

Proceedings from  
A National Invitational Conference  
On Community Building

“Community Building in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
A National Dialogue to Build, Empower and Sustain  
Community”

Hosted by:  
Cambridge College

December 6 – 8, 2004  
Cambridge, MA

“Think together, plan together and hope  
together.”

– Mahesh Sharma, President of Cambridge College –

Sponsored by:

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Boston Foundation

The Boston Women’s Fund

Cambridge College

Charle Stuart Mott Foundation

Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

Ford Foundation

Mabel Louise Riley Foundation

Marguerite Casey Foundation

Needmor Fund

W. K. Kellogg Foundation

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## *Foreword and Acknowledgments* *From Garland Yates*

It is with a great sense of humility and gratitude that I share with you the results of a two-year effort to orchestrate and conduct a national conversation for and about community builders and community building in these United States. The conference experience about which this report is written is intended both to honor the work and dedication of the many persons – residents, practitioners, funders and policy analysts and researchers – who have been toiling in the community change arena; as well as to champion their cause by engaging in pointed dialogue on the major challenges that remain before them.

Toward these ends, colleagues from nine foundations joined me and Cambridge College in co-sponsoring this event – bringing with them the resources of their institutions and, more importantly, a commitment of their personal time to the planning, design and oversight of the effort. It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge them here and to thank them for their immense contributions to this endeavor.

*Donna Lartigue, Director*  
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We are a democracy of spectators. And one of the things that we sense as we gather in this room is that there is something about community building, however exactly you define it that is the way. It is the promise, and it is the spark that is particularly important for engaging the next generation and making it “The Next Great Civic Generation.” There is nothing anywhere in sight, with anywhere near this much promise, for engaging young people in caring about and organizing around shared concerns, the world around them, building bonds of community, and seeing and recognizing the power in collective action. – Xavier De Sousa Briggs, Harvard University

## The National Invitational Conference On Community Building

On December 6 – 8, 2005, Cambridge College and ten foundations co-sponsored a 3-day invitational conference, in Cambridge, MA, to discuss the current status and future directions of community building efforts currently underway in many of the distressed communities across the United States. Six topics were the focus of discussion as follows:

- **Issues of Clarity:** What is community building? Who’s doing it? Where? And How? And how can community building be understood as both distinct from, and in relation to, community development or community organizing?
- **Measurement Issues:** What is it that community building is trying to do? And what are the best ways of learning/knowing whether and/or how well it is getting done?
- **Mobilization Issues:** What are the important lessons/questions for how communities can build an infrastructure to promote community awareness, engagement and mobilization.

- ***Sustainability Issues:*** What are the critical questions that relate to the long-term viability of community building as an approach to social and community change?
- ***Partnership and Accountability Issues:*** How can and/or should we refashion the relationship between communities and their funders in order to make it a true partnership of shared goals, joint responsibilities and mutual accountability for the results?
- ***Research and Policy Issues:*** What are the research and policy issues that are most critical to the future of community building?

This document is drafted to tell the story of this conference and of the discussions and conclusions it inspired. In so doing, we will recount its origins, its rationale, its evolution and its proceedings in the belief that each offers important reflections on the community-building field and its continuing quest for definition and efficacy. Our overarching purpose in this writing is to share the lessons, concerns, and conclusions we have drawn from the conference experience along with the recommendations of the more than 100 guests who participated in the discussions of these topics.

## I. EVOLVING THE RATIONALE

In June of 2003, the Annie E. Casey Foundation commissioned the firm, James B. Hyman, Ph.D., Inc., to explore the feasibility of a national invitational conference on the theory and practice of community building in the United States. Six months earlier, the foundation had released a report, *Not Quite Chaos...*, which presented: a framework modeling five fundamental processes that constitute a theory of community-building practice; and a diagram depicting “interim” and “optimal” structures for how local community-building efforts might be organized. The purpose of the firm’s explorations then was to canvass selected leaders in the field on the need for a national conversation on these ideas as an important step in the continuing efforts to “build the field.”

Over a six month period, the firm conducted 18 telephone interviews with a diverse audience of funders, researchers and practitioners active in and knowledgeable about community-driven change efforts. The interviews produced surprising insights both about the intensity of interest in a national meeting and about the breadth of issues respondents thought should be covered in the agenda. There appeared to be a set of “big think” questions that respondents raised repeatedly – not the least of which was whether community building is effective as an approach to social change. Indeed, there are mixed views in the field about the effectiveness of community building as an approach to persistent family and community poverty. Two views seem to exist simultaneously and in direct opposition. Both are well-considered and supported by strong evidence.

***One view is that:*** Over the past fifteen to twenty years, we have promoted lots of place-based, community-specific initiatives that invest in building a community infrastructure as a means of affecting community change. IT HAS NOT WORKED! We *have* built some new capacity in neighborhoods. And we *have* secured some new resources and increased some service levels. But results/outcomes have been achieved only at the margin and are at best disappointing given the hopes, expectations and investment levels in the target communities. There has been no significant policy change; no real change in community conditions; and no significant increase in outcomes for resident families and children.

***The alternative view is that:*** Over the past 15 – 20 years we have tried to think differently about intervention strategies – in ways that increase resident engagement; strengthen a sense of community; and build the capacity of communities and their residents to affect change. We have tried to direct these new efforts toward more immediate, realistic and “reachable” things. Larger systemic changes have not yet been the primary targets of these efforts and so are not an appropriate metric for assessing impact. This is still a new experiment from which we are learning lessons. It has sharpened our focus on community processes; brought community stakeholders together around a set of consensus outcomes; engendered hope; and encouraged people to feel empowered to make change and get things done. Our relative success at “reachable” things however needs to yield greater lessons for larger impacts on broader social questions.

Though these opposing views cannot both be correct, they do speak to the issue that would become a central question for the conference – what does the field need to do to increase its effectiveness as an approach to community and social change? This and other similarly large, “big think” questions in our reconnaissance led us to two conclusions that helped reshape the vision for the conference – first, that there is an enormous appetite for a national convening but that this interest extends well beyond the proposed focus on theory and practice; and second, that a more broadly defined conference would offer a major opportunity for the field to clarify its motives, means, and methods and to chart a course for its future directions.

On the basis of these findings, the foundation decided to expand the conference beyond its original focus on a Casey-funded report and to further broaden the effort by: (1) encouraging other interested foundations to join as co-sponsors and co-planners; and (2) by committing to extensive consultations with community-building leaders in creating the conference agenda.

Because of its strong and long-standing commitment to community studies and to educating older, urban, students of color, Cambridge College, in Cambridge, MA was recruited as a conference Co-Sponsor and Host and was given a grant to work with the Hyman firm in planning and executing the conference. Over the ensuing 12 months, nine additional foundations joined with Annie E. Casey in the conference’s sponsorship and planning effort as follows:

W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Charles Stuart Mott Foundation	Mabel Louise Riley Foundation
Marguerite Casey Foundation	Ford Foundation	The Boston Women's Fund
Ewing Marion Kauffman	Boston Foundation	Needmor Fund

The result was a national conference, hosted by Cambridge College on December 6 – 8, 2004, entitled ***Community Building in the 21st Century: A National Dialogue to Build, Empower, and Sustain Community***. Its purpose was to engage a selected group of 100 knowledgeable funders, community residents, practitioners, and research and policy scholars in intensive discussions of major issues affecting the current status and future directions of the community-building field. The intent was to probe these issues from this variety of perspectives – to deliberately promote discussion across these different audiences – in an effort to find common ground, common understandings and common sense on the important issues facing the field; and, where possible, to reach consensus on their implications for future of community building as an approach to community and social change.

## II. FASHIONING AN AGENDA

The Hyman firm and Cambridge College assumed primary responsibility for planning and implementing the conference with the advice and assistance of a planning committee made up of Casey Foundation staff and members of the college's Community-Building Advisory Board. The co-sponsoring foundations, listed above, formed a steering committee that provided general oversight.

