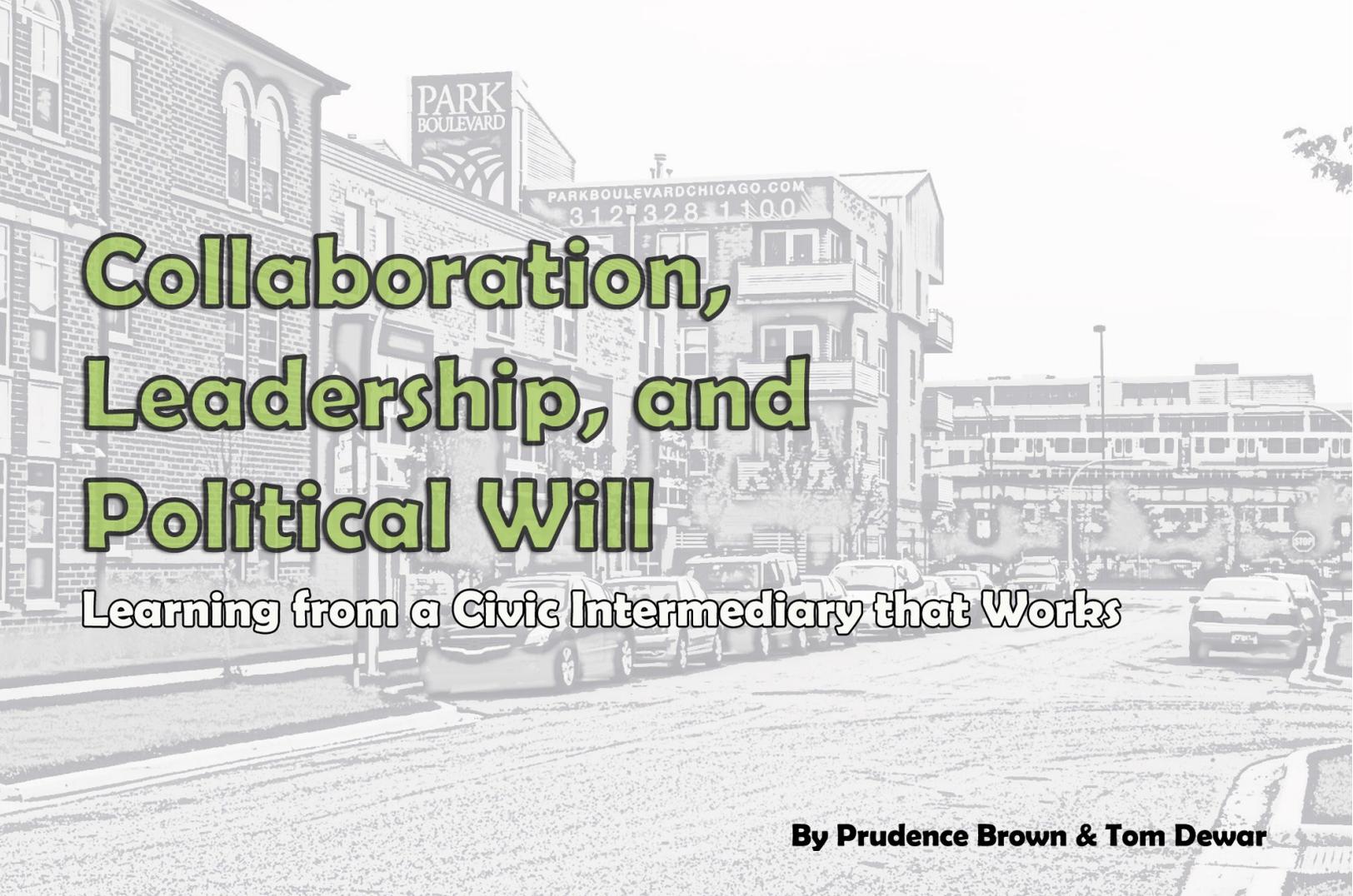


THE PARTNERSHIP FOR NEW COMMUNITIES



Collaboration, Leadership, and Political Will

Learning from a Civic Intermediary that Works

By Prudence Brown & Tom Dewar

The Partnership for New Communities is a fund created by leading civic institutions and businesses to support the success of the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, a sweeping effort to reinvent public housing. The Partnership raises money and invests it in employment-related initiatives, economic development and community building to bring about large-scale improvements to the neighborhoods most affected by public housing transformation.

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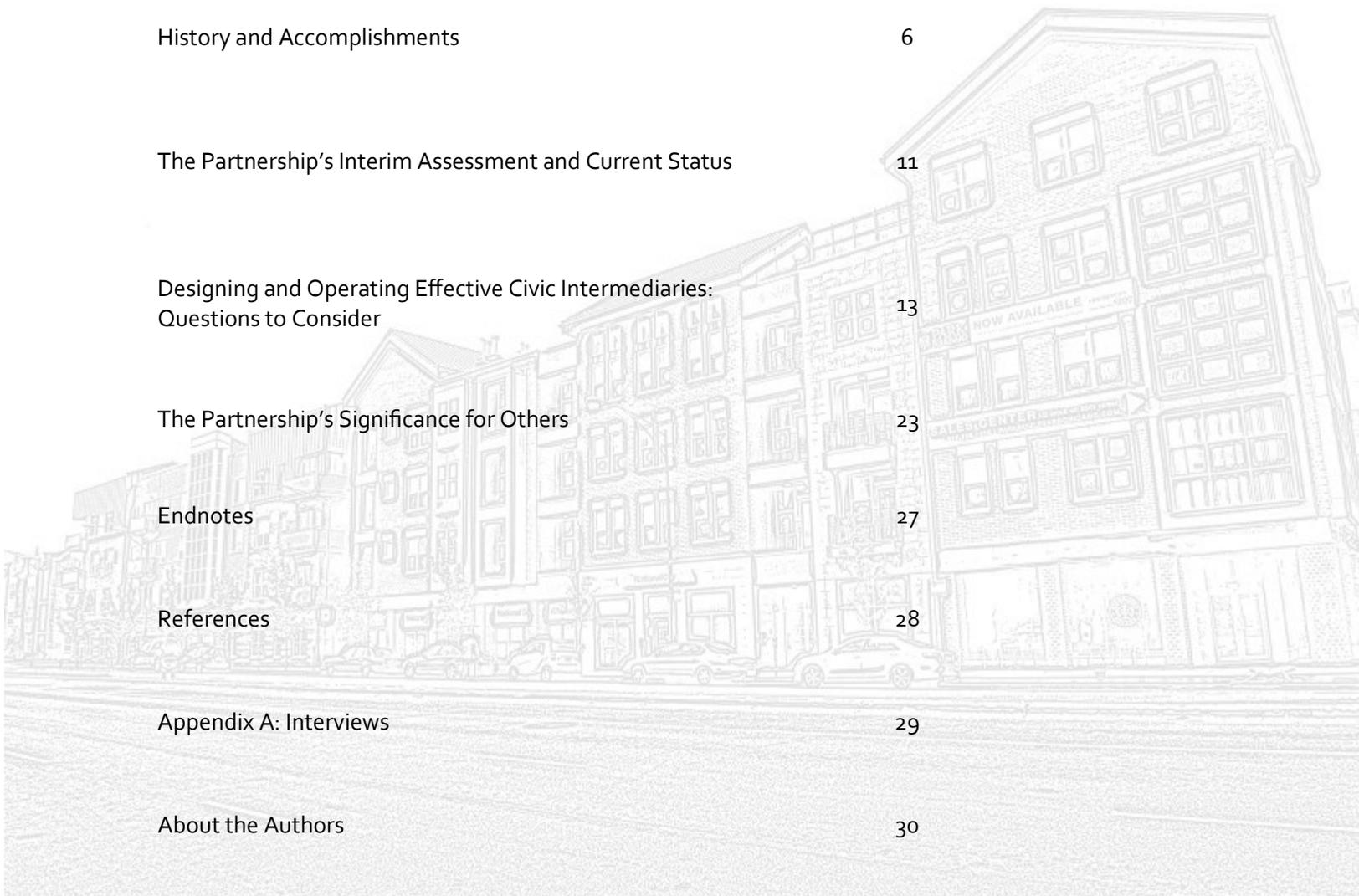
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**The Partnership
for New Communities**

