

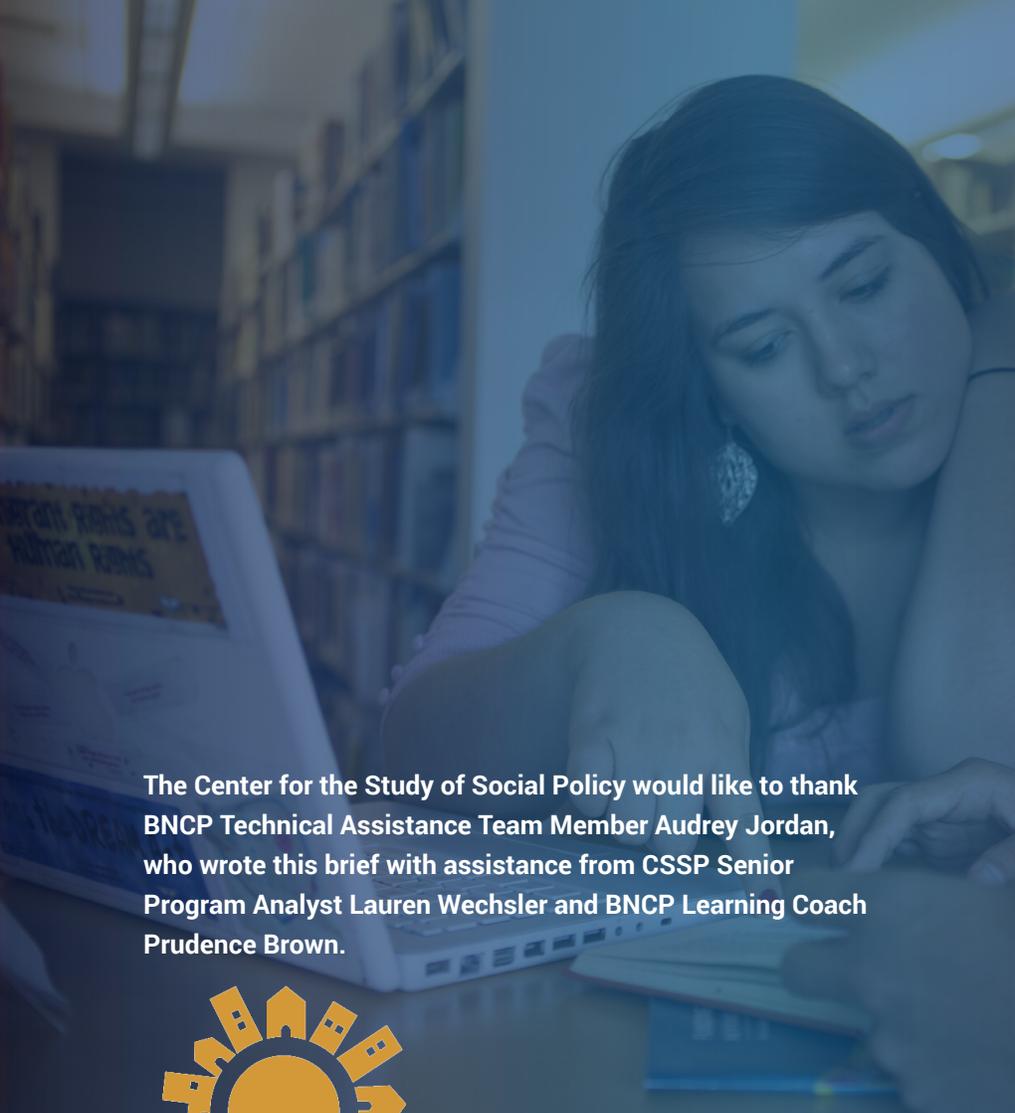
Learn By Doing in Action: Fresno

BUILDING NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITY PROGRAM PRACTICE BRIEF



Building Neighborhood
Capacity Program

buildingcommunitycapacity.org



The Center for the Study of Social Policy would like to thank BNCP Technical Assistance Team Member Audrey Jordan, who wrote this brief with assistance from CSSP Senior Program Analyst Lauren Wechsler and BNCP Learning Coach Prudence Brown.



