

Community Support Organizations: Enabling Citizen Democracy to Sustain Comprehensive Community Impact

By Joseph A. Connor

Nearly every community-based collaborative – formed to address issues ranging from homelessness to the arts to child wellbeing – is expected to support and sustain its work by itself. Think about it. Agencies and organizations from across sectors with markedly different cultures, which often compete for funds and attention, are expected to design, manage and propel complex collaborative enterprises. Although we often think that the participants in a community collaborative should be the ones responsible for sustaining it, we can see from other professions that collaboration doesn't just happen on its own: A team of ballplayers isn't expected to win a championship without a team of coaches and athletic trainers and doctors and physical therapists. Actors aren't expected to make a movie without a team of cameramen, designers, acting coaches, editors, and technicians. Carpenters and bricklayers and electricians aren't expected to build a building without a team of site managers and designers.

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“When we expect our communities to collaborate, however, we seem to have forgotten that group work requires support.”

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In most parts of society, whenever we want to accomplish something with a diverse group of people, we seem to realize that they need support from other people to get the job done. Not just leadership (the head coach, the director, or the foreman), but *teams* of behind-the-scenes specialists and organizers who serve the needs of the group. And nobody thinks the actors, athletes, or carpenters are “disempowered” because others help them. When we expect our communities to collaborate, however, we seem to have forgotten that group work requires support. Worse: when these collaborative efforts fail to achieve outcomes, we throw up our hands in frustrated surprise.

Those who want to foster successful community problem solving, and thus to fund communities and systems, must also be prepared to fund the behind-the-scenes specialists, organizers, and coaches that are necessary to sustain the effort and get results. Planning together, implementing collaborative approaches, and sustaining action require support. Collaborative efforts need someone who maintains progress between meetings and in the face of participant turnover. They need someone who is keeping an eye on the ball at all times, who is taking responsibility to find answers to questions, involve additional participants as necessary, handle logistical details, and assure that the process is achieving results. They also need someone who will continually remind the group of its highest aspirations and challenge attempts at compromise or consensus that falls short of these aspirations.

After ten years of providing these kinds of support services to community problem solving in a large, diverse community, one local funder observes, “You need to fund full-time glue and connective tissue in community work.” He believes it is essential to have staff supporting broad-based community partnerships, because “you’re trying to build a central nervous system for your community, to create another way information is passed around the community and received and processed and utilized. And this just takes full-time work.”

Otis Johnson, director of the Savannah Youth Futures Authority (a comprehensive systems reform effort), says that three kinds of support are needed to change the way an entire community assists needy families and children:

- Someone who manages the data and keeps meticulous track of the results;
- Someone who functions as a networker to keep the politics and the communications among agencies running smoothly; and
- Someone who looks at the big picture and pays attention to long-term goals and planningⁱ

The Aspen Institute’s study of comprehensive community initiatives reveals the need for “core staff” who “facilitate the planning process and take responsibility for moving from planning to action” and for “technical” technical assistance to help community participants understand particular social issues or funding streams. Aspen recommends a “coach” who can be objective and provide advice and guidance to the various participants in an initiativeⁱⁱ

Charles Bruner, a former Iowa state senator now with the Child and Family Policy Center, writes about this need as a major finding of his research on comprehensive community reforms:

“This [community work] requires a form of support and technical assistance that is flexible, individualized, comprehensive, community-based, asset-oriented, seamless, and timely. It requires intensity and duration of involvement, a long-term commitment that most national technical assistance providers do not now provide. It requires a much better coordination of the technical assistance that is offered, avoiding mixed messages that can overwhelm sites receiving advice from all directions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Funders – public and private – interested in community-wide solutions need plans to undergird community work with a sustainable infrastructure of support services. If collaboration is not just a “nice thing to have when it works” but an essential strategy for community problem solving, then funders and community leaders must become aggressively intentional about their commitment to behind-the-scenes support for collaboration.

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“...to move beyond competent transactions to genuine community impact.”