Civic Leadership for Chicago's Neighborhoods

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Introduction

Addressing complex civic problems requires cross-sector problem-solving work, adaptive leadership, and political will over an extended period of time. Few community vehicles exist for doing this challenging work: aligning diverse, sometimes competing, interests and establishing a shared, public commitment to be accountable for tangible results; maintaining enough political independence to test out innovative approaches but enough (sometimes informal) connection to relevant decision-makers to get things done and sustained at scale; and providing the leadership and management functions required to guide effective implementation of the many moving parts in a dynamic environment. Without an organizing structure or “backbone organization”¹ that can take on these tasks over an extended period of time, the efforts of those involved are unlikely to achieve sufficient alignment and power to generate meaningful community results.

The Partnership for New Communities is one such vehicle. Established in 2001 as a time-limited civic intermediary, The Partnership aimed to support the goals of Chicago’s Plan for Transformation, an ambitious effort to overhaul public housing and create healthy, economically viable communities. For a decade The Partnership promoted strategic collaboration among government agencies, business, workforce and community development experts and providers, developers, and other key actors to strengthen implementation of the Plan and assist public housing residents overcome barriers to employment and opportunity. In early 2011, The Partnership announced that it would begin winding down its operations and would complete work on its existing initiatives in 2012.

This report chronicles The Partnership’s experience as a civic intermediary, and tries to draw some lessons from it. It is not an evaluation of The Partnership, nor a comprehensive catalogue of all its strategies and accomplishments. Rather, we examine its experience to identify and reflect upon the elements that seem most critical to its success. The goal is to translate this experience into useful knowledge for other civic enterprises, both in Chicago and nationally. The report draws upon about 30 interviews with those directly involved with its work as well as with some informed observers (see Appendix A). We also reviewed written materials from The Partnership’s files and website, meeting notes, and outside reports and evaluations.

The report begins with a brief history and description of The Partnership and its context. It then describes some key design and operating questions that face all civic intermediaries and discusses the specific choices made by The Partnership, choices we believe contributed to its overall success. The report concludes with a discussion of The Partnership’s significance beyond Chicago.

As a time-limited civic intermediary, The Partnership for New Communities aimed to support the goals of Chicago’s Plan for Transformation, an ambitious effort to overhaul public housing and create healthy, economically viable communities.

Executive Summary

Addressing complex civic problems requires cross-sector problem-solving, adaptive leadership and political will over an extended period of time.

For a decade, The Partnership for New Communities has worked to support the goals of Chicago's Plan for Transformation, an ambitious effort to overhaul public housing and create healthy, economically viable communities. Established in 2001 as a time-limited civic intermediary, The Partnership promoted strategic collaboration among government agencies, business, workforce and community development experts and providers, developers, and other key actors to strengthen implementation of the Plan and assist public housing residents overcome barriers to opportunity. In 2011, The Partnership announced that it would sunset in 2012.

Impetus for The Partnership came initially from the president of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, in concert with Chicago Housing Authority leadership, the mayor, and The Chicago Community Trust (Chicago's community foundation), where it was structured as a donor-advised fund.

The Partnership's legacy is evident in two reinforcing ways. First, it has supported the goals of the Plan for Transformation and increased effective workforce options for public housing residents. Secondly, it has built civic capacity by demonstrating how a group of leaders can work across sectors and institutions to address tough social, economic and political problems and produce concrete results. Taken together these two send a clear and compelling message that it is not only possible for a civic intermediary to make a real difference against considerable odds, but the willingness and confidence to do so again on another public issue can also become part of a city's considerable knowledge base and civic capital.

Several aspects of The Partnership's story have particular significance for others looking to take on similar challenges and design and operate a civic intermediary of their own. These include:

- + **Craft a strategic focus, and stick to it.**
Success comes from choosing something that seems very important, do-able, and for which the intermediary and its likely resources and capacity are well positioned.
- + **Alignment is essential and must be a continuous priority.**
The leadership of effective intermediaries appears to be both pragmatic and opportunistic in pursuit of alignment, constantly on the lookout for new and more effective ways to bring resources, commitments and influence to bear in support of its agenda.
- + **Community foundations are natural homes for this kind of work.**
Community foundations are set up to attract and disburse funds to achieve a wide array of public purposes. Hosting a civic intermediary can build their capacity and credibility for taking on these kinds of challenges in the future.
- + **The intermediary must fit its context.**
Strategies, actions and governance structures must fit the specific contexts within which civic intermediaries work. As conditions change, strategies, actions and governance may need to adapt.
- + **A sense of urgency is very important.**
Urgency helps drive the work. Where a sense of urgency is not present, it may need to be created. Being time-limited, as in The Partnership's case, can heighten a sense of urgency.
- + **Leveraging resources, commitments and influence is important to create impact.**
A capable, strategic and well-run intermediary leverages key resources through its clear and widely communicated vision and goals, and through the plausibility of its strategies. Leveraging should reinforce the intermediary's focus and strategy rather than challenge or erode it. Thus, leveraging opportunities should not only be evaluated in terms of how much and from whom the resources come, but they also must be understood as a way of reinforcing strategy and strengthening capacity for achieving the chosen goals.

History and Accomplishments

During the 1990s the dire conditions facing residents of high-rise public housing developments in Chicago became emblematic of failed public housing policy that concentrated and isolated the poor. In 1995, the federal government took over the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and then returned control three years later to Mayor Richard M. Daley and a new management team at CHA. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development approved the Plan for Transformation, a \$1.6 billion effort to tear down about 14,000 high-rise public housing units and provide 25,000 new or updated homes for low-income families and seniors. A key component of CHA's Plan was to build healthy mixed-income communities where distressed public housing once stood.

The Plan for Transformation was the most ambitious reconstruction of public housing ever launched in this country. In an environment of contentious debate about public housing and informed skepticism about CHA's own capacity, many questions surrounded its launch: would demolished units really be replaced and every resident's right of return be honored? Would market-rate homeowners be attracted to the proposed new mixed-income developments? Would these new communities thrive economically and socially? Most importantly, would poor residents of Chicago be better off?

