



Homegrown partnerships that make a difference for youth

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive community change initiatives have attracted attention and resources in recent decades as a way to improve outcomes for young people through aligning local systems and services. They have yielded positive outcomes and useful and inspiring lessons. However, they have also resulted in local disillusionment and outcomes that fall short of their goals. This article suggests that more organic approaches, based on purpose-driven partnerships, are worth considering, especially for communities that are just starting to think about collaboration or that lack the resources for more ambitious system change attempts. The authors discuss four such partnerships and suggest that they offer an alternative, practical, sustainable approach to community change.

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Organizations serving young people and their families are frequently characterized as fragmented, bureaucratic, and inefficient. More specifically, they are described as being too often set up “to respond to categorically defined problems ...; rewarded for expensive institutional interventions instead of preventive... ones; geographically and culturally remote from those who need services; and evaluated on the basis of number of persons served or services provided, not on results” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995, p. 4). As a consequence, individuals facing multiple barriers to economic and social stability may never have access to all of the supports and opportunities for which they are eligible or that they need.

Efforts to address such system fragmentation are not new — going back (at least) to 19th century settlement houses (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007). These community-wide reform ventures attempt to improve lives through “systems-change work”, which optimally includes the residents who are most affected by fragmentation in decisions made about policies, practices, regulations, and funding. More practically, systems change efforts convene the people and organizations that care about the target population (such as poor people or young people) and/or the target issue (such as disengagement from school, adolescent pregnancy, or poverty) so they can collaborate for community improvement. Such endeavors are often referred to as comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs). Certain features are common to most CCIs: They “take a broad view of community problems ... engage all sectors of the community ... use long-term strategies ... build trust and forge common purpose ... [and] encourage

participatory decision-making” (CCI Tools for Federal Staff), including involving the people that these organizations and professionals are supposed to help.

Yet the outcomes of these ambitious, intentional efforts to transform, or at least improve, specific geographic areas and/or populations through community-wide collaboration and system reform have often been less than satisfactory (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Brown & Fiester, 2007; Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Kadushin, Lindholm, Ryan, Brodsky, & Saxe, 2005; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). The literature suggests a number of challenges that may help to explain these disappointing outcomes, including the inability of a single community to conquer poverty and related struggles; the realities of power imbalances in the community; the issue of whom to convene; the complexity of the work; and the tendency to hang on to initial ideas about solutions (see, e.g., Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Brown & Fiester, 2007; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Gibson, Smyth, Nayowith, & Zaff, 2013; Kadushin et al., 2005; Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013). The current article uses a multi-case study methodology to explore three CCIs that have managed to avoid these pitfalls and achieve substantive, positive outcomes; in this case, workforce development outcomes.

A community may be able to mitigate, but cannot solve, the many interrelated challenges related to poverty. These include but are not limited to substandard housing; food scarcity; unemployment, underemployment, and lack of family-sustaining jobs; underperforming schools and family support systems; second-rate health care; and inadequate transportation systems. As a whole, such issues are out of the control of a single community, with structural factors arising from regional, national, and even international forces. Even the most effective attempts to make local systems work better are unlikely to successfully

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address many of these issues comprehensively (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Greenberg, Williams, Karlstrom, Quiroz-Becerra, & Festen, 2014; International Youth Foundation, 2012; Marris & Rein, 1967).

Similarly, CCIs often fail to fully acknowledge issues of power as well as social, economic, racial, ethnic, and class divisions even though “the problems of the poor are deeply embedded in the class character of American society” (Stone, n.d., p. 2). CCIs that do not appreciate these issues will fall short of their potential (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006). Even when they explicitly recognize them, community members (and their funders) may be ill equipped to challenge power relations (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Kadushin et al., 2005). As one CCI veteran put it, “Some [of our work for change] has just made entrenched power more sophisticated about how not to share that power” (Center for Youth and Communities, 2001, p. 27).

Another CCI challenge is the question of who will participate. One common CCI goal is to convene everyone involved with the target population and/or issue. However, researchers have noted that assembling such a broad-based group “tends to bring together too many players with contradictory and often irreconcilable goals” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 270). Differences in size, form, style, values, language, resources, power, and perspectives among participating organizations can contribute to communication gaps and worse. These kinds of problems are even more serious if the “community” as defined by the initiative is not viewed locally as a “community”. Moreover, communities can be “junkyards full of organizational roadblocks to new coalitions” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 266) because of past negative experiences with CCIs or other reform efforts: Individuals and organizations whose participation is logical and needed may stay away from, or even sabotage, the CCI.