What is the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program?

The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) catalyzes community-driven change in neighborhoods that have historically faced barriers to revitalization. Recognizing the power of place to influence access to opportunity, BNCP is part of the Obama Administration's place-based programming efforts, which includes the Promise Zones and Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative.

BNCP focuses on building community capacity: the knowledge, skills, relationships, processes and resources that neighborhood residents, partner organizations and city-level stakeholders need to work together to achieve better results in public safety, education, housing, employment and other key areas. BNCP was launched in 2012 in eight neighborhoods in four cities – Flint, MI; Fresno, CA; Memphis, TN; and Milwaukee, WI. In 2014, the program was extended, providing each city with two years of additional support to expand to a third neighborhood.

BNCP represents a federal interagency partnership, with funding from the U.S. Departments of Justice, Education, Housing and Urban Development; additional partnership from the Department of Health and Human Services; and technical assistance from the Center for the Study of Social Policy. For more information about BNCP, visit <http://www.buildingcommunitycapacity.org>.

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About this Guide

Learn By Doing (LBD) is a process that engages residents and partners in collective action to address a neighborhood priority. In addition to making a difference in the community, LBD provides an opportunity for participants to work together, learn more about neighborhood conditions and develop knowledge, skills and relationships that can be applied to future revitalization efforts.

If you want to build neighborhood capacity while producing early, tangible benefits for community members, LBD may work for your neighborhood. Findings from other neighborhood revitalization planning efforts demonstrate the value of early action that reinforces initial engagement, nurtures local leadership, provides opportunities to build new relationships and practice new skills together and supports projects that generate visible community improvements and neighborhood pride.

This practice brief features an example of the LBD process from the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) in Fresno. It is intended for diverse audiences, from resident leaders who are working to improve results in their communities to neighborhood practitioners who staff or support capacity building and revitalization efforts. You will read how a long-term concern of residents in the neighborhood of Yokomi became an idea for action. You will learn how that action produced intended results through the partnership that residents developed with other interested stakeholders. Along the way, you will follow the steps of the LBD process, which can be used as a guide to inform work in other neighborhoods.

Those steps include:


Identify a core LBD team.


Covenene the LBD team to discuss desired neighborhood results.


Focus on a LBD priority.


Identify and implement action steps.


Reflect on how to apply capacities developed to ongoing revitalization efforts.



Step One: Identify a core LBD team

As you begin the LBD process, your first task will be to identify people who live and work in your neighborhood and want to join with others to make a positive difference. Along the way, there will be an opportunity for many different contributions. Not everyone on your LBD team needs to engage in every step of the process. However, having a core group who will contribute to both planning and implementation will provide a foundation for collective dialogue, action and learning.

When assembling your core LBD team, strive for diverse representation. Have you engaged participants who reflect the demographics of your neighborhood? Have you reached out to organizations and other stakeholders who have capacities and resources that could contribute to your efforts, including city-level partners?

In the Yokomi neighborhood in Fresno, a cadre of residents interested in forming a neighborhood association met at a local block party. BNCP staff supported the new group in organizing itself, helping members get to know each other while beginning to forge a collective identity around a common commitment to improving their neighborhood. Through ongoing discussions, members began to raise the strengths and challenges they experienced living in Yokomi.

The group was composed of resident volunteers, neighbors who had attended the block party and were energized and excited to work together. But members knew they would have to continue to work hard to increase and diversify the number of people at the table. Looking around the room at meetings, the initial group reflected the ethnic mix of the neighborhood (majority Latino but with a rich assortment of residents with other heritages), but members were dedicated to expanding their outreach over time – in particular connecting with the many young families in the community.