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In responding to the prospect of extensive state budget cuts, a Michigan County Administrator emphasized that for his county’s government services to move beyond competent transactions to genuine community impact, the way the departments thought of and organized their work – from health to public safety and justice to records – had to change fundamentally in order to support and

facilitate the connections and collaborations required across sectors to get to solutions. The entire budget process was changed to enable citizen democracy and engage stakeholders from across the community. This process recommended county budget priorities that pointed to systemic solutions which connected the assets and resources of the community with county government acting as the catalyst and support for achieving comprehensive plans and outcomes. What was potentially a time of drastic cuts became a map for strategic investments in infrastructure and impact.^{iv}

Our research and experience has led us to coin the term *community support organization* (CSO) to describe the kind of sustainable infrastructure that communities need in order to support collaborations and build the community's capacity to systemically address social problems.^v While the CSO need not be a newly created organization in the community, it is critical that this sustainable infrastructure be housed in an accessible, impartial, and well-respected local entity. In addition, to fully leverage the benefits of this infrastructure, it should not be created separately for each community collaboration; instead, it should be designed to serve multiple systemic efforts to get to solutions.

We believe that a community support organization is a key strategy for funders to foster successful community problem solving. Our development of the CSO concept has resulted from research on collaboration and community problem solving, from our own experience providing support services to community collaborations, and from studying the work of several CSO-type organizations around the country. This article is adapted from our book: *Community Visions and Community Solutions: Grantmaking for Comprehensive Impact*. (2003, St Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation).

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A CSO in Action: Finding Unspent Resources and Getting Children What They Deserve

The Northern California Council for the Community (NCCC)^{vi} acts as a CSO-type entity for the San Francisco Bay area. NCCC has convened a broad-based coalition of community leaders called the Bay Area Partnership. Membership includes representatives from the regional offices of five federal departments, ten county governments, two United Ways, and numerous community-based philanthropic organizations. Members are united by a common commitment to get better outcomes for children and families through more integrated, collaborative neighborhood- and community-based approaches.

NCCC serves as "secretariat," which involves doing administrative tasks (keeping the database of members, sending out announcements, developing meeting agendas, producing minutes), providing research data to inform the Partnership's ideas for change, and receiving grant funds on behalf of the Partnership.

NCCC staff have used mapping and census data to help the Partnership identify 52 neighborhoods in which a major portion of the Bay Area's impoverished families live, so that systemic efforts to improve lives can be targeted to those neighborhoods most in need. One of the first projects they undertook was to improve children's access to in-school nutrition and extended-day programs. Ed Schoenberger, NCCC's President, explained the task this way:

"We discovered that there was a lot of federal and state money for nutrition programs that wasn't being spent. And a lot of the school districts serving those neighborhoods weren't applying for that money. With the help of key federal administrators, children and youth advocates, and educational leaders, we actually published a list of school districts, citing those numbers, those neighborhoods, and then all of the sudden everybody got excited, and said "You're serving a neighborhood where there's 70% or 60% low-income kids, and you're not offering snack programs, you're not offering breakfast programs?" Phones just started jumping

off the hook. And in the following year and a half or so, there were about fifty or sixty new programs in Bay Area schools, serving those neighborhoods.”

The Partnership, he concluded, “Provided the forum by which the right people were in the right room at the same time to say, ‘You know, we could do something about this if we really wanted to.’” As the behind-the-scenes support, NCCC brought these people together and then provided the background research and the information dissemination to help the Partnership realize its goal. Buoyed by their success, the Partnership is now tackling a broad range of issues around workforce development, child development, and related issues affecting the fifty-two neighborhoods.

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What is a community support organization?

A community support organization (CSO) is an impartial, skilled, local intermediary that is dedicated to fostering the success of local collaborations and systemic reforms in order to improve the way the community solves problems. The “ideal package” of a CSO provides the following kinds of support to a variety of collaborative activities in a community:

- Convening representative boards to make community-level decisions
- Facilitating cross-organization meetings and community forums
- Providing research services to help community groups make informed decisions
- Tracking systems-based outcomes data
- Coordinating funding streams or facilitating local funder collaboratives
- Managing collaboratively owned resources
- Being a liaison between community initiatives and government officials within and outside of the community
- Developing information management systems for local use

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Whether a whole organization unto itself, or a service housed within another organization (such as a community foundation, county government or community college), the CSO must have staff whose full-time responsibility is to serve and sustain community collaborations. By definition, the CSO staff must have the time and commitment to do the between-meeting tasks that allow community work to

progress. This provides a stability that is essential for collaborative efforts built around the volunteer time of community leaders and the ever-changing faces of government officials and nonprofit executives. Like the manager at a construction site who attends to the whole building while carpenters, plumbers, and electricians come and go, the CSO staff keep the collaborative process moving along, even as the participants may change. And as the support needs of each collaborative group ebb and flow over time, the CSO can target resources appropriately, allowing people and funding to be applied in a just-in-time fashion.