It was in this context that The Partnership for New Communities was established in 2001. Impetus for The Partnership came initially from the president of The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, in concert with CHA leadership, the mayor, and The Chicago Community Trust (Chicago's community foundation), where it was structured as a donor advised fund.

In an environment of contentious debate about public housing and informed skepticism about CHA's own capacity, The Partnership for New Communities was established in 2001.

The Partnership was envisioned as a time-limited civic intermediary whose mission was to:

- Support the goals of Chicago's Plan for Transformation of public housing;
- Stimulate large-scale economic revitalization of some of Chicago's most distressed neighborhoods;
- Promote the development of strong institutions that enrich community life and sustain mixed-income diversity; and
- Invest in the human potential of community residents.

Guided by a 15-member Advisory Committee of business, civic and foundation leaders, The Partnership was led by three co-chairs: the presidents of the MacArthur Foundation and The Chicago Community Trust, and a prominent Chicago business leader who at the time was serving as Senior Advisor to the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools. The diverse Advisory Committee included corporate leaders, the presidents of two universities, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, CHA's CEO, and other key civic and philanthropic leaders.

In translating its broad mission into specific activities and defining its niche within the larger political and organizational landscape, The Partnership made some initial grants in 2001 but began full-scale operation in 2003 when it hired its first (and only) executive director. The Partnership's agenda and associated grantmaking then evolved along two lines: workforce development and neighborhood development, which consisted of economic revitalization and community-building strategies largely focused in a few of those neighborhoods most affected by public housing transformation. With a fundraising goal of \$15 million, The Partnership actually raised over \$19 million in both general and program support from a range of foundations and corporations and a one-time grant from the State of Illinois for Opportunity Chicago, a major workforce development initiative.

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Workforce development. Early on, The Partnership recognized the central role of employment in helping public housing residents become economically self-sufficient and in creating strong communities. Indeed, criteria at most of the mixed-income sites required that residents be employed or engaged in services to help them meet that requirement of occupancy. Opportunity Chicago, a five-year initiative (2006-2010), evolved out of The Partnership's early employment-related work and enabled The Partnership to focus its energy and resources on key workforce issues. Two years into the initiative, the CHA issued a work requirement for all public housing residents (with some exceptions, such as age and disability), adding further urgency to the need to create and test new approaches for disadvantaged job seekers. The challenges in doing so were daunting. Many residents had limited or no experience in the labor force and low literacy skills. The relevant public agencies charged with serving this population—CHA, human service and workforce agencies—had not coordinated their services effectively in the past, nor had their different funding streams been easily coordinated. Few well-tested workforce models existed that were responsive to public housing residents' strengths and challenges. CHA and all its partners would need to work together in very different ways to produce different kinds of results at a scale that could make a difference for a large number of low-income residents.

After a series of modest initial grants in support of employment and training, Opportunity Chicago emerged as a \$27.5 million collaborative of government agencies, foundations, non-profit organizations and employers committed to helping connect 5,000 public housing residents to jobs through skills training and education. The Partnership and its Opportunity Chicago collaborators combined private and public funds in a pool that could respond quickly and flexibly to innovations that were ineligible for the City's public workforce development funds.

The Partnership developed a creative structure for operating Opportunity Chicago. The Chicago Jobs Council managed the initiative and facilitated collaboration among all the parties. A Strategic Advisers Group that included leaders from key city and state agencies, private foundations and non-profit organizations, met regularly to develop the initiative's strategy, draw on best practices and test new approaches, measure and learn from both failures and successes, and advocate for public policy and systems change. An organizational culture and shared framework focused on innovation and data-driven decision-making created a platform for experimentation and generated significant learning and results in such program areas as transitional jobs, industry-specific training, and contextualized literacy and bridge programs.

As of early 2011, more than 6,000 individuals prepared for and found work through Opportunity Chicago. Significant progress has also been made in improving inter-agency coordination, prioritizing disadvantaged populations, and institutionalizing promising practices and programs.

The evaluation, which is being conducted by the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago (CUED) and Abt Associates, will be complete at the end of 2011.²

Early on, The Partnership recognized the central role of employment in helping public housing residents become economically self-sufficient and in creating strong communities. Few well-tested workforce models existed that were responsive to public housing residents' strengths and challenges.

In **2006**, Opportunity Chicago committed to helping connect **5,000** public housing residents to jobs through skills training and education in 5 years.



As of early **2011**, Opportunity Chicago exceeded its job placement goal, linking thousands of residents with quality employment.

Neighborhood development was identified as a complementary strategy for creating economic opportunity in the Plan for Transformation's mixed-income developments and their surrounding neighborhoods.

Neighborhood development. Although it represents a much smaller portion of The Partnership's overall grantmaking budget than workforce development, neighborhood development was identified as a complementary strategy for creating economic opportunity in the Plan for Transformation's mixed-income developments and their surrounding neighborhoods. Many of these neighborhoods have experienced long-term disinvestment and lack the basic services and local businesses that characterize a vibrant economic base. The Partnership has made targeted, if modest, investments in a range of economic revitalization and community-building activities such as small businesses and commercial corridor development, the economic development work of local community development corporations, and neighborhood branding and marketing. Often this work has helped to position these neighborhoods and organizations as attractive opportunities for more significant outside investment.

Because the economic downturn occurred as many of the mixed-income developments were coming on line, it became clear that attracting market-rate homebuyers to the neighborhoods was going to be a slower process than originally anticipated. As a consequence, in 2008 The Partnership helped to design and promote a special initiative called Find Your Place in Chicago, an incentive program of \$10,000 in cash and other benefits for eligible buyers who purchase homes in one of the five new mixed-income developments. The Partnership and CHA consider this program a success in that it has supported the purchase of more than 100 homes and has helped to keep some modest development momentum going during the economy's most troubled years and slow recovery.



The Partnership's Interim Assessment and Current Status

The Partnership's long-term impact will depend on developments yet to come. CHA's Plan for Transformation was extended from 2010 to 2015, so its ultimate success is still in the works. The evaluation of Opportunity Chicago will be available by the end of 2011, but it will take additional time to assess how well its policy and system change recommendations get institutionalized into ongoing practice. Similarly, it will take years to understand the dynamic evolution of the mixed-income communities and the extent to which they become healthy, vital places in which children and families thrive.³

Nonetheless, in early 2011, The Partnership announced that it would begin winding down its operations and would complete work on its existing initiatives in 2012. It was always understood that The Partnership would be a time-limited endeavor with a sunset tied to successful implementation of the Plan and the various strategies The Partnership undertook to support it. As The Partnership's Advisory Committee and staff reviewed the status of this work, they determined that CHA was well positioned to complete the Plan. Now about eleven years into the Plan, with about 80 percent of the public housing units slated for construction or rehabilitation having been completed, the CHA has clearly made gains since The Partnership was launched. There is a broad consensus that it has become a more professional, competent and data-driven agency with increased credibility among local constituents and an enhanced reputation nationally. And while many challenges lie ahead for the neighborhoods and residents affected by the Plan, important strategies for enhancing economic opportunity have been forged and partners strengthened. As a result, The Partnership concluded that because the conditions that provided the rationale for its establishment in 2001 were sufficiently improved, it made sense to end its work.

