

LISC-BSC Partner Meeting Themes Summary

Frogtown-Rondo Action Network (FRAN)

Background

Wilder Research was hired by LISC to evaluate the overall Building Sustainable Communities program. In order to develop an evaluation plan that accurately reflects the context, needs, and goals of the different partner organizations funded through this program, Wilder Research met individually with each lead agency to learn more about their organization's work, evaluation goals, and community context.

This is a summary of the main themes from two meetings held by Wilder Research staff with the Frogtown-Rondo Action Network (FRAN) and its community partners. The first meeting was on December 17, 2013, attended by FRAN staff, volunteers, community members, and partner organization representatives. A final focus group was held on October 1, 2014 with 14 community members and organizational partners.

This summary is meant to be an overview of the discussions and a supplement to the full meeting notes. It is also intended to serve as a feedback loop between Wilder Research and the partner organizations, ensuring that we accurately captured and interpreted the things said during our meetings. Once agreed to, it will also help to inform LISC staff.

Initial meeting

Community conditions

During our discussion, FRAN staff and volunteers described how FRAN grew out of Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (ASANDC), which originally grew out of the block clubs formed after the building of interstate 94 cut through the middle of their community. Community members felt that decision makers did not take into account the voices of the community when making the decision to build the

interstate through their community, and as a result have been determined to help bring the voices in the community to be heard by those in positions of power. This is often challenging because they said policymakers do not often spend much, if any, time in their community, so the policymakers are not able to know and accurately represent the community in policy decisions.

With the building of the light rail on University Avenue, FRAN worked to organize community members to bring their needs and goals to the forefront of planning decisions, which helped in influencing policymakers to add the three additional stations along the Green line in the neighborhood. They described an increased presence at the capitol and at decision-making tables as they have grown in their organizing efforts over the last few years.

However, despite these increased efforts to overcome historical power disparities that have negatively impacted the community, there still remains some difficulty in organizing the nonprofit and social service organizations in a way that best serves community members. They described a disconnect and lack of communication from one service organization to the next, often being reluctant to refer someone to another organization that could provide the needed services. As a result, FRAN has had to often take on the role of a service navigator for community members.

Activities and strategies

It is in this context of historical disconnect between decision makers and community members' interests, and between organizations serving the community, that FRAN has taken on strategies that ultimately center on relationship building. At the meeting, staff and volunteers described how their efforts over the last few years have largely focused on building relationships with community members, going door-to-door and through local community events. By building these relationships, FRAN feels they are better able to not only most accurately represent the

needs and hopes of their community, but most effectively organize and leverage the knowledge, skills, and passion of their community towards positive change. They are focused on place-making in their neighborhood: making their neighborhood a place where those living there can afford to stay, can access good paying jobs, high quality education, and accessible transportation, and can continue to build the sense of community identity that drives their work.

In order to engage the community, they have focused on extensive outreach, training community members to do this outreach and interviews. With community volunteers having interviewed 288 people (with a goal of 500 by mid-2014), they are frequently reporting back to the community on what they have learned and gather further input on how to turn that information into an action agenda. From these interactions, they are focusing on three primary areas of immediate action: housing, jobs, and youth programming/recreation. Their agenda moving forward is focused on action, creating several action teams dedicated to each of the three topics.

The scope of their action-related work is pragmatic at its core, working at the individual community member level, the community level, the cross-organizational level, up to the policy-level advocacy work. At the individual level, they are building relationships, training volunteers, and acting as service navigators in their community. At the community level, they are gathering community voices/perspectives via interviews, organizing around certain issues (i.e. local elections), and hosting community events. At the cross-organizational level, they are partnering with other local nonprofit and human service organizations to help bridge connections across the siloes that previously/currently exist between the organizations serving the community. And at the policy level, they are building relationships with local elected officials and public agency representatives, advocating at different decision making tables, and doing direct advocacy work at the Capitol.

Learnings to date

One of the most important learnings to date that FRAN staff and volunteers described was how essential community engagement is to their work. Though still concerned about working with other organizations in the area, they have shifted their focus to community engagement as the bedrock of their activities and strategies with the idea that the community is the ultimate expert on what it needs and the best ways to address those needs. As a result, they emphasized how important it is for them to listen to the full range of voices in their community, and thus the need for extensive relationship building and community engagement efforts.

These engagement efforts take on a variety of approaches, from simply saying hello to people on the street, connecting people to one another around certain topics or areas of interest, listening to people's concerns and goals for the community via interviews, to asking people to become directly involved in their work via volunteering. Volunteering is an important aspect of their work because they are able to bring in a diverse group of experiences, interests, and skills that more accurately represent the diversity of their community, as well as provide stipends to community members who are involved in their work. They have also conducted a series of leadership and engagement trainings, called the Power of 1+1.

FRAN staff and volunteers emphasized that this is not always a neat and orderly process. Rather, their approach to this community work is complex and often chaotic. However, in this chaos they find that they are best able to adapt to the ever-changing needs, goals, and demographics in their community. Nonetheless, it requires compromise and working with those who have varying interests, giving their work a push-pull flow that they are always trying to balance.

