

Building Community Capacity for Action



*Lessons Learned in Leadership
and Partnership from the
LISC Houston Experience*

The LOCAL INITIATIVES SUPPORT
CORPORATION helps resident-led,
community-based development organizations
transform distressed communities and neighborhoods
into healthy sustainable ones-- good places to live, do
business, work and raise families. By providing capital,
technical expertise, training and information, LISC
supports the development of local leadership and the
creation of affordable housing, commercial, industrial
and community facilities, businesses and jobs.

We help neighbors build communities.

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LISC Houston supports sustainable communities by building neighborhood leadership, inspiring local self-reliance, and promoting city and regional policies which can create the conditions for community health and well-being. Through a commitment to partnership with local communities, government agencies, businesses, philanthropy and other non-profits, LISC Houston leverages investment and fosters collaboration to generate positive and lasting community development.

Overview

In spite of all the scientific discoveries, technical advances and economic progress we have made as a culture, we are still at the dawn of our understanding of the process of community development.

The act of community development, where people come together to determine a better future for themselves, their families and the places they live, work and play, is an ancient practice. We have countless examples of success in this human endeavor and numerous challenges to learn from, yet there is no science underlying the way people will interact with one another, organize, and respond to challenges in order to create healthier communities.

This report captures the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Houston's reflections and experiences in building capacity for community action. It illustrates lessons learned over the course of several years working in a local context with Houston communities and is meant to share thinking, document learning, and suggest new approaches to comprehensive community development.

Partnership and leadership are specific aspects of the community development process highlighted here because of LISC's orientation to serving as an authentic partner and supporting genuine partnership in communities. In this process, LISC strives to support the central role of leadership in creating self-reliant, healthy neighborhoods.

Certainly, all community development must be responsive to a number of variables including the unique characteristics of a place, the interweaving of culture and history, and the effect of current circumstances. Nevertheless, we hope that the lessons and recommendations shared here can help deepen the practice of community development in the Greater Houston area and beyond.

