



Building Sustainable Communities

Twin Cities Implementation and Lessons Learned

J A N U A R Y 2 0 1 5

Prepared by:
Ellen Shelton and Ryan Steel

451 Lexington Parkway North | Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

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Summary

Building Sustainable Communities in the Twin Cities

The Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation, or LISC, is part of a national organization of 32 city, regional, and rural offices that provide financial and technical assistance to organizations engaged in the creation of vibrant neighborhoods and communities. It acts as a funder, lender, advisor, and consultant to promote comprehensive community development activities.

In 2007-08, as part of a national LISC initiative, Twin Cities LISC introduced the Building Sustainable Communities (BSC) program in this region, supporting its implementation by seven lead agencies in five neighborhoods:

- The **Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)** in North Minneapolis
- The **Back Yard Initiative, Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI), and Hope Community** in South Minneapolis
- The **Frogtown-Rondo Action Network (FRAN)** on the Central Corridor (University Avenue) in Saint Paul
- The **East Side Prosperity Campaign (ESPC)** on the East Side of Saint Paul
- The **Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC)** in Hopkins

The BSC model is grounded in three core principles: the work is expected to be *community-driven*, to focus on *comprehensive community development*, and to be done *collaboratively*.

LISC supported these local initiatives in several coordinated ways. **Grants** to the lead agencies supported staff to take care of the “backbone” tasks of engaging, connecting, and coordinating residents and organizations, including communications, facilitation, and evaluation tasks. A **peer network** was convened each month to facilitate sharing insights about learning and mutual support around issues and challenges. LISC has also provided a variety of **technical assistance** and connections to resources. Moreover, approximately 80 percent of LISC’s investments in physical infrastructure were made in the same neighborhoods, often in coordination with or informed by the work of the BSC sites.

Study purpose and methods

During 2014, the seventh year of the BSC program in the Twin Cities, this evaluation explored how the BSC model is understood and implemented by the lead agencies and what has been learned about what it takes to do the work effectively. The findings in this report are based on site visits with each of the seven lead agencies, participant observation at peer network meetings, focus groups with community and organization participants in the activities of each site, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with LISC staff and site leaders.

Findings

How are the three core principles understood and implemented?

Community-driven. The community-driven nature of the work sets the BSC model apart from most other approaches to community development. We found that this principle is also the foundation that shapes, supports, and gives meaning to both of the other core principles.

The “community-driven” principle is also highly variable in how it is realized across the sites, but at its heart, for each site the core elements are **listening to learn the community’s vision for itself** (assisted by having a *gathering space* and *direct personal invitations* to participate) and **connecting the vision to resources and action**. This connection is strengthened if the effort *offers varied opportunities* for participation; provides *leadership development; links individual activities to the work of organizations*, and builds *connections to political leadership*.

The evidence collected as part of this evaluation points to many different reasons for implementing the community-driven approach. It helps change community members’ perceptions of themselves and the community, and helps build self-efficacy among residents. The connections it builds, in communities that are often fragmented, promote safety, cohesion, and collective efficacy (or the capacity of a community to take effective action on behalf of the whole), as well as trust among residents and for the initiative and its leaders.

Comprehensive. This principle is less consistently defined and applied. By LISC it is variously defined in terms of different kinds of community capital to be built: housing, economy and workforce, community quality and safety, community institutions and relationships, social and health services, and education and culture. More briefly, it has been compared to a three-legged stool made up of human and social capital, physical development, and economic development.

As understood by the sites, there is a lack of clarity about the level or scale at which the principle most applies. Some stakeholders understand it at the project or initiative level (e.g., involving multi-sector partners or addressing a range of issues or topics), some at the community level (e.g., making connections to resources both within and beyond the community), and one at the individual level (the initiative's work attends to the whole of people's lives, not just one aspect). Six of the seven sites were addressing both physical development and social development, either directly or through partners, and nearly all addressed many of the different kinds of community capital.

Collaborative. There is considerable agreement that essential elements of this principle include two important components: *relationship-building* and *coordinated action toward a common goal*. In a majority of the sites, the work included active efforts to strengthen connections and shared activity at three different but inter-related levels: *Individual to individual* (community residents working together), *organization to organization* (community organizations working together), and *individual to organization* (connections between community residents and organizations).

Additional elements of collaboration that occurred among a number of sites, but are not essential, include establishing clear *roles and relationships* among organizational partners, and the *sharing of resources* among collaborating organizations.

Implementing the collaborative principle is seen to promote effectiveness of efforts through several different mechanisms. It *strengthens actions and results*, making it possible to undertake actions that would not otherwise be possible, and achieve results otherwise not attainable. It *builds partners' capacity* and also helps *build the social capital and cohesion* that is needed for a thriving community. If connections are built to organizations outside the community, they help expand the type and magnitude of resources available to address community development. Individual-to-organization connections help organizations better understand what community members are looking for. As organizations become more connected with community residents, they can be more aware of what is needed and desired, enabling them to respond more nimbly as conditions or opportunities develop. As a result, the *quality and fit of services* are likely to improve, and through ongoing connections with elected leaders and/or public agency representatives, the vision of the community for its own well-being is more likely to be heard and to enacted in the form of policy change.

Other principles that matter for efforts to strengthen communities

In the process of examining the “3 Cs” of the BSC model and how they are implemented, we discovered a number of considerations that help to implement the core principles and add to the effectiveness of the BSC efforts. Most of these cut across the three core principles, and cannot be neatly assigned to a support role for just one. These cross-cutting principles are:

A clear definition of “the community” (which can be based on culture as well as geography); an **asset-based approach**; a balanced approach that is **both purpose-driven and also flexible and creative**. To implement the many interrelated parts of the initiative requires the consistent support of a **backbone organization** (or person) to help bring participants into the initiative to share their voice, and help to keep people – and organizations – engaged, on task and on schedule, and connected. For the sake of consistency and continuity, this role needs to be filled by a regular **staff person**, and the lifeblood of the initiative is consistent, two-way, and transparent **communications**.

Outcomes of the local initiatives supported through the BSC

Outcomes are evident at multiple levels: individuals and families, organizational capacity, and the overall community. According to participants in focus groups and ripple effect mapping exercises, and reports of agency leaders, the following are the most common kinds of outcomes across the sites.

Outcomes for individuals and families include increased involvement in community activities, increased social connectedness, feelings of hope, and self-efficacy, and increased access to opportunities ranging from art to education to affordable housing to leadership development. Depending on the particular kind of activity in which participants were involved, additional outcomes range from improved educational access and proficiency, increased health and wellness, help developing entrepreneurship skills or opportunities, and more stable housing. Another kind of outcome described anecdotally in several sites is for community participants to obtain jobs with organizations to which they became connected as part of the community activities.

Outcomes for communities. Community-level outcomes include increased social capital (including connections and trust) that has resulted in increased community safety and perceptions of the community as more welcoming for diverse residents. Other changes related to BSC activities include better services and greater participation in community services and activities; improvements to the physical environment; influence on decisions about transit service to the community; and increased influence with political leaders and other decision-makers. In addition, in some of the sites the growth in organizational

capacity has built a “culture of collaboration” in the community that has increased the community’s capacity to respond to new challenges or opportunities.

Outcomes for lead agencies. For the lead agencies, the primary benefit has been growth in capacity through funding and/or learning. Much of the growth in capacity resulted directly from BSC funding, but some also increased their ability to secure additional grants or funding. The peer network promoted new and shared learning by providing the space – and a compelling reason to carve out time to join it – for discussion and sharing of insights and challenges.

