concerns were also documented in an earlier phase of the evaluation research; see Greenberg, Verma, Dillman, and Chaskin (2010), pp. 54-55.

But even among agencies with an orientation toward policy and advocacy, there are also reservations about the possibility of achieving consensus around policy issues and about whether this role suits LISC/Chicago. The director of one such agency noted that the policy issues that mainly concern this agency are shared by only a minority of NCP communities. Another said of LISC/Chicago's potential role in helping orchestrate a shared agenda that, "as LISC it kind of hasn't made sense to really be pushing that," although there might be room for expanded funding for advocacy by lead agencies "where it makes sense for their mission." Another voiced concern about "who gets to choose the platform . . . who's driving the train," citing a measure of top-down decision-making in the Olympics planning process and the tight relationship between LISC/Chicago and city government: "We're very married to the city in some respects, but when the philosophy of the city runs in opposition to the philosophy of the community, where does LISC stand, and do they politically sort of have to straddle that fence?" This director also noted that:

Some of this stuff is already happening within the city. Advocacy around housing, for example, is very strong, so do we want to reinvent that wheel, or are there ways for LISC and the NCP platform to sort of join on with some of those existing efforts, like the Chicago Rehab Network,<sup>6</sup> for example?

Yet another NCP director argued, citing some of the short-lived efforts discussed above, that NCP is not an optimal vehicle for policy and advocacy because the majority of lead agencies do not share agendas, and most do not have the motivation or staff capacity to persevere in such efforts, which by their nature require perseverance, suggesting that any successful NCP policy effort would need to be open to non-NCP participants. Notably, only one of the four lead agencies in the community-level case studies was wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the prospect of an NCP-wide policy platform when last interviewed in the spring of 2011.

Interviews with strategically positioned individuals in the nonprofit, advocacy, corporate, and public spheres also yield views corresponding to both sides of this debate. There is a general perception of LISC/Chicago as city "insiders" who work behind the scenes, avoid taking issue positions, and are careful not to put themselves at odds with their political allies. As the director of one citywide development nonprofit remarked, "LISC/Chicago won't take [positions]. I don't know if they're even allowed to. . . . If they're advocates locally, they are so in a very soft manner. Very soft."

Or, in the words of another nonprofit executive:

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<sup>6</sup>The Chicago Rehab Network is a nonprofit organization that works to increase and preserve affordable housing in Greater Chicago by strengthening community development corporations, advocating for affordable-housing policies, and providing relevant research and information.

I think some of the projects that are adopted and implemented and supported in some ways by LISC even with just technical assistance do have policy implications. . . . But in terms of taking on a particular system to change it in order that it better serve those communities, I don't see it. It may be that some of that takes place in a less public way and a more behind-the-scenes kind of partnering way with the city.

This link between LISC/Chicago's insider status, particularly with city government, and its orientation toward policy and systems change was drawn by several of those interviewed. Some observers judge this insider brokering role to be the optimal one for LISC/Chicago, given its intermediary mission:

It's a fine role. I'm not saying they should be more aggressive. . . . They're a filter between the business community and maybe you could say philanthropic and government . . . and the people in the street, the nuts-and-bolts people. . . . So LISC is more of a collector, convener, marshaller of resources, and I think that's more useful than taking positions on things.

But some feel that the absence of attention to the systemic dimensions of the challenges facing NCP neighborhoods is a significant shortcoming of the initiative. As one key informant from a nonprofit organization that has a greater advocacy emphasis described it:

NCP puts the onus of building the community squarely on the community, and it doesn't have that system approach to say, well, there's a reason that certain communities are not getting attention.

According to this argument, some of the energy for policy and systems engagement among NCP lead agencies has been diverted by the narrower community focus of the initiative, and LISC/Chicago is partly responsible for this insofar as it has posed community-building and advocacy as an either-or proposition.

Elements of this critique were leveled not only regarding LISC/Chicago, but also the MacArthur Foundation and the initiative as a whole. Indeed, the MacArthur Foundation takes a similarly facilitative, behind-the-scenes stance to engaging in broader policy issues — funding organizations to focus on them, convening players, using their relationships and leverage as a funder to help shape or set agendas. Those who expressed this perspective focus on the close relations both LISC/Chicago and MacArthur have with city government, and on a generally risk-averse orientation that is seen as a hindrance to taking a more ambitious policy stance and role. An observer with experience in both city and state politics provided a clear example of this view, characterizing the Daley administration as issuing directives:

A lot of the issues that were being funded were led by [city hall]. . . . [They] just won't challenge, will not challenge! Anything that was controversial was a "no," or anything that was perceived as controversial was a "no. . . ." I think



that they and other foundations need to take a look at it and say, “Hey, you know what, part of our thing is to be a voice.” There are issues that come up that you need to take a stand on, or to allow those communities to take a stand on. . . . I think the bigger foundations are the ones who could afford to take a risk.