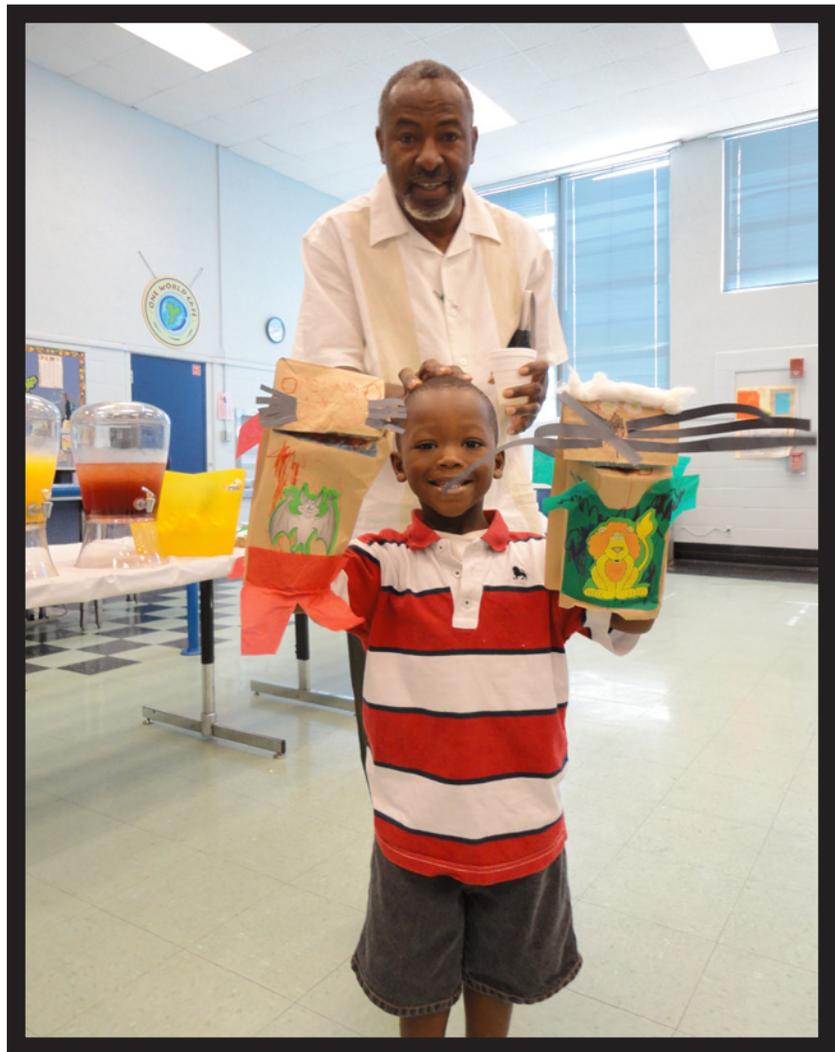


LISC and the Sustainable Communities Initiative

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has always been committed to supporting and revitalizing communities. More recently, LISC as a whole saw an opportunity to increase its impact and effectiveness in communities, and in 2006, launched the Sustainable Communities Initiative. The initiative has created a significant and vital transformation within the organization nationally.

Historically, LISC worked primarily as a funder, lender and intermediary assisting low income communities in the process of developing infrastructure – from housing to commercial corridors. But while communities, particularly those which have been historically disadvantaged and discriminated against, need bricks-and-mortar development the true heart of any community is the people who live there and can share its history and shape its future. While the built environment can influence a community's culture, character, health, and economic vitality, it is the members of that community who are instrumental in leading change.

LISC has always worked directly with community members, but the Sustainable Communities Initiative has required a deeper and more integrated element to its efforts in cities like Houston





and across the country. LISC successfully pioneered this initiative in Providence and Chicago, all the while understanding that building sustainable communities and the process of comprehensive community development appears differently in every city and in every neighborhood. LISC knew that newer cities and regions of the South and West required distinct approaches to community development and demanded clarity on the role of an intermediary such as LISC as a partner and capacity builder.

The LISC Houston Experience

LISC Houston modeled its initial steps toward capacity building for sustainable communities by embarking on a “Neighborhood Challenge” process in 2008. This process was important to both assess readiness for two initial “pilot communities” to receive substantial technical assistance and funding while providing support and facilitating shared learning across eight communities.

The first step of the Neighborhood Challenge process was a series of leadership and community building training sessions for communities throughout Houston. These training sessions offered a basic orientation for community members around developing skills in community leadership, community engagement and community building. However, while many participants reported utilizing skills learned through these trainings in their communities and improving their leadership, this process alone was not enough to embed the type of leadership and capacity necessary to guide comprehensive community development.

While the training sessions were taking place, LISC conducted a competitive process to determine which two communities would serve as pilot neighborhoods and receive funding and support for articulating a Quality of Life Plan and meeting additional capacity building needs. The communities not selected during this initial process would serve as “pipeline communities” and also receive training, support and investment. An important part of the process was balancing selecting particular communities that could receive a particular level of focus, while engaging all interested communities in a broader ‘learning community’ focused on community development practice in the Houston area. Learning communities provide ongoing opportunities for informal learning and peer support. These communities are able to benefit and learn from each other’s successes and struggles as well as those of the pilot communities selected, and also have access to training and funding as available through LISC Houston for smaller neighborhood projects.

Through the Neighborhood Challenge process, the neighborhoods of Independence Heights and Near Northside emerged as the first candidates to receive further capacity building and investment through LISC’s work. These two communities were selected based upon the strength and extent of involvement in a broad team of community leaders and members, a clearly articulated set of guidelines for their work together, and the presence of community agencies willing to serve as partners with LISC and as conveners for the planning process.

Both communities engaged in a year-long community engagement and planning process to set a vision and develop quality of life agreements focused on different dimensions of their community. Community members also received concurrent leadership development and engaged in project-based work. This phase of the initial GO Neighborhoods process culminated in a presentation of community vision and goals to city officials in Houston in October 2010.



Transforming LISC Houston's Role

As an intermediary, LISC has always had both a pivotal and sensitive role to play. Traditionally, LISC provided funds for real estate development and organizational capacity building serving as a partner in offering both technical assistance and financial resources. This role carried over during the transformation in the organization as a whole inspired by the Sustainable Communities Initiative and a repositioning of local LISC staff (in the Houston area in this case) as partners of a different kind in the community building process.

In community building, attention must be paid to the role of power and perception, especially in cases where partners provide financial and other resources to the community. LISC staff always endeavor to work as authentic partners while framing certain guidelines for the process, from expectations for selection as a pilot community to recommending a road map and measures of success for the community planning process. Part of this is the result of being a local and regional representative of a national organization which both allows significant flexibility and requires particular performance outcomes.