Outcomes for partner organizations. Organizational partners report their organizations were strengthened by their involvement with the initiative, including improvements in the quality or results of their activities; the ability to take on projects or secure funding that they would not have had the capacity to seek alone; being better able to sustain action, funding, or additional partnerships as a result of the connections formed in the initiative; and also, for some, improved service targeting and/or quality due to their ability through the BSC initiative to hear from community members about what they saw as most important.

Impact of the BSC initiative on LISC

There is consensus among the interviews with agency leads and LISC staff that the BSC initiative has helped LISC achieve its mission. First, the outcomes described here show that local initiatives have clearly helped people and places to thrive. Second, the peer network and the connections made by the LISC staff acting as liaisons to sites have helped LISC to benefit from the knowledge and perspectives of agency leaders who have extensive experience with a variety of other forms of community development. LISC staff report that this learning has influenced their work beyond the BSC program.

Impact of LISC on the BSC lead agencies

As the lead agencies have coordinated and energized the work of individuals and organizations in their communities, LISC has similarly help to coordinate and energize the work of the lead agencies, and this has helped deepen and strengthen the work of the lead agencies. This has happened through several pathways: the peer network, organized by LISC to facilitate sharing of skills and strategies; the expertise and connections of the LISC staff liaisons; the loan and grant resources that funded physical investments in their communities (and also strengthened some of the local partnerships); and connections to the network of national BSC efforts and other LISC leaders, experts, and other resources nationwide.

Issues to consider

Variations in settings and structure

The evidence collected during this evaluation shows that the BSC model includes core principles that are well suited for a range of communities, while having room to interpret and supplement those with the adaptations needed to fit local contexts. It has demonstrated its ability to be adapted successfully in a suburban location as well as in a community that is defined by culture rather than geography.

Another natural experiment was seen in the relative emphasis that Twin Cities sites put on individual-level efforts versus organizational collaborations. The ESPC is an example of a site where the primary energy was in a core set of actively engaged organizational partners. At the other end of this continuum is FRAN, which in its current operations primarily organizes and mobilizes community residents, involving and seeking to influence organizations as a secondary strategy. As of the final focus groups and interviews, both of these sites appear more uncertain than the other sites of their ability to sustain their operations in the absence of the BSC support, and the evidence points to the importance to the strength of the BSC model of linking strong community participation with effective organizational partnership for action.

Considerations for sustainability of the local initiatives

Critical success factors contributed by the lead agencies – with support and amplification due to the BSC initiative – include community outreach and engagement, convening (of residents, organizational partners, and/or wider groups of stakeholders), support for relationship development through a variety of means, action planning and oversight of implementation, and communications.

This capacity supports the lead agencies' foundation for creating positive change as defined by its own community, and one would expect it to therefore support a stronger foundation for securing investment by internal and external partners. Despite how vital this role is, however, these activities are typically considered “general operations” that are hard to fund except in the context of a specific (and usually new) program. Nevertheless, it is clear that the same level of activity and outcomes observed in the last seven years of the BSC could not continue without the continuation of those functions. They are very similar to the roles played in formal collaborations by a “backbone organization” that is charged with being the keeper of an initiative's vision, manager of its process, and tracker of its results while a variety of partners each take charge of specific implementation tasks.

The concept of a backbone organization has gained enough circulation that it may be possible for an entity such as the BSC lead agencies to claim their ability to manage this suite of functions as “a program” in its own right. There is a growing body of evidence, including from this study, to document the ways in which this kind of support can benefit the process of community development, and of the many ways in which this kind of backbone support can help generate or augment positive outcomes that help community efforts become stably institutionalized.

Potential next steps

As LISC considers changes in its other programs and strategies, we recommend seeking ways to build in resources to support the “backbone functions” of organizations that can show the capacity to connect with community residents, connect with organizations, and – perhaps most importantly – connect the two levels with each other to translate community voice into effective, shared action. In addition, an evaluation function is important throughout the process. Many organizations would benefit from technical support and capacity building to help them learn to do this effectively on their own, or share a common resource to support their efforts.

LISC can also use its learning from the Twin Cities Building Sustainable Communities initiative to make more funders aware of the way in which the backbone function can magnify the productivity of more traditional funding. We recommend that LISC develop communications products that help educate a variety of audiences about the value of this function and, possibly, brand it as a program or service that is clearly distinguished from “general operations” and hence more readily identifiable as a funding opportunity.

Introduction

Background: Building Sustainable Communities in the Twin Cities

This report presents results of a qualitative evaluation of the effectiveness of a community development partnership in the Twin Cities and its impacts on participating individuals and organizations and the community at large.

The Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation, or LISC, is part of a national organization of 32 local, regional and rural offices that provide financial and technical assistance to organizations engaged in the creation of vibrant neighborhoods and communities. It acts as a funder, lender, advisor, and consultant to promote comprehensive community development activities. Its mission is to *Help People and Places Prosper*.

In 2007-08, Twin Cities LISC introduced the Building Sustainable Communities (BSC) program in this region as part of a national LISC initiative, which grew out of the findings from the ten-year New Communities Program in Chicago. Its roll-out to fifteen sites nationally included an ideal model based on effective elements of the Chicago program, but was also expected to offer opportunities to test the model's applicability in other sites and contexts.

The basic model as distilled from Chicago's New Communities Program prescribed a number of core elements to be implemented in the expansion sites. However, as the emerging field of implementation science has begun to document, any program or model that is successful in one place or context must be adapted if it is to be successfully replicated elsewhere. Typically this involves a process of understanding not the action steps that must be replicated, but rather the principles that help guide the choice of action steps based on unique local conditions.

As implemented in the Twin Cities, three core principles drive the community development work. As part of BSC, the work is:

- Community-driven
- Comprehensive
- Collaborative

Communities and lead agencies involved in BSC

Twin Cities LISC identified seven organizations in five neighborhoods that were actively engaged in work that was consistent with these principles and that were interested in partnering with LISC to explore how this model could work in their neighborhoods. Over time, as local energy has shifted, there has been some revision to the set of organizations, which are referred to in this report as *lead agencies*. During the period of this study, these lead agencies and their neighborhoods were:

- In North Minneapolis, the **Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ)**
- In South Minneapolis, three organizations: the **Backyard Initiative**, the **Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI)**, and **Hope Community**
- On the Central Corridor (University Avenue) in Saint Paul, the **Frogtown-Rondo Action Network (FRAN)**
- On the East Side of Saint Paul, the **East Side Prosperity Campaign (ESPC)**
- In Hopkins, the **Blake Road Corridor Collaborative (BRCC)**

These local initiatives are referred to as lead agencies or sites throughout this report. Each one partnered, in varying ways, with individual community members and with a set of other organizations in the community, referred to in this report as “partner organizations.” LISC supported their efforts in several coordinated ways.

Grants

Grants made to the lead agencies were for general operational support. They were used in a variety of ways, but mainly to support staff who could take care of the “backbone” tasks of engaging, connecting, and coordinating residents and organizations, including communications, facilitation, and evaluation tasks.

Peer network

Each month LISC convenes representatives of each of the lead agencies to share updates on what they are doing and insights about what they are learning, raise questions about issues and challenges, or strategize about possible approaches. This has also been an opportunity for LISC to share expertise or connections to resources.

