

# Linking Neighborhood and City-Level Change Strategies

**BUILDING NEIGHBORHOOD CAPACITY PROGRAM PRACTICE BRIEF**



Building Neighborhood  
Capacity Program

[buildingcommunitycapacity.org](http://buildingcommunitycapacity.org)

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## What is the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program?

The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP) catalyzed community-driven change in neighborhoods that have historically faced barriers to revitalization. BNCP focused 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.

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# Introduction

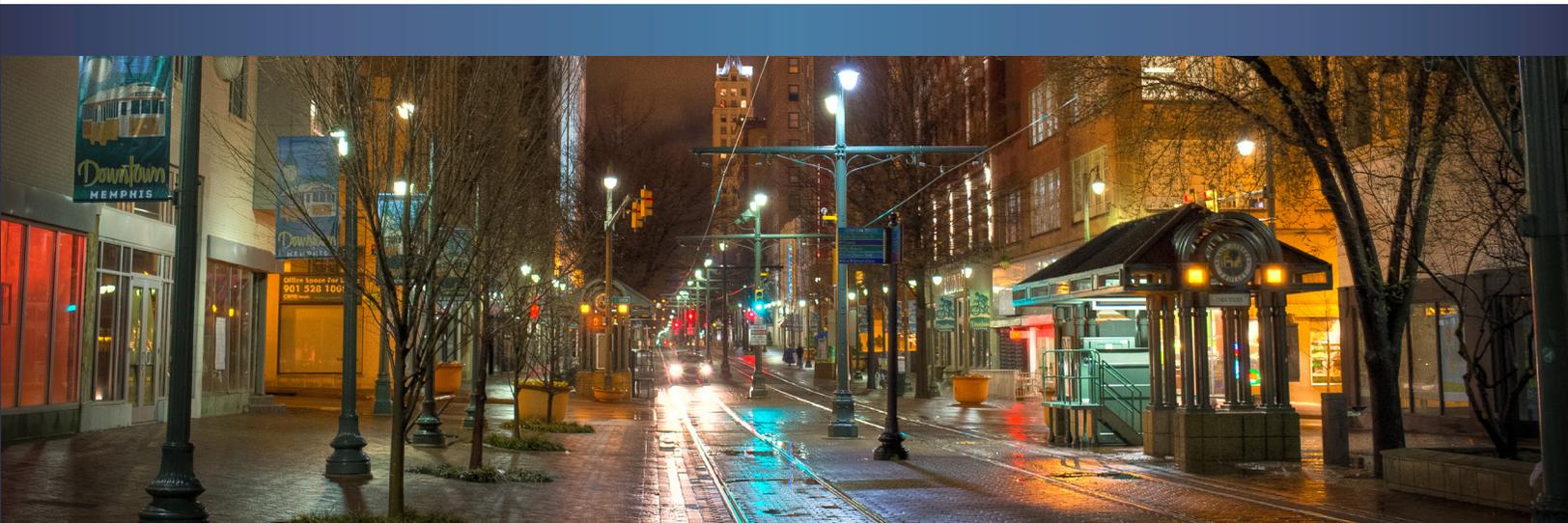
The Building Neighborhood Capacity Program was designed as a two-track enterprise, with a focus on building the capacity of both neighborhood resident groups and citywide leaders to improve conditions in neighborhoods that have faced generations of disinvestment. BNCP had two primary strategies. The first was fostering and strengthening local teams of residents and community organizations through leadership development, action-learning, and community planning. The second was mobilizing cross-sector partners in the larger city environment with the political will, know-how, structures, and resources to effectively support neighborhood improvement.

The assumption was that by successfully implementing these two strategies, BNCP would result in neighborhoods that could *“effectively access, use, and leverage public and private resources and facilitate alignment of housing, education, public safety, health, and economic investments.”* BNCP’s long-term success, then, was less defined by project-level results accomplished during the grant term than by *“transformed relationships and ways of doing business,”* both within the neighborhood and between the neighborhood and citywide leaders and resources.