The specific lessons learned and recommendations detailed below have emerged from the experience of community capacity building in Houston and are central to the deepening of LISC's Sustainable Communities Initiative in the area.

CASE STUDY # 1

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Approach to Leadership Development

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, whose mission is “to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families,” uses lessons learned from their major initiatives to champion the importance of leadership development for a broad spectrum of participants in the community development process.

The Casey Foundation’s **Rebuilding Communities Initiative** was a comprehensive seven-year effort launched in 1994 to revitalize distressed neighborhoods in seven U.S. cities. Among other important features, the initiative represented a shift for the foundation towards individual and community empowerment as fundamental to fighting poverty and revitalizing neighborhoods. This asset-based orientation acknowledged that people living in impoverished neighborhoods, with support and guidance, were well-positioned and well-equipped to lead change efforts. At the conclusion of the initiative, the foundation confirmed that leadership development, along with community organizing, is critical to the success of any neighborhood revitalization work.

The Casey Foundation incorporated lessons learned about leadership development into the **Making Connections Initiative**, which commenced in 1999. The Initiative is a ten-year effort to improve outcomes for families and children in ten neighborhoods throughout the United States, guided by the premise that children do better when their families are strong, and families do better when they live in communities that help them to succeed. Leadership development is a thread that runs through every programmatic element of the Initiative. One example is Making Connections Denver, where residents are provided opportunities to hone their leadership skills in order to advocate for improved public schools.

Experience from these and other Casey Foundation initiatives informs the work of their **Leadership Development Unit**, which strives to understand the most effective ways to “accelerate the performance of individuals, organizations and communities in their efforts to make measurable improvements in the lives of disadvantaged children and families.” This “talent management” approach builds the capacity of individuals, organization staff, grantees and community members so that they can effectively lead change efforts. One example of the implementation of this approach is the Children and Family Fellowship, which is a 20-month leadership development program for professionals from public and private agencies who serve communities. The program provides tools and resources for these professionals to broaden their vision for improving outcomes for families and neighborhoods, expand their knowledge, enlarge their networks, increase their confidence and enhance their leadership capacity.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Several themes and recommendations have emerged over the course of LISC Houston’s work with a number of neighborhoods, and in more intensive engagement with two pilot communities. While these are lessons learned in a particular place at a particular time, many of these observations may hold true in other communities around the country.

Community Development is Evolutionary

The process of community development does not move “from Point A to Point B” in a straight line, nor does it obey a particular timeline. It is evolutionary and responsive to numerous variables. There are unexpected detours, new discoveries, and opportunities to pause and reflect along the way. While there is no formula that enables a community to realize its vision according to a particular schedule, there are several indicators that can help frame any community’s journey.

- **Place Matters.** Communities are each unique combinations of people, history, infrastructure, and resources. We need to be able to carefully and clearly understand the complexity of factors that make up any one community or place, and work with that community to choose opportunities carefully that will work. The act of simply listening to and sharing stories with community members can be a profound first step toward unearthing what matters to those who live, work and play in a particular place.
- **Honor Culture and Promote Inclusion.** A critical element of any community which is intimately linked to its history and physical layout is the interaction of cultures found in that community and the related but separate ‘community culture’. In serving to support community development—and to avoid, address, or ameliorate conflict—understanding both the unique cultures found in many communities and the dynamics that result through the combination of these cultures in one place cannot be understated. Cultural competency of intermediaries, local agencies, and organizers should be a central consideration in effective community development.



- **'Build' Community.** The work of both community organizing and community building are vitally important for creating healthy communities, but they have different results. Organizing involves linking people and organizations around a common cause, like providing health care for community members or cleaning up a source of pollution, empowering the community in the process. Community building involves engaging those in the community in creating long-term relationships with each other. Comprehensive—and lasting—community development is asset-based, building on what is already working, and is solutions-oriented, focused on positive responses to the vision a community has articulated.
- **Foster Collaboration.** We live in a world too often framed by competitive principles rather than collaborative ones. Helping to bridge organizations and residents within and across communities through providing opportunities for dialogue, shared projects, and incentives for cooperation deepens the community building process.
- **Think Past a Plan.** While a plan is an essential part of community development, often there is a significant drop in involvement once a plan has been created—as if this product were the final goal, and not merely the first stone laid in a long path.