Site leaders (staff at the lead agencies who have been primarily responsible for coordinating the BSC-related efforts) have found the peer network highly valuable. Their comments

about the value of this forum are in many ways similar to the comments of partner organizations about the value of collaboration with each other within the sites. Site leaders expressed appreciation for the way connections have allowed them to benefit from each other's strengths and created time and space for shared reflection and learning. They have found the group personally supportive as well as professionally enriching. This forum has also helped LISC learn from sites, especially about the non-physical kinds of development that were new to LISC.

Other technical assistance

Each site had a LISC staff member as their liaison, who stayed in touch and was available to provide a variety of support including advice and connections to resources and expertise. Another form of support that was important to at least one site was help to address the occasional friction that can easily occur when a nationally-designed and -specified program must be adapted to fit with the locally-driven vision for how to organize the site's efforts.

LISC also contracted with the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) to work with the sites to develop and implement a set of quantitative measures of their community related to gaps in racial and ethnic disparity around socio-economic conditions. Joined by University of Minnesota Extension, CURA also supported a Ripple Effect Mapping exercise for three of the BSC sites to document qualitative results.

Finally, it should be noted that approximately 80 percent of LISC's investments in physical infrastructure were made in the same neighborhoods, and these were often coordinated with or informed by the work of the BSC sites.

Study purpose and methods

In 2014 Twin Cities LISC asked Wilder Research to conduct an evaluation to explore how the BSC model is understood and implemented by the lead agencies and their partners and what has been learned about what it takes to do the work effectively. The evaluation was designed to include a contextualized understanding that takes into account the need for the overall BSC model to be adapted to its local community. The evaluation was guided by the following *research questions*:

- How is the BSC model understood and implemented by the partners?
- What are the commonalities and differences in how partners prioritize or implement different aspects of the BSC model or process? What parts do they feel are more effective, and how are these differences related to the specific contexts of their neighborhoods?

- What improvements in the community can be connected to LISC's and the partners' efforts, and what are some options for measuring and reporting these improvements?

To address these purposes, Wilder evaluators developed evaluation plans collaboratively with LISC and the lead agencies. The data for findings are based on:

- Initial visits to each site to meet with the site leaders and sometimes community participants and/or organization representatives, with the purpose of understanding each site's purpose, partners, and organization; evaluators also shared notes and asked for feedback following these meetings, to check for understanding.
- Attendance at monthly peer network meetings, as participant and observer.
- Focus groups with partner organizations and community participants in most sites, depending on site context.¹ Focus group method and questions were developed based on input from LISC and the BSC site leaders. Focus group participants included 46 community residents and 33 partner organization representatives.
- In-depth, open-ended interviews with each agency leader and the three LISC staff.
- Review of a variety of documents related to the overall BSC initiative and individual sites, including Ripple Effect Maps prepared for three sites by a CURA Research Assistant, with support from the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

¹ One group was held at FRAN, including mostly community participants, which was representative of the active partners in the work of the site. In the Backyard Initiative, no focus groups were conducted because they would not be consistent with the principles of the local initiative, which only supports activities that are responsive to the purposes of the community itself. One group was held at ESPC with organizational representative, who are the active partners in this site.

Findings

How are the three core principles understood and implemented?

There is very strong agreement among LISC staff and site leaders on the meaning of two of the three principles driving the work (community driven and collaborative), and a generally consistent approach to the third (comprehensive). However, the actual operational practice varies considerably for all three. In addition, it is clear from the focus groups and interviews that these three principles are closely related to each other in how they are applied, and that each supports the others' effectiveness.

Community-driven

The community-driven nature of the work sets the BSC model apart from most other approaches to community development or even other models of comprehensive community initiatives. It is clear from all the groups of stakeholders who were part of this evaluation that this principle is also the foundation that shapes, supports, and gives meaning to both of the others.

The “community-driven” principle is also highly variable in how it is realized across the sites, but at its heart, for each site the core elements are concisely defined as follows by one of the site leaders in the peer network:

The folks need to decide what the problem is and what the solution is, and implement it themselves. – Backyard Initiative representative

Common elements in all communities include:

■ **Listening to learn the community's vision for itself**

The following appear to help strengthen this listening element:

Gathering space. A number of sites have a place where community residents feel comfortable and want to come, and which facilitates making connections. The importance of this gathering space was highlighted in many different interviews and focus groups. Examples include the main Hope building; the NACDI Gallery; the Aurora-St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Center building where FRAN is headquartered; and, in a slightly different way, the 43 Hoops basketball facility and community garden for the BRCC.

Direct personal invitations to people to participate. Community residents in the focus groups almost universally mentioned direct personal invitations as the impetus for their involvement. These often come from staff, but this is not necessary. If other community members make the invitation, it helps promote additional and stronger connections among community members and builds stronger networks for action.

Other supportive elements that apply to multiple principles are listed in a later section.

■ **Connecting the vision to resources and action**

The vision alone does not sustain energy and participation. To generate community-driven action it is necessary to connect the vision to resources that can create and sustain action to achieve the vision. The following appear to help strengthen this element:

Offer varied opportunities. The availability of opportunities to participate at different levels of engagement and in different types of activities is important because it provides many different doors by which people may enter. It also increases the chances that a person, once involved, can discover additional opportunities to maintain their involvement. An array of options also makes it more attractive for people to bring others they know (family or neighbors) along with them because it increases the chance that the other person will also find something of interest. For example, many BRCC parents first got involved because their children were offered activities. A variety of opportunities also allows the site to “meet the participant where they are at” and calibrate the time commitment or kind of task to something that is comfortable for the participant.

Leadership development. Opportunities for leadership development may be formal, informal, or both. This involves creating opportunities for the practice and application of leadership skills at different levels through a variety of actions or projects. Many of the BSC sites explicitly include youth development and **youth leadership** efforts. Among any age group, leadership is an important factor in strengthening the community’s capacity for joint action as well as the commitment to shared community values to help guide that action to benefit the community.

Links between individual activities and the work of organizations. The evidence suggests that the most sustainable implementation, with the strongest outcomes, includes consistent activities to engage both community residents and organizational partners and also to link the two kinds of engagement with each other. Organizational links should include not only those that are already active in the neighborhood, but also some that are outside the neighborhood, in order to broaden residents’ connections and expand the pool of resources that can be tapped to benefit the community.

Connections to political leadership. Building and strengthening relationships with elected and/or appointed public officials is also valuable to the development of effective action and change. Successful strategies included bringing political leadership into the community, mainly through events, and encouraging community members to visit elected officials at their offices.

Why does the *community-driven* principle matter?

The evidence collected as part of this evaluation points to many different reasons for implementing the community-driven approach.

- Over time, the consistent practice of working this way changes community members' perceptions of themselves and the community, and helps build self-efficacy among residents.
- To do the work this way requires building connections within communities that are often fragmented. In turn, this helps build safety, cohesion, and collective efficacy (or the capacity of a community to take effective action on behalf of the whole).
- This mode of operation helps build trust among residents and in community initiative and its leaders. This in turn helps build both of the above and also increases involvement.
- Through accomplishing all of the above, this kind of practice not only addresses the community issues that are the subject of the effort but also strengthens the community members themselves.

Collective efficacy is a characteristic of a community or other social group that indicates its capacity to take effective action, individually or jointly, on behalf of the whole. This concept combines two underlying factors, *social cohesion* (supportive interpersonal relationships) and *informal social control* (the capacity of a group to regulate its own members according to shared social norms, such as through intervening to stop overly aggressive behavior among children on the playground).