The discussion of broad lessons learned that follows takes off from an assessment that The Partnership commissioned in 2008 to examine its performance. The goal was to assess both what The Partnership had accomplished and how well it had functioned as a leadership collaborative and vehicle for philanthropic and civic support. An excerpt from the Executive Summary captures the report's findings:⁴

The overall picture that emerges from the assessment is that of an organization that has earned widespread respect among relevant and diverse audiences. The Partnership's demonstrated capacity to get important things done and its ability to work in partnership with a range of public, private, and nonprofit actors are embodied in Opportunity Chicago. This initiative filled important workforce gaps for public housing residents, spurred innovation, helped build a shared data system, leveraged new partners and resources, and has begun to promote focused system change. Similar, if more modest, results characterize The Partnership's work in economic development and support for the goals of the Plan's mixed-income developments. To its credit, throughout its agenda, The Partnership has managed to maintain its independence and be a "critical friend" to CHA, as well as to the other systems and sectors with which it is working to create opportunities for public housing residents.

The overall picture that emerges from the assessment is that of an organization that has earned widespread respect among relevant and diverse audiences.

Nothing in our new 2011 interviews, involving some different people along with follow-up interviews from 2008, contradicted our previous assessment in fundamental ways. So both inform the discussion that follows. The focus here is less on capturing The Partnership's specific accomplishments and challenges and more on highlighting what The Partnership learned from its ten-year experience as a civic intermediary and what it can contribute to the fields of community development, public policy and philanthropy.

Designing and Operating Effective Civic Intermediaries: Questions to Consider

Constituting a new civic intermediary requires addressing a host of strategic design and operating questions: who should be a member, how should the group be structured, what resources will it need to accomplish its mission over what period of time, where should it be housed, and so forth. The answers to these questions depend on the core mission of the group and the community context in which it is being established, as well as idiosyncratic factors like who steps forward to lead the group. In this section, we identify some of these questions and the key choices that appear critical to The Partnership's success given its particular context and mission. Based on what we read and what we heard in our interviews, these observations cover how The Partnership was structured and operated as an intermediary, how it defined its strategic niche, how it stimulated innovative and improved practice, and how it worked to create policy and system change.

1. Who should be engaged?

Establishing an effective civic leadership group requires weighing a number of desirable qualities that potential members can bring: expertise and experience, visibility and reputation, networks and constituencies, personality and commitment/energy, and so forth. The Partnership's 15-member Advisory Committee included a mix of civic, business, and philanthropic leaders, all of whom had demonstrated a willingness to engage with complex economic and social problems in the past. The broad consensus from our interviews was that The Partnership got the right number and kinds of people for the tasks involved. One member noted that compared to another board he was on that had *"more people with money and political clout, The Partnership had the right people from different sectors who were engaged, rather than it just being show and tell, and it was small enough in size to really get something done."* Another said that The Partnership *"did not waste their time, talent, and commitment...They were tapped for things they can do, enjoyed that, saw the real time problem solving...In sum, they owned it, they were valued and valued each other."*

Frequently civic enterprises such as The Partnership aim to be representative and inclusive but then struggle with how to move the agenda forward with a large group. As one observer noted: *"People feel compelled to do this big democratic thing with everybody at the table. But those tables can get too big and too clunky. It is important to get something done."* The Partnership resolved this challenge by constituting a relatively small though diverse Advisory Committee at the same time that it created several other tables at which to engage other stakeholders. An 18-member Strategic Advisers Group guided the work of Opportunity Chicago. Then there was an informal colleagues group that met regularly with Partnership staff to provide valuable problem-solving assistance, a sounding board for ideas, and a useful vehicle for debriefing from key meetings and coordinating strategies. Finally, short-term ad hoc groups convened for specific tasks like designing Find Your Place in Chicago or finding ways to mute the impact of the slowing economy on the mixed-income community developments.

To retain its legitimacy with public housing residents, both Partnership staff and Advisory Group members had various meetings with tenant group leaders and put a face on The Partnership's work and accomplishments along the way. The Partnership's legitimacy was also boosted by the participation of people like the Cardinal, who was seen as a voice for the interests of low-income people in general.

By convening many tables, rather than one big representative one, The Partnership was able to benefit from the expertise and networks of numerous leaders from different sectors and perspectives. Over time many of these people became champions for the work, helping Partnership staff keep their finger on the pulse of evolving political issues and creating further momentum and support for its agenda in different networks and communities.⁵ For other purposes, such as developing a neighborhood or city plan, a more complete array of interests and people might be a near necessity if those plans are to have legitimacy. But in this case, for these purposes, the mix seemed just about right.

2.

Should the intermediary be time-limited?

Some intermediaries are created to add permanent capacity to the civic landscape—a local public education fund, an intermediary designed to improve local business districts or a community coalition charged with promoting healthy neighborhoods. Others, like The Partnership, are created to address a particular issue or carry out a bounded task. Clearly the decision about whether to be permanent or time-limited depends on the group's mission within the particular civic context in which it is being established. The Partnership's experience, however, is consistent with reports from others about the benefits of a time-limited enterprise.⁶

“The time limited nature creates a sense of urgency and protects against an ‘endless annuity’ approach.”

Although organizers did not specify an exact timeline at the outset, it was common understanding that The Partnership would be a time-limited endeavor tied to the Plan for Transformation (which was originally ten years and later extended to fifteen years). Opportunity Chicago had a five-year timeline from the start. Interviewees highlighted a number of ways in which the time limits served the intermediary well:

It helped the group raise funds because, as one interviewee said, “funders here are leery of new things that keep popping up and won't die. It really makes a difference if it's time-limited — you set goals, achieve them, get out...” A funder put it this way: “The time limited nature creates a sense of urgency and protects against an ‘endless annuity’ approach.” It also means

that The Partnership was not perceived as a long-term competitor for ongoing support that might otherwise go to others.

Besides creating a sense of urgency, the timeline also helped members of Opportunity Chicago's Strategic Advisors Group to step outside their natural competition for resources and, for the first time for many, dig deep into a shared agenda. One funder notes, “There was something at stake, and a focus. They had to play nice but not forever. The declared time limit did help...” The group developed a serious collective problem-solving culture that rewarded candor and immediate results over issues of status and credit—it was in everyone's interests that the group succeeded.

The challenge of being time-limited, of course, is thinking from the start how to sustain the progress made during the life of the group.

3.

What sort of institution provides a good “home” for a civic intermediary?

A new civic intermediary is faced with two choices regarding an institutional home: it can become a new nonprofit organization, or it can affiliate in some way with an existing public or private entity. The Partnership took the latter route and found a hospitable home as a donor advised fund at The Chicago Community Trust. Community foundations around the country are increasingly serving in this type of community leadership role, using their convening, catalyzing, and connecting functions to engage communities in a finding new ways to address critical issues and assemble the resources to implement solutions.⁷

Using the Trust as a home meant that The Partnership did not have to set up a host of administrative supports and procedures but was able to draw upon the Trust’s reputation and networks. Observers noted that the high-powered Advisory Committee ensured that The Partnership helped maintain its independence, while putting on the “coat of problem-solver” helped The Partnership defuse some of the heated debate and public critique that had surrounded the CHA historically.