BNCP staff, who worked as part of the City of Fresno's Neighborhood Revitalization Team, were connected to other city-level staff and neighborhood organizations who could contribute to ongoing discussions and projects as they emerged. However, the initial group was resident-centered, providing a trusted space for community members to determine their priorities and develop relationships with each other.





Step Two: Convene the LBD team to discuss desired neighborhood results

Change happens when the people who live and work in your neighborhood decide what results they want to achieve and take action to achieve them. Results are desired conditions of well-being for people in your neighborhood. For instance, a desired result might be “we live in a safe neighborhood” or “youth in our neighborhood are ready for college and career.”

As you bring together your LBD team, discuss what has been learned about the neighborhood to date. What results are important to people in the room? What priorities have emerged through early resident engagement efforts? As you share, a picture will begin to emerge of what people want for their kids, their families and the neighborhood as a whole.

At Neighborhood Association meetings, members spoke about what it was like to live in Yokomi, considering both neighborhood strengths and challenges. In naming what they loved about their community, residents lifted up their passion for working together to revitalize their community. They pledged to continue to reach out to others—to better connect neighbors and to increase the number of people collaborating. Community assets discussed included institutions like the Yokomi Elementary School, which touched many families and children in the neighborhood. However, residents noted that many of these assets could only serve as true connection points if the neighborhood around them was safe.

Living in a safe neighborhood was often described as an important result for the Neighborhood Association’s work together. In the case of Yokomi, there was not a formal process to identify safety as a desired result. However, priority themes became readily apparent over time as the BNCP staff supported residents in structuring their meetings so that they were outcomes-focused and forward-looking, building upon movement from one meeting to the next.

As residents shared their desires for their neighborhood, a meeting facilitator helped them track their conversations and priorities by documenting and synthesizing meeting notes. At the start of each session, members would briefly review what had happened to date and have an intentional discussion about desired outcomes for the conversation to come. The meeting facilitator would stand in the front of the room and use the same easel sheets of paper from one meeting to the next, adding to action plans in real time based on the discussion. Before concluding the meeting, members would determine next steps for subsequent meetings. Initially, BNCP local staff facilitated meetings, but resident members assumed that role over time, supported by leadership development training that included how to develop an agenda and run an effective meeting.



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Step Three: Focus on a LBD Priority

The purpose of the LBD project is to take initial steps toward engaging people who care about your neighborhood in building the capacities needed to work together to achieve change. The path you take to choosing a LBD priority is flexible. The most important aspect of the selection process is that it is inclusive, providing an opportunity for all team members to participate. When discussing potential focus areas, think about ways you can make sure everyone has a voice and feels comfortable sharing their views.

As you discuss priorities for action, always keep your neighborhood's desired results at the forefront. Ultimately, these results are what you want to achieve through your efforts. Encourage participants to articulate the reasons for their decisions. Why do they think various issues are worth the investment of time and energy? How can collective action fill a neighborhood need or priority? What can participants learn from the experience about their neighborhood? What other capacities can the LBD process help build?

As the BNCP staff started working with the Yokomi Neighborhood Association, they set about identifying issues the residents felt they could change in a short amount of time with big impact. Staff facilitated planning conversations to focus on residents' own priorities, which were regularly captured on easel sheet records of each meeting. Rather than doing for, BNCP staff were focused on doing with, and doing with in a way that developed Neighborhood Association members' own knowledge, skills and confidence about how to take action in the future.

When it came to safety, the issue of speeding at the elementary school emerged from the beginning as a tangible challenge. Determining what it would take to solve this problem was of clear interest to the group. The specific focus for the group's first LBD project emerged in summer of 2015. At a regularly scheduled meeting in July, everyone assembled agreed that the treacherous walk across the street at Yokomi Elementary School, with cars zipping by on their way to the hospital a few blocks away, was the top issue to work on. The existing signage indicating a school zone was ineffective at reducing speeding, but it seemed as though everyone viewed the circumstances as something they couldn't do anything about.



The group decided it couldn't wait until a child got run over to take action.