A first priority for the planning effort was to fashion a conference agenda that would capture the issues, interests and imaginations of the field. Conference planners and co-sponsors saw this as the effort's most important challenge. One of the major issues uncovered in earlier reconnaissance was the need for more dialogue and understanding between the practitioners, researchers and funders in the community building field. Many who had been consulted early in the project had stressed a lack of communication and understanding among these community-building actors – asserting that residents, practitioners, researchers and funders have very different community-building interests and discussions that were largely un-reconciled. **WE NEED TO PROVIDE A CHARACTER OF THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES.**

So, an immediate concern for the agenda was that it be fashioned to address these varied perspectives and to promote a “cross-role” dialogue that would allow for their full expressions and for the potential for reaching common ground and shared understandings. These goals compelled the planners to seek the advice and opinions of a diverse set of advisors. Toward that end, the project convened a consultative session in Denver, CO in March of 2004 where a group of 40 experts – community residents, practitioners, funders and researchers – spent 3-days in intensive discussions to generate candidate issues for conference consideration.<sup>1</sup>

The consultative session began with a site visit to the Casey-funded Making Connections Denver initiative site followed by a dinner presentation on the future of community building as perceived by one of the funding co-sponsors.<sup>2</sup> Day 2 began with presentations on the history of community building and on lessons documented in the research. The site visit and presentations were intended to ground the planned Denver discussions in a common set of exposures and understandings to and about community building. The discussions that followed were intentionally partitioned into three topical areas to assure that the varying perspectives were used as lenses for generating candidate conference topics.

The 40 advisors were divided into 3 smaller, mixed groups that conducted 3-hour discussions on each of the three focal areas for the remainder of the 3 days as follows:

- Fashioning an agenda of Practice-Related Issues;
- Fashioning an agenda of Research and Policy-Related Issues; and
- Fashioning an agenda of Funder-Related Issues

The discussions around these focal areas were intense and, by the end of the 3-day session, had produced a list of 11 broad issues containing of a total of 50 individual questions as candidate agenda items for the national conference. The larger issue areas list as follows.

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting was funded in its entirety with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation at the request of Donna Lartigue, Director of Battle Creek Programs.

<sup>2</sup> Presenter: Janine Lee, Vice President, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation

## **Practice-Related Issues**

- The need for clarity: What is community building? If it is everything then it is nothing.
- Measurement issues: How can we know whether we are doing what we intend and doing it well?
- Operational issues: How can we strengthen the community organizations that form the infrastructure for resident engagement and community capacity? And how do we support and strengthen our community organizing efforts?
- The long term: What are the critical issues that will affect the long-term viability of community building as an approach to community change?

## **Research and Policy-Related Issues**

- The utility of research for practitioners: How can we redirect research to be more relevant to community-level concerns and package it to make it more consumable by non-technical community audiences?
- Areas of needed research: Clarification of community outcomes and impacts; developing a typology of variations on place-based community change efforts and conduct reconnaissance to identify who is doing what, where and to what extent; and compiling best practice information on successful initiatives and strategies in ways that can encourage replication and bolster learning.
- Pursuing policy impacts: How to leverage local improvement efforts into systemic change? How to recruit municipal, county and state governments as active partners? Are there ways to “map” community priorities onto policy areas most critical to affecting change?

## **Funder-Related Issues**

- Stability/continuity of foundation commitments: How does the field gain commitments at an institutional level? The current reliance on individual program officers leaves community building vulnerable to staff turnovers, leadership changes, and shifts in foundation policies and program direction.
- Need for change in grant policies: Funder policies and practices need to change in ways that: (1) encourage funders to follow, not lead, community change efforts; (2) provide more general support; (3) provide more acceptance and support for advocacy and organizing; (4) promote greater transparency in decision making; and encourage more collaboration both within and across foundations and other funding agencies.
- Developing a rationale for and approach to public funding: Community building, as a public good needs a rationale for government support and a strategy for garnering public funding from a largely categorical funding system.
- Increase funder sensitivity and understanding: Funders should recruit/train staff in ways that ensure sensitivity to the dynamics of community work; and provide technical assistance in ways that support rather than police community efforts.

In June of 2004, a meeting of the co-sponsors was convened at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, MI., to review the Denver meeting output and to draft the final agenda for the upcoming national conference. Noting a great degree of overlap in the topics raised by the Denver meeting, the cosponsors were able to prioritize and narrow the focus of the upcoming conference to the following six major issues.

- **Issues of Clarity:** What is community building? Who's doing it? Where? And How? And how can community building be understood as both distinct from, and in relation to, community development or community organizing?
- **Measurement Issues:** What is it that community building is trying to do? And what are the best ways of learning/knowing whether and/or how well it is getting done?
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### III. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The National Invitational on Community Building convened as a three-day meeting, in Cambridge, MA, on December 6 – 8, 2004. [Invitations had been extended to 112 persons and 102 of them participated. Participants were funders \(25\), Practitioners \(16\), Community Residents \(8\), and Research and Policy scholars \(20\).](#) The conference began with an orientation that included: introductions; a review of the conference goals and agenda; and presentations on the history of community initiatives and lessons from research.

The actual work of the conference occurred in small groups. Each conference participant, upon registration, had been asked to rank his/her preferences for the six conference topics according to his/her interest. On the basis of those preferences, each was then assigned to two topic groups. In making these assignments, conference planners were careful to maintain a mix of participants that would foster cross-role discussions. Discussions on the six topics were scheduled to run concurrently in two separate, 3-hour, time slots in the morning and afternoon of December 7, 2004. Participants were assigned to these morning and afternoon sessions.

Great pains were taken to support and to capture these discussions. Each small group session was supported by a staff of three persons: a facilitator who guided the flow of the discussion; a “scribe” who recorded major points on flip charts; and a “diarist” who compiled a narrative record of the session. Because each participant was able to engage in discussion on only two of the six conference topics, day three of the conference was devoted to plenary sessions for sharing results, prioritizing issues and thinking about the future.

The report that follows is based upon the events that occurred and materials that were generated over days two and three of the conference. We will begin with a report on the small group discussions of our six conference topics and then proceed to the deliberations during the day 3 plenary sessions. As appropriate, insights from earlier reconnaissance and from the Denver Consultative Sessions may also be integrated into these reports. The final section of this report will present a discussion of lessons that were extracted from this two-year conference and planning experience as digested by this author and by the conference cosponsors in a post-conference follow up meeting held at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City in May 2005.

## Clarity

*“Community is the Flower of Belonging”* – Donna Bivens,  
Women’s Theological Center

**Session Rationale:** The topic of clarity, as a focus of the NICCB conference, stemmed from a concern expressed during the project’s early reconnaissance and again in pre-conference sessions, that: (1) the term “community building” means nothing if it means everything; (2) we need additional clarity in order to communicate what we are doing to audiences in and outside of the community; and (3) if we can’t define it then we can’t measure it. Our understanding going into the conference then was that having conferees grapple with the definition of community building would help advance the field.

*“Community building is a way people are connected to each other to solve problems, envision the future and shape public life.”*

**Conference Discussion:** Much of the conference discussion on this question mirrored the concerns expressed above but there was also some tension and dissention around the importance of arriving at a single definition of community building. Funders in particular expressed some urgency about the need to develop precise and workable definitions. But a few practitioners advised caution – questioning the need for defining community building at all. They suggested that the push for a definition was more an issue for funders and researchers worried about accountability and evaluation issues – whereas community people just want to see progress and they don’t care what we call it. There was also a suggestion that definitions can be divisive by defining some people “out of the box” and invalidating work that doesn’t fit.

There was also some question as to whether we should refer to community building as a field as opposed to an approach. Proponents of the approach interpretation argued it might be more important to build the theory and practice of community building rather than worrying about developing it as a field.