Trust leadership describes its experience with The Partnership as being an important opportunity to demonstrate how a major cross-sector collaborative venture could work, and it helped the foundation develop the know-how and confidence to integrate these kinds of public interest ventures into its ongoing structure and practice. In fact, this experience helped position the Trust to play a central role in the 2009-2010 Recovery Partnership, a vehicle for helping the City secure and distribute \$2.2 billion in federal grants through engagement of over 350 people from 100 public and private organizations in the city.⁸ The possible downsides for the Trust of such ventures, largely reputational risk or confusion among or competition for donors, did not materialize with The Partnership. After working out some initial administrative procedures, all parties, as well as our interviewees, defined the fit as excellent.

Using The Chicago Community Trust as a home meant that The Partnership did not have to set up a host of administrative supports and procedures but was able to draw upon the Trust’s reputation and networks.

4.

How does a civic intermediary raise and disburse funds effectively?

The Partnership did not define itself as a traditional funder collaborative but instead adopted a hybrid funding model that included both pooled and restricted funds, and both funders and those who contributed non-monetary resources.

The Partnership did not define itself as a traditional funder collaborative⁹ but instead adopted a hybrid funding model that included both pooled and restricted funds, and both funders and those who contributed non-monetary resources. This approach attracted funders who for a variety of reasons could only support particular projects like Opportunity Chicago. Although somewhat more challenging to manage, it also enabled The Partnership to engage a broader group of potential champions for the work, most of whom joined Opportunity Chicago's Strategic Advisors Group. Some interviewees were quick to point out, however, that the success of this kind of hybrid approach depends on a core group of funders who are willing to provide sufficient general operating support so that the intermediary has the flexibility to be a creative and nimble in its grantmaking and leadership activities.

The Partnership's impact was also enhanced because several foundations funded work that complemented its goals and extended its reach. For example, the MacArthur Foundation's support for LISC's New Communities Program, for capacity-building investment in CHA data systems, and for research examining community building in emerging mixed-income developments overlapped in at least three neighborhoods in which The Partnership had targeted investments.

Interviewees drew two other lessons from The Partnership's funding experience. First, many other factors besides money—sustained leadership, highly competent staff, focused goals and actionable strategies, quality implementation, independence and transparency, to name a few—affect the scale and sustainability of a civic intermediary's impact. Other big civic enterprises in Chicago (e.g., Renaissance 2010, a public education initiative that was launched with \$50 million a few years after The Partnership and has raised another \$50 million since then) had raised more money and received broader visibility. But many interviewees underscored how much The Partnership's small staff accomplished with relatively modest funds, averaging less than \$2 million annually over about a ten-year period. At no time did its staff number more than four; for most of its existence The Partnership had three staff people.

A second lesson reported by Partnership staff and Advisory Committee leadership is the challenge of generating national funding interest. The Partnership knew how to attract attention and leverage resources from diverse parties, both public and private. Its investment of \$5 million in Opportunity Chicago leveraged an additional **\$22.5** million from other sources, including \$5 million from the State of Illinois, \$450,000 from the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, \$690,000 in U.S. Department of Labor funding through Jobs for the Future and \$250,000 from Living Cities, a national funder collaborative. Partnership staff also knew how to communicate the value of the work and was invited to present at numerous local and national conferences and policy briefings. But, as several interviewees noted, "*national funders are not going to pay for local services.*" Even when that local work is framed in terms of a larger demonstration about public housing, workforce, or civic collaboratives, The Partnership found it difficult to identify national funders with a willingness to commit dollars. This is not atypical for a place-based venture like The Partnership but underscores the need for realistic expectations regarding national support.

5.

What organizational and leadership capacities are particularly important for a civic intermediary?

Intermediaries by definition mediate the goals and interests of multiple actors to get something done.¹⁰ The Partnership's agenda, finding ways to support the goals of the Plan for Transformation, necessarily involved people and organizations across sectors, government agencies, nonprofit providers, employers, foundations, civic organizations, housing developers, advocacy groups, public housing residents associations, and so forth. The Partnership aimed to do its work and interact with all these actors, as well as the general public, in a way that drew attention to and increased collective understanding about public housing residents and their communities. In the process, it created a common framework that provided clarity about goals and strategy and a common language. Both of these are critically important, especially when working across sectors.¹¹ And when shared as a joint endeavor and commitment, help translate and reinforce the work.

The Partnership aimed to do its work and interact with all these actors, as well as the general public, in a way that drew attention to and increased collective understanding about public housing residents and their communities.

Interviewees uniformly characterize The Partnership as *"implementing with excellence."* Although intermediaries vary significantly in function and roles, the more complex the tasks, the more actors involved and the longer their timelines, the more critical are certain operating capacities and principles: clarity regarding goals, roles, decision-making and accountabilities; a tone of mutual respect, transparency and shared risk taking; effective management and administrative functions; and ability to learn and adapt over time. In addition, two organizational capacities were repeatedly identified by interviewees as particularly important to their favorable assessment of The Partnership: staff leadership and effective communications.

Highly competent and respected staff. The Partnership's staff is commonly viewed as highly focused and consistently effective in managing the many relationships needed to get the work done. As one observer noted, staff spends considerable time on relationships that need *"tending, updating, reassurance, persuasion, listening, tough or soft talk."* Staff leadership was relentless in the pursuit of results, meeting with Advisory Committee members and others before and after meetings, providing consistent follow up, mediating differences and helping key players find ways of moving forward together. This means *"setting tables, but not orchestrating them;" "being gentle but firm, welcoming yet assertive"* and *"never losing focus or dropping the ball."*

Unlike some grantmakers who have difficulty addressing the power dynamics that often accompany funding relationships, Partnership staff operated in a flexible and transparent way that grantees perceived as helpful. Each grant agreement letter clearly spells out The Partnership's expectation for the grantee, its commitment to the grantee in terms of explicit, non-grant support, and the specific ways in which each party pledges to be a *"communicative and collaborative partner."* One grantee noted that *"it is hard to be a peer or partner and a funder who has to demand accountability: The Partnership does it well, however."* Another reports that Partnership staff *"listen, probe, prepare, think, and push us in good ways."*

Effective communications. Like other intermediaries, The Partnership was challenged to develop both an internal communications strategy to keep all of the players and partners updated and in the loop and a broader public communications strategy to generate support for the Plan for Transformation. The Partnership's reputation is strong on both counts. Many interviewees refer to a style that conveys respect and clarity and demonstrates ability to listen and problem-solve rather than dictate. It is rare that an organization with power and money, as well as a "change" agenda, ends up generating such widespread regard among so many diverse parties. One funder offered a similar assessment of The Partnership's external communications: *"They have had excellent communication work. It has been frequent, clear, and informative. It has also been educational, by which I mean they have taught people about public housing residents and communities, and I think they have really added a lot of knowledge in the face of prejudice and just over-generalizations."*

An additional benefit of effective communications is keeping stakeholders aligned in terms of what is being done, how it is being done, and what progress looks like. Over time, some stakeholders tend to wander or lose focus, even if they are directly involved in organizational governance, so communications can do important work both inside and outside the intermediary.