Almost everyone had a story about what they'd seen or experienced on Thesta Street right in front of the elementary school. Despite not knowing exactly what it would take to get this problem solved at the onset, the group reached consensus quickly that this was the issue it wanted to take on. With so many stories about the problem, they knew they wouldn't be alone in the fight - they could get their school board member involved and the school as allies, and they could rally parents and other families in the neighborhood to the cause.

BNCP local staff brought the sense that the group could do something about the issue of speeding near Yokomi Elementary if the members were prepared to act. Together, they could make change happen in their neighborhood with smart, constructive action. And the staff made it clear to the residents that they would be right there with them. They supported the group through careful facilitation of meetings and follow-through to identify initial action steps and then to take well-reasoned and strategic next steps. Not all neighborhood groups have the resources to hire staff, as was the case through BNCP; however, identifying local technical assistance and training organizations in your city that offer guidance and leadership development opportunities can help to connect volunteer-run groups with support.

Step Four: Identify and implement action steps

Having identified a priority to focus on, it is time to get started. Make sure there is agreement on what you hope your action will accomplish. In Yokomi, that meant reducing speeding by the elementary school to allow for safer passage. What would success look like in your own community? Consider how you would know that your efforts have produced desired outcomes. Agreeing on a common destination makes it easier to chart a path forward.

Sometimes, you will be able to develop a complete action plan, from start to finish—with thought to the activities, timeline, roles and capacities/resources required for implementing your project. But knowing where you want to go does not always translate into knowing how to get there. Often initial action steps are required to gather more information and determine who has helpful knowledge and resources to contribute. Your LBD process can begin with information-gathering and continue with an iterative cycle of thinking, doing, learning and adaptation.

When planning for initial action, a critical moment occurred when the residents realized they needed to know more about what would work to reduce speeding by the school. Moreover, they realized that the city was the entity with the data, authority and resources to make change happen. One of the residents, Veronica Burgess (who no longer lives in the neighborhood), stepped forward and agreed to contact the City's Public Works Department. Someone from the Traffic Department responded fairly quickly and agreed to have an initial meeting to understand the problem and to bring in other colleagues as needed to find an effective solution.

Going into their meeting with the Traffic Department, the residents and BNCP staff wanted to demonstrate that a critical mass of neighbors was concerned about this issue. By talking to residents in the other two BNCP neighborhoods (El Dorado Park and Kirk), they learned that speeding was an issue that extended beyond the Yokomi neighborhood. Prior to meeting with the city, residents from all three neighborhoods met to discuss their concerns regarding speeding problems. Joint planning conversations co-facilitated by staff and residents across the three neighborhoods subsequently followed.

After careful preparation, a group of residents met with the Traffic Department at City Hall to share observations and stories about the dangers experienced by children and families on Thesta Street. They had done some initial research about traffic strategies and asked what it would take to install a speed table (i.e. a raised area in the road to slow cars down). However, they indicated they were open to discussing other viable solutions.

The Traffic Department staff, Jill Gormley and Leslie Barkley, were moved by what they heard, but they too needed to know more. They decided they would do a study to determine the scope and scale of the problem: how many cars were speeding, how fast, how often, and when. To capture data, the Traffic Department put down a speed strip that captured information in real time, yielding answers to those questions. They found that there were too many speeding cars at times when children and families were going to and from the school, with too little attention paid to the current markings and postings that were present to direct traffic. Veronica followed up with the Ms. Gormley and Ms. Barkley to review the results, and they agreed to take immediate action.

Based on the data they collected, the Traffic Department committed not only to installing stop signs but also to repainting the crosswalk and curbs and to adding additional signage in very short order. They explained to residents that based on their experience in other neighborhoods, this was the best solution – more effective and less costly than speed tables. The residents respected this solution – they had come to partner with the City, not fight with “the enemy” – and indicated that if there were still problems with speeding cars – they'd be back to seek a different approach.