**Conference Conclusions on Issues of Clarity:** Despite the cautions reported above, conferees stressed the importance of clarifying what community building is. One participant asserted, “It is essential that community building embody a theory or a set of principles and practices that help us understand what it is or is not and what is reasonable to expect it can do.” Others cautioned that theories will be of no use if they are not supported by practice. To be useful theories of community building have to be validated by practitioners in field.

While there was general agreement on these points, the session on clarity failed to produce a consensus definition of community building. Instead, there were a number of attributes, features, and issues related to community building on which conferees did agree as follows:

- Community Building is place-based, collective action through a relationship and capacity building strategy.
- Community building is a way people are connected to each other to solve problems, envision the future and shape public life.
- Community building creates and enhances relationships and in the process satisfies human needs for belonging.
- Community building creates “win-win” situations for individuals, neighborhoods and the larger political, social and economic communities. Stronger neighborhood communities positively impact their surrounding larger communities (city, state, nation).
- Community building initiatives involve an educational component around such things as leadership, confidence and communication skills that increase the human capital of the people involved.
- Community building necessarily involves conflict because it is a process designed to facilitate community change and undo the status quo.
- Any definition of community building has to find resonance and power with people in the community – that means non-technical, plain English.

## Measurement

“The overarching goal is to change evaluation so that it is no longer a tool used to tell trustees how money is being used, but something more informative, an instrument for learning, instead of an instrument of torture.” – Practitioner

**Session Rationale:** The focus on Measurement issues in the conference was propelled by a single question: How can we know/demonstrate whether we are doing what we intend and doing it well? Pre-conference consultations suggested that the field needs to be clearer about what it thinks constitutes success – that it needs to develop/identify a set of compelling interim outcomes that it can be held accountable to; and that funders can have confidence in and measure grant effectiveness by. As an extension of this concern, interviewees suggested that the field needs to define what our investment leads to in the

short term and where it will lead in the long term. Thus much of the pre-conference concern for measurement issues focused on accountability and reporting needs involving the following issues and questions:

- **Outcomes:** What results are we striving for and is it possible to prescribe a uniform set of outcomes which we can hold up as the “gold standard (e.g., levels of community organizing, community engagement, community infrastructure) separate and apart from wins and losses on community issues?”
- **Evaluation:** Who are the primary audiences for evaluation results? What are their evaluation/documentation/information needs? And can we get an up-to-date assessment of the state of the art in measuring community change?
- **Benchmarking:** What kinds of information would be most useful at the community level for assessing progress in our community change efforts? Are the measurement tools that we have created effective in helping with practitioners’ planning and assessments?
- **Is evaluation overblown** as the “hook” to which we attach this work? How imperative is the work irrespective of our ability to definitively assess its impacts?
- **Managing Expectations:** How do we reconcile conflicting views on the timeframes for producing outcomes and set reasonable expectations for what might happen when?
- **How do we provide “safe spaces”** for experimentation, failure, honest assessment and learning? We should value, not suppress our mistakes and failures.

***Conference Discussion:*** The morning and afternoon sessions on the topic of measurement produced very similar conclusions about the current status and future directions of efforts to improve measurement in community building. There was however a marked difference in the tone of the two discussion groups.

In the first session, there was early consensus in discussions that several national foundations, once active funders of this work, have stepped away from it in large part due to an inability to produce credible evidence of progress and success. The result of this “mushiness” has been a counter-reaction among funders for a harder, “bean-counter” approach to measuring results and outcomes. Many of the first session conferees fear that this kind of orientation fails to capture what community building is or has accomplished.

Discussions in the second session followed on similar themes but the tone was much more strident. Some of the animus was directed at evaluators but much of it was directed at funders. Foundations, in particular, were seen as being “obsessed with evaluation.” And the second session conferees believed that the exclusive focus on accountability neglected other important uses of evaluation. One participant noted that there are models of “co-generative inquiry” and “community-based participatory evaluation” in use already (e.g. by the NIH and CDC) that transform evaluators into “facilitators of learning.” Conferees agreed that such an approach would help to unload some of the negative baggage surrounding the term “evaluation,” which they felt has been more often

used as a means of punishment by funders rather than a tool of learning for all stakeholders.

Several of these conferees felt that the adoption of new and more community sensitive measurement and evaluation methods would require changes in funder behaviors and priorities. They identified foundation trustees as the critical audience to educate and influence. Sensitizing trustees to the nature of community-building work would help eliminate the bean-counting and could help solidify deeper institutional commitments to the work.

But despite differences in tone, the following were issues that both sessions agreed were essential to solving the measurement problem:

- The need to strike a better balance between the current focus on exploring “population results” (e.g., demographic, socio-economic and other quality of life impacts on individuals) and “community results” that would be more reflective of changes in community (e.g., resident engagement, mobilization, and collaboration).
- The need to incorporate more community voices into the measurement process including: prioritizing community-building outcomes; specifying indicators; collecting and analyzing data; and conducting evaluations.
- Measurement and evaluation protocols need a “360 degree focus” – to consider the entire community-building enterprise including the roles and contributions of funders to their community-building processes and outcomes.
- That no progress could be made on better approaches to measurement until there was a clearer understanding of what community building is and the theory and practice associated with it.

*“Our challenge is to articulate the results of community building as critically important drivers of other results that can’t be obtained unless you build community first – that community building results drive success in all the other areas.” – Sandy Jibrell*

A portion of the measurement discussion crossed over into the need to clarify what community building is. Conferees stated that, on one hand, it is “a process of organizing, mobilizing, and building capacity that creates the conditions for community change.” On the other, it is “a capacity we can measure involving a dense set of relationships that can be deployed for purpose.

**Conference Conclusions on Measurement Issues:** Though the morning and afternoon conferees held discussion on several similar themes, they produced dissimilar outcomes. The morning group finished up with a set of conclusions as follows:

- We need to define community building how we measure it, and its connections to the outcomes we seek, in order to make the case that *community building is the driver of change*.
- We have identified four levels of measurement for effectiveness and impact of community building:
  - Baseline context of community strengths, relationships, etc.
  - Measures of engagement and participation in collaborative process
  - Capacity to effect change
  - What change is produced?
- We need reciprocal learning arrangements so that local community efforts can inform the field of community building and the field can inform local community efforts.

The afternoon group put forward a set of recommendations specifically geared to evaluation:

- Evaluation should be a 360 degree learning tool for all stakeholders.
- Communities need to have equal involvement in order to maximize the utility of findings. Communities have the capacity but need the tools, training, resources and recognition that their perspective on evaluation is equal in importance to the perspective of academics, foundations, etc.
- Communities need to develop their research capacity and organize to redesign the dominant evaluation models.

“We’ve got this thing turned upside down. Our quest in measurement ought to be about getting practice-based evidence instead we are under pressure to pursue evidence-based practice.” – practitioner.

A practitioner noted that measurement and evaluation needs should not be allowed to drive the directions of the work. Community building goes far beyond things that can be readily measured. And measurement efforts need to focus on assessing what practitioners actually do. Community building is about changing a community climate, building social capital, human capital and leadership development, enhancing community capacity for collective decision-making and collective action.

These and other transformations in community are the immediate outcomes that should be measured and monitored. Their applications to specific neighborhood issues that

affect individual and community well-being are longer term outcomes that communities strive for. It is a two-step process – build community first, then use community strength and capacity to affect community change. These community-building and the issue-related outcomes need to be put in proper perspective. And both need to be the subjects of measurement and evaluation – not just the latter.

## Partnerships and Accountability

“There is a clear need for partnerships on all levels that share power equitably and that build trust among local residents, providers and national foundations.” – Tracey

Thompson, Cambridge College

**Session Rationale:** The principal issue driving the partnership and accountability session of the conference was a concern among grant recipients and community-based practitioners to become full and equal partners with their funders – sharing both the ownership of and the responsibility for the priorities, the directions, the activities and the outcomes of their community-building efforts. Our pre-conference reconnaissance suggested that there are several dimensions to this issue. The following comments are extracted from interviews.