How should the intermediary define its strategic niche?

In developing strategy, an intermediary must strike a balance between having a compelling vision and being realistic. Many seem to overstate what they can or want to achieve, thus setting up a predictable pattern of over-promising followed by under-performing. In the case of The Partnership, however, it is clear that this is not what happened. It defined its strategy wisely, and realistically. As importantly, it communicated this vision and action plan in a clear and consistent way, thus keeping everyone on task while helping to control expectations. Most people we interviewed, in fact, thought it had achieved more than they had expected.

Part of the attraction for people being asked to get directly involved was that they could join in the strategy development themselves.

When the Partnership began, its strategy was not pre-determined. Indeed, part of the attraction for people being asked to get directly involved was that they could join in the strategy development themselves. Once discussion began, a number of factors were at play in deciding what to do. Paramount among them was the question of what would contribute the most to the Plan and its overall goals. This translated into consideration of what would help the prospects of public housing residents, which quickly led to employment as a key factor for residents and their families. One foundation staff person directly involved in early strategy development recalls that the *"challenge... was to figure out what to do without getting caught taking on something too big, or too expensive...It gradually got settled by a process of elimination that the main issue facing people who wanted to return to these new mixed-income developments was going to be employment."* In addition to employment,

there was interest in providing support for local economic activity in the areas surrounding the new mixed-income developments called for by the CHA's Plan – along with informed caution from advisors about whether The Partnership was going to be able to do that well.

Another concern was about independence. The Partnership wanted to work with but not under the control of the CHA and Mayor. Since the Plan for Transformation had already been announced, The Partnership didn't have to invent an entirely new agenda. Rather, it just had to figure out how to be supportive of the Plan's goals, and especially how to improve the prospects for public housing residents.

Some defined the employment problem as being about "gaps" between programs, and inconsistent performance by service providers. Others thought that the more basic problem was that the "hardest to employ" were simply no one's priority. Thus, one element of the strategy was to put the hardest to employ firmly on the agenda, and further, to emphasize the challenges and realities that public housing residents, in particular, face. Second, innovative programs to serve them would be sought out, or created.

The Partnership had to be mindful that it was entering a complicated and crowded field, with many long-standing programs and professional interests. It would not be easy to enter. It did not come on the scene with a self-assured critique or agenda. It did not threaten to impose its will on others, as many feared at the outset. Perhaps most importantly, it did not dismiss or overlook good practice or strong partners that could be found in the workforce system as it operated in the city in 2001. One long-time neighborhood development leader observed of The Partnership's approach that it showed him, and others, "*That you can really enter the field and make a difference, but to do that you have to be clear, and you have to be consistent.*"

The Partnership had to be mindful that it was entering a complicated and crowded field, with many long-standing programs and professional interests.

"The biggest lesson was that the solution cannot be imposed. It must percolate up."

Thus, how it treated others was part of its strategy. While the Partnership's Advisory Committee met and discussed options, staff listened. Wisely, they consulted directly with a variety of practitioners, policy makers and program analysts. Over time, they slowly built relationships, trust and working knowledge. They kept people informed about plans and progress. The decision to work with rather than against the system was very important because it also allowed The Partnership to feature improved performance, better data and accountability as the work unfolded. One Advisory Committee member noted, "*The biggest lesson...was that the solution cannot be imposed. It must percolate up. If I have power, (providers) will do what they must do to comply but it won't build their capacity to solve problems.*"

In sum, The Partnership chose an important, relevant focus for its work. It didn't overreach. It began by consulting with and learning from the field, a process it became known for and through which it was able to find capable allies. It identified and built on assets, and in so doing demonstrated it was more interested in getting results than anything else.

7.

How does a civic intermediary stimulate innovative and improved practice?

“Their discussions have been honest. People were invited to offer ideas, and critiques. Those of us with some experience on certain issues were encouraged to express ourselves, and to say what we thought.”

Once employment was chosen as their focus, The Partnership searched for activity and organizations to support – to find good practice. This search was guided by the question of whether groups served or were willing to serve public housing residents. It named its target goals, and found some realistic ways to pursue them. Sometimes they seeded new efforts, sometimes they helped expand existing programs with a track record. An example of the latter was contextualized literacy programs. Examples of new efforts included sector strategies around manufacturing, hospitality and retail, health care and green jobs.

For those getting Partnership support, it meant a focus on results, as well as a chance to experiment and then learn. They were told, in effect, “Do what it takes, and tell us what happens.” Rather than promoting some “model” that all programs are expected to pursue, The Partnership’s approach asked what works best, for whom, and under what conditions. Once again, practitioners placed high value on this way of operating.

Another part of The Partnership’s approach to better practice was the creation of honest, constructive forums. Many of its meetings, including those of its Advisory Committee, Strategic Advisors, and even informal “colleagues group,” became forums for discussing and trying out ideas, reporting on progress, and getting serious about results. Indeed, we heard from CHA and other institutional leaders how meetings with The Partnership’s Advisory Committee and staff became “serious” moments. One knowledgeable funder of workforce programs observed, *“Their discussions have been honest. People were invited to offer ideas, and critiques. Those of us with some experience on certain issues were encouraged to express ourselves, and to say what we thought...”*

People took their encounters with The Partnership very seriously, and believe these improved their own thinking and ability to communicate with others about the realities of their agency, organization or work. For this learning cycle to be robust, mistakes and shortcomings must be identified and discussed for innovation to be turned into progress, or program improvement.

Partnership staff report that these discussions were *“focused and constructive, but could be tough... People would get criticized and challenged, and would listen, and not get too defensive. And just as important, all that stayed at the table. It kept being emphasized that all this needed to be kept at that table.”* These discussions, along with improved and timely data, trust among participants, and an attitude of constructive criticism and a focus on results that count, contributed to an environment within which people could genuinely adapt and learn. These conditions represent important capacities that must be built or created, and once found, carefully maintained.

8.

How does a civic intermediary work to create policy and system change?

It is worth noting that system change was not part of the initial language for The Partnership, and only emerged as evidence about the impact of some of its grant-making emerged, most notably through Opportunity Chicago. This is consistent with the observation that strong, well-timed system change must emerge from or grow directly out of practice and experience. Furthermore, it is an on-going process, not a one-time campaign or event. It requires relationships and credibility of the kind described above. Often it grows, and builds on initial gains. Other times it responds to a crisis, or seizes on a moment of public attention or even outcry. New leadership “at the top” can also usher in real change.

In this case, these gains might include better or different programs, or programs that make it a priority to serve the hard-to-employ. It also builds on better information and data about just what, exactly, are the key things to do. But if these changes cost too much, or disrupt the day-to-day status quo of frontline workers, they may be resisted or slow to be adopted as new routines. Pushing change requires strong leadership and follow-through by top leaders, as well as support by mid-level managers and supervisors. Many believe they can wait out proposed system and policy change, thus undercutting the likelihood that changes will become permanent. If not supported through day-to-day supervision, workplace rules and incentives, and professional mindsets, system change will simply not take hold.