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Diversity of Community Leadership.

In our work, we have supported a diversity of community leadership groups as they developed an understanding of the need and sought to serve as catalysts for establishing community support organizations in their communities. Here is a partial list by organization type that shows: organization, framing issue and community where CSOs have been established.

- ◆United Way: United Way of Greater Battle Creek. Teen Pregnancy. Calhoun County, Michigan. (www.uwgbc.org)
- ◆Regional Foundation: Northwest Area Foundation. Poverty Reduction in the thirteen neighborhoods (67,000 residents) of North Minneapolis, Minnesota. (www.nwaf.org)
- ◆County Government: Washtenaw County Government. Comprehensive Community Impact. Washtenaw County, Michigan. (www.ewashtenaw.org)
- ◆Funder Collaborative. Los Angeles Urban Funders. Job Placement. South Central, Los Angeles, California. (www.lauf.org)
- ◆National Foundation: Kahanoff Foundation. Shared Space / NP Community Campus. Calgary, Alberta, Canada. (www.kahanoff.com).
- ◆Community Foundation: Peninsula Community Foundation. Child Readiness in San Mateo, California. (www.pcf.org)
- ◆Civic Forum: LINC. After-School Programming. Kansas City, Missouri. (www.kclinc.org)
- ◆Central Government. England. Strategic Partnerships/Community Systems Accountability. Recognition that government devolution in the UK required the development of local support infrastructure, citizen engagement mechanisms and accountability. (www.audit-commission.gov.uk)
- ◆Other leadership examples: Chambers; Universities; Hospitals; Churches; Corporations; Community Colleges, etc.

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A single CSO in the community can serve multiple coalitions and collaborative groups while providing a link among these integrated efforts. Thus, one CSO spreads the cost of supporting multiple collaborative efforts while preventing the community from having to create a whole slew of new 501(c)(3) organizations for each collaborative group. This defeats the devolutionary mandates which have unintentionally led to higher silos versus systemic and civic engagement. Further, this model avoids creating multiple permanent structures that must be kept alive, even after their collaborative group's purpose has been fulfilled. At the same time, the CSO doesn't let collaboratives peter out as if in a "natural life cycle" when they haven't yet accomplished the goals for which they came together.

Communities that have a CSO have come to rely on it as a key resource for making the case for coordinated approaches, creating the political resolve to affect change, removing barriers to implementation, building relationships across traditional boundaries, and preventing conflicts while not allowing the community to take "no" for an answer. The CSO challenges community leaders to reach for the highest aspirations for their residents, and then keeps community work from getting stuck in the process of turning visions into action. The CSO also helps the community respond to increasing government mandates for community-based collaboratives and governing bodies.

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"The ideal CSO is not a direct service provider and does not run its own programs."

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The CSO is a champion for community improvement, a bridge-builder, and, above all, a servant to its community. The ideal CSO is not a direct service provider and does not run its own programs. Instead, by committing itself to the success of alliances—over and above the success of any participating organization, program, or project—the CSO remains impartial in its relation to any one leader, organization, or sector.

The presence of a CSO in the community, serving and connecting multiple collaborative efforts, makes many benefits possible:

- By encouraging community engagement in the full system of social problem solving, the CSO enables a focus on "what do we want?" and on community- or system-wide outcomes rather than individual agency outcomes.
- By actively involving a wide range of stakeholders in any collaborative effort, the CSO enables and undergirds the work of collaborative governance.
- By bringing a problem-solving bias to the goal of improving efficiency (not just mergers to reduce duplication), the CSO helps the community realize economies of scale while preserving multiple strategies to address problems.
- By fostering community examination of needed system changes, the CSO makes apparent the tools needed for successful collaboration, including the need for technology to support collaborative work and system-based outcomes measurement.

- By tracking the community’s return on investment in social services, the CSO provides information for empowerment and allows budgeting and implementation to focus on prevention rather than remediation.
- By holding all members of the community to high aspirations for achievement, the CSO provides an ongoing stimulus for community improvement. It makes possible the citizen engagement that moves social challenges from “problems to be addressed by not-for-profits and government” to “solutions to be enabled by the full community.”