- Foundations and other funders must follow not lead communities. They should expand their roles as “funders” to become real “partners” and share responsibility and accountability for local outcomes and for progress in the work. We need to develop a common understanding and agreement upfront on our vision, definitions, and expectations of each other in the community-building process. And reconsider their grant expectations so that they match more realistically with community expectations and outcome timeframes.
- Funders need to deliver “Supportive” Technical Assistance. Much of the TA seems inspired by a lack of trust and/or confidence in the communities’ abilities to do things properly. TA should be directed to the real and expressed needs of the practitioners and be geared to assisting and enabling rather than to prescribing and constraining.
- Foundation Staff Need a Greater Appreciation for the Dynamics of Community Work. There is a great need for staff development and skill building efforts that can help prepare funders to be more comfortable and effective partners in community work particularly with regard to race, culture and power issues. Foundations may need to recruit more persons with community experience to be program officers in this area.
- There is a great need for more “transparency” and trust in the decision-making and the accountability of funders. Practitioners need to have a better idea about

who has the authority to make grant decisions and what the process for making the decision entails. Are there or should there be a set of criteria for responsible grant making as it relates to community funding?

“The best relationships my organization has had was when the funder’s program officer had previous experience as a community organizer or practitioner,” – Denise Perry, Power U Center for Social Change.

**Conference Discussion:** Conferees seemed to concur that a wide and diverse range of local partnerships among funders, service providers, researchers, policymakers, and residents holds the greatest promise for initiating successful community building efforts and that this array of partnerships is key to creating and maintaining positive momentum for the work, bringing it to scale, and sustaining it. They stressed that community-building partnerships should be strategic and should be allowed to vary in their durations, purposes and functions. Forming different partnerships that address distinct elements of the community building work creates the potential for each partner to be able to contribute their greatest strengths to the effort.

There was strong agreement that about the importance of clear and open communications to the strength and long-term viability of these partnership arrangements. But conferees also recognized that this is difficult. Practitioners’ fear that open and honest communications may not be possible with the funders who provide them with financial and technical resources. Funders, on the other hand, are often concerned that providers may feel pressure to pay lip service to community building while really being engaged, out of self-interest, in building their own capacities or in doing a specific activity with the help of the funders’ grants.

This call for more “transparency” in partner relationships stemmed largely from the need conferees felt to build mutual awareness of each partner’s mission, values and approaches to the work. Conferees agreed that it is vital for partners: (1) to be absolutely clear about their expectations from the start; (2) to reconcile those expectations into a consensus vision for the work; and (3) to hold each other accountable for fulfilling the roles they are expected to play in achieving those joint expectations.

“We need to carefully consider the number of partnerships we form and shouldn’t form a partnership unless we’re willing to have a dedicated, committed, long-term relationship that’s going to make a difference. We

have to be ready to take ownership of the partner role.” –

Robert Holmes, Riley Foundation

The other challenge that was addressed had to do with the fact that community building partnerships don't move forward in a linear fashion. Participants discussed the importance of continuing to make space for newly committed stakeholders. As an example, growing the resident leadership group was seen as an essential component of the work, but doing so involves a constant struggle to integrate new personalities and communication styles. The ebb and flow of people in this work means that these community processes can be very inefficient and occasionally frustrating. It is often a major challenge to make residents, practitioners and funders feel comfortable working together. As a result, the danger of falling back into the old way of doing things is always there. Constant communications – that address the confusion, complexities, and problems, as they emerge, and jointly figuring out solutions – seems to be the only answer.

A large focus of the partnerships discussions revolved around a strong interest among practitioners in striking a new and different relationship with their funders. Practitioners would like to see themselves as foundation partners rather than just as foundation grantees. Both have important stakes in the progress of the work and practitioners complained that they often feel that they are not singing from the same song sheet. One practitioner noted: “We need to develop a common understanding and agreement upfront on our vision, definitions, and expectations of each other in the community-building process.”

Another issue raised was exploring how community builders can strike a deeper “institutional” partnership with funders in addition to the relationships they have with individual program officers. They would like to know that their program officers are empowered to speak and commit for the institutions and that the foundations' support will not evaporate with changes in foundation staff. There was agreement that if program officers knew “what would fly with their boards,” they could have more fruitful conversations with community practitioners.

Questions of power relationships were also raised in these discussions. Virtually all participants agreed that a balance of power is needed in community partnerships and that the community and its residents must be at the center of that power balance. Conferees suggested that this means: “looking at goals, strategies and actions through a community lens, not from a funder's perspective; creating more transparency; and finding real and meaningful ways to share power with residents.”

Partners often take on key responsibilities for moving the work forward – such as co-investing, delivering supportive services and programs; or acting as advocates in promoting the work or engaging and enrolling others in the work. A considerable portion of time was spent discussing the importance of mutual accountability for the various roles partners agree to play and the need to define the desired results of those roles upfront. Conferees agreed that each partner in a community building partnership must be held

accountable for the community process as well as for the community outcomes. Partners need to find ways to measure these outcomes and to hold each other accountable for reaching them.

“But funders also need to accept that there will be failures. They and their partners need to be open to learning from failure without assigning blame or assessing penalties.” – James McHale, W. K. Kellogg Foundation

### ***Conference Conclusions about Partnerships and Accountability:***

The four general topics on which the morning group focused were as follows:

- Agreement among partners is needed concerning language that addresses race, class and power issues.
- Partners must engage in an upfront dialogue on the importance of using simple, accessible language that promotes honesty and openness across all groups.
- A variety of partnerships are needed, and they all should be individually defined in terms of their broad mutual goals, specific result areas, key strategies and actions.
- Relationship building (individual and institutional) and collective learning must be part of every partnership and partnerships need to be driven by our shared passion for the work.

The afternoon group also identified four areas of agreement concerning the kinds of partnerships that will be needed to advance the community building profession:

- To make partnerships work in the long-term, upfront commitments need to be made about accountability – to results and to each other.
- The power of partner relationships and the venue for them should reside in the community.
- Equilibrium of power between partners (particularly between funders and grantees) should evolve along with the ongoing process of the work and the continuous learning by both parties.
- Mutual trust and respect must be built into the core of every partnership in order for them to be successful.

## **Sustainability**

“How are you going to sustain a community building effort if funders aren’t in it for the long term?” – James McHale,

W. K. Kellogg Foundation

**Session Rationale:** One of the more critical issues identified for the National Invitational Conference on Community Building was whether and how proponents of community building will be able to secure the kind of long term commitments necessary for the fruits of the work to stabilize and begin to show cumulative positive impacts on the well-being of children, and families, and on the institutions that serve them. Distressed communities have taken decades to reach their current conditions and it will likely take decades to reverse these trends. This larger question led to a number of specific concerns that were offered as fodder for conference discussion.

- What are the critical functions and capacities must be maintained and what are their resource requirements? Given the lack of a coherent funding system, how can we fashion a mixed portfolio of local, state and national government and philanthropic resources that can support program as well as operating expenses?
- How do we grow and sustain the levels of community engagement and energy needed to assure effective and authentic community voice?
- Succession/Transition of Local Leadership: How do we build a continuous inter-generational leadership cadre in order to provide for smooth, seamless transitions in leadership changes?
- How do we think about connecting the within-community capacity building efforts to needed and helpful resources of the larger communities, regions and states?

“As a field, community building is “almost totally reliant on foundation funding.” Will Fay report pg 15

Much of the focus of pre-conference discussion centered on foundations’ support and the ways in which it could be made even more supportive of community-building efforts.

- Institutional vs. Individual Support. Community building needs to be elevated to a higher level of recognition and priority in philanthropy. It needs to become more visible and important to the CEOs and Trustees of foundations rather than only the few enlightened and committed program officers who are currently engaged.
- Longer Term Orientation. Funders need to increase their appetites for longer term commitments. Community change will not likely happen on the usual 3 – 5 year grantmaking timeframe.