R.J. Sampson, S.W. Raudenbush, & F. Earls. (1997.) "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy." *Science*, 277, 918-924.

*The purpose is to ensure that the residents are being built along with the organization. --
FRAN community member focus group participant*

Comprehensive

This principle has less consistency in how it is understood and applied. The original BSC model defined it in terms of the different kinds of community capital to be built: housing, economy and workforce, community quality and safety, community institutions and relationships, social and health services, and education and culture. The list of these kinds of capital has varied over time and the specific domains appear to be less important than that many of them be included. This idea is sometimes simplified as a three-legged stool: human and social capital, physical development, and economic development.

Based on the many different ways sites described how they are embodying this principle, the essential aspect is the combination of infrastructure and social developments, or addressing both physical and personal aspects of the community.

One way that the definition of “comprehensive” is unclear is the level or scale at which the principle most applies. Some stakeholders understand it at the project or initiative level and name the following as examples or elements: multi-sector partners; addressing a range of issues or topics; engaging youth as well as adults. Others see it operating at the community level, citing a need to make connections to resources both within and beyond the community. One suggested that a comprehensive approach was one where the work in the community attends to the whole of people’s lives, not just one aspect.

Five of the seven sites are working on a range of issues that include either directly creating physical improvements through their own partnerships, or significantly influencing physical improvements through advocacy efforts. A sixth site partners with agencies that do physical development, though not as part of their partnership (NAZ). The seventh site does not address physical development (Backyard Initiative).

In addition to the work of the funded agencies, LISC itself is funding physical developments in each of these communities, through its other programs, and has worked with the BSC partners to find ways to coordinate these efforts with the visions and priorities of the communities. Reciprocally, the shared learning promoted through the BSC peer network and LISC’s staff liaisons with the sites has contributed significantly to LISC’s own learning about doing the non-physical kinds of community development work.

An important factor in successful comprehensive work is *coordination* of the different efforts. This includes the selection of activities that are mutually reinforcing, as well as coordinated implementation to make the most of efforts that can advance multiple purposes. An example is Hope’s listening efforts that simultaneously build leadership, link individuals to organizations, and identify focus areas and strategies for future work.

Why does the *comprehensive* principle matter?

- **Engagement.** A comprehensive approach promotes community engagement through offering multiple entry points, connections with more members of a family, and more opportunities to sustain or deepen the involvement. It also helps expand options for working cross-culturally, and thereby to better integrate the diversity of the community.
- **Reinforces the community as the basis of the effort.** A comprehensive model promotes community-driven work by increasing motivation and opportunities for learning and practicing leadership (due to the greater likelihood that people can see connections to outcomes they value and want to help create).
- **Jobs and income.** Although not a deliberately planned outcome, this approach has been found in several of the sites to help promote career and financial opportunities. This occurs because residents come to the notice of organizations and have the opportunity to build connections with those organizations while they are participating in the initiative's actions. There are many examples of BSC participants who have gotten jobs with partner organizations.

Several of the observations about the effects of a comprehensive approach reference the interplay with the effects of a community-driven approach. It is clear that these are mutually reinforcing principles. However, as can be seen with the Backyard Initiative, it should not be assumed that just because an initiative is community-driven it will necessarily also be comprehensive. As described earlier, the Backyard Initiative is comprehensive at the individual level (i.e., it attends to the whole of a participant's life and not just one aspect) but is not comprehensive at the initiative or community level (i.e., the action agenda for the initiative does not address multiple domains of community well-being).

Collaborative

There is considerable agreement on what needs to be included in the collaborative aspects of BSC work. However, in keeping with the nature of collaboration, this principle quickly develops multiple layers that make it complicated.

When put into action, essential elements of this principle include two important components:

- **Relationship-building**
- **Coordinated action toward a common goal**

Within this common framework, however, we observed some striking differences in who was building relationships with whom. In a majority of the sites, the work included active efforts to strengthen connections and shared activity at three different but inter-related levels:

- ***Individual to individual:*** community residents working together.
- ***Organization to organization:*** community organizations working together – sometimes in relatively formal or long-term relationship with each other, sometimes more informally as a particular area of activity requires the collaborative approach. These relationships also vary in whether they occur in clusters (with many organizations all having links to each other) or spokes (with many organizations having relationships with the central lead agency but not necessarily with each other). Some sites included government agencies as collaborative partners, while others worked to influence government agencies by advocating for policy change.
- ***Individual to organization:*** this usually involves building or strengthening connections between community residents and organizations so as to improve services or to be more responsive to community needs.

Elements of collaboration that occurred among a number of sites, but are not essential, include:

- ***Clear roles and relationships among organizational partners.*** This appears to be helpful whether the relationships are informal or part of a formal, ongoing collaborative structure.
- ***Organizations share resources with each other.*** Many of the most durable collaborations among the sites mentioned as a strength that they share such things as networks, resources such as staff training, and space. Some, but not all, of the sites with the most extensive outcomes mentioned this feature.

Why does the *collaborative* principle matter?

- ***Strengthens actions and results.*** Collaboration at any of these levels helps those who are part of it take actions that would not otherwise be possible, and achieve results otherwise not attainable. An example is a grant that Project for Pride in Living (PPL) obtained from Minnesota Housing to provide housing subsidies to 50 families who are receiving other kinds of supports from NAZ. Without the NAZ capacity, a PPL representative said they could not have undertaken the obligations the grant required for data collection and tracking, among other administrative requirements.
- ***Builds partners' capacity.*** Many of the organizational focus group participants reported that the interchange of knowledge and insights among partners broadened

their perspective of the issues, broadened their networks, and helped them learn new skills, tools, and strategies from each other.

- ***Builds community.*** Connection helps build the social capital and cohesion that is needed for a thriving community.
- ***Builds “linking capital.”*** If connections are built to organizations outside the community, they help expand the type and magnitude of resources available to address community development. These resources may be tangible, such as funding for sidewalks or programming, or intangible, such as leads for employment. Another example is the housing resource directory prepared by FRAN which helps residents navigate the housing system.
- ***Improved services.*** Individual-to-organization connections help organizations better understand what community members are looking for. As organizations become more connected with community residents, they can be more aware of what is needed and desired, enabling them to respond more nimbly as conditions or opportunities develop. As a result, the quality and fit of services are likely to improve.
- ***Foundation for systems change.*** The development of relationships with elected leaders and/or government agency representatives, through formal collaborative relationships or less formal ongoing communication, creates a basis from which policy change can be achieved. The community-driven nature of the work gives the content of the communication an authenticity that makes it meaningful for policy-makers to listen to.

Other principles that matter for efforts to strengthen communities

In the process of examining the “3 Cs” of the BSC model and how they are implemented, we discovered a number of considerations that help to implement the core principles and add to the effectiveness of the BSC efforts. Most of these cut across the three core principles, and cannot be neatly assigned to a support role for just one. These cross-cutting principles are:

A clear definition of “the community”

For six of the BSC lead agencies, the community of focus is a geographic area. NACDI is unique in defining its focus in terms of a cultural community (the Twin Cities Native American community). However, it makes sense that it is grouped with other South Minneapolis sites because of the large concentration of Native Americans in this part of the city.

It does not appear to be necessary to define the precise geography being served (but creates challenges for evaluating physical change). Hope has been very successful without defining clear boundaries, although its physical developments are all within a narrowly concentrated area at the heart of its community area. In fact, for urban neighborhoods with high rates of poverty, social connections formed when people are neighbors are frequently extended to wider distances due to high rates of residential mobility. NAZ, for example has defined a very specific geography within which to enroll families. One of its family support programs helps unstably housed families stabilize their housing, but NAZ has been unable to find enough affordable housing options within its geography. As a result, families remain enrolled in NAZ even if they must move outside the Zone, so long as they remain on the North Side of the city.