Beyond the particular role that LISC/Chicago or MacArthur might play by virtue of their organizational position, reputation, and relationships, several informants at both advocacy nonprofits and in the public sector spoke of the *collective* capacity of NCP to help ensure that policy is more responsive to neighborhood needs. As a senior administrator at one public agency put it:

I would say that the NCP communities as a whole, if they were able to craft some initiative-level policy action recommendations, I think, as a whole, the initiative could have a greater impact. . . . Let’s say if you had an NCP summit [that might generate] a five-point agenda that comes out of NCP at the initiative level . . . that may be something that they would have to consider what parts need to go to the city, what parts need to go to the state.

From the perspective of at least this particular “target” of a potentially united NCP advocacy voice, such initiative-level coordination would make NCP a more *effective* policy interlocutor rather than necessarily a more troublesome and demanding one.

The MacArthur Foundation has voiced similar interests in the development of an NCP policy agenda. While acknowledging that a nonconfrontational “insider” approach and brokering role that prioritizes building and sustaining alliances can yield results and has sometimes done so, MacArthur is increasingly concerned that, without more of an intentional systems orientation, NCP’s impacts are at risk of becoming “piecemeal” and “parochial,” and that some issues are too broadly systemic to be amenable to LISC/Chicago’s current approach at all. MacArthur is thus interested in seeing LISC/Chicago build on the policy- and systems-change focus emerging from particular NCP sites (for example, SWOP’s foreclosure work) or to coordinate NCP-wide efforts (for example, around a transportation agenda that might support community-driven efforts like the one in Auburn Gresham) and begin collaborating with regional planning and advocacy institutions to pursue it. From this perspective, a more assertive and systematic policy approach — one that would not necessarily be confrontational but that would be more intentional than opportunistic — is a prerequisite to gaining real leverage on some of the fundamental systems-level challenges that NCP communities face.

## **Coda: Exploring New Terrain**

As the research for this report was winding down in late 2010, the NCP initiative was entering a phase of transition under potentially challenging circumstances. LISC/Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation were engaged in discussions regarding the future of the initiative after the 2012

end-date of the foundation's original 10-year commitment, which would clearly involve reduced funding levels. Mayor Richard M. Daley had announced, to the surprise of many, that he would not run for a sixth term in the elections of February 2011, guaranteeing Chicago its first new mayor in 22 years and potentially jeopardizing LISC/Chicago's close relations with city government.

In early 2011, LISC/Chicago convened all NCP lead agencies in a series of meetings designed to craft a set of broadly shared priorities for the initiative as a whole going forward — the first time it had attempted such NCP-wide coordination in the course of the initiative. Although this exercise was not directly oriented toward policy or systems change, the question of whether NCP should develop a common policy agenda arose repeatedly during the process. Moreover, of the dual purposes for which the process was intended — developing a common framework for the upcoming NCP grant renewal application to the MacArthur Foundation and crafting an NCP briefing paper to present to the incoming mayor — the latter implied an aspiration to publicly advocate for citywide priorities that had rarely if ever characterized LISC/Chicago's past approach to working with city government. From the outset, it had frequently promoted the communication of community-level agendas to the mayor and other city officials and leveraged resources for community-led programs and projects. Less frequently, but very effectively, it had leveraged resources to multiple communities through the likes of federal foreclosure recovery and broadband funding. Now it was acting on its own initiative, and it was attempting to coordinate all 14 NCP communities and leverage their aggregate weight to influence the new administration's community development agenda.

This process began, appropriately to LISC/Chicago's general orientation, as a set of independent, community-level planning and issue identification exercises. In October 2010, the lead agencies were charged with conducting a short series of meetings with community stakeholders in their neighborhoods in order to select three to five issues on which their work would focus in the next phase of the initiative. On the basis of these plans, which were completed in December 2010, LISC/Chicago drafted a summary of high-priority work consisting of 34 projects and programs in five priority "interest areas." These interest areas are "stronger youth, healthier families"; "a green, vibrant city"; "new jobs, modern skills"; "school-community partnerships"; and "building blocks for tomorrow." A month-long, iterative process of feedback and discussion, organized around three all-agency meetings, took place in January and February 2011. The first meeting focused on refining the areas to be presented in the mayoral briefing paper. The second focused on how these areas would be presented to the MacArthur Foundation, by asking lead agencies to prioritize resources among the 34 projects and programs and among operational categories such as staffing, technical assistance, communications, and project seed grants. The third focused on planning cross-community events and public messaging. A follow-up meeting in March 2011 was subsequently arranged to develop

next steps and discuss substantive issues about cross-community coordination that had arisen during the process.

