



## Resident Engagement: Effective Strategies for Community Building\*

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Community-building initiatives bring together a number of stakeholders to set goals and implement activities to revitalize neighborhoods. As part of this process, organizations seek ways to incorporate resident input and increase resident engagement. Intermediaries and technical assistance organizations such as the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) provide strategies and best practices to solicit resident ideas and to encourage residents to participate in the process of building a community. According to the LISC Institute for Comprehensive Community Development, “The work of building a community begins with old-fashioned organizing, sophisticated relationship building and a diverse ‘big tent’ approach to achieve lasting personal commitments to neighborhood action.”<sup>1</sup>

In recognition of this need for input from residents in community building, at the Reinventing Our Communities conference held in September, the Philadelphia Fed hosted a learning lab in partnership with LISC on strategies for resident engagement. Presenters shared case studies and best practices on how to connect with local residents and incorporate their ideas and encourage their participation in community-building activities. The participants also discussed opportunities to support leadership capacity building for residents.

The learning lab was held at the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, an urban extension center

of Drexel University in West Philadelphia. As an anchor institution, Drexel has invested resources into building better relationships with community members and integrating resident input into building a plan for the future of the neighborhoods surrounding the university. Lucy Kerman, senior vice provost for university and community partnerships at Drexel, leads this partnership process. In her remarks to participants, she noted the center’s role in transforming the relationship between Drexel and its neighbors. The Dornsife Center is a place in the neighborhood where university members and local residents can meet and gather for events such as civic meetings, afterschool programs, job training, and community conversations. The Dornsife Center also helps build trust between the university and local residents. Kerman emphasized the importance of identifying trust-building activities between large institutions and communities. One of the first steps of engagement, she said, is to “see what the community needs and how you can help them.”

### **The Four T’s of Resident Engagement: Time, Trust, Team, and Transparency**

In another presentation, Drexel’s Loretta Sweet Jemmott, vice president for health and health equity, walked attendees through a community engagement plan — the “We’re Here Because We Care: Building Healthy Communities Together” initiative.<sup>2</sup> This initiative uses community partnership and input to create evidence-based

\* The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia or the Federal Reserve System.

<sup>1</sup> The LISC Institute for Comprehensive Community Development provides resources for practitioners and researchers in community development. See [www.instituteccd.org/-How-To-Do-It-/Organizing.html](http://www.instituteccd.org/-How-To-Do-It-/Organizing.html).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://drexel.edu/cnhp/news/current/archive/2016/April/2016-04-18-were-here-because-we-care/>.



sustainable programs that address community health needs. Jemmott emphasized that anchor institutions and intermediaries interested in community engagement should incorporate a strategy of four T's: time, trust, team, and transparency.

According to Jemmott, it took time to identify leaders within the community who could provide insights and help build relationships with other residents; time was also critical to building trust between residents and the institution. The initiative also needed to create a team of community organizational partners to facilitate gathering residents for meetings, town halls, and interviews. She suggested that organizations should identify the

neighborhood in which they want to start and the civic, faith, or neighborhood partner with whom they want to work. Jemmott emphasized the importance of holding meetings after work hours and providing food and child care. Finally, transparency about the process and the goals of building a neighborhood health equity plan helped the initiative gain community buy-in.

### **Perspectives on Resident Engagement**

Relationship and trust building are also central to several resident engagement strategies from Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Somerville, MA, all of which were highlighted later in the session.



High school students work on their digital work portfolios at Drexel University's Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships. Photo credit: Drexel University.

*Community Connectors — People's Emergency Center, Philadelphia, PA*<sup>3</sup>

The Community Connectors program employs residents in West Philadelphia to act as liaisons between the People's Emergency Center (PEC) and neighborhood residents and businesses. These outreach engagement specialists go door to door to distribute information about community planning projects and meetings. The team also organizes town halls that act as a forum for new ideas and for providing feedback on existing planning processes. Interested participants must contribute 24 hours of volunteer service for PEC before they can apply to its Community Connectors program. Some community connectors have gone on to become full-time employees of PEC, thus integrating community members into the organization's fabric. Cassandra Green, manager of community outreach and partnerships for PEC, shared that "community connectors are an important part of our work because they are able to support building trust with communities. These connectors also allow groups that are usually outside of the process, such as youth, to become involved and to lead the change." Through the program, Green and PEC hope to "build a culture of community connecting."

