

Who Says CCIs Don't Work? Lessons Learned from Chicago's Comprehensive Community Initiative

By Joel Bookman and Andrew Mooney

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Introduction

Chicago's community development field faced a crisis in 1995. Several notable community development corporations (CDCs) were failing, some in bankruptcy. The burden of their real estate portfolios, largely fueled by the relatively new Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) market created in the 1986 federal tax re-write, had exposed the fragility of a community development approach that relied almost exclusively on housing development. Government and foundation leaders were losing confidence in the much-touted ability of local communities to organize a redevelopment program for their neighborhoods. Neighborhood leaders themselves were losing confidence in both the housing approach and its practical outcomes.¹

The most important question raised at the time was whether – after more than a decade of concentration on housing redevelopment as the principal tool for renewing neighborhoods – the neighborhoods were significantly 'improved' during this time, from economic and social perspectives. The answers were mixed. Clearly the time had come for a reset.

LISC/Chicago, which was at the forefront of the LIHTC movement (and had been instrumental in its passage through Congress), had to confront the issues head on. Simply buckling down and producing more housing without realizing the context and consequences of the moment was a non-starter. Instead, it decided to organize a very public, open dialogue among community development, political and civic leaders to face the issues and decide whether and what the next steps would be. Called 'The Futures Committee', the dialogue played out over the next eighteen months and resulted in a clarion document entitled *Changing the Way We Do Things*² that literally revolutionized the way the City has pursued community development over the last twenty years.

Based on the Committee's findings, LISC/Chicago, in collaboration with over 20 of its community development partners and The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, embarked on a bold new stratagem called the *New Communities Program* (NCP) that

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¹ It should be noted that the Chicago experience reflected similar dilemmas in other cities at the time.

² *Changing the Way We Do Things*, October 1997, available at <http://tinyurl.com/FuturesCommittee>.

Notably, the first presenter at the public gatherings was then-State Senator Barack Obama, whose influence on the findings of the Futures Committee was profound.

refocused the community development world toward a comprehensive approach to neighborhood development that has retained its impetus to this day.

Key result: the creation of localized and citywide ‘platforms’ that provide a systematic set of relationships within and outside of the neighborhoods which allow for on-going leadership development, planning, organizing (community building), communications, and investment.

We say that this intangible outcome is the key result, with the longest legs of the program. But there’s also the tangible result. In its first ten years, to which The MacArthur Foundation made the longest (and largest, \$50mil) single civic commitment in its history, the program generated over 800 discrete projects and programs, and leveraged a total investment of over \$900 million, a 17-1 return on the MacArthur investment.³ In broad terms, it was a very good investment with a very good set of returns.

Structure of the Program

The New Communities Program began in 1999 as a small demonstration effort called the New Communities Initiative (NCI) in three neighborhoods. In 2001, with the Foundation’s support, the Initiative expanded to become NCP in 20 communities (with 16 ‘lead agencies’) in a ten-year endeavor that became the largest comprehensive community development program of its kind in the nation.

NCP began with a structured but flexible framework fashioned after the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP) in New York City, which was headed by the community development veteran Anita Miller and funded by the Surdna Foundation for nearly a decade.³ CCRP provided a basic methodology and discipline that served NCP well in its roll-out phase.

LISC/Chicago empowered a lead agency in each neighborhood, acting as a local, community-based intermediary to organize the community, coordinate planning, develop partnerships, manage projects, and communicate successes. The lead agencies were often experienced community development organizations, but some were ‘purpose-built’ and others were existing agencies that re-purposed themselves for the program. All were selected after a lengthy review process largely on the basis of the strength of their Board and staff leadership and their apparent potential for acting as a central ‘hub’ for their neighborhoods.

With support from LISC/Chicago and a professional planning firm, these lead agencies engaged community stakeholders in adopting a common vision for their communities and crafted comprehensive, grassroots “quality-of-life” (QoL) plans. Community leaders identified specific issues, strategies, and projects to realize their vision – and made specific

³ As reported in the evaluation of NCP commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation conducted by the firm MDRC: *An Evaluation of the New Communities Program*. See

<https://www.macfound.org/press/evaluation/assessment-new-communities-program>

³ See: Going Comprehensive: Anatomy of an Initiative That Worked (Miller and Burns, 2006).