One of these issues, which arose repeatedly in the three meetings, was the role of policy and advocacy in NCP's future development and the potential for a common policy agenda and collective impact. LISC/Chicago staff members were generally receptive to this possibility, raising it themselves in some contexts, and expressing a willingness to move in this direction if it was a priority among the lead agencies. Yet they also articulated the organization's longstanding wariness toward policy and advocacy on several occasions, suggesting that their role would largely be a supporting rather than a coordinating one, and shifting the focus of systems engagement from policy reform toward resource leverage and project priorities. At the same time, these meetings did not give rise to unanimity among lead agencies themselves on this question, although the strongest voices tended to be the ones calling for orchestrated policy influence.

In the aftermath of this all-agency phase of the transition planning process, both LISC/Chicago staff members and a few NCP lead agency participants expressed reservations about both the way the meetings were organized and what they ultimately achieved. Since the transition process was not a focus of the research informing this report, only provisional conclusions are warranted, but it seems safe to say that LISC/Chicago showed itself to be not entirely comfortable in the unfamiliar role of actively coordinating an initiative-wide agenda, and that much can be learned from this first attempt if the organization continues in this direction.



## Chapter 7

# Conclusions: Opportunities, Challenges, and Implications

As the analysis in the preceding chapters makes clear, policy and systems-change objectives, although not central to the work of the New Communities Program (NCP) at either the community or the initiative level, are increasingly emerging as important dimensions of work among NCP stakeholders. However, the questions surrounding this work — what it means to focus on “systems change,” how much to focus on it, what strategies and tactics are most effective, whose responsibility it is (and in what ways) to spearhead and support it — are points of some debate.

NCP’s general orientation toward and the current “state of play” regarding engagement in policy and systems-change work is similar to that of many other comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), today and historically. Like other CCIs, in spite of an explicit recognition of the ways in which local communities are embedded in larger systems and of how the decisions and actions of policy, market, and institutional actors beyond the neighborhood often have significant impact on community opportunities and outcomes, the lion’s share of investment and energy still focuses inward, toward community-level activity and the development of projects and programs in response to particular community needs and priorities. Although there are, of course, exceptions, this orientation is, in many ways, hard-wired into the structure of CCIs and the institutional contexts that frame action within them. The foundations that sponsor CCIs tend to be somewhat risk-averse with regard to political engagement, and they see their role primarily as providing support — funding, ideas, technical assistance, access to information and relationships — for community planning and (mostly programmatic) action.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>There are exceptions — for example, among foundations operating as “embedded funders” (Sojourner et al., 2004; Karlström, Brown, Chaskin, and Richman, 2009), some of which have pursued policy and systems change in support of community priorities by leveraging their own relationships and stature in relevant political and policymaking settings. The Humboldt Area Foundation has helped reshape the economic development policies of both local government and nonprofits along California’s North Coast by bringing together otherwise disconnected or antipathetic stakeholders in extended dialogue and planning processes. The Piton Foundation has promoted school reform in the Denver Public Schools by partnering directly both with community organizers to mobilize parents and with a reform-oriented schools administration. The Skillman Foundation’s 10-year initiative in six Detroit neighborhoods has involved community planning and goal setting akin to the NCP quality-of-life planning process and resource brokering of the sort that LISC/Chicago has prioritized, as well as direct and sometimes confrontational support for policy and systems change in public education, energy policy, and state funding mechanisms that put inner-city neighborhoods at a disadvantage.

The organizations that drive CCIs on the ground are for the most part more focused on planning, development, and service provision than they are on mobilization and social action. In this vein, they may have some experience with interest-group policy advocacy, but are rarely oriented primarily toward policy change in the ways that many social movement organizations are. The intermediaries that support these local organizations' work tend to see their role as, and have their core competencies grounded in, capacity building and technical assistance for organizational, program, and project development. And the very local focus on neighborhood change tends to limit structural analysis to specific instances, often in response to an obstacle or crisis that community-level action alone cannot address. In spite of this, a focus on systems change and efforts to influence policy, market, and institutional actors does emerge in CCIs, largely oriented toward collaborative efforts to forge consensus with key actors and to promote alignment between community interests and those of powerful outsiders. More rarely, though with some exceptions, do CCI actors engage in broader mobilization and strategies of contention.