Step Five: Reflect on how to apply experience gained to ongoing revitalization efforts

The LBD process is a continuous cycle of learning and doing that does not end with the completion of a single project or goal. Having reached one benchmark of success, take the time to stop and reflect on next steps. In some cases, you may want to directly build upon what has been accomplished—for instance, if the residents in Yokomi had decided to add a public education campaign on speeding to their signage and enforcement efforts. In other cases, you may want to develop a new project or longer-term strategy focused on your desired result—for instance, turning from speeding to streetlights as part of a larger safety strategy—informed by your knowledge and experience gained.

From the initial Neighborhood Association meeting with BNCP to the placement of signs, it was a matter of 2-3 months, and the speeding problem in Yokomi was solved. The stop signs, fresh paint and additional signage greatly reduced the speeding traffic on Thesta Street. An additional positive change was that the crossing guards in front of the school now helped pedestrians cross the street by the stop signs, and they were able to do their jobs better and feel safer in the process. Said Paula Franco, crossing guard: “Although there is still room for improvement, the addition of the stop sign on Thesta has made my job easier as a crossing guard and has made streets safer for parents and children walking to school.”

Importantly, this was the start rather than the end of the partnership’s ongoing work to make the neighborhood safer. The Yokomi residents felt victorious after the speeding problem was addressed, so much so, that they were motivated to take on other issues, including stray dogs and prostitution in the neighborhood.

Moreover, the collaborative relationship forged with the City had paved the way to respond to other issues as they emerged. For instance, in direct response to the repainted curbs, some parents took to parking their cars in what was clearly a “red zone,” close to the crosswalk where they were not supposed to park. Thanks to their positive relationship with the Traffic Department, the Yokomi Neighborhood Association alerted Traffic staff to these parking violations, and the city in turn followed up. In partnership with the crossing guards and vigilant Neighborhood Association members, regular ticketing now occurs, solving yet another problem.



There is a newfound sense of choice and control that is palpable within the neighborhood. Said Bruce Thele, Principal at Yokomi Elementary School: "The addition of the stop sign has made it much safer for our students coming to and leaving school. A parent is even posted there as a crossing guard! Besides the safety aspect, it is just nice to feel energy being put into our local community to make it a nicer place for our families and students. We can control what happens on campus, and now it is extending beyond our gates."

The experience with the speeding issue also laid the groundwork for ongoing communication between the Yokomi Neighborhood Association and the Traffic Department. When emails are sent back and forth between the Neighborhood Association and the Traffic department, the BNCP local staff (in other neighborhoods, this could be a stakeholder or partner who has played a contributing role) are also copied. But the work is led by the residents.

When asked about how the LBD process could have been strengthened, Neighborhood Association members framed the capacity building process as a developmental process. The issue was not so much challenges encountered but rather ways to continue to grow as leaders and take on issues and strategies that were bigger and longer-term over time. Capacity building goals that Neighborhood Association meetings and BNCP staff set their sights on included bringing new residents to the table, deepening relationships with neighborhood partners –from Yokomi Elementary School to property owners in the community, and working with both residents and partners to identify what would work to achieve the community's desired results, including safety.

As you reflect upon your neighborhood's own LBD experience, consider the outcomes of your actions in terms of both impact and capacity-building. Examples of questions to discuss include:



Did the project contribute to your desired result(s)? What notable successes were achieved and why? For whom? How do you know?



How could your efforts have been strengthened? What are some reasons for the challenges you faced?



What capacities have been strengthened? For instance, what new relationships or partnerships were developed? What knowledge or skills were acquired?