BNCP was designed to provide increased visibility and resources for neighborhoods with a history of challenges, including racial or economic segregation and public policies that have severely restricted opportunities. These neighborhoods require sustained capacity building and revitalization investments to fully realize their own priorities. Similarly, the cities in which they are embedded require new ways of doing business and new policies that address historic inequities and promote opportunity for all residents. Neither neighborhood nor citywide strategies alone are likely to be entirely successful, but BNCP hoped that implementing these strategies together would stimulate meaningful and sustainable change in BNCP neighborhoods and eventually in other similar ones.

The [first two BNCP Practice Briefs](#) focused on the principles and capacity-building practices underlying BNCP’s neighborhood-level work. The [third Practice Brief](#) examined what it takes to support neighborhood residents and partners working across differences in race, class, and power. This Practice Brief focuses on the city-level side of the equation, specifically how government, nonprofit, business, and philanthropic leaders can adopt strategies and allocate resources to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of disinvested neighborhoods in their cities.

The Practice Brief begins with an examination of the broad goals and challenges of working at the city level in a way that effectively complements neighborhood capacity-building and planning strategies. Then it looks in some depth at how two of the BNCP cities, Fresno and Memphis, approached this task. The final section of the Practice Brief includes some observations about BNCP’s experience as part of a broader national trend to connect place-based work with systems and policy change strategies.



# Neighborhood Development: Goals, Barriers, and Examples

A [formative assessment](#) of BNCP after the program's first two years emphasized the importance of sharpening the program's focus on engaging cross-sector partners and other civic leaders to increase local support—resources, policies, and practices—for neighborhood revitalization. Neighborhoods are embedded in larger ecosystems with policies, institutions, and market forces that exert powerful impacts on a neighborhood's prospects for development. Thirty years of place-based work demonstrate that neighborhood-focused strategies alone cannot produce the scope and scale of change required for significant improvement in the lives of residents. But neither can citywide strategies alone: city-driven solutions are unlikely to stick unless they have an equal partner in neighborhood residents. So fostering and deepening connections between neighborhoods and “downtown” decision makers and institutions in the ecosystem is critical for successful neighborhood development.

**For many years, advocates of place-based initiatives often saw themselves standing in apparent opposition to policymakers. There were those who believed that change needed to be enacted on a highly local level and that policy-level changes were too far removed from day-to-day life to offer more than tangential effects. And there are those who believed that, since the causes of concentrated poverty were often rooted in society-wide economic or racial inequality, only policy reform would yield real change. Today, it is not only fundamentally accepted that both approaches are necessary, but it is also understood that they must be aligned with each other for mutual reinforcement. (Ferris and Hopkins, 2015)**



The effective connection of place-based and citywide strategies does not, however, happen without focused attention or even struggle. Too often:

- City actors in different sectors or fields struggle to develop a common vision for neighborhood development around which to align their work, leading to investments by foundations, local government, and business that are uncoordinated or operating at cross-purposes. Even when they do embrace a common vision, city actors can make ineffective resource decisions and policies because they fail to solicit and reflect the priorities, knowledge, and assets of neighborhood residents and stakeholders.
- Neighborhood investment strategies that produce promising results struggle to find the consistent funding needed to sustain them. Even if they are sustained in one neighborhood, scaling them up to other neighborhoods and building support for them as part of the city's ongoing policy and resource environment is much more challenging.
- Efforts to align neighborhood and city level development strategies within a change initiative confront operational challenges. Neighborhood organizers and policy/systems change advocates sometimes struggle to overcome differences in language, culture, pace, and strategy and fail to find the "sweet spot" where neighborhood-driven strategies contribute to and benefit from city-level efforts to change policies and systems.

BNCP is not alone in its dual focus on neighborhoods and the larger civic context. The Skillman Foundation's **Good Neighborhoods Initiative (GNI)** aims to improve conditions affecting youth by making deep, ten-year investments in six neighborhoods in Detroit, complemented by a citywide strategy focused on improving education, youth employment, and other youth-related systems and policies. GNI found that it was the Foundation's deep roots in the neighborhoods that gave it the standing and leverage to be an effective civic leader for citywide policy and systems change. Many of GNI's key successes in such areas as safety, blight, and youth employment are widely viewed as a function of working both at the neighborhood and citywide levels rather than at either level alone.<sup>1</sup>