The analysis in this report is intended to provide grounded insight into the ways in which policy and systems-change work is understood, catalyzed, and implemented in NCP, and the key factors that condition its evolution and impact. At the community level, organizational and contextual factors influence whether, where, and how NCP's lead agencies will develop a policy agenda. Strong alliances with influential people and entities are crucial in providing initial access and, sometimes, generating critical leverage. Forging these alliances often relies on the perception of reciprocal benefit and on building mutual trust over time by gradually building and nurturing relationships. These relationships can be fruitful, although impact is generally incremental and highly contingent. Indeed, even when agendas are modest, the odds against succeeding are significant. Structural constraints, from those framed by the nature of CCIs noted above to broader (sometimes unexpected) political and economic contingencies, throw up formidable challenges, and any hope of success often requires considerable perseverance and agility. However, even when they are unsuccessful in their initial aims, these efforts can sometimes generate important unexpected benefits, often in the form of new relationships and alliances.

At the initiative level, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) has sought broadly to reorient the community development system to be more connected, coordinated, and responsive to the needs and priorities of the neighborhoods with which it works. It has provided targeted resources and leveraged its relationships using a number of approaches to support community-level efforts to influence systems change in often narrow but quite important ways. It has also both leveraged the NCP agenda and brokered external opportunities through its relationships, especially with the city, to funnel resources to NCP communities and position them to contribute to the shape and implementation of broader policy initiatives related to, for example, schools, federal stimulus funding, and technology.

Finally, in a few instances it provided some support to cross-site efforts aimed at issues of common concern.

To a large degree, this is engaging policy at the margins — and intentionally so. As described throughout this report, LISC/Chicago’s orientation in this regard is intentionally opportunistic and protective of its relationships in order to continue to generate clear, short-term gains while retaining the ability to wield influence over the long term and have the potential of impact, over time, in incremental ways.

The debate emerging within the initiative concerns the extent to which these targeted, independent, and incremental efforts to motivate particular policy, market, and institutional actors toward specific, short-term actions and ends makes full use of the potential that the NCP “platform” provides, and whether they can lead to the kinds of measurable, sustainable change at the neighborhood level that the initiative was designed to promote. Certainly, the individual, community-based forays into seeking to engage with policy and systems are to some degree fundamentally limited, and there is some disconnect between initiative-level activity on this front and the policy- and systems-change agendas of local communities participating in NCP. It may be possible to more powerfully leverage NCP — its actors, capacities, activities, and relationships — toward broader change in systems that have an impact across neighborhoods and to contribute to the achievement of key quality-of-life goals within them. How this might be accomplished, around what objectives, and what contributions participants might make toward this end are important considerations for initiative participants to contemplate. Three elements, in particular, might warrant consideration: identifying key issues, cross-community organizing and collective action, and building broader alliances.

## **Identifying Key Issues**

Although NCP neighborhoods differ considerably along important dimensions — demographics, location, organizational infrastructure, economic opportunity, trajectories of neighborhood change — they also face some similar challenges and are affected by the decisions and actions of some of the same political and institutional leaders. Some of these challenges (around, for example, public education, public transportation, affordable housing, unemployment, and safety) may provide an opportunity for collective planning and for shaping a change agenda that targets institutional actors, resources, and decision-makers “upstream” of the individual neighborhoods but that may have implications for each.

The mechanisms for identifying key issues, analyzing their relevance for and differential impact across communities, and prioritizing among them are less than clear. Priorities for neighborhood change that have been codified in the quality-of-life plans emerged from a set of independent (if centrally supported) neighborhood-based planning processes, and responses to

more global influences (for example, the economic downturn and the impact of public housing “transformation”) have been similarly framed within a set of very local, neighborhood-by-neighborhood perspectives. Cross-site communication, whether centrally facilitated by LISC/Chicago or engaged in more informally among lead agency NCP directors, has been episodic and, although in some instances serving to surface issues of common interest, has not provided the means for more intentional cross-site consideration of issue identification, definition, prioritization, or assessment. Being more intentional about collective issue identification — beyond the recent efforts organized around transition planning — may require support for a set of particular inputs (such as information and data analysis), processes (such as cross-site planning), and a set of capacities (such as dedicated staff in lead agencies and at the initiative level) that are currently not in place.