Here, for example, it has meant a great deal that Mayor Daley cared about the Plan and worked in support of its goals. He spoke about its importance early and often, which in turn sent a message – it put people on notice. One fundamental system change that The Partnership clearly aided was the transformation of the CHA. Among knowledgeable insiders, as well as policy and political figures, the change in the agency has been dramatic, a steady improvement in both CHA practice so that it is now possible to view it as a more professional, well-managed organization.

A primary achievement of The Partnership has been to demonstrate what can be achieved through better coordination and integration of programs and especially of “funding streams.” As one Advisory Committee Co-Chair noted, the results show that, *“if you can coordinate these workforce resources and programs with focused efforts, the outputs can be really big (so much bigger than any other effort around)... There are no malignant forces against this change but there is the natural tendency for all of them to want to do their own thing.”*

“There are no malignant forces against this change but there is the natural tendency for all of them to want to do their own thing.”

Another element of system change here is the commitment to better use public data about performance. This commitment must be ongoing, but there is clearly an opening and momentum as a result of The Partnership's work and approach. One high-level CHA staff person observed about the many changes it has made, *"We will sustain the changes ...because we have seen the impact."*

Having evidence about results changes the conversation, and enables inside champions of change to make a stronger case.

Similarly, workforce policy and programs in Chicago now take public housing residents more seriously than before. This has led to new or expanded programs, such as transitional jobs and contextualized literacy, as well as new strategies, such as sector employment, that appear to have a greater foothold now and have extended their reach to help low-skilled Chicagoans who do not reside in public housing, as well as those who do. The point is not that these are final answers, but that they are now considered viable and even necessary options, and thus should be funded as promising and then tracked to see if and how well they actually work.

In the current tax and budget climate, the biggest threat to these (and other) system changes and policy gains is cost. A second barrier is the natural resistance from current leadership and practitioners to changes that often re-emerges and pushes back after a period of initial hope and early attempts at implementation.

*"We will sustain the changes ...
because we have seen the impact."*



The Partnership's Significance for Others

The Partnership's experience demonstrates the powerful role that a civic intermediary can play in addressing significant community problems and accomplishing lasting community improvements. The Partnership took on a contentious issue, defined a clear set of goals and actionable strategies, engaged relevant players across sectors and constituencies, and implemented with excellence. Key to this excellence was the commitment to understand the context and historical moment within which it operated. It was willing and able to listen; flexibly invest its time, energy and money; and maintain a nimble style that put a premium on learning and adaptation, trying new ways of doing things and adjusting strategies based on intentional feedback about results.¹²

People acting elsewhere and informed observers might reasonably ask of The Partnership and its story, "What's so new about all this?" This is a fair question. The Partnership is really a story of doing very well what we all know needs to be done but rarely is – and adding in some creativity along the way. It is thus not so much a story about novelty as it is about effective implementation of a smart strategy – with focus, flexibility and especially strong follow-through.

Several aspects of The Partnership's story appear to us as having particular significance for others who are looking to take on similar challenges and design and operate a civic intermediary of their own.

Craft a strategic focus, and stick to it.

Effective civic intermediaries must have a focus within the overall goals of their work. They cannot be everywhere, so they should not try to be. Instead, success comes from choosing something that seems very important, do-able, and for which the intermediary and its likely resources and capacity are well positioned.

Over time, there may be strong pressures to expand or blur the focus so that others can find their way in. Although this might be perceived as a compliment, if things are going well, or a criticism if things take longer than expected to get going or slow to get traction, tampering with the focus can be a threat to eventual, real impact.

Alignment is essential and must be a continuous priority.

A core function of an intermediary is to better align disparate interests and resources. Creating and reinforcing a shared strategic vision is one of the keys to this work. This means that programs, practitioners, funding streams and policies that typically operate independently or even at cross-purposes must be coordinated.¹³ This takes hard work and trusting relationships, especially after that vision has initially been created.

Work on alignment must occur internally among the staff, board and advisors, as well as among the various implementing partners and program providers that help to carry out the strategy. It must also take place externally among those who share an interest and even commitment to the work and its goals in the wider context of institutional, professional, political and economic power within

Alignment is not a one-time event; it must be done continuously as circumstances change, barriers develop, and opportunities appear.

which the work plays out. Furthermore, alignment is not a one-time event; it must be done continuously as circumstances change, barriers develop, and opportunities appear. The leadership of effective intermediaries like The Partnership appears to be both pragmatic and opportunistic in pursuit of alignment, constantly on the lookout for new and more effective ways to bring resources, commitments and influence to bear in support of its agenda.

Intermediaries that are also funder collaboratives can grow future cooperation as well as investments among funders who may not be accustomed to working together. Creation of a coherent plan, with goals, operating and outcome principles, and key strategies, helps funders better structure their decisions and provide accountability. This can lead to continued and expanded investment.¹⁴

Community foundations are natural homes for this kind of work.

Community foundations are set up to attract and disburse funds to achieve a wide array of public purposes. Hosting a civic intermediary can build their capacity and credibility for taking on these kinds of challenges in the future, as illustrated in The Chicago Community Trust's case. This work takes practice, and so it benefits the community if particular institutions invest in getting better at it.

This does not mean that a given community foundation or other host institution should become the only or favorite choice when a home for the next civic intermediary is sought. Indeed, each opportunity must be understood carefully in terms of the goals, challenges and likely resistance inherent in each of them. Rather, it means that strong communities require institutions that are willing and able to take on tough but do-able jobs on behalf of community-wide benefits. This combination of capacity and will, once created, must be used to be lasting. Both can erode through disuse as much as expand through appropriate and timely use.

The intermediary must fit its context.

Strategies, actions and governance structures must be developed that fit the specific contexts within which these civic intermediaries work. As conditions change, the strategies, actions and governance may have to be adapted. Further, the extended nature of the work puts a premium on the intermediary's capacity to adapt to change in key leaders, (e.g., there were three CHA CEOs during this time) as well as to larger contextual forces, such as the recession, while maintaining its original vision and focus.

Most contexts are full of interests that self-segregate themselves into tables that are in fact too narrow to tackle complex problems. An intermediary can make sure that key decision makers are at some of the tables it sets or joins. These decision makers might be policy makers, practitioners, analysts, or advocates. Thus, an effective intermediary will look around and make informed judgments about what is missing or needs attention. It will join and help shape existing tables and discussion relevant to its mission, as well as create new forums and frameworks for bridging these policy and problem-solving gaps. This is a form of alignment, as discussed above, but it is also an example of trying to fit the work as it unfolds to the particular context and historical moment within which it operates.



A sense of urgency is very important.

Urgency helps drive the work. If conditions present this urgency naturally, as through an economic downturn or natural disaster, or as in key leadership that strongly engages the community (either positively or negatively), this sense of urgency will be compelling and can be built upon and used to the advantage of the intermediary and its work.

Where a sense of urgency is not present, it may need to be created. Many times, this will not be easy, and can easily absorb precious time, energy and money at the outset of the work and, in effect, undermine the possibility for eventual success. Thus, sometimes conditions are not conducive enough for even a well-planned civic intermediary to emerge and flourish.