There is evidence that the size of the geography does matter. If a defined “community” is too large, it is hard to reach the scale needed for effectiveness. This applies both to the numbers of people and organizations to involve, and also to the practical possibility of achieving a density of connections to be effective. However, if a community is too small in size, it may be difficult for it to obtain the attention of funders, partner organizations, and policymakers, and it may also be difficult to demonstrate results, because changes in the community are easily overlooked in the larger area around them.

Given the critical importance to the BSC model of building connectedness, it probably makes the most sense for a “community” to be defined in terms that fit well with natural social groupings, so that interpersonal links that already exist can best be built on, and new links can be created with the help of a context within which they are most easily developed.

Asset-based approach

All sites in the Twin Cities BSC emphasize an approach that builds on the vision and competencies of the community, not its needs and weaknesses. This philosophy is naturally associated with and sustained by a community-driven approach, but it is also very important for the comprehensive and collaborative principles. Comprehensiveness is affected because the selection of what issues or opportunities to focus on should be based on building assets, not solving deficits. Collaboration is strengthened at both the individual and organizational levels through the recognition that different participants bring different strengths to the relationship, and they should try to recognize, celebrate, and build actions on them.

Purpose-driven but also flexible and creative

In its original definition, the BSC ideal model called for an agreed-on goal and action plan that would guide implementation activities. (This is also a critical component of the Collective Impact model of community initiatives.) This principle appears to work better for organization-led sites, but does not appear to be necessary for BSC success. Some sites have a specific action plan, while others have more general and evolving ones. NACDI started in its current formulation with a “blueprint” within which coalition members would select specific projects to work on. However, based on comments at the organizational focus group in the fall of 2014, some participants still feel there is a lack of focus. ESPC felt itself to be under pressure (due to national grant conditions) to identify specific focus areas and show outcomes quickly, and consequently adopted a mini-grant implementation model that the partners now feel was not a good fit for their collaborative’s purposes and capacity.

It appears that a specific action plan, if it is narrowly focused, can block the flexibility needed to respond to emerging opportunities. However, the lack of a clear goal for the work is likely to make it difficult to keep multiple efforts focused so that they are mutually reinforcing.

We conclude that there is still an unresolved tension about the right balance between clear goals and adaptive flexibility. A good operating guideline is to be firmly fixed on a shared idea of *what* the initiative is seeking to accomplish, while reserving plenty of leeway in the definition of *how* the goals will be accomplished.

Flexibility is the yin to the “purpose-driven” yang. Purpose grounds the work, and gives it a boundary, which helps keep energy from dissipating. Flexibility offers a chance to augment energy by being able to identify and take advantage of emerging opportunities or changing needs. Many of the sites, while describing outcomes of their initiatives, mentioned a series of efforts they had undertaken before identifying the best way to move forward. A common phrase among success stories was, “Our first try didn’t work.” The purpose helped the group keep going after the first try; the flexibility helped them identify better approaches.

Backbone

All of the site leaders and LISC staff agreed that the Collective Impact model of a backbone organization describes the lead agencies at least somewhat well. It is clear, from the patterns of implementation in the BSC sites, that there is a need for a lead organization – or a lead staff member of a partner organization – to be such a “backbone.” In the collective impact literature, this only applies to coalitions of organizations.

However, it is evident from the BSC model, which has a larger emphasis on the role of the grassroots community, that the backbone operations are also critical for building connections and shared purpose among individuals. In this setting the necessary work looks a lot like community engagement or community organizing, but it also differs from pure community organizing in emphasizing the building of partnerships with the organizational players.

The backbone operations are vital to the success of each of the BSC sites in the Twin Cities. This work helps to bring participants into the initiative to share their voice, and helps to keep people – and organizations – engaged, on task, on schedule, and connected. It is proving to be important to have a consistent, known person to help build trust and identify and articulate a common purpose from the many voices that are consulted. The backbone person also helps to facilitate organizations’ awareness of and responsiveness to community voice and vision.

Staffed

All BSC lead agencies had at least one staff person coordinating the BSC activities. For some, this was made possible in whole or in part by the LISC grant and would otherwise not have been possible. The focus groups and interviews offered a multitude of examples illustrating how activities could not have been accomplished without the central role of the staff person as the nexus.

The need for a staff role is not at all due to a lack of talent among volunteers in the community. Rather, it reflects the reality that volunteer efforts are rarely as consistent or durable as those with paid staff. The backbone person functions as a nexus for all aspects of the initiative, and becomes the face of the program. The consistency of always having the same person in the role helps build awareness, visibility, and trust for the initiative.

I have found, through doing collaboration building work, ... you have to have an organization or one key staff member really holding the reins. There really needs to be a backbone organization. – ESPC representative

Communication

It may go without saying, but communication – consistent, two-way, and transparent – is the lifeblood of the initiative. It is a necessary element for all three of the core principles. A Hope community participant described its impact at the resident level:

[Hope makes a] deep investment [in me and other participants]. There is tension and we work it out. It's like a family in that sense – we work it out in a healthy way, with good communication and accountability.

Outcomes of the local initiatives supported through the BSC

All of the stakeholders who were consulted during evaluation were asked for examples of outcomes that have been observed as a result of the BSC initiatives' efforts. We have not independently confirmed any outcomes, but rather use the examples to understand the magnitude and variety of what is possible with the BSC model of community development, and whether the outcomes vary depending on how the model is implemented.

It is not possible to make the claim that any of these outcomes occurred only because of the BSC initiative. LISC funded organizations that were already active in their communities, and we have no counter-example of what would have happened had the same lead agencies continued to operate independently of the BSC. Nevertheless, for many of the outcomes that have been observed there is clear evidence that the BSC funding and other supports *contributed*, in that the activities supported by the BSC played a clear role in helping to create the change.

Outcomes are evident at multiple levels: individuals and families, organizational capacity, and the overall community. According to participants in focus groups and ripple effect mapping exercises, and reports of site leaders, the following are the most common kinds of outcomes across the sites.

Outcomes for individuals and families

Residents have become involved in community development activities, and have remained involved. This involvement has resulted in increased social connectedness, feelings of hope, and self-efficacy. Activities have also promoted a wide range of opportunities in communities, including opportunities to: create and appreciate art, increase educational proficiency, participate in a variety of recreational opportunities, access affordable housing, and develop and practice leadership skills. Depending on the particular kind of activity in which participants were involved, additional outcomes include improved educational access and proficiency, increased health and wellness, help developing entrepreneurship skills or

opportunities, and more stable housing. Another kind of outcome described anecdotally in several sites is for community participants to obtain jobs with organizations to which they became connected as part of the community activities.

Outcomes for communities

Community-level outcomes include increased social capital (including connections and trust) that has resulted in increased community safety and perceptions of the community as more welcoming for diverse residents. Other changes related to BSC activities include: better services available to community members and greater participation in community services and activities; improvements to the physical environment; influence on decisions about transit service to the community; and increased influence with political leaders and other decision makers.