- The Need for General Support. The restrictions most foundations place on general operating and administrative support work contrary to the resource needs of community building and community change initiatives. Capacity building activities are not “programmatically” or issue driven and consequently lack funding appeal. But they are fundamental to community empowered change.
- Willingness to Fund Organizing and Advocacy. Community organizing and advocacy are critical and perpetual components of effective community change strategies. But many funders are wary of supporting these activities particularly advocacy work. There is a great need for increased funder education about the rules of public advocacy funding.

*Conference Discussion:*

“How can we help community groups get money? I’m very concrete about this. And I say this from view of someone who’s had to make payroll. It’s about how to get money, and keep it coming in...if you don’t have ready access to money on a regular basis, *the work will suffer.*” - practitioner

Conferees acknowledged sustainability as one of the more difficult issues being addressed by the conference. Many agreed that the challenge of achieving measurable results depends in large part on the ability of communities to continue the momentum and the work long enough for interventions to take hold and to grow in sufficient number and reach as to create some critical mass. So, much of the sustainability discussion focused on the questions most important to continuing this community momentum.

Establishing reliable and long term financial support for community building was discussed as the most obvious, pressing need. Conferees agreed that longer term commitments of more flexible financial support from a mix of public and private sources are a better prescription for sustaining current and future community-building efforts. One funder suggested that, since adequate funding is a “given” and understood condition for sustainability, the group might concede this issue and move on to other topics that might warrant more discussion and debate.

Many such topics were touched upon. For instance, some conferees suggested that, to sustain this work, the field must be more clear about what community building is and what it is trying to do; and that this clarity of definition and purpose must be accompanied by clarity of language if community builders are going to engage people from all walks of life in the dialogue. Still others expressed concerns about leadership continuity. Poor neighborhoods often see high rates of resident mobility. And leadership transitions in these neighborhoods can cause serious setbacks in momentum. A

practitioner stated that “a lot of community building gains are lost when leaders move or fade away.” This led to a discussion of the importance of leadership development and transition planning as components of this work.

“New Leaders take a while to grow therefore we should be thinking three generations ahead and invest in leadership development to stabilize our efforts. It’s an investment in stewardship.” – Practitioner

Indeed, pre-conference reconnaissance had surfaced interest in connecting community builders with their local youth development efforts. Respondents suggested that many youth programs are directing their efforts toward increasing youth participation in their communities – conducting community youth forums and community mapping exercises and other activities that encourage youth engagement with their neighborhoods. Including youth development in community-building efforts would begin to engage a largely overlooked and important constituency for community change in the work and help set a cross-generational, neighborhood expectation for community participation. Hampton, VA is perhaps one of the most notable examples of a community where youth participation permeates every aspect of government and community life and functioning.

But two subjects were deemed the highest priority issues for sustainability behind the issue of financial support. These were movement building and inclusiveness. Conferees felt that one of the more promising strategies for sustaining this work was to create a movement for change – a ground swell of resident recognition, identification and buy-in that could function as a compelling social and political force for community participation and community-driven change. Inclusiveness was among many issues that were thought to be critical to building that movement. Continuous outreach, clarity of speech and sensitivity to language minorities were viewed as important to ensuring that inclusiveness.

One participant suggested that the way to enlist residents in a movement would be to define a set of unifying values around which residents could unite. She suggested that the conference take a lesson from the recent national elections that were waged as much or more, in her opinion, on values than on issues. She felt that values such as: family well-being; jobs with good benefits; quality education; and opportunity for all are values that most residents could subscribe to. They would join the movement because they agree with those values. A more specific suggestion was that community builders condense a values message down to four or five short, clearly-stated points and that they be publicized and recited repeatedly in the media until they become well known in the community and are identified with the work.

Another participant suggested that after identifying the values, communities should fashion “aspirational goals that can drive a strategy.” For instance, if everyone agrees that obesity is bad for children’s health, point out that children can’t play outside due to the fear of gun violence. The link between a perceived good (healthy children) and a community problem could fuel a campaign to end gun violence, and gain support from many allies – community members, health providers, parents, and teachers.

One funder noted that values could solve the mystery of why people support policies that are not in their best interest. They do so, he felt, when the policy appears to be tied to a value they find compelling. The movement could take a lesson from this. “The message won’t work unless it is connected to a value people hold.”

### ***Conference Conclusions on Sustainability***

Two major themes seemed to evolve from the sustainability discussions. The first was the immediate group consensus that adequate, stable, flexible, and diversified financial resources were critical. The feeling of unanimity on this point was so strong that conferees felt little need for further conversation on it. The second major theme related to the need to build a movement. Interestingly, these themes are connected and interdependent. Stable resources are needed to support movement building and building the movement is a strategy for procuring stable resources. Success on either of these goals was thought to depend on several other questions, for instance:

- To some extent sustainability will depend on whether the field can clarify what it is and what it is trying to in terms and language that will convince people about the value of this work. It needs a compelling answer to the question “what is it that you are trying to sustain and why?” It was strongly suggested that couching the work in a statement of values could be a powerful way to bring additional clarity, purpose and momentum to the work.
- After clarifying the “what” and the “how,” means must found to answer the question “so what?” The field needs to have concrete results that are documented and measurable to sustain funding and resident participation.
- Finally, there is a great need for effective communication strategies to raise awareness of the work being done and the successes being achieved – strategies for marketing to the community and to funders, particularly to government and corporate funders.

The discussion of movement building raised additional aspects of the sustainability challenge that also need attention. Continuity in leadership and maintaining community participation, despite ebbs and flows of resident engagement and leadership turnovers, were important concerns that pointed to the need for continuous community organizing and leadership development. And finally, much emphasis was placed on inclusiveness and the need for continuous and effective outreach to the entire community.

## **Mobilization**

“It took people realizing ‘This is not the situation we want to be in’... and by them taking on the issues, you can make that positive change. It is not something that happens overnight, it took those residents years and years of hard work, and commitment from residents, from community organizations, from funders, and from government.” – Juanita Cox, La Union del Pueblo Entero

**Session Rationale:** The conference session on Mobilization was intended to focus on the challenges and opportunities for building sustainable community capacity, civic engagement, and community organizing in ways that would help propel the community-building movement in this century. Among the issues raised during pre-conference explorations were the following:

- How do we grow and sustain the levels of community engagement and energy needed to assure effective and authentic community voice?
- How can we build/enhance/strengthen the community organizations that form the infrastructure for resident engagement and community building – particularly enhancing their ability to build effective, broad-based, inter-generational, community resident leadership not just leadership for CBOs. Our hopes for community building rest heavily upon them.
- What is the role of academia especially community colleges in supporting local community building efforts.
- How do we give practitioners and particularly community leaders the support and “relief” they need to assume larger roles in the field – as TA providers, policy advocates and in other leadership roles?
- Scalability: How does a community-level capacity building effort, like those we see in community building processes, aggregate their impacts into larger scale social change (e.g., in education, employment, housing, justice policies writ large)?
- Bridging issues: How do we think about connecting the within-community capacity building efforts to needed and helpful resources of the larger communities, regions and states?
- Many of the nation’s distressed communities are a rich mosaic of whites, blacks, and browns expressing themselves in a variety of languages. Outreach to the entire community is important but how do we manage the racial and ethnic diversity (e.g., language, cultural and other demographic differences)?

- With the advent of gentrification, some communities are becoming more socially, politically and economically diverse as well. How do we meet the challenge of engaging a more affluent population of newcomers in change efforts that speak to the needs and concerns of poor residents and peoples of color? How does gentrification affect community cohesion and consensus on community issues?