A sense of urgency remains important once the work gets going, and may be even harder to generate if things are going well, or seem to be “under control.” Thus, having leaders that continue to talk it up, and who look for new and creative ways for others to contribute or join the effort, is very important. Being time-limited, as in The Partnership’s case, can also heighten a sense of urgency.

A sense of urgency may be even harder to generate if things are going well, or seem to be “under control.”



Leveraging resources, commitments and influence is important to create impact.

A capable, strategic and well-run intermediary leverages key resources through its clear and widely communicated vision and goals, and through the plausibility of its strategies. In many cases, this allows it to bring in others who can see clearly that doing something together makes sense. Being strategic on one’s own is typically less effective than figuring out how to do it in concert with others. This ethic of “better together” thus can serve to assemble significant, bigger commitments of resources and influence than might otherwise be the case.

At the same time, leveraging also allows for multiple, smaller and even tentative commitments. These might come from people who never consider doing this on their own, or who are even a bit skeptical of the goals, but can see the quality and focus of the effort, and are drawn in by the opportunity. They are then well positioned to learn and might later reconsider their own long-term commitments as funders, policy makers, or practitioners. The lesson here for the intermediary is finding a place for them and then listening, engaging and informing them. Even if they do not end up fully committed to the particular enterprise of the moment, they may be more interested in doing this kind of focused, strategic civic work down the road.

Leveraging should reinforce the intermediary’s focus and strategy rather than challenge or erode it. Thus, leveraging opportunities should not only be evaluated in terms of how much and from whom the resources come, but they also must be understood as a way of reinforcing strategy and strengthening capacity for achieving the chosen goals. For example, Partnership staff underscore the high value that unrestricted resources brought to their work, proving often to be more useful than larger but constraining commitments that are conditional or limit the intermediary’s ability to adapt its strategies to changing needs and opportunities.

In sum, The Partnership's legacy is evident in two different and reinforcing ways.

First, it has supported the goals of CHA's Plan for Transformation and increased effective workforce options for public housing residents and other low-income workers in Chicago.

Secondly, it has served to build civic capacity by demonstrating how a group of leaders can work across sectors and institutions to address tough social, economic and political problems and produce concrete results. Taken together these two send a clear and compelling message that it is not only possible for a civic intermediary to make a real difference against considerable odds, but the willingness and confidence to do so again on some other public issue can become part of the city's considerable knowledge base and civic capital.

Endnotes

- 1 Kania and Kramer (2011).
- 2 See www.thepartnershipfornewcommunities.org for CUED's earlier evaluation reports, as well as the 2010 publication, *A Partnership for Change: How Opportunity Chicago Helped Create New Workforce Pathways for Public Housing Residents*.
- 3 See, for example, MacArthur Foundation-supported research by Chaskin and Joseph (2011) on mixed-income developments.
- 4 Brown and Dewar (2009).
- 5 Stannard-Stockton (2010).
- 6 West (2010).
- 7 Hamilton, Parzen and Brown (2004); CF Leads & Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (2008).
- 8 Chicago Recovery Partnership (2010).
- 9 Hopkins (2005); Grantcraft (2009).
- 10 Briggs (2003); David (2007).
- 11 GrantCraft (2010).
- 12 Fulton, Kasper and Kibbe (2010).
- 13 Kubisch et al (2010).
- 14 Scott (2007).

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Appendix A: Interviews

Advisory Committee Members

Julia Stasch (Co-Chair), Vice President, U.S. Programs, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Terry Mazany (Co-Chair), President and CEO, The Chicago Community Trust
David Vitale (Co-Chair), Board President, Chicago Public Schools
Lewis Jordan, former CEO, Chicago Housing Authority
Donald Cooke, Senior Vice President, Philanthropy, McCormick Foundation
Terry Perucca, retired President, Bank of America, Illinois

Key Current and Former Staff at The Partnership, Chicago Housing Authority & MacArthur Foundation

Dena Al-Khatib, Program Officer, The Partnership for New Communities
Alaina Harkness, Program Officer, U.S. Programs, MacArthur Foundation
Maria Hibbs, Executive Director, The Partnership for New Communities
Linda Kaiser (CHA Liaison), Executive Vice President of Resident Services, Chicago Housing Authority
Susan Lloyd, Consultant, Lloyd Consulting (former MacArthur Foundation staff)
Spruiell White, former Senior Program Officer, MacArthur Foundation

Partnership Funders

Deborah Bennett, Senior Program Officer, Polk Bros. Foundation
Sharon Bush, Program Officer, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation
Fred Dedrick, Executive Director, National Fund for Workforce Solutions

Government Partners

Evelyn Diaz, CEO, Chicago Workforce Investment Council
Byron Zuidema, Regional Administrator, U.S. Department of Labor-Employment & Training Administration

Partnership Grantees

Joe Antolin, Executive Director, Heartland Human Care Services
Earnest Gates, Director, New Communities Program (NCP), Near West Side CDC
Bernita Johnson-Gabriel, Director, NCP, Quad Communities Development Corporation
Jennifer Keeling, Director of City Policy, Chicago Jobs Council
Kimary Lee, Project Manager, CUED/Abt, Center for Urban Economic Development at University of Illinois-Chicago
Michael Quinlan, MRRI Project Manager, Near West Side CDC
Robin Snyderman, Vice President of Community Development, Metropolitan Planning Council
Stephanie Sommers, Community Services Division Director, Association House of Chicago
Nik Theodore, Director & Assistant Professor, Center for Urban Economic Development at University of Illinois-Chicago
Joanna Trotter, Community Development Director, Metropolitan Planning Council

Others

Mark Joseph, Assistant Professor, Case Western Reserve University
Michael McAfee, Director, Promise Neighborhoods Institute
Valerie Piper, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, Chicago Department of Housing and Urban Development
Erika Poethig, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

PRUDENCE BROWN

Prudence Brown is an independent consultant based in New York City whose work focuses primarily on community change: how to understand and learn from it, and how to improve practice and policy to build communities that support children and families. She has designed, funded, evaluated and provided technical assistance to a range of community initiatives.

From 1992-2007 Prue worked at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago where she co-directed its Program on Philanthropy and Community Change, an effort to build knowledge and stimulate learning for foundations and their partners involved in community change. Before Chapin Hall, she served as Deputy Director of the Urban Poverty Program at the Ford Foundation and, before that, on the faculty at the School of Social Work at Columbia University. She holds a BA from the University of Chicago and a MSW and Ph.D. in Social Work and Psychology from the University of Michigan.

TOM DEWAR

Tom Dewar now lives in Baltimore and is Co-Director of the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change. Before that he taught international and community development at the Bologna Center of the School for Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University (2001-2007); served as Director of Evaluation for the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, Illinois (1998-2000); was Senior Project Associate at Rainbow Research in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and served on the faculty of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, (1974-1996.) He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Urban Policy from Northwestern University.

He has evaluated efforts to revitalize neighborhoods, re-integrate formerly institutionalized (and other labeled) people into local communities, provide targeted employment for lower skilled and less experienced workers, improve the integration of school and work, carry out peacemaking and conflict mediation, strengthen sustainable agriculture, and promote strong community organizing.