The California Endowment's **Building Healthy Communities (BHC)** also has a dual focus, working to improve health in 14 low-income communities while at the same time mounting efforts to reform statewide health policy and practices. BHC reports some important policy "wins" at the state level in such areas as school climate, restorative justice, and policy attention to young men of color that align well with the goals of the work in local communities. But marrying the need to support community-defined goals while at the same time working toward statewide campaigns has been challenging and has led to the addition of special staff within the Foundation who can identify and pursue areas of local-statewide confluence.<sup>2</sup>

Both these initiatives have discovered the opportunities for greater impact of working at multiple levels, as well as the challenges involved in aligning them in ways that create synergy. Ideally, local communities test and drive needed changes in neighborhoods, connected to city and state actors who push for scaled-up policy and systemic change. But, as TCE notes, *"this is a far easier and attractive idealized notion of how our democracy and civic engagement should work than in practice."* Nonetheless, these two foundation-driven initiatives and others have demonstrated the value of working to develop practical ways to operationalize this ideal.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Lelle, "Creating Change through Civic Leadership: Highlights from The Skillman Foundation's Good Neighborhoods Initiative" (December 2016 Draft).

<sup>2</sup>The California Endowment, "A New Power Grid: Building Healthy Communities at Year 5" (2016).

# Learning from BNCP's Experiences

BNCP's design called for a city-level cross-sector partnership or group charged with *“developing a vision for revitalizing neighborhoods across the city, helping to build neighborhood capacity, and working to align policy and sustainable funding with neighborhood needs and priorities.”* The notion was that each city would have representatives from philanthropy and the public, private, and nonprofit sectors working to support BNCP neighborhoods and to advance a citywide neighborhood development agenda.

Each city constituted such a cross-sector group but given their different civic and political contexts, each group had quite a different trajectory, none of which were as robust as BNCP had hoped (though in some cases the foundation for such a leadership group was built by the end of BNCP). For instance, in some cities, cross-sector groups met periodically for information sharing and networking, or they met ceremonially when funders came to town. In other cities, key members, particularly funders, met regularly to coordinate their work, and/or they met informally about particular neighborhood issues. Some cross-sector leaders—the head of the Housing Authority, a lead funder, or a citywide nonprofit leader—individually provided support like office space, neighborhood data, access to resources, and other operational and strategic assistance.

Thus, the ways in which city-level actors translated their interest in neighborhood development into action varied considerably based on local context. As a consequence, BNCP's strategies for promoting strong and effective citywide support for BNCP neighborhoods and for neighborhood revitalization more broadly had to be customized city-by-city to capitalize on local opportunities for leverage and momentum.

The Fresno and Memphis cases that follow illustrate two very different strategies that city actors have used to support neighborhood development. In each city, BNCP is working with three neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and historic neglect to build capacity and voice. In Fresno, leadership for policy and systems change came from inside City Hall, which used the opportunities presented by BNCP to test out a new way of organizing and delivering key neighborhood services. In Memphis, leadership involved a citywide community development intermediary—along with other city-level partners—who began work to create a shared development framework and build the public will needed to leverage more resources and more effective investments in the city's low-income neighborhoods.



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# Fresno

**Summary:** In 2009, the Office of the Mayor of the City of Fresno proposed a clear vision and instituted a long-term strategy for improving the lives of residents in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and neglect. It was a vision that recognized the dual need to build resident leadership and organizational capacity in these neighborhoods, while reorganizing City staff and resources to better connect to their needs and priorities. With BNCP's support, City leadership worked to deepen their knowledge about effective strategies for neighborhood capacity-building and to build support for new ways of funding and implementing City services. As BNCP comes to a close, the City has launched the next phase of the work, which targets ten new neighborhoods for intensive revitalization in partnership with the Fresno Unified School District, Fresno Housing Authority, and community-based organizations.

**Context:** Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin took office in 2009 with a vision that included revitalizing the City's downtown and the historically neglected neighborhoods surrounding downtown. She recognized that Fresno's vitality—and its ability to attract outside investment—depended in part on the health of all its neighborhoods. She and her deputy chief of staff, Kelli Furtado, worked over the next eight years to test out an approach to revitalization, learn from the experience, and scale it up to other parts of the City.