In addition, the growth in organizational capacity translates to an outcome at the community level when the relationships and “culture of collaboration” (as one ESPC representative described it) become institutionalized in the culture of the community. This results in growth in the community’s capacity to respond to new challenges or opportunities, as the infrastructure of relationships and collaborations, built for certain activities or issues, can be tapped for a new purpose. Because of the greater capacity that institutions can exert for change, the community impact is greater when the collaborative infrastructure is among organizations. However, the same principle also applies for interpersonal collaboration and collective efficacy: once built, if the infrastructure and culture of cooperation is sustained it can be brought to bear on new priorities and purposes. A variation is for the lead agency or collaborative to pilot an effort long enough to test approaches and build support, then find a new organizational home that can sustain it (exemplified by the ESPC “Buy Local” effort).

There is evidence that organizational collaboration has reached this level of institutionalization in BRCC, NAZ, Hope, and ESPC. There is evidence that community resident participation and collective action is at a point where it can be tapped for a variety of purposes in BRCC, NAZ, Hope, Backyard Initiative, and FRAN. It is possible that either of these levels of sustained capacity has developed in other sites not named here, but due to the open-ended methods of collecting data, we cannot be certain of it from the evidence available in this assessment.

Outcomes for lead agencies

Most information about outcomes was at the individual and community levels. However, it is clear from what study respondents described that the lead agencies and, to a lesser extent, partner organizations also realized benefits. For the lead agencies, the primary benefit has been growth in capacity through funding and/or learning.

Funding. Much of the growth in capacity resulted directly from BSC funding. Some were able to leverage this and increased their ability to secure additional grants or funding, due to the proven track record of collaborative action and/or the additional capacity available through their partners.

Learning. It is widely recognized in the fields of adult and organizational learning that knowledge and practical skills are most effectively shared through person-to-person interchanges. This kind of setting also promotes the generation of new insights through discussion. The BSC peer network has provided the space – and a compelling reason to carve out time to join it – for these interchanges, and site leaders who have attended are unanimous in finding it to have been of great value. The kinds of community development being practiced in the BSC is not common, and according to one agency leader, “We don’t have a lot of peers” who are doing similar work. This makes the opportunity to provide mutual trouble-shooting and support doubly valuable.

[The different BSC neighborhoods and lead agencies have in common] the approach to doing the work – the challenge of having people accept that community-driven approach, being open to it, understanding it, valuing it. – BRCC representative

Outcomes for partner organizations

In most of the organizational focus groups, partner organizations described ways in which their organizations were strengthened by their involvement with the initiative. Many said the quality or results of their activities were improved because of the sharing with peer organizations. Some reported that the collaboration had enabled them to take on projects or secure funding that they would not have had the capacity to seek alone. Some also report being better able to sustain action, funding, or partnerships as a result of the partnerships established through the local initiative. Some also reported that improvements in service targeting and/or quality were due specifically to their ability through the BSC initiative to hear from community members about what they saw as most important.

Some public services have been revised and improved due to community input. Examples include community education in the St. Paul School District (ESPC), crime prevention strategies by the Hopkins Police Department (BRCC) and public school programs among partner schools in North Minneapolis (NAZ). In these sites, the agencies were at the table as collaborative partners in the BSC activities. In other sites, government agencies have been recipients of advocacy efforts mainly from community participants, and here also there are outcomes to cite: a new St. Paul ordinance related to storefronts (FRAN), transit planning decisions more favorable to historically underrepresented communities (FRAN, ESPC, BRCC, and NACDI), and investments in public art (NACDI). Other efforts are

currently underway related to access to recreational facilities (FRAN) and racial equity in city parks (Hope).

The factor most associated with successful change in a public system appears to be the strength of ongoing engagement and relationship-building with public sector decision-makers. This appears to be a more important consideration than whether or not the public sector is formally engaged as an organizational partner.

Considerations for measurement of outcomes

It was not a purpose of this evaluation to systematically document the outcomes of the BSC initiative, either overall or in the participating communities. Rather, qualitative information about outcomes was gathered as a means of helping to identify implementation practices that are most effective in producing individual and community change. Through the process of this evaluation, in partnership with LISC and the BSC partners, we have identified outcomes that would be of particular value to measure and potential opportunities for tracking those outcomes.

Outcomes for individuals. Because different communities have identified different priorities, there will be no single set of measures that is appropriate for all. LISC has contracted with the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) to work with BSC leaders to develop a set of quantitative measures, available from existing public data sets, that will be of use to each community to identify needs, quantify the scale of change required to address the needs, and be able to track progress over time. These include measures of individual well-being at the community-wide level in a variety of domains, including housing, employment, income, and education. Importantly, the reports prepared on these measures show racial disparities. Most site leaders report that these data are helpful to them in planning and/or preparing to track progress of their work.

Inevitably, many of the most important elements of community well-being are not concretely measured and tracked by existing data sources. Cultural and spiritual well-being, social connectedness, sense of efficacy, and hopefulness are some of the most important indicators of the successful development of a thriving community, but there are no established and on-going measures for these. However, several of the sites have incorporated a structured listening process or other forms of interviewing through which they collect and report on residents' perceptions for the community. It would be valuable to identify consistent questions that would be valid and reliable measures for these kinds of outcomes. This could allow communities to track a core set of important measures consistently and comparably.

Outcomes for communities. Besides community-wide measures of individual well-being, other community outcomes include measures of community capacity, such as the availability of institutions capable of meeting residents’ needs and supporting the achievement of their vision. This includes the infrastructure of collaboration mentioned above. The following are some potential measures.

- **New collaborative capacity:** One measure of capacity may simply be the documentation of occasions on which individual or organizational collaborations have been engaged in addressing issues of importance to the community.
- **Sustained and flexible collaboration:** The ability of a community to *sustain* this kind of activity is a strong measure of community well-being. One very telling indicator of this would be to document when a set of relationships developed for one purpose is able to be called upon to address a different purpose. For example, a collaboration originally developed to address safety in BRCC is now working on tutoring and affordable housing.
- **Effectiveness of the lead agency:** Another potential measure is the extent to which the coordinating agency is visible in the community and perceived as effective. This can be measured by the number of people who seek it out to ask it for information or offer input, the number who become involved in activities, and the number who remain involved.
- **Collective efficacy:** Finally, a powerful measure of a community that is able to address its own issues is the construct called “collective efficacy.” Collective efficacy is a combination of supportive interpersonal relationships and a culture of mutual support for the overall good (such as overseeing the behavior of others’ children, or taking care of the upkeep of a vacant lot). Since many of the sites have invested considerable effort in listening and/or surveying activities with residents as part of the ongoing community engagement efforts, it might be possible to build some of these more qualitative measures into a survey tool that could be done in conjunction with the listening activities, and the results tracked over time.

These kinds of qualitative measures should not be undervalued. They are not as familiar as the kinds of quantitative measures that CURA has developed with LISC and the sites, but they can help to show other less measurable but equally important outcomes that help to tell the story of community well-being and its capacity to take charge of its own development. In fact, throughout the BSC initiative, sites have struggled to come to consensus on a short list of common quantitative indicators that would be relevant for all, and this is not at all uncommon for initiatives focused on comprehensive community development. Given the community-driven nature of this work, measures of specific outcomes – such as health

outcomes, education outcomes, or access to recreational opportunities – will not be relevant across all sites. However, the capacity measures suggested above would have general applicability, and would help to predict the community’s ability to produce the more specific outcomes.

