

LISC-BSC Partner Meeting Themes Summary Hope Community

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 has met individually with each partner organization to learn more about their organization's work, evaluation goals, and community context.

This is a summary of the main themes from three meetings held by Wilder Research staff with Hope Community and its community members and partners. The first meeting was on Jan. 9, 2014, attended by two key staff leaders from Hope. Two final focus groups were held on Sept. 11, 2014 with seven organizational partners and Oct. 10, 2014 with four community members.

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

From the discussion with Hope Community staff, they made it clear that relationship building is at the core of all their work. They said that their current activities have grown out of 37 years of history in the community. Since the late 1990s Hope has held listening sessions with over 3,000 diverse residents. Many say they want to stay in the diverse neighborhood. They also say good transportation in

the area is a strength. Other consistent themes include the importance of quality, affordable housing; safety; strong institutions including schools and good jobs; and respect for their neighborhood. The importance of culture and cultural history is raised consistently, as well as concerns about stereotypes and racism. At the same time people want to be a strong part of their community and see the importance of multi-cultural communities.

Hope staff described their neighborhood as having drug and crime issues, as well as major disinvestment when they began their work at Hope in the 1990s. Many vacant and substandard buildings lined the streets where Hope's rehabbed and new buildings now stand. Although there have been many positive changes, many community residents are low-income and current concerns of the community members exist in a neighborhood environment that they described as having a lot of different organizations, and cultures. This can provide for major opportunities, as well as challenges.

Activities and strategies

The two staff leaders that we talked with described how when they started their work at Hope, they began by building relationships with community members and listening to their challenges and hopes. Because of the urgent need for housing in the area Hope began to acquire property and rehab houses and smaller buildings on the "Hope Block", as well as plan for a major development on the abandoned corners of Portland and Franklin. To date Hope and partner, Aeon, have developed the South Quarter with three completed buildings (126 rental units co-developed and co-owned) at the Franklin/Portland intersection. Hope owns an additional 47 units in the immediate area. South Quarter Phase IV will begin construction in 2013. Businesses in the South Quarter

include a child care center, a neighborhood market, and Hope's community center and offices.

During the years that Hope's housing was being developed and built, Hope was also developing its model of extensive community engagement. Their community listening model is used for large formal "listening projects" as well as smaller, more informal listening. The listening is not used as a linear tool, but as a way to stay consistently connected to the community. Community members have roles in implementing the sessions. The current focus is listening sessions targeted at food and food access, as well as financial literacy.

The Hope staff said they have understood from the beginning that housing alone is not enough to create a strong future for the challenged neighborhood, and so began to engage the community in a variety of ways. What started out as a few programs 10 years ago is now a systematic approach to engaging people in opportunities to build more opportunity for themselves and for their community. Hope works with people in the broader community (almost all low-income people of color), not only residents in their housing, and impact institutions and systems as well as individuals. Currently about 500 people a year are involved.

Hope's work creates an environment with multiple opportunities -- called entry points at Hope -- where people can engage around their interests. Youth learn and become leaders in a community-based literacy program, through art and music opportunities, in group mentoring about leadership and employment. Intensive adult opportunities include SPEAC (Sustainable Progress for Engaging Active Citizens), an eight-month leadership and organizing training and action program. A year-around Food, Leadership and Community program has over 100 people involved annually and a community food justice team about to embark on engaging 400 people in the community in dialogues related to food justice. Additional opportunities include a 12 week micro-entrepreneur training twice a year (NDC partnership for 12 years); economic empowerment training (Twin Cities RISE! training done by Hope staff); training youth to succeed in applying to the Step Up program. Adults also

learn, lead and network in parent learning groups, a bike and transportation group, an art and community dialogue program. Hope is a Prepare + Prosper tax preparation and financial information site for three months each year (over 900 people served in 2014 not included in above numbers).

Hope leaders call the whole of this work with community members a "platform" of opportunity and connections. Partnerships are a core strategy. A recent count showed 38 organizations and institutions that were directly involved through informal and formal partnerships. They talk about this "platform" strategy as creating a web of relationships, connections and networks. Hope and community members also work to impact issues like: Literacy and education, transportation, equity in Minneapolis parks, and food justice.

