

Next Generation Community Revitalization: A Work in Progress

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Overview

A new wave of efforts designed to break the cycle of poverty and revitalize distressed communities is attracting attention and support from every segment of society. Prominent among these efforts are six emerging national networks: Building Sustainable Communities, Choice Neighborhoods, Promise Neighborhoods, Purpose Built Communities, Strive, and The Integration Initiative.

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The energy these initiatives—and others around the country—have unleashed is truly exciting. We see grounds for optimism about their potential to outperform their predecessors:

- They share a bias toward building on “what works”
- They explicitly embrace key management principles and practices
- They recognize that lasting change requires a robust civic infrastructure
- Policy makers in several key federal agencies are playing a new, and markedly different, role
- There is a strong, if dispersed and incomplete, body of knowledge and experience to draw on

At the same time, there are also significant risks—many structural and addressable—that could cause these efforts to founder and fail:

- Funding that is largely short-term, fragile, and opaque
- Leaders who are overstretched, with consistent gaps in organizational capacity and capabilities
- An uneven commitment to resident engagement
- Unrealistic expectations about how much can be accomplished how soon
- Limited access to what works—or shows promise of working—in critical program areas

- Silo-ed thinking, despite some important shared challenges, as initiatives pursue work and learning agendas separately from one another

Should this generation of efforts fail, today's positive momentum could quickly become tomorrow's disillusionment. For this work to take hold and grow, it will need the kind of credibility that comes from genuine success stories. Creating those success stories will require continued tenacity complemented by the management acumen to overcome a set of barriers that are consistent across these six initiatives: gaps in practical knowledge; painfully overstretched management teams; and plans that are insufficient to guide implementation.

Based on what we heard from people doing this work, their advisors and supports, and on what we know about the field's collective capacity to address those barriers, we believe some of the most useful next steps for maintaining momentum and strengthening the field would be to:

- Accelerate learning and the acquisition of practical know-how: by providing additional resources to deliver knowledge where tools and frameworks already exist; and by rapidly developing, prototyping and sharing new applied knowledge where definitive answers are not yet known or there may never be one "best" way
- Build stronger, deeper management teams at initiative sites and at the centers, including investing to develop cohorts of talented leaders
- Provide ongoing support and incentives for leaders at local sites to develop realistic operating plans that can be both funded and implemented

By dint of previous hard work or good fortune, there are some sites which have greater potential to deliver compelling results in the near term. National philanthropic leaders have a unique opportunity to help these sites break through as true success stories. Rather than "picking winners," an investment in these high potential sites would be an investment in the entire field.