Swearengin and Furtado understood that: 1) the City would not have substantial new public sector resources for neighborhood revitalization given a variety of economic constraints; 2) generating support for new ways of doing business was more likely to succeed politically and culturally in Fresno if it was framed in terms of the physical infrastructure rather than social services; and 3) development of each neighborhood's capacity to identify and voice local priorities and work with external partners to address these priorities would be key to the new approach. They were also deeply committed to ensuring that whatever improvements the City made in its strategies to address disinvested neighborhoods would ultimately be sustainable within the City's normal operations and budgets.

While it took time and fine-tuning strategies and staffing structures, the version of “proactive code enforcement” that evolved became known as Community Revitalization, a division within the Neighborhood Services section of City government, which continues today even as a new Mayor takes over. The approach involves the City's Neighborhood Revitalization Team (NRT), which is composed of community coordinators and code enforcement specialists, working intensively in each neighborhood alongside cross-sector partners for an initial 6-8 month phase, then gradually moving through several additional phases until a neighborhood is considered sustainable. While establishing relationships with residents, team members document the conditions in the neighborhood on a property-by-property basis and identify all code violations, work through the code cases systematically until they are closed, and develop partnerships in the neighborhoods to help residents get access to services and address other problems identified by residents, like illegal dumping, traffic issues, safety concerns, stray dogs, and blight.

At the same time, the NRT community coordinators help to organize residents around neighborhood priorities and concerns and build longer-term capacity to advocate for these priorities with the City and other potential funders and partners, often times resulting in support for neighborhood groups. Cross-sector partners include Neighborhood Resource Officers, funded in part by the Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services, the Fresno Housing Authority, and other community-based organizations and City department representatives as needed. Several phases of work continue until the neighborhood is considered in the sustainability phase.

Restore Fresno, announced in 2015 as a signature initiative of Mayor Swearengin, is a compilation of the City's initiatives to improve property values, living conditions, public safety, and the overall quality of life in historically neglected neighborhoods. In addition to the work of the NRT, Restore Fresno includes incentives for private investment and strategies for building sustainable neighborhood-driven structures, such as a formal or informal neighborhood association, Neighborhood Watch, or a community development corporation (CDC).

As Mayor Swearingin noted in her Restore Fresno plan and FY2016 budget, when residents organize their neighborhoods, it is much easier for the City to focus its services on their highest priorities. And because neighborhood revitalization requires ongoing work and constant effort, neighborhoods need self-sustaining organizations to continue the work when the City moves its intensive focus to other areas (while still providing general services to all neighborhoods). This is why, with some support from BNCP, the Fresno Housing Authority in partnership with the City commissioned an outside consultant to assess and work to strengthen Fresno's small number of local CDCs, three of which are located in or nearby BNCP neighborhoods.

**Recent Status:** In the fall of 2016, as the end of her eight year tenure in office approached, Mayor Swearingin announced the next phase of Fresno's neighborhood revitalization strategy: ten additional low to moderate income neighborhoods were selected for intensive attention. The selection grew out of a set of meetings among the Mayor and the Fresno Unified School District's Superintendent, Fresno Housing Authority's CEO, the Police Chief, City Manager, and City staff to discuss Restore Fresno and move forward in new neighborhoods. They selected the neighborhoods based on the footprint of a neighborhood school and input from various partners utilizing criteria such as student achievement, police issues/resources, blight, low-moderate income, various community health indicators, proximity to existing revitalization efforts, and neighborhood assets. The neighborhoods under consideration were also evaluated to determine if their deterioration standards met the HUD guidelines that would allow this work to be funded through the use of the Community Development Block Grant program.

In 2016, Furtado became Assistant Director of the City's Development and Resource Management Department. Subsequently, BNCP's former director became the Department's Neighborhood Revitalization Manager for the Community Revitalization Division with authorization to add a diverse group of six additional team members to expand the NRT's work into a total of 15 neighborhoods. This expansion reflects the broad success of the work in the first five neighborhoods (three which were funded through BNCP and two additional which were funded through the City): resident leadership has been cultivated, blight has been dramatically reduced, housing issues have been improved, and neighborhood leaders are working together with City staff to resolve intractable problems. Each of the first five neighborhoods continues to receive the support of the NRT through regular code sweeps and consistent resident contact each month. Beginning in February 2017, two will be in their sustainability phase.