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A CSO in Action: High Aspirations Lead to Greater Resources

Combining its own resources with funds from the City Council of Toledo, Ohio, The Collaboratory began facilitating and coaching a community-wide effort to address homelessness through a comprehensive, coordinated approach. It served as an impartial convener, researcher, meeting facilitator, and connector for the people involved in the homelessness project.

The Collaboratory began its efforts in the Fall of 1999 by bringing together a broadly representative community body that learned about homelessness in the community. In addition to reading research reports, the community body developed its knowledge by listening to presentations by representatives of other local groups—of service providers, clients, and funders—whom The Collaboratory had also convened separately to assist in preparing their presentations. The larger community body then developed a shared goal and recommendations for addressing homelessness in Toledo that represent the community’s highest aspirations. This group has since moved forward on a variety of tasks, including creating a permanent governing body for the homeless services system and exploring options for the purchase of a multi-organization management information system. In addition, the circle of participants from throughout the community has continued to widen (to over 150 people), allowing a greater understanding of the problem and a greater representation of those who can influence policy, resources, and services to get to results.

The value of this participation was evident when the new governing body was reviewing Toledo’s 2000 “Continuum of Care” application to HUD for funding for homelessness services. With the diligent review of community members and attention to their highest aspirations for the community, they were able to develop enhanced strategies and increase their grant request by 25 percent over the prior year. The funds were granted by HUD, thus providing Toledo with greater resources to apply to their more coordinated approach. The facilitation by the CSO-like Collaboratory resulted in funding for Toledo’s highest aspirations for resolving the issues of homelessness.

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How does a community support organization work?

The services of a CSO are applied to various collaborative efforts in whatever ways are necessary to keep those collaborations progressing. Just as the extent of a movie's behind-the-scenes technical and design support increases with the complexity of the film, so the services of the CSO ebb and flow with the complexity of the community collaborations. Some may require a full complement of services, from convening to research to logistical assistance to managing funds, while others may simply need regular administrative support. The CSO may support existing collaborative groups or help start new collaborations around emerging concerns.

The day-to-day tasks of the staff of a CSO include the following:

- Getting people to participate
- Basing work on shared aspirations
- Making meetings happen
- Making meetings matter
- Following up between meetings
- Managing information
- Serving multiple collaboratives

Getting people to participate

In order to get the broad community engagement necessary for systemic solutions, CSO staffs spend a lot of time encouraging individuals to join particular collaborative groups. They develop an ever-growing list of potential participants and engage in many one-on-one conversations to explain the goals of the collaboration, past work, and why participation is important. The CSO follows-up these conversations with information packets and regular appreciation for each individual's commitment. Through this ongoing process, the CSO helps each collaboration involve an ever-wider circle of influencers, from policy makers, to business executives, to neighborhood leaders, to funders. And it ensures an orientation for each new participant, so that the rest of the collaborative members are not continually back-tracking to bring new people up to speed.

Basing work on shared aspirations

When working with a collaborative group, one of the first responsibilities of the CSO is to ensure that the group knows what its purpose is and bases all of its decisions and actions on reaching its shared goal for the community. The CSO staff then post this goal on the wall at every meeting and highlight it in reports and announcements.

Making meetings happen

CSO staff develop a schedule of meetings for each collaborative group so that participants know far in advance when meetings will occur. The staff then locate space, send reminders and an agenda that makes people want to attend, and ensure that everyone has directions to the location and that any preparatory materials are mailed in a timely fashion.

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A Funder as a CSO: Hands-on Support from a Community Foundation

Since 1994, San Mateo County has had the benefit of a community collaboration called the Peninsula Partnership for Children, Youth, and Families.^{vii} This Partnership has linked public and private resources and leadership to improve kindergarten readiness and reading proficiency among third graders as key goals for enhancing the lives of children and youth and preventing future problems. Using a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down approach, a Partnership Council (which consists of leaders from city and county government, schools, nonprofits, and foundations) helps nine local collaboratives as they build networks and strengthen strategies (such as home visiting for new parents and preschool book lending programs) to reach the core goals.