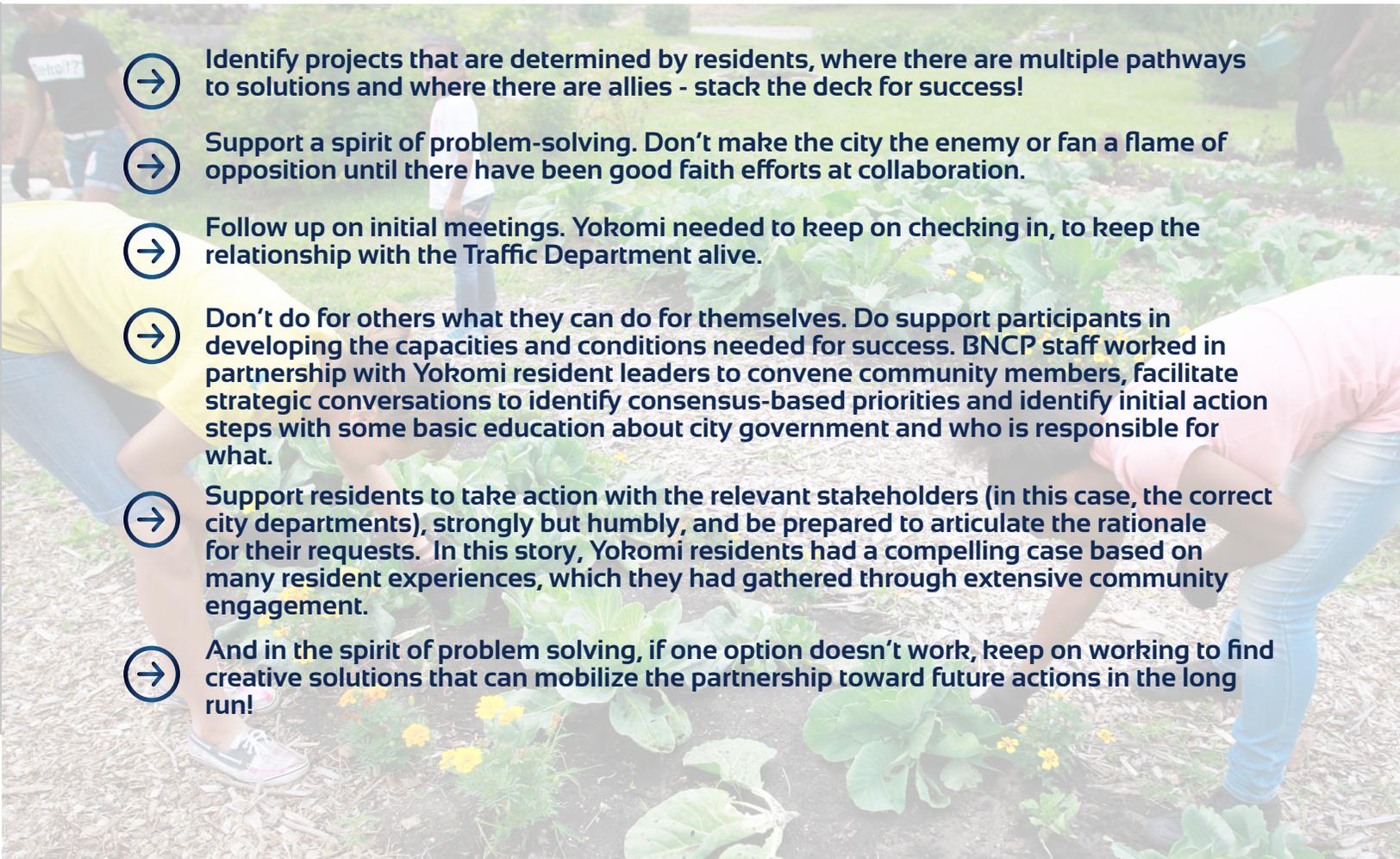
What about what you learned could inform ongoing and future efforts - in your own neighborhoods or others?

In the other BNCP neighborhoods in Fresno, the successful experience of the Yokomi neighborhood spurred continued interest in addressing their own speeding challenges. El Dorado Park, for example, had a speeding issue in the alleys. They were able to build upon Yokomi's existing relationship with the Traffic Department to have their own problem-solving meeting with the city. Unlike speeding by schools, El Dorado Park learned the Traffic Department doesn't assume responsibility for alleys, arming them with new information about where city government could act and where community members might need to work at the neighborhood-level to develop a home-grown solution.