Impact of the BSC initiative on LISC

There is consensus among the interviews with agency leads and LISC staff that the BSC initiative has helped LISC achieve its mission. This is evident through two different pathways of influence:

- First, the local initiatives have clearly helped people and places to thrive, as detailed in the Outcomes section above, thereby contributing to the fulfillment of LISC’s mission.
- Second, the peer network and the connections made by the LISC staff acting as liaisons to sites has promoted shared reflection and learning not just among the site leaders. Prior to the BSC initiative, LISC was focused almost exclusively on physical development. The initiative, including their work with the peer network as a group as well as liaison activities with individual sites, has helped LISC to benefit from the knowledge and perspectives of site leaders who have extensive experience with other forms of community development. LISC staff report that this learning has influenced their work beyond the BSC program.

Impact of LISC on the BSC partners

As the lead agencies have, to varying extents, assumed the role of backbone organizations for their communities, LISC has similarly played a backbone role to provide a consistent vision, connections, resources, and evaluation support for the lead agencies. Similarly, as the coordinated action of lead agencies and their residents and partner organizations have helped to strengthen the neighborhoods, LISC’s support and coordination has helped to strengthen the lead agencies.

This evaluation did not systematically assess changes in the lead agencies due to the BSC program, but many examples were offered during the course of the study. Most commonly, lead agency representatives reported that the BSC initiative had “broadened and deepened” their work, and had “added to, but not changed, how [they] understand the work.” By introducing the BSC model and coordinating peer conversations and resources around its three principles, LISC has provided a structure for agency leaders to conceptualize their work more richly and organize and share their thoughts about how to build on what they were already doing.

- **Peer network:** Often, lead agency representatives specifically say their work is stronger because of the peer network organized by LISC, and the opportunity it affords them to learn from each other's expertise as well as that of LISC. Examples of what they have learned from peer sharing include engagement and collaboration strategies. Less concretely, but no less importantly, they report the peer network gives them an opportunity to share the successes as well as frustrations of their complex work for which they have few true peers, and to provide support for each other to sustain the patience that is needed for work that is slow and cannot be sped up through short-cuts.
- **LISC liaisons and local resources:** Site leaders also often cited the support of LISC staff, who were described as "a partner to help us figure out the work" and posers of challenging questions. They also report that LISC staff provided connections to LISC's own expertise and resources on specific topics such as workforce training, entrepreneurship development, and housing.
- **Grant and loan resources:** LISC's investment in physical infrastructure, of which about 80 percent was devoted to the same five communities, helped support the lead agencies' own efforts. One lead agency representative reported that as LISC built relationships with local organizations to strengthen housing and financial literacy in the community, they also helped to strengthen the lead agency's own partnerships by helping to reinforce the common vision and sense of purpose.
- **National connections:** Through connections to the national network of BSC sites, as well as other LISC organizations nationally, LISC has introduced lead agency leaders to examples, expertise, leaders, and resources on a national scale.

Issues to consider

Design and context factors both contribute to effectiveness

The implementation of the Building Sustainable Communities initiative in the Twin Cities is in part a test of how the model, derived from experience in Chicago that began in the 1990s, might be generalizable and effective in a very different setting. As implemented here, the test includes the further application of the model to a remarkable variety of settings within the Twin Cities area, including a suburban community, a community defined on the basis of culture rather than geography, and communities in which the driving energy derives from different kinds of groups.

A particular challenge for the replication of the BSC model is the *community-driven* principle at its core, which dictates that it be adapted to suit local conditions – not only as initiative funders perceive them, but even more importantly as the local community perceives them.

The evidence collected during this evaluation shows that the BSC model includes core principles that are well suited for a range of communities, while having room to interpret and supplement those with the adaptations needed to fit local contexts.

Suburban implementation

Much recent attention has been paid to the spread of poverty to suburbs. The Twin Cities LISC was somewhat ahead of the curve to recognize this when they selected the Blake Road Corridor Collaborative in Hopkins as a BSC partner in 2008. Experience with the BSC-related efforts there reflect the reality that in a suburban setting, it is easier to access and partner with the public infrastructure because it operates at a scale that is more accessible to individual neighborhoods. By contrast, in a major city, the public institutions or agencies (such as school districts, police departments, or recreational departments) are too large to become partners for individual neighborhoods. This advantage is somewhat offset by the relative absence of many other kinds of resources that are generally more available in large cities – such as strong public transportation systems, affordable housing developments, or a network of social service programs.

Implementation in a cultural community

The definition of a community in cultural rather than geographic terms has been a success in this initiative. This is likely helped by the fact that the Native American community in the Twin Cities has a strong concentration in one neighborhood where there is enough density of members to support some of the concrete, visible aspects of a community, such as a gathering place and public art. This ability to anchor the efforts in a particular location has helped to create a sense of place that in turn helps build cultural pride and facilitate the development of individual-to-individual relationships and participation. If the community were greatly dispersed without such a geographic concentration, it is less likely that it would have been as successful. The coordination of efforts with organizational partners would likely be no more difficult, but it would be harder to ground those efforts in the collective voice of the community.

Implementation led by residents versus organizations

Another natural experiment was seen in the relative emphasis that Twin Cities sites put on individual-level efforts versus organizational collaborations. The ESPC is an example of a site where the primary energy was in a core set of actively engaged organizational partners. At the other end of this continuum is FRAN, which in its current operations primarily organizes and mobilizes community residents, involving and seeking to influence organizations as a secondary strategy. As of the final focus groups and interviews, both of these sites appear more uncertain than the other sites of their ability to sustain their operations in the absence of the BSC support.

It is not possible to identify how much this relative uncertainty is due to the sites' different operational structures, and how much is due to unique differences in the history of each community and the lead agencies. However, in both it is clear that the ability to pay for staff to coordinate the efforts has been essential to their success. It is also true that this is not something that is easy to sustain in the absence of the BSC grants. For the organizational-centric site, the staffing was essential in establishing an ongoing connection to community members to keep the work grounded and community-driven. For the resident-centric site, although the residents are motivated and empowered and have developed a wide range of skills for organizing and advocacy, the fact that they have relatively few organizations as ongoing partners limits the scale of work that can be acted on as part of a planned, collective strategy (as opposed to won through a process of advocacy). Both of these kinds of limitations in linking individual to organizational efforts appear to constrict the range and scale of outcomes at the community level. In turn, this challenge of documenting outcomes is likely part of the challenge in securing funding for ongoing operations.

Considerations for sustainability of the local initiatives

The Twin Cities Building Sustainable Communities initiative has reached the end of its grant-funded period. Given the highly positive perceptions of the value of the efforts that it helped to support, a question of intense interest to site leaders as well as LISC is, “What might it take to sustain the work?”