I think that we have to figure out some connections, the relationships, and how it is we that we can support the commitment that has been made by these residents to pursue a stronger future. – Juanita Cox, La Union del Pueblo Entero

**Conference Discussion:** An overarching conclusion from the discussions on mobilization was that community building cannot sustain itself to mobilize its broad and long term agenda unless and until it aggressively and substantially addresses the several issues that follow:

- **Tackling the political and cultural contexts** that some conferees believed are at best indifferent and at worst hostile to community building, but which may also bring new opportunities for mobilization into sharper relief
- **Dealing with race, class and power** not just within communities but also within the field of community building itself, addressing the complexities of how people of color and communities define themselves (as opposed to funders and systems) and taking on the issues of power deeply implicated in the funder/grantee relationship.
- Acknowledging and **working to resolve tensions** between: (1) advocates of community organizing and of community building; (2) our focus on urban vs. rural places; (3) the perspectives of researchers vs. community activists; and (4) the connection between our local organizing/community building efforts and work to change national policy.

On the political/cultural front, conferees believed that there were ominous signs in the national election campaigns that had just ended. They thought that the values debate had focused public attentions on questions of religion and morality in ways that obscured and sometimes even opposed issues of equity and fairness. This combined with concerns about the national economy, the threat to domestic programs posed by a rising national debt, the war on terrorism, and questions about the Patriot Act and civil liberties were believed to have raised the “us vs. them” political climate to an unprecedented level of divisiveness. The issue of gay marriages, for instance, has cause serious cleavages between the African-American clergy and other politically progressive forces. And faith in God is now being driven to assuming the position of America’s new political fault line. Some conferees expressed concern that compassion may be leaving America.

“The country looks more in tune with Old Testament messages of condemnation than New Testament messages of love, forgiveness, and understanding” – Will Fay report pg. 3

Addressing the issues of race, class and power as they intersect with community building also assumed a high priority for conferees. Many were concerned about the lack of diversity in community organizing entities as well as in the institutions and organizations supporting community work. The suggestion here is not that whites are less sincere or capable in their community efforts but rather that promoting, enlarging and sustaining resident engagement in poor and largely minority communities might be more effective if the visible leaders in those efforts looked more like the persons they are trying to engage.

Still other conferees urged that we need a whole new way of thinking about race in this country and about race and class. The old black, white, Hispanic, and “other” demographic descriptors are increasingly inadequate for describing America’s population as well as being increasingly contrary to the ways in which individual Americans describe themselves. The reason is that “other” category is growing and splintering into numerous combinations and permutations of racial and ethnic identification. The black vs. white debate that has permeated national politics for the last several centuries is losing currency and there are many social and political scientists who would argue that “class” has trumped “race” as the dividing line for social inequality in the United States.

“I grew up in New Orleans. My mom’s side is Dominican; my Dad’s side is African American. We need to think about the interconnectedness of people. It is important for us to understand these groups are constantly shifting, and are much more complex than one word sounds ... how do we think about having a conversation that goes beyond singular races?” – Will Fay Report, pg. 7

“I am white and Latina. I do not fit even what Latinos have internalized as their own self-image ... there is going

to come a time when none of these categories fit.” – Will Fay  
Report, pg. 7

Defining mobilization and particularly distinguishing it from community organizing was another priority focus of this discussion. Some conferees wondered whether community building is just a euphemism – a term that eases funders’ concerns about funding community organizing – or whether there are legitimate distinctions between the two. Efforts to define mobilization took several different directions premised on what it might take to embark on a 10-year effort. The following were major themes.

- *Defining mobilization as distinct from organizing.* Mobilization focuses on building alliances across sectors, as opposed to concentrating primarily on resident engagement and capacity building.
- *Dealing with the challenge of comprehensiveness.* “Comprehensiveness does not mean ‘doing everything’ – it means using a broad vision and perspective to take a systemic look at where to intervene.” Issue-based mobilization is too limited. Instead, mobilizing communities should be about “building a constituency to make change.” Thus, “when an issue comes up, we have a constituency we can move. It’s the difference between looking at how many people you can bring to an issue, versus having 300 folks out there from which to mobilize 100 people for a variety of issues.”
- *Linking national and local.* A key challenge is connecting local and national mobilization efforts for community building. Conferees proposed national structures that advance community-building values, messages, best practices and information sharing. One suggestion for this was to create a national environment for change by bringing together and helping integrate the community building, community development, and community organizing sectors. Another approach was advancing a national vision by creating a national and regional network.
- *Invert the expertise pyramid:* examine funder dynamics, foster honest dialog and put community voice, expertise and experience at the top of the pyramid. Conferees suggested: that we analyze the funder/grantee relationship; that we look at how a community building process actually happens; and that we have a more honest conversation about community building work, not just from funders but also from communities.

Some effort was made to put the terms “mobilization, community building and community organizing” in some perspective. This conversation led conferees to view organizing as the “umbrella” for mobilization and community building. One reason they viewed organizing as the more robust frame was their perception that “community building has not delved deeply into race and class” whereas there are “deep examples of community organizing where that has been taken on” such as the Community Reinvestment Act and living wage campaigns.

In an interesting exchange, one participant asserted that the community building approach can actually slow momentum because of its cross-sector, collaborative approach. “Sometimes when we are doing this work we do not want everyone at the table but

because we say we are doing ‘community building,’ there is assumption that we *need* everybody at the table and so we may slow things down in efforts to *get* everyone to the table.

***Conference Conclusions on Community Mobilization:*** A major conclusion of discussions on this topic was that there is a perpetual need for efforts to stir the imaginations, the participation, and the energies of community residents in order to get and keep them involved in community change efforts. However one defines this and regardless what one calls it – community organizing or community mobilization – this aspect of community building is seen as the fundamental building block of community capacity. The following are some of the other points on which conferees agreed.

- We must push national funders for a long term commitment to mobilization efforts – from 10 to 20 years -- to effective mobilization at the local and state level so that such efforts can aggregate and have impact nationally. The point is that mobilization cannot “be done on the cheap or fast
- A lack of clarity on what “mobilization” means, and what to mobilize around, must be addressed. The field needs to define its terms.
- Developing a consensus around a common vision and defining end goals for are key to mobilization efforts
- There should be more effective and broader programs to develop informed community leadership
- More intentional efforts are needed to help form and sustain strategic partnerships between communities, institutions, systems and funders.
- We need to identify models, tools and best practices for collaboration and resident engagement and build the community’s capacity execute on them
- We must identify ways to attack the negativity that is clouding today’s political climate and prevent politicians and the politics of division from preventing cooperation, collaboration and community building
- We need to focus mobilization efforts on real issues that impact people’s daily lives: high housing costs, gentrification, and improving social services.

In Mississippi...we never thought that, through ...  
developing relationships, we would have accomplished  
the things we have accomplished... kicking out the large  
hog farms. We never thought that we would be able to  
get local officials to clean up dump sites.. But this all

came about as a result of community people coming together. – Hollis Watkins, Southern ECHO

## Research and Policy

**Session Rationale:** The conference focus on research and policy was borne of several concerns expressed in pre-conference interviews. One such concern was the utility of current community-building research and the need to increase the relevance and usefulness of that research so that it can guide and inform the efforts of people working for change in these communities. A second concern related to outlining areas of future research that would increase our understanding of community processes and/or persistent community problems in ways that might help propel the community building field forward. And still a third concern for these discussions was whether and/or how the community-building efforts of individual communities might be leveraged beyond their impacts on immediate micro-level issues of local neighborhood conditions to the more difficult macro-levels of policy impacts.

“It is a question of research for whom and policy for whom. Too often research and policy aren’t informed by those that it wants to be its subjects. I have problems with that; we need to be very careful to make sure that the subjects are part of the research and policy design process.” – S. Torian Report, Pg. 3

**Conference Discussion:** Several themes were highlighted in these discussions including: 1) the importance of good research; 2) the need to involve the community in the research projects and in efforts to influence policy; 3) the need to convey the findings from research to policy makers and to ensure that they use them in policy decisions; 4) the need to include the rural perspective in research and policy work; 5) the need to ensure that research efforts translate into action; 6) the need to improve how research findings are communicated to the community, to policy makers, and to other researchers; and 7) the need to avoid partisanship and ideology in order to ensure that research is broadly accepted and use. Each of these themes will be discussed below.