Looking to the future, without the BNCP funds that supported dedicated staff to work with residents, the City would not have had the same success in institutionalizing the NRT. City leaders have adjusted the model and will continue evolving it in the next ten neighborhoods with committed cross-sector partners including Fresno Unified and its Parent University program. This program has staff who work with parent leaders with much the same focus on learning and development as BNCP did to “empower, engage and connect families to support student achievement.” The curriculum for parent training will incorporate what the NRT learned from BNCP's resident training and leadership development work. And residents from BNCP neighborhoods are now positioned to help the new groups develop their own confidence and direction.

Swearingin and Furtado have employed a range of creative financing and program strategies for elevating neighborhood revitalization in a city with one of the nation's highest rates of poverty concentrated in historically disinvested neighborhoods. Institutionalizing these strategies required: 1) building support with City Council members and other civic leaders; 2) identifying ways to redirect existing resources and holding City staff accountable for using these resources effectively; and 3) customizing the NRT so it was uniquely matched with the funding sources within the City budget.

# Memphis

**Summary:** About the same time that Swearengin and Furtado began reorganizing the way the City of Fresno worked with its low-income neighborhoods, a group of foundations and community development leaders in Memphis was establishing a broad plan for revitalizing the City's neighborhoods and creating a citywide community development intermediary (Community LIFT) to lead implementation of the effort. BNCP helped LIFT demonstrate the value of capacity-building in three high poverty neighborhoods that were identified as good places to start the work. However, the lack of substantial investments from both the City and business community, as well as the relatively weak neighborhood development infrastructure citywide, convinced LIFT and its partners that they also needed to cultivate a broad civic consensus about why investment in strong neighborhoods was critical to Memphis' growth and success. This group is now striving to build the case and develop a shared framework for a more aligned, resourced, and effective citywide approach to neighborhood revitalization in Memphis.

**Context:** In 2008, a group of foundations and community development leaders began work to generate recommendations for a strategic approach for revitalizing neighborhoods citywide. The 2009 plan, *Greater Memphis Neighborhoods: A Blueprint for Revitalization*, established the Greater Memphis Partnership (GMP), a cross-sector group charged with creating the recommended infrastructure for the implementation of the Plan. In 2010, the GMP created Community LIFT, a community development intermediary, to revitalize distressed neighborhoods through building human capacity, improving economic conditions, and increasing quality of life. LIFT also developed an affiliate Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) to stimulate inner city economic development. In 2011, the GMP Plan was adopted by City Council as advisory policy for the City. The GMP went through an extensive data-driven neighborhood selection process and chose four neighborhoods as initial targets for revitalization, three of which eventually participated in BNCP in 2012-2016.

Central to the GMP's plan and LIFT's charge was the critical role of neighborhood organizing. All three neighborhoods participated in the BNCP capacity building and action learning process and developed neighborhood plans based on an analysis of neighborhood data and resident priorities. While strong, the plans developed by the first two neighborhoods in 2014<sup>3</sup> have yet to generate significant investments from the City or other sources (although some individual projects have received modest funding). This disappointment has made the need for a citywide neighborhood development strategy even more critical.

**Recent Status:** LIFT commissioned a study in 2015 to examine the state of the community development industry in Memphis and suggest a unified approach to strengthening Memphis neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> The study identified an underdeveloped neighborhood improvement nonprofit sector and the following gaps at the city level:

- The **absence of a sound neighborhood strategy** that matches the scope of Memphis' revitalization challenges and is linked with a broader economic development agenda.
- **Little evidence of the intentional alignment** of grant investments among public and private sector players.
- **Limited local government staffing and expertise** and **modest public resources** flowing toward neighborhood reinvestment.
- A **lending sector that is underdeveloped in how it contributes to community development**, limited private market investment activity, and relatively weak neighborhood real estate markets.
- A respected Community Development Council policy role but **limited broader policy support for the sector** and neighborhood revitalization.
- **Underdeveloped local data capacity** and expertise in community development.
- Limited **civic champions for this work** within the business community to press for greater public-private investment in neighborhood improvement.

<sup>3</sup>The third neighborhood finalized its plan in November 2016.

<sup>4</sup>The report, *Community Development in Memphis: A Review of CDC Capacity and Performance and the State of the Industry, 2015*, was conducted by the Urban Ventures Group and is available from Community LIFT.