## **Cross-Community Organizing and Collective Action**

The second issue follows from the first, and focuses on opportunities for *cross-community organizing* — moving beyond cross-site issue identification and assessment to *collective action*. Unlike many CCIs, NCP has the advantage of significant scale — operating in 14 different neighborhoods in the same city that, together, represent several hundred thousand people. With the identification of a collective policy agenda, the potential for cross-neighborhood action toward a policy advocacy campaign is very real. The particular agenda that might drive such a campaign, and the particular strategies, tactics, allies, and targets that it would entail, is of course a matter of considerable importance and considerable choice. It might be more or less oriented toward mobilization or negotiation, collaboration or contention, insider or outsider orientations. It might be driven by different sets of actors. And it might be implemented through different collaborative arrangements.

As with the question of issue identification, leveraging the potential collective influence of NCP neighborhoods acting on behalf of a sizeable constituency with regard to policy or systems-level issues requires intentional choices and behavior, and raises questions about how best to catalyze, organize, and enact a collective agenda. Without a dedicated capacity to catalyze such cross-site organizing, it is unlikely to get done. LISC/Chicago, as the managing intermediary for the initiative and with significant access to key players in both local government and the business community, is arguably in the best position to marshal such activity. Nonetheless, there are questions of balance to be negotiated and trade-offs to be considered — including questions of central control versus neighborhood autonomy, of leveraging versus squandering political capital, of existing organizational capacity versus the need for new skills, knowledge, and tools. Taking on this role also entails costs, and would require targeted resources to support it. Some lead agencies may have greater institutional capacity for — and certainly greater experience with — particular kinds of organizing and mobilization than does



LISC/Chicago, suggesting the possibility of different ways of structuring a division of labor among initiative participants.

## **Creating Broader Alliances**

Related to the last point, a third issue concerns a consideration of broader alliances and division of labor beyond the current core group of initiative participants. As noted above, efforts to influence policy, market, and institutional actors toward key aspects of systems change can take many forms and can be supported in different ways by different participants and stakeholders. Organizations have particular proclivities, as well as particular strengths and weaknesses. The complexity and ambition of the kinds of community-change goals that characterize NCP and other CCIs are beyond the capacity of any single organization to achieve. Further, not all organizations are well endowed or well positioned to do direct advocacy work, or to be equally effective at “outsider” tactics or “insider” negotiations. There may be unrealized opportunities in NCP, however, to craft broader strategic alliances with organizations engaged in policy advocacy and systems-change work on issues that conform to the interests of NCP participants, and that allow for a division of labor among organizations that draws on the relative strengths and proclivities of each to be effective in their realm, grounded in coordinated effort.

A number of organizations in Chicago take community mobilization and policy advocacy around particular areas — such as housing, education, and transportation — as a central part of their mission and are connected to broader coalitions of individuals operating at different levels to try to effect policy change and shape systems reform. LISC/Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation, or some broader combination of NCP leaders may benefit from engaging more intentionally with these actors. They could, for example, play a more direct role in some of these coalitions, participating in their meetings and contributing to their campaigns. Or they could remain more distant but seek to intentionally support, inform, or otherwise connect to the lines of work in which they are engaged. In these ways, they may be able to reinforce the effect of these organizations’ and coalitions’ independent advocacy such that they may have important impacts on NCP communities.

Such engagement is not without risks, of course. Turf battles, philosophical disagreements, differences in relative priorities, or competition for resources (to name a few potential complications) can hinder or even derail collective efforts of this sort. And, again, such engagement requires dedicated support — resources, skills, staff capacity — to be able to pursue such an agenda with intentionality and focus. But doing so at least potentially provides an opportunity to shift the focus beyond the local, connect the priorities generated and activities being engaged in locally to the broader actors and processes that influence the likelihood of success, and allow for participating organizations to play to their own strengths while leveraging the strengths — skills, knowledge, resources, networks — of their partners.

## **Beyond the New Communities Program**

The implications of these considerations have relevance beyond NCP to CCIs and community-building initiatives more broadly. Particularly in the context of multisite initiatives, they suggest ways in which it may be possible to leverage initiative structure and reach toward greater impact. But even in the context of efforts grounded in a single community, they suggest the importance of intentionality in framing community-building efforts more explicitly with reference to the structural conditions and higher-order actors and processes that promote or constrain communities' ability to effect change. They also suggest the value of considering broadly the range of strategies (including political contention) that are available to them, and of framing responses in the context of a broader ecology of relationships and alliance building.

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## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.