**The importance of good research:** Conferees agreed that research can be an important driver for community change but were concerned that the research community is looking

at the community-building field through the wrong lenses. They argued that community building research is at a difficult crossroads. There is a strong pressure in the field for evidence based practices. But the research paradigm for evidence focuses largely on quantifiable impacts and, consequently is looking at indicators that are less appropriate to community building. As an example, too frequently researchers measure the changes in individuals rather than the changes in systems and because changes in individuals can take years to occur, this research can make community building seem less effective. Instead, conferees thought that changes in systems is what needs to be measured. “When we talk about community change and then measure the resident, that is flawed. We need to be measuring the community.”

Changes in the...“Status conditions for people might be fifteen years out, but you can show the change in the systems immediately....You won’t get changes at the population immediately.” – S. Torian Report Pg. 2

*Involving the Community in Research and Policy:* The discussion of community involvement in all phases of the community-building and policy agenda was a central focus in these discussions. Most participants agreed that, by involving the community in the design and execution of research projects, researchers can ensure that the research they produce will be more useful to practitioners on the ground. There was also strong agreement that, once completed, research needed to be “translated” into ordinary language so that it will be consumable by residents, practitioners and other non-researcher audiences.

Several conferees also argued that translation is only a first step – that there should be additional efforts to build the capacity of communities to understand the research and policy implications themselves. One researcher described this capacity as, “This is more about critical thinking. Rather than having data translated for residents, we could invest in their capacity so that they can absorb data on their own terms and the practical way to get at it would be to target community leaders for this capacity building.”

“Social justice policies are not evidence based. They are values based. Nevertheless, we have to do good research about good policies. One part of me says we

have to do our research well; another part says it doesn't matter.” – S. Torian, Pg 4

*Bringing Research to Policy Making:* Ironically, though conferees all believed that research is a powerful tool for influencing policy, they also expressed a frustration that research is not examined regularly when policy makers are forming their decisions. In the words of one practitioner, “We are talking about research and policy. There is a great divide between those two though....Frequently, policy is not decided on research. There was a poll of elected officials about what moves them on children’s issues. Most got their information from people around them who were not drawing on the research at all....People frequently wave the research around but don’t use it for deliberation.”

At least one practitioner expressed frustration at the long length of time between when research is conducted and when it influences policy, exclaiming, “The average length of time to get from research to policy is 17 years! That is a lifetime!” Another echoed this feeling, arguing that researchers continue to collect research on issues as those issues become worse: “How do we move beyond collecting research to figuring out what we are going to do about it?” How do we use it to mobilize people to change things?”

Another participant suggested that the current national administration is less open to using research and evidence to influence policy decisions: “I think that those who come out of a research and policy tradition think that if we get good evidence about what is working, we can convey that to policy people and they will use that to create good policy. Now, we realize that that is not the case at the national level. This begs the question of what the research and policy is about now.” Conferees seemed to agree with this assessment but were more hopeful about the willingness of local policy makers to use research as the basis for their policy judgments. Targeting local officials with local research findings seemed to be a consensus high value strategy for leveraging research into action.

*Including the Rural Perspective:* It was noted that rural communities have been largely neglected by the field. One participant asserted that this conference, like many other “community” conferences has overlooked issues involved in community building in rural areas, “When I read the materials prepared for this conference, there is no rural perspective whatsoever.” The problem conferees saw in this was both an issue of “abandonment,” as if those communities do not matter, and a consequent concern for some political volatility that might result in rural America. “We often dismiss rural communities and then they find themselves lost. When they are lost, they go to whoever throws them something.”

*Messaging:* Conferees expressed great concern about ways to effectively convey the findings and lessons from good research to the broader public, whether that be the communities being studied, policy makers, or the community at large. Convincing

people that they should be interested in and care about what is working to improve low income and disinvested communities is difficult. According to one participant, “There is a huge majority of people in our cities and regions and they don’t know what is going on. We are talking to the children of children who grew up in the suburbs. Grandma never even lived in the cities. They never went there. There is a great disconnect. I don’t know if it is the nexus between policy and research or between policy research and dissemination but we need to figure that if we want to make real progress.”

“The field has never had a “transparent way to take the research to the people on the ground, We have gotten tired, as a country, of facts and figures; our eyes glaze over.” – S. Torian, Pg. 6

*Partisanship and Ideology:* Because the conference occurred less than a month following a contentious presidential election, reflections on national politics often found their way into the conference discussion. In the research discussion however conferees were cognizant of the need for some caution.

“If you want to have a dialogue and have this movement be bigger than pure ideology, you need to frame it differently. There has been an assumption that everyone in the room is a liberal left Democrat. There are others who will feel totally alienated when they hear these issues framed this way. We ought to be trying to figure out where we can work together.” – John Foster-Bey, Corporation for National and Community Service

These comments led to a fruitful discussion about the importance of not letting research on community building be driven by ideology. As one researcher explained, “We really want research that will inform the dialogue and debate in the field. Researchers should concentrate on how they can frame their work so that more people can agree on what the

issue is. And we need to recognize the different conclusions that people will arrive at. There are different sources of data that speak to the same issue. And even when we agree on the data, we might not be able to translate that into policy implications that we agree on.”

One practitioner argued that, no matter how careful we are, we will need research to support advocacy efforts and that is inherently political. “We should talk about specifics, about the administration’s positions on Section 8 housing vouchers. Issues like this are impacting people’s lives. So while we can and should be careful to be non-partisan and objective in the design of research and in data collection and analysis, using that data to affect change is a political exercise.”

***Conference Conclusions on Research and Policy:*** Discussions on research and policy provided glimpses into the divide that exist between residents and front line practitioners, one hand, and academics and policy persons on the other. Major themes issues included:

- A concern that community-building research be carefully crafted to construct indicators that appropriately reflect, measure and inform important audiences about the real outcomes, impacts and implications of the work;
- The need to incorporate more community persons and perspectives in the design, preparation and execution of community-building research projects and the need to build the communities’ own capacities and facility to conduct and use research;
- An uneasy ambivalence about the relationship of research to policy development and change in the current climate of value-drive politics; but a belief that research matters and that its local application may still hold promise for affecting change;
- An admonition that rural communities also have a stake in this work and we likewise have a stake in rural communities;
- The need for better research communications strategies that can inform work and educate larger uninformed audiences in ways that can help build support and larger constituencies for the work; and,
- The need to keep partisanship out of our research methods and analyses while being mindful of the political nature of using research as an engine of change.

## **IV. Conclusions: Current Prospects and Future Directions**

The National Invitational Conference on Community Building convened a diverse group of over 100 invited guests from 50 cities in 35 states to come together for three days of intensive discussions about the status and future of community building as an approach to community and social change. Six themes formed the topical outline for these conversations and, as might be gleaned from the above, these topics and the conference discussion itself involved a great deal of overlap.

This section of the report attempts to summarize the discussion into a set of conclusions that puts the six topic areas in some perspective – focusing particularly on three issues as organizing frames: clarity, partnership and accountability, and sustainability. In so doing, we do not intend to elevate any topic over any other as a priority but rather to demonstrate the “interwoven-ness” of the six issues and the discussions that surrounded them.

“We need to define community building, how we measure it, and its connections to the outcomes we seek, in order to make the case that community building is the driver of change. Without it, other results, even if achieved, cannot be sustainable or go to scope and scale. Once we define community building, our theory of change, and practice-based evidence measures of success, these can be applied to any community and area of change for social impact.”

**Clarity:** The Clarity discussions cut across all of the conference conversations and did so in a variety of ways. Clarifying community building definitions, terms, communications, goals and outcomes, and theories and practices were all viewed as critical to future of the work. The following is a synopsis of the ways in which clarity permeated the conversations. Conferees agreed that:

- Neither **research**, nor evaluation nor **measurement** can proceed without clear definitions and clear specifications of what the fields sees as the legitimate near and longer term goals and outcomes from the work.
- Conceptual clarity must be accompanied by clarity in language in order to engage the widest possible array of stakeholders in the work and to lay the groundwork for **mobilization** and building a movement for community-driven change.
- Marketing – for instance to government, foundation and other private funders; to the national and local press and media; and to community constituents as well – is increasingly recognized as a critical strategy for **sustainability**. An effective marketing effort is needed: to support awareness raising; to assist fund raising and promote financial solvency, and to sustain resident recruiting, organizing and engagement. That marketing effort requires a clear statement of community

building's theories, practices and accomplishments in order to present a compelling case that it is a promising approach to community improvement and change.