Partnership is Paramount

At every level of the community development process, true partnership is a crucial practice. More often than not, there exists an opportunity to define and execute partnership in a fundamentally different way. Authentic partnership requires entering into a relationship on equal footing, and this is rarely the case in a community development context. The following guidelines have evolved based on LISC Houston's ongoing experience with the partnership process.

- **Create Agreements.** Perhaps the most essential part of the partnership process is working together to frame the agreements and guidelines that can hold people accountable as partners—in the work that they do and to each other. It is the first test and practice of a successful partnership when these agreements can be structured by those involved without coercive influence. Ideally, agreements are created before any work is done, as they provide a companion to a shared vision and offer clarity around the “rules of engagement”.
- **Commit to Conflict** (*and to Resolving It*). One of the most common mistakes in a partnership (and in community development generally) is not expecting and preparing for conflict. Conflict is a crucible for strengthening relationships—if it is addressed appropriately—and can often serve as the glue for successful partnerships if there is a structure for handling it. The first step in any such structure is talking with partners about having an “attitude of resolution”. No matter how simple this might seem, it is a critical piece to learning from and creatively diffusing conflict so that it can serve to support true partnership.
- **Engage in Co-Design.** The veteran organizer and writer Saul Alinsky spoke of an Iron Rule with community process—“never do for others what they can do for themselves”. When engaging in partnership—with a community or within it—striving to “co-design” projects, educational opportunities, and outcomes is a clear sign of a commitment to partnership. Rather than presenting guidelines, training, or prescriptions for a community, engaging people in collectively identifying and designing what they need and what it looks like builds partnership, leadership and community health.

CASE STUDY #2

Kellogg Leadership for Community Change

In 2002, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) program to “promote collective and culturally appropriate leadership in communities across the country.” Kellogg places an emphasis on the importance of developing the skills of individuals and organizations that, although extremely capable, are typically considered to be non-traditional leaders in today’s society and culture. The program is, in fact, very intentional about utilizing leadership development to disrupt the traditional structures that create inequities in our society.

The KLCC program, administered by local host agencies and run by the Center for Ethical Leadership, is broken into 36-month sessions designed around a theme or topic of interest to the foundation’s program areas and goals. Two sessions have been completed, the first in 2005, focused on “strengthening public will and action toward quality teaching and learning,” and the second in 2009, focused on “valuing and building youth and adult partnerships to advance just communities.”

At the core of the KLCC program are a diverse pool of fellows, who participate in and explore the main elements of the series, including understanding place-based leadership, developing individual leadership gifts, and how to make change happen.

Nearly 400 fellows have completed the program and a multiplicity of tools and resources have been developed in order to share learning and spread knowledge to a wider audience. The tools include a workbook, website and video series that detail the Framework Approach that the KLCC program utilizes, as well as a learning exchange for communities, a collective leadership book, an online community called the KLCC Knowledge Well and a toolkit.

The KLCC program aspires to engage and develop the leadership skills of a broader community to create individual, organizational, systems and policy change. Not only does KLCC have specific examples of these changes taking place, but through the learning community, they have compiled these and other cross-cutting lessons learned (from Leadership for 21st Century Change: a Report on the KLCC Program, 2009):

- The wisdom to make substantive community change already exists in communities
- Individual and collective leadership are integrally connected
- Openness to learning and unlearning is a critical leadership skill
- Identifying a compelling, shared purpose helps people work across boundaries
- Collective leadership tempers the leadership transitions that can undo change initiatives
- Collective leadership is fundamentally about creating relationships and strengthening social fabric

- **Realize and Reflect on Your Role.** There is humility in true partnership which tends to be a rare or lost value in the United States. Partnership requires putting ego aside and not simply listening to but also acting on another's recommendation or request. Partnership requires deepening individual and institutional self-knowledge to understand the impact that power can have. And partnership also requires a clear delineation of responsibility, along with consistent reflection with others regarding the expectations for and performance of each partner.
- **Understand 'Readiness'.** In framing comprehensive community development, particularly in the LISC Houston experience, there is an attempt to define a neighborhood's 'readiness' to engage in community building. While it's important to have a set of standards or criteria, the concept of readiness fundamentally contradicts a community development model which values asset-based, solutions-oriented process. At a minimum, there need to be a certain core set of individuals and organizations willing to work within the neighborhood and across neighborhoods with others to learn, plan, and build resources together. Beyond the threshold of this commitment to partnership, every community and every organization needs to be met where they are, and honored for their own evolution.