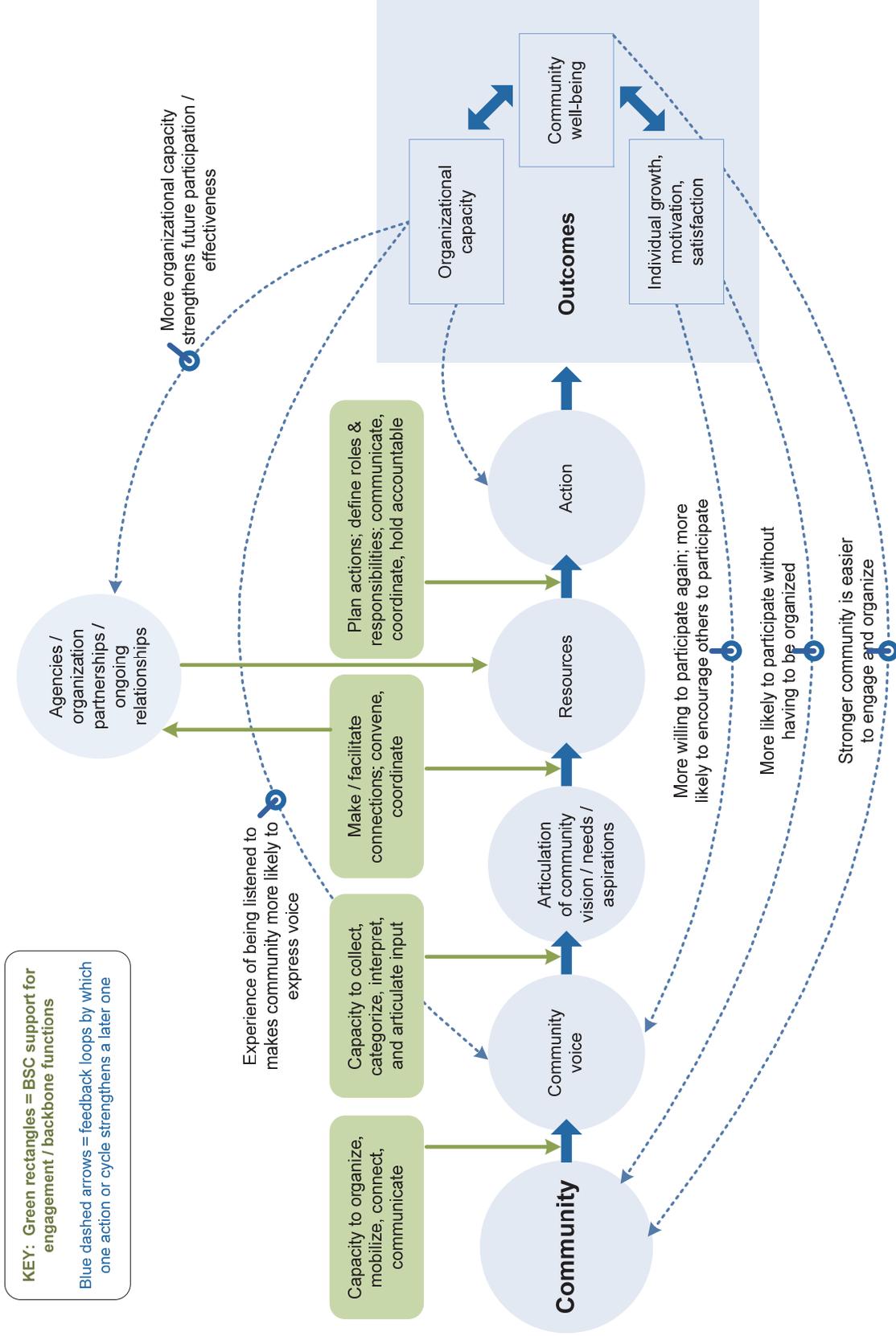
The answer to this is likely to vary among the different lead agencies in the initiative. Some are well-established organizations with stable histories and a variety of funding sources which support on-going operations, while others are much smaller and have less ongoing support that can be relied on for general operations. The critical success factors contributed by the lead agencies include community outreach and engagement, convening (of residents, organizational partners, and/or wider groups of stakeholders), support for relationship development through a variety of means, action planning and oversight of implementation, and communications. Despite how vital this role is, these activities are typically considered “general operations” that are hard to fund except in the context of a specific (and usually new) program. Nevertheless, it is clear that the same level of activity and outcomes observed in the last seven years of the BSC could not continue without the continuation of those functions.

There is the community of organizations that are attempting to work with and support this broader community. ... [S]ustaining this community of community workers is an important part of helping to support community improvement. There's a lot to be gained in that peer support of the collaborative atmosphere – sustaining the community sustainers. ... It is very hard to get that funded – funding an appropriately positive forum to keep getting charged up to do the work. ... On a human scale, that's a thing that can make a big difference. – NAZ organizational partner

The recent high visibility of the Collective Impact model of social intervention may offer one way to give greater prominence to the importance of these vital roles. They are very similar to the roles played in formal collaborations by a “backbone organization” that is charged with being the keeper of an initiative’s vision, manager of its process, and tracker of its results while a variety of partners each take charge of specific implementation tasks.

The concept of a backbone organization has gained enough circulation that it may be possible for an entity such as a BSC lead agency to claim their ability to manage this suite of functions as “a program” in its own right. There are enough examples of the success of the collective impact approach to lend credibility to the importance of this kind of support without it having to be proven separately by each organization. The diagram on the next page is a simplified representation of the many places within a larger

Pathways by which BSC model influences community outcomes



community development effort that this kind of support can benefit the process. It also illustrates the many ways in which such a process, once developed with this kind of backbone support, can generate or augment positive outcomes that help it become stably institutionalized.

The green rectangles show the added value provided by the backbone organization or staff at each stage of the community development process. The dashed blue arrows show the feedback loops through which success in one cycle of activity helps to encourage and/or strengthen activity in later cycles. In this way, these feedback loops help to sustain and institutionalize the ongoing initiative.

Potential next steps

As LISC considers changes in its other programs and strategies, we recommend seeking ways to build in resources to support the “backbone functions” of organizations that can show the capacity to connect with community residents, connect with organizations, and – perhaps most importantly – connect the two levels with each other to translate community voice into effective, shared action. The most important backbone functions are highlighted in the green boxes in the diagram on the previous page. In addition, though it is not reflected in this diagram, an evaluation and communication function is important throughout the process. However, many organizations would benefit from technical support and capacity building to help them learn to do this effectively on their own, or share a common resource to support their efforts.

LISC can also use its learning from the Twin Cities Building Sustainable Communities initiative to make more funders aware of the way in which the backbone function can magnify the productivity of more traditional funding. We recommend that LISC develop communications products that help educate a variety of audiences about the value of this function and, possibly, brand it as a program or service that is clearly distinguished from “general operations” and hence more readily identifiable as a funding opportunity.

Appendix:

Summary of key principles of action and why they are important

Principle	Essential elements	Strengthened by	Why it matters
Community-driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to learn community’s own vision for itself Connect the vision to resources and action – ideally, through actions determined and implemented by the community itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A gathering space • Direct personal invitation • Varied opportunities for participation • Leadership development • Linking individual and organization action • Connections to political leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes community’s perceptions of itself and increases self-efficacy • Increases connections within communities, helps increase safety, cohesion, and collective efficacy • Builds trust for the initiative and its leaders • Addresses both individual and community-level capacity
Comprehensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combine infrastructure and personal/social development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment among different activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps promote engagement • Reinforces the community as the basis of the effort • Can lead to jobs and income for participants
Collaborative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship-building -- may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Among individuals ○ Among organizations ○ Between individuals and organizations • Coordinated action toward a common goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles and relationships clearly defined • Organizational relationships that include sharing resources • Linking individual and organization action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthens both the actions taken and the results accomplished • Builds capacity among organizational partners • Builds community • Builds “linking capital” • Improves services
Other principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear definition of “community” • Asset-based approach • Both purpose-driven and flexible • Backbone organization or person • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment with existing social links • Best balance of these is an open question • Role filled by a staff member, not volunteer • Consistent, two-way, and transparent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines the scope of the action • Strengthens effectiveness of all the 3C principles • Bounds and helps align actions while allowing responsiveness to emerging opportunities or needs • Build connections and shared purpose among individuals; build links to organizational action; maintain communications; keep action aligned and on schedule