Armed with insights about why Memphis' low-income neighborhoods had experienced disinvestment for decades, community development practitioners and other stakeholders met in early 2016 to establish top priorities for action, including creating funds at LIFT for building the capacity of the community development system and "educating and enlisting key Memphis corporate, philanthropy, and government leaders to build a broader civic consensus on neighborhood revitalization as a top economic strategy to grow Memphis."

Participants agreed that building a more robust and sustainable community development system required a shared vision by all sectors—including financial institutions and others in the local corporate community—about why investment in strong neighborhoods is critical to Memphis' growth and success.

LIFT proposed a Learning Exchange to ***"build more understanding and agreement locally about how Memphis could better weave together its financial, technical, political, and institutional resources to address its significant neighborhood improvement challenges."*** The strategy was to assemble a representative group of leaders from government, philanthropy, business, and the nonprofit sector, to hear from knowledgeable practitioners from other cities—Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia—where effective collaborative strategies are already in place, and engage in constructive dialogue about how Memphis might scale up its efforts to revitalize neighborhoods and increase economic opportunities for residents. An Advisory Group made up of representatives from different sectors guided the effort.

With BNCP support, a team interviewed possible participants in the exchange and uncovered considerable interest but lack of agreement about how Memphis should direct its collective energies toward a more unified approach and what principles and priorities should guide the effort. The team further identified a readiness to explore additional ways of expanding local public sector resources for neighborhood improvement, such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF), employment of bonding authority, special fees, and taxes. But participants had less clarity about how expanded public sector spending could be combined more effectively with philanthropic support to better leverage increased private investment in neighborhoods.

The Learning Exchange provided the opportunity for participants to hear how neighborhood investment strategies in Memphis as compared to those from the other cities were too modest and too fragmented to support increased cross-sector integration or the achievement of significant results. Thoughtful discussion addressed many related issues, creating some urgency behind the need for Memphis to develop a neighborhood investment strategy. However, attendance at the exchange was somewhat lower than expected and, overall, the process has not yet identified one or more local senior level "champions" who could mobilize leadership across sectors. Some point to local cultural norms about "operating at our own pace." Others suggest that long-established racial divides help explain the lack of action to date.

Nonetheless, Learning Exchange organizers and LIFT leadership will soon meet to plan follow-up strategies including a possible cross-sector group visit to Indianapolis. They characterize the work ahead as a long-term change effort, but they also point to signs of progress that suggest a growing sense of momentum and opportunity. One encouraging sign that may hold promise is a growing interest citywide in aligning cross-sector resources around a new two-year Memphis comprehensive plan development effort, the first in forty years, which could help to better focus governmental and non-governmental investments. Its success will depend, in part, on whether the planning process generates new resources and new connections between neighborhoods and city actors, not simply new plans.



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# Observations for Practice

For the first two years of BNCP, the technical assistance team focused on building the capacity of neighborhood teams to engage residents, gather and use data, and apply knowledge and relationships fostered to design effective revitalization strategies. While critically important to building capacity, the predominant focus on community organizing and planning was not enough to realize BNCP's aspiration to create and sustain a more supportive ecosystem for neighborhood development at the city level and beyond.

In response, during BNCP's expansion period, there was an effort by the technical assistance team to engage in more active and ongoing relationship-building and problem-solving between the city and neighborhood levels to increase local support (e.g., resources, policies, and practices) for neighborhood efforts. In some sites, like Fresno, public sector partners were already actively engaged in developing a citywide strategy and structure for neighborhood revitalization but needed assistance to better integrate neighborhood leadership and perspectives into their plans. In other sites, like Memphis, the potential for cross-sector strategy development had been mostly latent and required intentional efforts to analyze the local landscape and identify entry points—such as stemming the city's population loss or changing the narrative about Memphis being a good place to raise children—to catalyze city-level stakeholders' interest and investment.

In both cases, key actors proceeded with a keen eye to the larger context, as they considered how work at multiple levels could reinforce each other for greater impact and sustainability. A critical insight was that there was no “one size fits all” recipe for cross-sector strategy development. The vehicle through which citywide partners expressed their interest and investment in capacity building and neighborhood revitalization varied depending on city history and dynamics, as well as current leadership. Determining the most strategic focus for time and resources depends on the goals and scope of the local neighborhood effort and the readiness for change among different actors at the city/county level. The following steps are proposed as building blocks to consider when developing a local strategy.