Grow Lasting Leadership and Learning

To build sustainable communities we need to build relationships and connections effectively through partnership in communities over time, led by those who are from that community. Growing an ongoing process of leadership development and learning is central to building community capacity for action over the long-term.

- **Build Relationships.** Simply put, the act of relationship building is at the heart of creating community, meaningful partnership, and effective leadership. Through one-on-one conversations, planning and execution of projects, and celebrations of success, we can build trust and lasting relationships in communities and have this support sustained capacity to affect positive change. Most importantly, the act of demonstrating a commitment to those relationships as an involved individual, neighborhood organization and especially as an intermediary is critical. Capacity is built through consistency.

- **Seed ‘Communities of Practice’.** We must help people remain connected with and learning from each other—within and across neighborhoods. A focus on developing real pipelines for community members and local organizations to play a role in changing and stewardship of their place is only possible through the support of others walking a similar path. Creating opportunities for people to engage in ongoing reflective practice builds relationships and develops local knowledge and talent.

- **Create a Culture of Coaching.** Most people have an experience of coaching which is connected with sports, where a coach might push you to be your best, push past your boundaries, and work effectively as part of a team. In a community context, coaching is about supporting and holding ourselves and one another accountable. It is about a shared commitment to developing leadership—in our own work and in that of others—and to discovering and learning what it means to be a leader in a community context. Coaching is an essential part of providing the ongoing support that people need as they do the work of community building, and results in greater capacity because of a consistent engagement over time.

- **Leadership is Learned and Shared** (*Not Trained or Isolated*). Leadership development for community building does not conform to many assumptions and approaches we have around learning. By facilitating experimentation and offering opportunities for veteran and emerging leaders to share their experiences, a shift from a training model to a learning community model takes place. Participants are able to trade stories, explore new skills, and set the agenda for themselves, so that leadership development becomes embedded in the culture. Likewise, identification of an individual or “type” of person with leadership qualities diminishes the roles and potential of others in the community who are leading in different ways. Our traditional conception of leaders as a single individual capable of motivating and directing others is not always helpful in a community setting. Shared leadership ensures a more sustainable approach to community development by providing a diversity of leadership styles to guide the work, supporting greater accountability, and limiting burnout which can happen when one individual is left to carry what is ultimately a community-wide responsibility.

- **Generate a Legacy of Leadership.** The most powerful demonstration of our leadership is the development of other leaders to widen and extend the practice of comprehensive community development. Both within and across particular neighborhoods, leaders are applying lessons learned in their work and modeling effective approaches for emerging leaders. Some participants in LISC leadership development activities have taken what they have learned and are working with others in the community to engage them in the leadership development process.

New Directions

LISC Houston has built on the significant transformation in its work inspired by LISC's national Sustainable Communities Initiative. There have been both interim results produced and greater opportunities and possibilities from work in LISC's GO Neighborhoods program in Houston

Rather than a top-down approach which dictates requirements and a timeline for communities, the GO Neighborhoods program hopes to support evolution without prescription while still framing agreements with communities to focus on results.



Some of the most meaningful results which have been observed as a result of LISC Houston's partnership and leadership development activities certainly include the quality of the community plans themselves.

But the way in which leadership and partnership lessons have appeared in the everyday in Houston communities produce a deeper set of results: from seeing leaders sharing power and civic leaders using what they have learned in their meetings to community members training each other and reaching out to recruit people for community meetings.

Communities have also been demonstrating greater intention and innovation around inclusion and ensuring that all segments of their community are involved. Beyond the neighborhoods, funders and city-wide partners have noticed the sustained energy and momentum in the neighborhoods.

As the GO Neighborhoods program moves forward, staff, consultants and community members have observed the need to ensure greater accountability by jointly setting guidelines for deliverables so that promises build trust throughout the community and with partners through verifications.



A vital part of this process and a foundation of strengthening partnership which has been recommended above focuses on framing agreements to guide collective work. Such agreements require deep listening and asking clear questions of partners.

Another important practice for generating community self-reliance and producing shared leadership is to prioritize giving voice to grassroots leaders and encouraging community members to share their stories and the story of the neighborhood—both in the community and in wider forums on city and regional policy development.



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