The leaders say that specific "entry points" may change (for example basic education provided by Minneapolis Public Schools was an important opportunity at Hope until the recession eliminated the funding), but the core purposes remain the same. Hope always focuses on skill building, leadership development, and opportunities to build individual capacity, community capacity and community change. After several years of working with this approach, they see many people engaging across interest areas, digging in deeper after being involved at a beginning level, using the networks and skills they are building to make a difference in their own lives, and participating at a community change level. Hope staff involve participants in planning, reflection and evaluation throughout all their work.

Hope Community has been working with LISC since 1998, and received funding from them mostly for general operations. They described how the Building Sustainable Communities model is difficult for South Minneapolis because of how many different cultures, neighborhoods, and organizations exist in the area, Hope's work is one way to adapt the model with its strong connection between physical development and extensive engagement with the community over many years.

Learnings to date

The Hope Community staff described how they are now able to take on different activities and strategies as an organization because of the earlier work, trust, relationship building, and capacity that gives them the necessary momentum and community buy-in to do so. They describe these different networks—between Hope and the community members, and between Hope and other organizations—as being vital to their work, saying that relationships and trust are at the foundation of all their work in the community. Nonetheless, this requires figuring out the right scale for their programs and involvement, and what the right level of formality and informality should be with certain partnerships in the area for different activities.

They also talked about how they are working on how to talk about the model they have developed. They also describe how they have come to truly value having a peer network to share learning locally with other organizations doing similar work, and how partnering effectively can be used to best address the needs of the community in a sustainable manner. They have also learned about the value of evaluating their programs, and have three separate evaluations going on at this point in time.

Evaluation hopes and fears

Regarding any evaluation fears that they have, they said that they hope the evaluation does not use a priori measures that do not necessarily apply to their community and their work, thus not being suitable for scaling these efforts and the learnings from them. They also said they hope that in an attempt to evaluate the entire BSC model that the evaluation does not end up picking the smallest common denominator items as areas for common measures, which they said often are not relevant to the actual communities in which the work is being done.

Rather, they hope that the evaluation is able to take a higher-level look at what is working in each community, and what common strands of work seem to apply across the partners' work in their respective communities, not just the least common denominators between them.

They also hope that the evaluation is able to show how their model of relationship building with the community and extensive partnerships is as equally important and valuable as more formal models of collaboration. By looking at all the BSC partners' models and seeing how each works in their context, there may be some great themes that emerge about the different effective approaches to doing sustainable, community-engaged work.

Final focus groups

Strategies for engagement

When asked what Hope first did to get them involved, community participants each described an initial connection through one particular activity, followed by increasing levels of connection over time as the staff worked to connect them to more opportunities and trainings. They described how Hope offers many opportunities and outlets for getting involved in the community, improving their own leadership skills, and growing their personal and professional social networks in the community, all centered around improving the community overall.

Participants also discussed how the staff at Hope are very skilled at recognizing the potential of each resident who gets involved, and help foster and invest in the development of residents' skills and areas of interest, building deep relationships with community members. This was described as being very empowering for residents, inspiring them to trust Hope and feel a greater sense of ownership in the organization and the community as a whole. One participant also emphasized how Hope is unique in their experience, inasmuch as it provides a variety of opportunities to get involved for all ages and interests, encouraging whole families to get involved sometimes. All of this was made possible by the quality and commitment of the staff to building relationships, trust, and skills of residents in the community, communicating effectively with residents and partners, and working together towards the common goal of improving the community according to residents' expressed priorities, needs, and vision.

Participants in the community member focus group noted the leadership training programs, the community garden, community organizing work, leadership youth camp, community models of entrepreneurship and support, food justice-related work, racial equity-focused work, and the bicycle program as some activities in which Hope has been involved. In addition, partner organization representatives also mentioned the urban farm site, the business support projects, infrastructure-related work and advocacy, the community engagement and listening/visioning sessions, the mural and art projects, and cross-organizational resource sharing as some other key activities that Hope focuses on and around which their partnerships are based. Both residents and organizational partners strongly emphasized how Hope shapes its work and vision based on the voices, hopes, goals, priorities, and needs of community residents.

Community member participants mentioned that Hope recognizes the expertise of each individual resident, soliciting their input and ideas on a regular basis through listening sessions and other activities in the community, which they said leads to residents feeling an increased sense of ownership and investment in Hope and the community. This was supported by partner organizations, who mentioned how Hope prioritizes its work with partners based on how it aligns with the expressed needs and priorities of the residents, always with a “bigger picture” vision and mindset for how the many different facets of work combine to help improve the community overall and over time. As one partner organization representative put it:

Our work with Hope has helped us [learn from] good strong engagement that allows our community's voice to shape our work... It's less about Hope [taking the lead] but really how do we foster and support those ideas and visions that are already out there that just need some support.