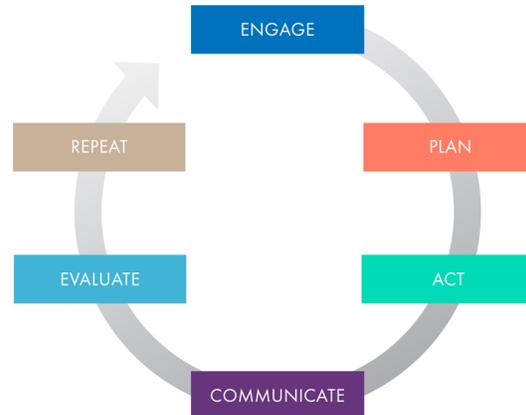
commitments to implementing one or more projects in the plans. Neighborhood planning teams targeted “early-action projects” – “doing while planning” -- to create short-term visible improvements that would showcase positive activities and grow collaborative relationships. Plans envisioned larger, catalytic projects with 5-year timelines, designed to inspire hope, promote investment, and change neighborhoods in important ways.⁴

Plans were implemented by local organizations, residents, and stakeholders, leveraging support from LISC, public officials, and the private sector. With the help of professional journalists, an ongoing communications process spread the word about successes and challenges and attracted partners and resources.

LISC served as the central intermediary, channeling resources and expertise to communities and coordinating resources among its lead agencies. Long-term, flexible funding from The MacArthur Foundation enabled LISC and its lead agencies to develop and maintain staff and program continuity to implement multi-layered, complex projects.

Lessons Learned

As lead agencies engaged their communities and planned for the future, a recurring “virtuous cycle” became evident. Organized stakeholders came to consensus around a common vision and specific projects. Working together on small-scale “early-action” projects, they deepened relationships, trust, and the confidence that comes with achieving goals. Continuous communication of successes, challenges, and ongoing activities attracted participation, partners, and investors. Public recognition of successes, coupled with honest self-evaluation, course corrections, and adjustments gave participants the courage to confront larger challenges and more imposing projects.



As NCP communities completed plans, accomplished early-action projects, celebrated their successes, and embraced more complex challenges, the process became a mantra: *Engage, Plan, Act, Communicate, Evaluate, Repeat*. And as communities began to see plans become reality, patterns emerged, and important lessons were learned:

- **Good planning begins with relationships.** Successful planning does not begin with a professional planner. It begins with the development of relationships between and among community stakeholders. Communities that began with a systematic process of relationship-building and maintained that process through the planning

⁴ Cf., <http://www.newcommunities.org/tools/qofl.asp> for the original plans. More recent QoL plans can be found at <https://www.lisc.org/chicago/our-work/comprehensive-community-development/quality-of-life-planning/qlps/>.

period and beyond progressed more quickly and effectively. An inclusive, participatory process that welcomes everyone may take time to develop, but it pays dividends when negotiating a common vision, goals, and the implementation of plans.

- ***Forging a social compact – a thoughtful “consensus-building covenant” within the community – is a critical step in implementing community change.*** All communities consist of diverse constituencies with multiple and often conflicting interests. Successful comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) emerge when lead agencies and their partners commit to the intentional work of identifying an agreed-upon vision and a set of projects that will unite stakeholders, keep them engaged and largely moving in the same direction. This also requires that the key actors have clearly defined roles in achieving their collective vision and that they keep each other accountable for carrying out their responsibilities. The most successful lead agencies created decision-making and accountability structures through which they and their partners would oversee the program during the long-term.
- ***CCIs should focus first and foremost on projects and activities that create the “political center.”*** For comprehensive community development to succeed, local stakeholders must be engaged, consensus must be achieved, and the lead agency and its partners must effectively “create the political center.” In other words, the local consensus must be broad enough, and sufficiently supported that the political will exists to drive implementation of the plan. “Fringe” projects and positions will not engender widespread support within the community, the private sector, or with public officials. It is the political center that gives local stakeholders the “hustle and muscle” to manage projects to completion, and the accountability to ensure that those projects are in the community’s interest.
- ***It’s a different kind of community organizing.*** Creating and nurturing new (or enhanced) relationships in a neighborhood, sometimes among leaders and organizations that have contentious histories, requires community-building skills that are different from those of traditional organizing. Often, it’s a matter of finding the right ‘sweet spot’ that will persuade others to the table. Always it’s a matter of developing the personal and institutional relationships that will endure through both successes and failures. This is a particular responsibility for the CEOs and Board chairs of the lead agencies.⁵
- ***Project management skills are essential in implementing quality-of-life plans.*** The skills required for project management, however, are quite different from those needed in organizing a planning process. Lead agencies that were the most effective at accomplishing their projects were those that either had separate, dedicated project management staff, or who had staff with extensive skill and experience in implementing projects. The ability to focus upon achieving measurable outcomes, on time and on budget, is a skill that is critical not only for real estate projects, but also for any and all projects identified in the quality-of-life plans.
- ***Investing in documentation and communications pays dividends.*** When NCP began, LISC/Chicago invested heavily in documentation and communications, using

⁵ Cf. Bill Traynor’s excellent article distinguishing between community-organizing and community-building, “Building Community in Place: Limitations and Promise” by Bill Traynor, in [The Community Development Reader](#), Fillippis and Saegert, 2008.

professional journalists, photographers, and designers to support the community planning processes and provide stories for websites and newsletters. In fact, we have learned that documentation and communications are even more important than we imagined. Real-time, fact-based documentation of meetings, programs, and trends offered invaluable, impartial input to stakeholders and LISC program officers. Vivid photography and striking design for publications attracted attention and documented progress. Websites, audio slideshows, and newsletters showcased results and help spread the word about NCP. Stories, case studies, and reports served as an important means to measure and evaluate outcomes.