Moving forward, FRAN plans to further their relationship-based model of community advocacy work by building on previous success, such as the additional three light rail stops and getting rid of X-rated businesses in the community. Their action orientation is focused on improving the lives of their community through coordinating local services and engagement, and also

now taking a larger policy-level focus and bringing their community's voices to policymakers, hoping to ultimately shift those power dynamics to a balance more equitable for their community. As they move forward they are working on balancing the tension between listening to and reflecting the full diversity of the voices in their community while also trying to come up with concrete action steps.

Evaluation hopes and fears

Regarding Wilder Research's evaluation of the overall Building Sustainable Communities model, they hope that the evaluation will be able to document the impact of their work in their community, particularly as it relates to making housing more available, accessible, and affordable. They also hope the evaluation documents the importance of well-paying jobs and other economic issues for the quality of life of the community and for this model of community-driven work. Ultimately, they are hoping the overall evaluation will be able to show the importance of effective community engagement and truly listening to the community for building communities that are in fact sustainable. By being able to document these key areas, FRAN hopes it will provide them with greater visibility and recognition as a key player in this work, and hopefully result in more partnerships in the area, such as with the Wilder Foundation.

The FRAN staff and volunteers also expressed some concerns and fears about the evaluation as well, such as a fear of losing access to the data that will be collected. They expressed concern about this in particular due to a previous negative experience with Wilder Research for the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood assessment that it was involved in. They are concerned that by losing access to the data, not only will their community not have true ownership of the information and the ability to use it themselves, but it will also result in losing access to other potential funding. Similarly, they fear that by focusing on the larger Building Sustainable Communities program that FRAN will lose its individual voice and thus lose credit and visibility for the work they are doing.

Final focus group

Strategies for engagement

The final focus group included both partner organizations and community participants. The most common themes for how residents originally got involved with FRAN include that the environment is personable, friendly, and welcoming, and that staff and volunteers are good at listening to the voices of residents and respect all involved. Community participants described people coming together around a shared commitment to empowering the community, addressing needs directly as well as making referrals to other organizations and agencies in the community that can help address residents' needs and priorities.

FRAN was described as being very resident-driven in its work, creating a space where residents and partner organizations can bring their voices "to the table" to be heard by everyone, who then work together collectively to create an action plan to address those shared concerns. In fact, when asked what work of FRAN's is guided or driven by residents, several participants simultaneously said, "All of it!" FRAN's decisions are made collectively and in unanimous agreement. Participants said this increases their personal level of investment and sense of empowerment when they all work together to reach an agreed upon action plan. They described this approach as building community power through hearing residents' voices and connecting them to the necessary resources to take action and address needs and priorities.

Community participants and partner organizations described similar reasons for continuing to be engaged with FRAN: their personal investment in FRAN and their community, the relationships they have built through their involvement with FRAN, and the mutual support from FRAN participants, as well as leadership training opportunities, support for local businesses and entrepreneurs, the expertise of community voices and perspectives, and the common values and interests in improving the community as other reasons for continuing to be involved at FRAN. As one participant said, "If I didn't do something, then who?"

FRAN community participants and partner organization representatives described a broad set of areas of work by the group, including recreation centers for the community, advocacy work with the city, education work (voting education, leadership training, housing training, professionalism and job training, etc.), research (interviews, coding, analysis, fieldwork, canvassing, world cafes, surveys), housing advocacy and strategic planning, youth engagement, fundraising, and network building. They described FRAN as being the face of community in action:

FRAN takes action. If we don't like something, we sit at the table, speak up, and take action!

This action-oriented and resident-driven focus was described as being empowering for residents and partner organizations involved in FRAN's work, helping to build and uplift participants' skills, talents, and assets; as some participants described, being involved with FRAN helps them with "claiming your own power" and "recognizing and owning your assets."

In naming important assets for their organizations' work with FRAN, partner organization representatives frequently emphasized the creation of the resource directory—which is a compilation of community resources and services arranged topically that is made available to the community—as well as their ability to tap the expertise of the community through FRAN's engagement and research work.

Similarly, residents also described FRAN's efforts in connecting people to opportunities—including employment, programs/services, ways to get more deeply engaged, etc. They also mentioned that FRAN has some involvement with the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood.

Relationship building

When asked how FRAN builds trust with the community, focus group participants described how FRAN is a safe and inviting place where people feel valued, and that all people are equal at FRAN and there is no hierarchy. They recognize and trust one another's expertise that every person brings to the table, knowing that they will be listened to and heard at FRAN. All of this was critically important for the trust-building amongst residents who have become deeply invested and involved at FRAN. This investment in personal relationships, empowering of each person's expertise, and action-oriented agenda has worked to foster what one focus group participant described by saying, "[FRAN is a] smaller community within the community."

FRAN is actively involved with Minnesota Housing Council, Metropolitan Consortium of CDCs, local housing programs, and St. Paul Promise Neighborhood. Organizations in the area see FRAN as a key partner with access to the voices of the community. Finally, the Resource Guide/directory that FRAN put together helps community members connect to the necessary resources available in the community.

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