El Dorado Park realized they had a couple of options on how to proceed, requiring innovation on their part. Ultimately, El Dorado Community Leaders partners - Wesley Church and Fresno State University – worked with the resident leaders to purchase their own signs and post them in the alleys, alerting traffic that children are playing there. As a result, the speeding has dramatically decreased. The different experiences of Yokomi and El Dorado Park demonstrate the value of customizing approaches to local needs, as well as sharing learning about the process required to identify strategies that work.

In reflecting on their experience, the BNCP local team in Fresno emphasized that every city is different, every opportunity is different, and there are no cookie-cutter solutions. They stressed that a big part of the growth and learning has been the experience of going through the process of relationship-building, discussion, discovery and action. To sum up some of what they have learned, the BNCP team in Fresno offers the following learnings from their experience for other resident leaders or neighborhood practitioners supporting community members through a learn by doing process:

Advice from BNCP-Fresno to other neighborhoods undertaking a LBD process

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- ➔ **Identify projects that are determined by residents, where there are multiple pathways to solutions and where there are allies - stack the deck for success!**
 - ➔ **Support a spirit of problem-solving. Don't make the city the enemy or fan a flame of opposition until there have been good faith efforts at collaboration.**
 - ➔ **Follow up on initial meetings. Yokomi needed to keep on checking in, to keep the relationship with the Traffic Department alive.**
 - ➔ **Don't do for others what they can do for themselves. Do support participants in developing the capacities and conditions needed for success. BNCP staff worked in partnership with Yokomi resident leaders to convene community members, facilitate strategic conversations to identify consensus-based priorities and identify initial action steps with some basic education about city government and who is responsible for what.**
 - ➔ **Support residents to take action with the relevant stakeholders (in this case, the correct city departments), strongly but humbly, and be prepared to articulate the rationale for their requests. In this story, Yokomi residents had a compelling case based on many resident experiences, which they had gathered through extensive community engagement.**
 - ➔ **And in the spirit of problem solving, if one option doesn't work, keep on working to find creative solutions that can mobilize the partnership toward future actions in the long run!**

Selected References

[Building Neighborhood Capacity Resource Center](#)

This resource from the Center for the Study of Social Policy includes information on the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program sites, as well as a variety of [tools and templates](#) on community capacity—including a practice brief on [developing local knowledge to inform action](#).

[Bureau of Justice Assistance National Training and Technical Assistance Center](#)

This resource from the U.S. Department of Justice provides information on a wide-variety of criminal justice topics, ranging from crime prevention to mental health to adjudication.

[Community Toolbox](#)

This resource from the Kansas University Work Group for Community Health and Development provides practical tools to help people work together to build healthier communities.

[Crime Solutions.Gov](#)

This resource from the National Institute on Justice provides research on what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice and crime victim services.

[HUD Exchange](#)

This resource from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provides HUD resources, updates and information.

[LISC Institute for Comprehensive Community Development](#)

This resource from LISC includes a variety of articles and practical tools focused on community development, including both process (e.g., [engagement](#) and [planning](#)) and specific issue areas. Additional information about safety can be accessed at the [LISC Community Safety Initiative](#), which includes information about the [Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Network](#).

[National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership](#)

This resource from the Urban Institute provides information about the development and use of neighborhood information systems in local policy making and community building.

[Office of Community Services of the Administration for Children and Families](#)

This resource from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides information on the department's social services and community development programs.

[Promise Neighborhoods](#)

This resource from the Department of Education provides training and technical assistance resources to help communities build pipelines of programs, service and supports so that children and youth can succeed in school and beyond.

[Youth.Gov](#)

This resource from the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs provides tools and other resources to help youth-serving organizations and community partnerships plan, implement and participate in effective programs for youth.



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