- ***Communities achieve more when they are supported by “activist program officers” in the central intermediary.*** Comprehensive community initiatives are complex and challenging. As NCP evolved, it became increasingly evident that CCIs require a different kind of staff in the central intermediary (in this case, LISC/Chicago) – an “activist” program officer, with the ability to understand organizing and engagement, partnerships and collaboration, and deal-making, not just in real estate, but also in education, arts, economic development, parks, sports activities, and more. The effective program officer acted as a part of the neighborhood team, as an ally and supporter of neighborhood efforts, always seeking new, different and better ways to accomplish the visions set out in the quality-of-life plans. The program officer linked organizations with technical assistance, potential partners, and available resources. When problems arose, the LISC program officer worked with lead agencies to offer guidance, solve problems, and help them help themselves. The program officer also provided oversight and a sense of discipline by reinforcing the expectations that the NCP participants had placed on themselves through the quality-of-life planning process.
- ***A long-term commitment by the chief funder is critical to success.*** The importance of The MacArthur Foundation’s long-term commitment to NCP cannot be overstated. Their generous funding established the program, but their decision to stick with NCP over a decade made it clear to all participants that this was one initiative that would not disappear overnight, and that the funder really understood the complex nature of community change.

Evolution of the Platform

Looking back at the early years of NCP, it became apparent that its most remarkable outcome, in addition to the intrinsic value of the program investments and dozens of completed projects, was the evolution of a neighborhood *platform*. As communities engaged in planning, early-action projects, and implementation of initiatives in their QoL plans, they developed a web of both internal and external relationships – a virtual infrastructure – that served as a base for accomplishing the many projects and activities conceived in their plans; and it connected the collective efforts of many stakeholders in their communities into the social, political, and economic dynamics of the larger region.

This web of relationships united often disparate organizations and individuals in common purpose, creating a *program delivery system* – the ability to get things done. As relationships grew, and accomplishments accumulated, this infrastructure became a *vehicle*

for investment from the public, private, and philanthropic sectors. The platform also became an *information system*, through which technical resources, innovation, and communication flowed.

Perhaps most importantly, the neighborhood platform made the neighborhoods resilient in the face of challenges that inevitably arose, such as the Great Recession of 2008 when many NCP communities were faced with the daunting impact of massive home foreclosures. At the same time, the platforms let those communities take quick advantage of the opportunities that came their way in the form of federal and state programs that were created to combat those self-same challenges.

Tangible Outcomes

While the principal long-term result of NCP might be the intangible platform, the tangible outcomes were impressive by any reckoning.

As noted above, the program leveraged nearly a billion dollars over ten years into the participating communities, in over 800 discrete projects that ranged from a neighborhood newspaper to major real estate developments. Among those projects were several innovative city-wide programs funded by multiple grantors in a wide variety of fields, including health care, education, economic development, real estate development, broadband access, and youth programming.

Specifically, by the end of the program in 2011, there were, among other things, 13 ‘Centers for Working Families’ (now called Family Opportunity Centers), 5 ‘Elev8’ in-school neighborhood health clinics, 7 ‘Smart Communities/Family Net Centers’ providing internet access to entire regions, multiple youth, recreational and arts programs (such as the much-vaunted summertime program ‘Hoops in the Hood’), 8 retail/commercial developments and over 5000 new housing units built. Nearly all these programs are still in place.

In fact, many of the original NCP participants plus a few other neighborhoods in Chicago, still utilize the quality-of-life planning process as a way to keep their communities organized and to induce investment in their neighborhoods.⁶

Conclusion

Chicago’s New Communities Program and its predecessor, the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program, both provide a blueprint for a successful approach to comprehensive community development. Neither was perfect, and both had to confront challenges that no one could have foreseen (such as the Great Recession in 2008). But both proved that communities – given the proper support and with a disciplined methodology – can be organized successfully to sustain and improve their neighborhoods, with tangible

⁶ “LISC’s Quality-of-Life Planning Bettering Neighborhoods throughout Chicago,” highlights several of the 23 QoL plans completed in Chicago neighborhoods since the conclusion of NCP, at <https://www.lisc.org/chicago/regional-stories/liscs-quality-life-planning-bettering-neighborhoods-throughout-chicago/>

and intangible accomplishments that benefit residents and enhance the character of the community over the long haul.