Partner organizations also mentioned that they go to Hope staff for their expertise; their willingness to discuss and vision together each of their organization's

work and how they can partner to improve outcomes; their willingness to share resources and invest in the development of its partner organizations' staff; and their commitment to racial equity and justice in the work that goes into improving the community. Some mentioned how Hope staff act as mentors to other organizations' staff, and invest in showing other organizations how to effectively engage and build relationships with residents. In other words, the strategic relational focus of Hope's work permeates throughout its various activities and partnerships, building trust with residents and other organizations while providing technical and resource support for each, in order to work for the overall improvement of the community as a whole. In the words of one partner organization representative: “They are tuned into the community and will continue to help us do this work. I feel like they've kept the program very grounded. They are tuned in to that greater goal from the community level.”

Relationship building

Not only has Hope helped connect residents to its work, but community member participants described how Hope has helped foster relationships among residents, between residents and other organizations, and between residents and elected officials. This was further supported by partner organization representatives who said that Hope has helped their organizations connect and build relationships with residents, with other organizations in the community, and with elected officials. For residents, this has meant building deeper relationships with other residents and even getting jobs with partner organizations as a result of their involvement with Hope. For partner organizations, this has meant improving the quality of their work by learning from others, gaining access to greater resources by pooling resources and communicating opportunities with one another, and by connecting each organization's work with that of others in the area to improve the outcomes of the work happening the community at a “bigger picture” level through coordinating inter-organization relationships.

Both residents and partner organizations mentioned how Hope's office has been a critical community

space and resource, fostering a safe and friendly environment for residents and organizations to use, connect, and build a sense of identity. In the words of one partner organization representative,

Hope has this great use of welcoming where you actually use the space as a community place. The barriers have really been removed for community organizations to actually use the space. If it's available, it's there. We work around trainings, board meetings, and staff retreats. That's been an absolute blessing.

It's for listening with community and building together. We don't know what's best, you know what's best and we want to get there with you. When you approach it from that perspective it's that trust that you're here to stay. It's not, "Pop in, serve us, fix this problem in your community." We're here to work with you to grow food or have some tea or hang out, work on the park board on racial equity – but we want to do it together. We're here for the long term. I think the lesson for me is that when we call folks to do something there's that trust and without that trust we couldn't do what we do.

Impacts

In addition to its relationship- and trust-building efforts with residents, partner organizations, and elected officials, Hope was also described by partner organization representatives as strategically focused on “building the field” and “framing the conditions” in the Phillips community for other organizations, efforts, and collaborations to be more effective, coordinated, and community-driven. In that way, Hope provides a sense of stability, longevity, and consistency for the various efforts and work happening in the community. Hope was also described as helping change people’s perceptions of the Phillips neighborhood for both outsiders and residents, and has worked to increase the community capacity to advocate for itself around issues of equity. They were also described as having helped build the foundation upon which other community work can grow in a resident-driven manner, and they have helped to bring together residents, organizations, and officials in what was described as being a previously fragmented community. In addition, one partner organization representative mentioned that Hope has been central in helping to prevent gentrification in the neighborhood as the community improves.

Overall, residents and organization partners agreed that Hope’s work has helped foster a sense of community identity, ownership, and pride, empowering residents to be active in improving and shaping their community. A Hope staff member summarized this, saying:

There was a strong sense that Hope is greatly appreciated by both residents and partner organizations for its emphasis on community engagement and arts/culture. Hope was described as providing creative outlets for connecting artists with community activism, and helping foster a sense of pride and commitment to the arts in the community. This not only helps foster a sense of identity and pride in the community, but also has helped in building trust and investment with the residents.

The community member focus group participants all emphasized how their lives, their level of involvement in the community, the composition and health of the community, and even their own professional careers would have been very different if it were not for Hope Community. This is further supported by partner organizations who said that the community would likely be more fragmented, organizational work would be less focused and less community-driven, and there would be less infrastructural and business development and fewer opportunities for youth to get connected and involved in the community.

Overall, it would appear that Hope Community’s relational focus, community engagement emphasis, deep and strategic partnership building, commitment to racial equity and leadership development, and its “big picture” strategic visioning are all critical components that make Hope successful in its work in the community over time.

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January 2015