



The Alliance – Advancing Community Development by Confronting Racism

The rapidly changing demographics of Greater Boston and of many of the urban centers throughout the state led the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Mass Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC), along with area CDCs, to begin working together in the early 1990's to find ways to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of CDC staffs – particularly at the mid- and senior levels. It had become apparent that neighborhoods in which community development corporations (CDCs) worked were becoming increasingly of color, yet the leadership of CDCs remained overwhelmingly white.

After more than a decade and a variety of programs and strategies later, more people of color occupy mid- and senior level positions within CDCs. However, the pace of change is slow and much

remains to be done, especially within senior management levels. The impetus of a community economic development project, undertaken by LISC program officer, Pam Jones, as part of her Master's program at Southern New Hampshire University, boosted LISC's and MACDC's efforts to a new level.

A number of studies and surveys of employment in Boston have confirmed the under representation of people of color (Asians, Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans) in leadership positions across the board – in the public sector, in corporate America and in nonprofits. However, few surveys have focused on CDCs, and none – to our knowledge – has looked at the *reasons* for the limited number of people of color in leadership positions within CDCs.

Focus Groups

In the spring of 2002, the Diversity and Human Capital Committee, a joint committee of MACDC and LISC, sponsored two focus groups to better understand the barriers to increasing the number of people of color in CDC management and leadership positions. We asked people of color who were currently working at or had previously worked for a CDC to choose what they believed to be the most important barriers.

"Racism/prejudice" was the most frequently mentioned barrier, with more than a third of the participants listing it as the most important barrier. This was followed by the "lack of support and/or mentors," chosen by 13%. Other significant barriers included the lack of education, i.e. a degree, the lack of career paths and salary levels.

In the fall of 2002, a survey of a diverse group of CDC staff was conducted to solicit their perceptions on the barriers to the recruitment and advancement of people of color in CDCs. Web-based surveys were sent to approximately 85 CDC staff members, again including several former staff members, in the Greater Boston area.

Nearly 50% responded, with many of their answers mirroring those from the focus groups.

Key survey findings were:

- Most CDC staff, both people of color and white people, agreed that the limited number of people of color in management positions within CDCs was a problem, if not a serious problem.
- Lack of knowledge about the community development field and CDCs in particular was a key barrier
- Discrimination – in the form of institutional racism and prejudice played a major role in limiting the number of people of color in management positions.
- Lack of support within CDCs and a lack of mentors were seen as barriers to advancement
- Sexism was not raised as a barrier even though 75% of the respondents were women

Not surprisingly, some of the differences in the survey responses of staff of color and white staff were striking. Most notably, 33% of the staff of color identified racism/prejudice as the most important reason, whereas only 13% of the white staff said that this issue was a reason. While 17% staff of color saw the lack of support as the most important reason, white staff did not raise this as an issue.

Executive Director Surveys and Interviews

Finally, CDC executive directors were asked to participate on two levels – six responded to the initial survey, which was then slightly revised and used with the above-mentioned staff. Ten executive directors were interviewed by members of the Diversity and Human Capital Committee during the spring of 2003.

Findings from the executive directors were wide-ranging. As with other CDC staff of color, executive directors of color raised similar issues pointing to racism – constantly having to “prove themselves,” facing “low expectations,” and, in some instances, lacking real power. Often, white executive directors saw these same dynamics being played out – admitting that “sometimes the role that power brokers play is patronizing, particularly in communities of color” and that “the system is heavily weighted against people of color.” At the same time, executive directors pointed to a number of other barriers, including the lack of support, the lack of career paths, pay, and a lack of knowledge about the community development field – to a large extent agreeing with focus group and survey respondents.

Examining the Findings

As the Diversity and Human Capital Committee began examining the findings, it was clear that solutions must be sought not simply at the CDC level, but at the sector level. Our approach had to be one that brought together the community development *field* and drew upon the collective wisdom and resources of our industry to seek common solutions.

A broad group of stakeholders from the community development field came together - under the banner of the Working Group to Transform the Face of Community Development in Massachusetts to review and challenge the findings and, using an approach called "appreciative inquiry," to help devise strategies to "create and sustain an environment which values and reflects, particularly within its leadership, the racial and cultural diversity of the communities in which we work."

During the course of four facilitated meetings, the Working Group – later renamed *The Alliance- Advancing Community Development by Confronting Racism* - articulated this vision for the community development field:

- As organizations, we are dynamic, open, welcoming, supportive, and participatory. We value, respect, and celebrate diversity. We encourage open, two-way communication and embrace different leadership styles and perspectives.
- All leaders within the community development movement (at the staff, board, and community levels) are committed, courageous, and supportive of diverse leadership. As a whole, the leadership reflects the communities in which we work and builds an open, respectful relationship with the community. Leaders actively recruit individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, races, and economic circumstances and set the tone for an inclusive, supportive organizational culture.
- Leaders and others within the community development movement acknowledge the existence of race and racism in our organizations and our communities, and demonstrate the will and the commitment to addressing the issues.
- Learning, teaching and mentoring are valued. Community development organizations create ongoing opportunities for learning and growth among staff, board, and residents at all levels. Current leaders demonstrate their commitment to learning by actively mentoring new leaders of color within the movement.
- The community development field is well known and is a career of choice for individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, races and economic circumstances. There are clear paths for advancement and people understand the skills and competencies needed to advance in the community development field.

Next Steps

The efforts of The Alliance are clearly only a beginning, but they demonstrate what we as a field can achieve by working together. The propositions give us an excellent starting point from which to build and achieve a shared vision for community development that will result in more vibrant, healthier, and engaged communities; stronger, more inclusive, productive and diverse organizations; and a more sustainable community development industry.

We hope that these findings will serve to challenge your thinking, engage you in dialogue and move you to action. We invite you - as a community development practitioner, funder, supporter, community resident, or other interested party - to review the data following this summary and to share your comments, insights and experience with us. And then, join us in transforming community development in Massachusetts!