Yet another challenge is the complexity of the fragmentation, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness a CCI is trying to address. In response to this complexity, some CCIs have developed new organizational structures to coordinate collaborative activities. However, a number of researchers have argued that such entities can become the end rather than the means, or become “a substitute rather than an instrument for system change” (Center for Youth and Communities, 2001, p. 13), because it can take “a great deal of energy and technical assistance to nurture the new entities’ capacity for basic functions” (Brown & Fiester, 2007, p. iii).

A final CCI challenge involves the need for flexibility and learning from experience. If major funders or key leaders see themselves as having “the answer”, they may be unwilling to learn, reflect, and adapt, make mid-course corrections, take risks, be flexible, or pull back as needed and be a limited partner. As a result, change efforts may define problems in a fixed way and tackle the problems with what end up being short-term solutions, rather than “understanding that definitions of problems are fluid and subjective” (Gibson et al., 2013).

The literature does suggest some factors and characteristics that are associated with more effective CCI efforts. One approach to addressing the root causes of poverty and related problems, at least to some extent, is to build social capital and promote economic development. However, this approach has not always been a high priority for CCIs, and even when it has, they have found it challenging to implement (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). Other approaches associated with more effective CCI efforts are (1) setting ambitious, yet specific and achievable, short- and long-term goals and recruiting partners who share them (Kadushin et al., 2005); (2) ensuring that partners have appropriate roles that are acceptable to them (Kadushin et al., 2005); and (3) incorporating a culture of learning and flexibility (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Patrizi et al., 2013; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995).

The community change efforts discussed in this article follow a slightly different tack than previous generations of CCIs. We focus on three cities where successful and effective community change

approaches have followed an organic developmental path, instead of a more prescribed or standardized path as directed by a funder or other entity. These partnerships were formed on the basis of shared purpose and mutual benefit, and grew out of attempts to find creative, sustainable ways to improve the community’s ability to employ, educate, and support youth. They did not begin as CCIs but have gradually grown to look more like CCIs. They began by asking which partners it was logical to approach, given their goals, contexts, and histories, and then built on those partnerships – bringing in more partners when it made sense.

The authors of this article were part of a team working with ten cities overall in a 2011–2014 summer youth employability initiative funded by the Walmart Foundation. The team provided technical assistance to participating sites and, in collaboration with them, studied the experiences and outcomes of youth participants, examined program implementation and operations, and explored the challenges and opportunities the cities experienced with respect to sustainability. These efforts were intended to contribute to continuous improvement for the initiative and the sites and provide information for internal reports and reports to the funder.

In the process of looking at program implementation, operations, and sustainability, the research and technical assistance team observed that strong, results-oriented partnerships were associated with the most positive youth outcomes and the most positive site outcomes in terms of sustainability and continuous improvement. Sites consistently discussed the value and effects of robust partnerships in presentations, reports, and site materials. Moreover, the importance of partnerships in programs that employ, educate, and support youth has been a key theme elsewhere (for example, International Youth Foundation, 2012; Ready by 21, 2014; Center for Youth and Communities, 2010, 2015; Stone, n.d.). This convergence led the authors to a decision to use an exploratory multiple-case study approach to delve deeper into the theme of partnerships in three of the cities.

The partnerships included in the study were:

- WorkReady Philadelphia, a campaign to promote career-connected education, has been led by a cross-sector collaborative since 2003. The Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) convenes this group and manages WorkReady’s efforts, which have served more than 100,000 youth since its inception in 2003.
- Capital Workforce Partners (CWP), in Hartford, CT, is one of five Workforce Investment Boards in Connecticut. CWP’s partnership-based youth employability approach features a tiered, competency-based system. CWP has been serving youth in a variety of ways since the late 1990s. From 2010 through 2014, CWP provided 11,419 job experiences to students in its region.
- Detroit Youth Employment Consortium (DYEC) was established in 2008 to provide more and better work experiences for youth in Detroit. The Youth Development Alliance (YDA) was formed in 2009 to support youth development organizations. The Skillman Foundation supported the development of these two partnerships as Foundation and community leaders recognized that more coordinated efforts were needed for youth employment.

All three communities were selected as part of the 2014 Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) initiative through the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. However, this article does not directly address the communities’ OYIF plans and efforts.

Method

Using data collected during the authors’ work with the youth employability initiative described above – field visits and interviews, cross-site convenings and other meetings, youth surveys, site reports and other materials, and frequent communications with sites – we explored:

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