## Understand the Civic Landscape

Conduct a nuanced and sophisticated assessment of the city/county landscape to understand how to shape the most powerful (i.e., one that is most likely to succeed culturally and politically) rationale for neighborhood investment. For instance, in Fresno, support for neighborhood revitalization stemmed from a belief that strengthening the urban core would improve property values, living conditions, public safety, and overall quality of life. Develop a deep analysis of the interests that motivate other individuals, groups, and organizations within the community—from examining city history to analyzing who currently has power and how they exercise it. Staying keenly attuned to these dynamics will help you identify and act upon areas of mutual self-interest when they emerge. Minimally, you want to increase the likelihood of getting your prioritized neighborhoods' fair share. But the ultimate goal is to create more systemic changes, such as incorporating more voices into policy development and resource decisions. Consider how you can increase opportunities for neighborhood residents and local knowledge to influence investment and practice.

# Establish a Network of Relationships with Citywide Actors

Get to know key decision-makers and sources of influence in each sector: private funders, community foundations, corporate investors, City and elected officials, and local business owners. While you may start with those who share your values, priorities, or field of interest, extend your efforts to those who may have different perspectives. BNCP had greater success engaging the nonprofit and public sector than the business community, something that Memphis is currently working proactively to change. At the same time, get to know possible allies with similar or overlapping networks—e.g., community development organizations, advocacy groups, and intermediaries like LIFT that work across disinvested neighborhoods and share values and overlapping vision and goals. This work is political, and you need relationships that can provide sources of information and leverage down the road.



## Influence and Link to Cross-Sector Priorities and Planning Process

Determine where neighborhood interests converge with partner priorities. BNCP's focus on developing neighborhood plans stemmed from a desire for community-driven priorities to influence partners' behavior vis-à-vis the neighborhood. As an Urban Ventures report on Memphis noted, "Such plans provide a basis for neighborhoods to compete for targeted resource investments and ultimately help to inform how those investments are focused. Such plans are also useful in guiding how other systems – such as workforce development, small business support, safety, health and human services, and transit improvements – choose to frame and implement place-based strategies that complement other, more physical forms of neighborhood improvement." Critically, neighborhood plans are most effective when they not only assert important community priorities—as framed above—but also indicate how proposed actions and strategies can build upon existing assets or reinforce other partners' goals—for instance, in the case of Fresno, those of the City's Neighborhood Revitalization Team.

# Follow the Money and Raise More of It

If your city's sectors are not yet aligned behind a common vision for neighborhood development, focus first on raising funds from the sector that is ready to lead. Regardless of where you start, align funding with function and sequence your work. For instance, local government resources for organizing will almost always be limited, so your task is often how to use other resources, especially philanthropy, to create neighborhood readiness for investment and creatively leverage other opportunities. A good example of leverage occurred when Fresno received a federal Community Oriented Policing (COPS) grant for school-related police work, but they proposed that the new workers be called “neighborhood resource officers” rather than “school safety officers” to reinforce their broader community function. Now, the resource officers will partner with the Neighborhood Revitalization Team and contribute even more proactively to resident and parent leadership development related to the schools. While starting with existing resources can go a long way, ultimately, local government and business resources are needed to sustain long-term efforts. Work hard to raise funding for neighborhood projects that can demonstrate tangible results but do not neglect the importance of tapping into or building ongoing funding streams for general operating support that can be used to resource staff and other community development infrastructure.