- There was a strong desire expressed, during the *partnership and accountability* discussions, for a new relationship between communities and all of their community-building partners – but particularly between communities and their funders. Discussion focused largely on the need for a clarification and redefining of roles and expectations based on principles of mutual respect, mutual ownership, and mutual accountability. There was consensus that these roles and expectations, in turn, should be defined by prior mutual agreement on community-building goals and outcomes and the means and methods to achieve them.

One “sense of the conference” then is that, in many respects, progress on each of the major topics chosen for the conference, and hence the future of community building, depends in large measure on achieving more clarity – clarity about: who we are; what we do and how and why we do it; and what difference it all makes in our communities. To endure, community-building work needs a firmer foundation upon which to: build and sustain its momentum; recruit, engage and retain committed partners and resources; and support necessary research and documentation.

***Partnership and Accountability:*** Redefining the roles of and relationships between community-building partners was also a major cross-cutting theme of many of the conference discussions. The issues seemed to revolve around a need for more trust, mutual understanding and agreement among partners with regard to the goals, objectives, means, methods and expected outcomes of the community-building work. A large portion of discussion focused on the need to encourage and respect a greater role for residents in defining these issues and in helping to plan and execute community-building strategies and activities.

As a complement, funders were encouraged to play less of a leading role and more of a collegial role of shared authority and power. Conferees felt that this new environment of shared responsibility would offer better opportunities to: *clarify* the work; specify credible and mutually acceptable sets of goals, and outcomes; and facilitate the search for reliable approaches to their evaluation and *measurement*. It was also suggested that a new relationship based on trust and mutual agreement and understanding would provide a better foundation on which to *sustain* the long-term commitment and investment of funders. Community building is long, hard work for which a mutually respectful, collegial, working relationship may be the only good hedge against funder fatigue.

Another focus of conference discussion centered on creating better partnerships for *research*. Participants expressed a concern that the design, conduct, and reporting of research should be performed in ways that better inform and support communities, the field, and the work. And again, a central issue here concerned the roles that community residents and community-building practitioners can and should play in creating and pursuing the community-building research agenda. A redefined partnership with

community should help sensitize researchers and reorient their agendas to important additional dimensions of the work such as the human and social capital outcomes that are often overlooked.

***Sustainability:*** Conference participants were mindful a challenging funding climate and of the field's dependence on soft money. Community building efforts around the nation are almost entirely funded by philanthropy. And the stresses on government posed by tax relief, the war on terror, rising energy costs, and a record national debt bleaken the prospects for public support in the near term. Given this scenario, conferees suggested that field needs to organize itself around ***mobilization*** and movement building efforts in order to build a political constituency that can advocate for local, state and federal resources. A concern with this strategy was the reluctance of foundations to support advocacy and the need for prospective grantees to educate themselves and their funders about tax laws that permit advocacy funding.

A portion of the sustainability discussions also focused on the ***partnerships*** with funders and particularly on how vulnerable foundation support can be to staff and leadership turnovers. Changes in foundation leadership can result in major shifts in program directions and turnover in the program staff can also affect support for the work. Conferees strongly expressed a need to deepen the funding relationships to the level of institutional, rather than just individual, program officer, commitments. Finding ways within the partnership to raise the visibility of the work to foundation CEOs and trustees was one of the primary suggestions put forward.

And much of the discussion focused on sustaining momentum within the communities themselves – how to maintain the energies and commitments of residents and practitioners to continue their engagement in community and the imperative this places on perpetual organizing, outreach and leadership development.

***Measurement, Mobilization and Research:*** As documented earlier, each of these topics generated energetic exchange and discussion among the conferees. In each case, however, discussion suggested that the prospects of making progress in each area was, at least in part, connected to progress on the issues of clarity, partnership and sustainability.

***Race:*** Though not an explicit topic of discussion, issues of race, culture and power permeated most of the conference. Immigration and changing racial and ethnic demographics and gentrification are expanding the racial and economic mosaic of communities and complicating the challenge of community building. The black/white dimensions of racial politics are giving way to a more complex configuration of black, white, brown and “other.” And a growing fault line is developing between English speakers and language minorities. This reality caused participants to strongly stress the necessity of constant community outreach and the priority that should be placed on intra-community communications and marketing.

## V. Recommendations/Suggestions on Next Steps

The rationale for this community-building conference was to provide an opportunity for the field to take stock of its prospects, challenges and future directions. But in addition to addressing these issues, as reported above, a major question for the conference was, “Where does the field go from here?” The following is a brief discussion of four major themes that arose as recommendations for next steps.

**Push Deeper into Communities.** Many of the conferees expressed a strong conviction that the conversations and considerations fostered by the conference need to be engaged at the local level and become part of the ongoing discourse in the communities. Conferees felt that the community-building neighborhoods are where each of the six conference topics (Clarity, Measurement, Mobilization, Sustainability, Partnership and Accountability, Research and Policy) actually play themselves out and, hence where they need focus and resolution.

**Pilot Our Conference Conclusions in a Demonstration Community.** Conferees strongly urged Cosponsors to assure that the conference lead to some concrete developments rather than conclude as just another meeting. They suggested that, because our discussions represented the best thinking of experienced people in the field, our conference conclusions present us with a blueprint from which we can devise a community demonstration of best wisdom if not best practice. As such, another next step suggested by our conferees is that the cosponsors distill the conference lessons and conclusions into a workable set of parameters on which a pilot demonstration could be designed and implemented.

**Strengthen the Community-Building Infrastructure by creating Regional Centers of Community-Building Expertise and Support.** One large concern expressed by many conferees throughout the conference was the need for more support to the communities engaged in this work. One promising idea put forward was to create number of regional community-building centers that could function as a resource to these communities – acting as archivists and repositories for best and promising practices; helping to support the community-building dialogue in engaged neighborhoods; providing technical and analytic support to local initiatives; and providing a network for communications between and among active communities in the region.

**Mapping the Community-Building Field.** A major impediment to conference planning and conference discussions as well was the lack of information about the community-building field itself. For instance, as conferees grappled with the central clarity question, “What is community building?” there was immediate recognition of some gaps in our knowledge. Strong concern was expressed that, until we can be clearer about who and how many communities are doing what, when and where, it will be difficult to speak with confidence about what constitutes community-building practice in the field. And it will be difficult to assess the status, strength and/or potential of a national community-building “movement.” Consequently, another

recommendation of the conference was that an effort be launched to inventory the field and collect information on the numbers, types, and locations of community change efforts around the nation.

**Reaching Out to Other Voices.** A major concern arising out of the conference was a dearth of political diversity at the conference – in particular, the lack of representation from politically conservative voices. At least one of our conferees suggested that there are a number of conservative foundations and activists who are equally concerned about conditions in poor communities and that the prospect of sustaining the work would be enhanced by reaching across the aisle to bridge relationships with them.

## **VI. Closing Comments**

In supporting the National Invitational Conference on Community Building, the cosponsors had hoped to foster deep discussion about community change efforts and to unearth some of the important lessons that have evolved out of our national experience. We want to be clear here that neither the conference nor this document makes any claim to have covered all of the issues important to the many institutions and actors engaged in community-driven change efforts. But we believe that we have done more than merely scratched the surface. And we certainly hope that our conference colleagues and other audiences who may review this record of proceedings will agree that we came a long way toward meeting those goals. It is also our hope that this document will contribute to the ongoing dialogue about community building and to continued efforts to enhance the reach, yield, and effectiveness of this work