*Community Planning — Somerville Community Corporation, Somerville, MA*<sup>4</sup>

The Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) has engaged residents in the development of a vision for the Somerville community by ensuring that everyone has buy-in. Meredith Levy, deputy director of SCC, shared SCC's "cycle of influence," which combines interactive participation, community planning and vision, organizing, decision-making and implementation, and evaluation into a collective process. One interactive activity in this process was a community mapping project. SCC asked residents to identify important areas and community markers in the neighborhood of East Somerville. Residents used cameras to photograph locations and audio recorders to capture their thoughts

on the significance of each place. With these tools, the community and SCC mapped the neighborhood's assets and identified resources and challenges from the residents' perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

Residents were also asked to list and prioritize community objectives. This exercise allowed SCC to identify objectives that already had engaged leaders or organizations as well as to identify situations in which leadership was needed to address critical priorities. The process resulted in an 11-point core community principles document — supported and vetted by community members — that outlined priorities for Somerville, including local jobs, economic and ethnic diversity, and safe and accessible community gathering spaces. By integrating community input and action into the process, SCC was able to concentrate its efforts on goals that align with community needs. This exercise helped build trusting relationships between SCC and residents that can be leveraged for future projects.

*Immigrant Integration — Asian Economic Development Association, Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN*<sup>6</sup>

The Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) created a community engagement strategy around immigrant integration to address equitable development surrounding a new transit corridor. This strategy focused on inclusion for the newest and most vulnerable populations of immigrants. Effective activities included building partnerships with immigrant-led organizations for which AEDA provided capital and resources for events and projects.

AEDA also turned to partner organizations to lead the direct work with residents, since they had the established relationships and language skillsets needed. Allowing community-based organizations to lead resident engagement also helped to build trust between AEDA and residents, especially those groups of residents who may have had a negative experience with community-building efforts. Va-Megn Thoj, executive

<sup>3</sup> See [www.pec-cares.org/](http://www.pec-cares.org/) for further information.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://somervillecdc.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> For more details about on the community mapping project, see <http://archive.somervillecdc.org/communitymap/makingOf.php>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://aeda-mn.org/>.

director of AEDA, shared that “this trust leads to increased participation and decisions that reflect the reality and needs of the community.”

### Barriers to Authentic and Inclusive Resident Engagement

Participants in the learning lab also discussed the barriers to resident engagement. Many noted funding challenges and stated that they do not have the economic resources of large institutions to provide funding for community meetings, including food or child care during these sessions. Language and jargon can also be large roadblocks to trust building between organizations and residents. Jemmott shared how she learned to use the language of the residents rather than the jargon associated with community development and research. She commented, “I asked the residents what should I call a key informant interview so that people will come? They told me, call it ‘coffee time.’”

Finally, time is a significant barrier to this work. Authentic and inclusive resident engagement requires time to build relationships with community members and to eventually establish partnerships. Participants also shared their concerns that projects and grants tend to run in one- to two-year cycles, whereas building the trust with a community takes much longer.

### Conclusion

Building trust between intermediary and outside organizations and neighborhood residents is integral to each resident engagement strategy discussed at the learning lab. The various sessions highlighted the role of intermediary and community development organizations and explored how intermediary organizations can find success in helping communities recognize and build upon their own assets. While the strategies presented were not exhaustive, they provide a framework for the key elements of trust and relationship building needed for resident engagement. 🏠



A local writer reads her work at an event for writers at Drexel University's Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships. Photo credit: Drexel University.

### Resources

- Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz, “Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever),” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2016, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community\\_engagement\\_matters\\_now\\_more\\_than\\_ever](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever).
- Tamarack Institute, Community Engagement, [www.tamarackcommunity.ca/communityengagement](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/communityengagement).
- Simone Peer, “Resident Centered Community-Building: What Makes it Different?,” The Aspen Institute, May 13, 2013, [www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/resident-centered-community-building-what-makes-it-different/](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/resident-centered-community-building-what-makes-it-different/).

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