## Build Community Development Infrastructure as a Key Element of Neighborhood Readiness

Get to know and support the organizations or networks in your community that can develop and articulate a shared vision and set of goals that attracts external resources for implementation. Like other neighborhood revitalization initiatives, BNCP's experience suggests that part of what makes neighborhoods “ready” for outside investment is a strong network of capable community development corporations (CDCs), strong Neighborhood Associations, or similar community-driven organizations. These organizations can work with residents on the ground and operate as neighborhood-based intermediaries to attract and facilitate effective use of outside resources. Neither Fresno nor Memphis had a strong infrastructure, a gap that BNCP worked to address but that will require additional and ongoing investment. Furthermore, CDCs and other similar neighborhood organizations benefit from being part of a larger network of such organizations, like the CD Council in Memphis, both to build their own organizational capacity and to join together to influence citywide policy and practice. As noted above, building community development infrastructure takes resources. For instance, a recommendation in the Urban Ventures report for Memphis was to “consider creating a more sustained source of public sector funding for CDCs and other neighborhood nonprofits. For example, Cleveland government has neighborhood improvement firmly established in its budget each year for decades. This allocation of funding has the active support of City Council members and a significant share of federal block grant dollars flowing to the City are deployed to support the operations of CDCs in each Council district.”

# Conclusion

Place-based approaches play a key role in any city's advancement, but especially those with a shrinking tax base like BNCP cities. To both attract new residents and retain residents who have lived there for generations, cities need to invest in strong, thriving neighborhoods of opportunity for all residents. In order to produce maximum impact, efforts to build the capacity of these neighborhoods need to be shaped by and embedded in larger citywide change strategies. Such a strategic approach requires curiosity about the city's history and dynamics, relationships with players from diverse sectors and perspectives, and the ability to challenge in a productive fashion the underlying assumptions that have created inequity across neighborhoods and populations.

Sometimes cities get stuck. The problems of long-term poverty and neighborhood disinvestment can appear to defy solutions within various resource and political constraints. When challenges seem intractable, programs like BNCP have the potential to

introduce external energy and resources that support people in thinking and acting differently. Both Fresno and Memphis benefited from consulting outside expertise and learning about strategies that have worked elsewhere. Fresno's City leadership, for example, visited Cleveland and was impressed by the important role played by a strong network of community development organizations in the City. Similarly, the Memphis planning group heard from, among others, a community development expert from Indianapolis about why and how a city like Indianapolis where business, which traditionally focused on downtown development, has more recently invested substantially in neighborhood revitalization.

Application of external ideas and models is most successful when local actors deeply understand their local context, recognize the need to "do business differently" at the city level, and work hard to adapt potentially effective policies and practices to the unique needs and opportunities of their cities. Developing a shared understanding of the local context was one goal of the BNCP planning process. A community-driven

planning approach ensured that resident voices and understandings would be foremost in that analysis. However, the relatively short timeframe for BNCP and the absence, except in Fresno, of a well-developed city-level change strategy at the outset meant that cross-sector partners across the other BNCP cities have much work left in order to align neighborhood and city-level revitalization strategies.

Ultimately BNCP and other federally financed place-based programs represent short-term investments intended to build a foundation for change. That foundation is only strong when there is commitment by key city-level stakeholders to align resources, increase investments, and/or change practice or policy in support of disinvested neighborhoods. The hope of BNCP and other programs like it is that capacity has been built to make decisions and work together across city- and neighborhood-boundaries in new and different ways, as residents and organizational partners alike apply local knowledge to inform action, sustain an action-learning approach to revitalization, and work across differences in race, class and power—motivated by a common desire to create neighborhoods of opportunity for everybody.



**The hope of BNCP and other programs like it is that capacity has been built to make decisions and work together across city- and neighborhood- boundaries in new and different ways, as residents and organizational partners alike apply local knowledge to inform action, sustain an action-learning approach to revitalization and work across differences in race, class and power—motivated by a common desire to create neighborhoods of opportunity for everybody.**

# Selected References

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Kansas University Work Group for Community Health and Development, [Community Toolbox](#).

This web resource provides practical tools to help people work together to build healthier communities, including creating and maintaining partnerships, advocating for change, and influencing policy development.

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This essay, to be available on the Skillman Foundation website in March 2017, illustrates how one foundation worked in six neighborhoods in Detroit while using its civic capital to create change citywide for low-income children and families.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation, [Institute for Comprehensive Community Development](#).

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The California Endowment, [A New Power Grid: Building Healthy Communities at Year 5](#). 2016.

This report communicates progress accomplished, lessons learned, and key changes undertaken at the half-way point of The California Endowment's Building Healthy Communities initiative, including an emphasis on shifting power dynamics and advancing policy and systems change.



Building Neighborhood  
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