Early in the development of The Peninsula Partnership, participants recognized the need for “full-time glue” to support community work, says Sterling Speirn, President of the Peninsula Community Foundation, which helped initiate the Partnership. “We know collaboration doesn’t take place on the backs of everybody’s full-time job.” The Partnership responded by hiring a full-time director who became a staff person of the Peninsula Community Foundation, but who was directly accountable to the Partnership Council with daily responsibility to serve and facilitate the work of the Partnership. Over time, three additional staff have been added, and Speirn commits about 15 percent of his time directly to Partnership work. In this way, he says, the Partnership emulates “the idea of a CSO” with the staff going to meetings all over the county and “just being out there to make it all happen.”

The Director of the Peninsula Partnership, Jennifer Sedbrook, and her staff are responsible for a variety of supportive activities, including orienting new Council members to the history and purpose of the Partnership, recruiting and training community residents to get involved in the local collaboratives, preparing agendas and reports for collaborative meetings, exploring new early childhood initiatives that might help meet the goals of the Partnership, convening and facilitating task forces to pursue new initiatives, helping local community collaboratives access funds for various programs, and negotiating the connection between the Foundation and the Partnership.

Sedbrook continually reminds herself that, “It’s communication, stupid!” as she regularly distributes meeting minutes and calls individual participants to make sure they feel connected to any new idea that the Partnership is considering. She emphasizes that the neutral position of the Partnership (compared to any one participating organization) “elevates the status” of any new opportunity, “taking it out of the political realm” and allowing the community to “get it done.”

It has required unusual “foundation stamina,” says Speirn, for the Peninsula Community Foundation to commit itself to such a comprehensive, long-term community effort, but the results have been worth it. For example, the county health department reorganized itself to focus more on “prenatal-to-three” services, a book-bag program now sends books home each day to over 15,000 preschoolers, and significant changes have been made in the culture and habits of local problem solving, allowing some communities to leverage millions of new dollars on behalf of children and families. Supporting the Peninsula Partnership, he adds, continues to bring “rich information and relationships” to the Foundation, allowing its board and staff to truly know the communities it serves and bring innovative opportunities to its donors and grant-making decisions.

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Making meetings matter

CSO staff ensure that good participation, a meaningful agenda, excellent facilitation, and adequate background information make each meeting worth the participants' time. Of course, agendas and materials are decided in consultation with members of the collaborative, but the CSO staff make sure the results are relevant, timely, and well distributed. If people are going to present at the meeting, the CSO staff ensure the presenters are organized, the content is clear, and the presentation will keep people's attention. CSO staff may also help presenters prepare materials and transparencies or PowerPoint slides and practice their presentation in advance. If someone besides a CSO staff member is going to facilitate the meeting, CSO staff coach him or her ahead of time so that the facilitation will be done well.

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“Through facilitation at meetings and conversations between meetings, CSO staff challenge participants to be guided by their highest aspirations for their community so that perceived barriers do not allow meetings to devolve into lowest-common-denominator compromises.”

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CSO staff attend the meetings and help keep the conversation focused on the goals of the collaboration, while guaranteeing that other issues are noted and tracked for future discussion. Through facilitation at meetings and conversations between meetings, CSO staff challenge participants to be guided by their highest aspirations for their community so that perceived barriers do not allow meetings to devolve into lowest-common-denominator compromises. Each meeting is evaluated by all participants for its content, structure, pace, and progress toward goals.

Following up between meetings

While participants in collaborative groups often leave the meeting to return to a mountain of other responsibilities, the CSO staff keep the collaboration foremost in their daily work. Minutes from the previous meeting and a summary of the evaluations are prepared as quickly as possible and sent to all interested parties. If research needs to be done about an issue raised in the meeting or promising practices from other communities, CSO staff start studying the matter in the hopes of finding an answer before the next meeting. Summary reports are then sent in advance of the next meeting, with suggestions for how participants can use the information. If guests need to be invited to the next meeting, or additional new participants need to be recruited, CSO staff make these calls.

CSO staff are also available between meetings to coach participants in the problem-solving and group process skills needed for effective collaborative work. CSO staff are hired and trained to excel in group facilitation, meaningful dialogue, positive engagement, and constructive feedback. Because of their neutrality, they can use these skills effectively in the community. Of course, community members need to use these skills in their collaborative work, but may need help in developing and practicing them as they build their team. While participants can receive group dynamics training at one or more of their meetings, they sometimes need private mentoring in how to handle and emergency conflict, how to see an issue from someone else's point of view, and how to listen as well as be heard. These conversations are also a welcome opportunity for CSO staff to remind participants of the purpose and aspirations of the collaboration.

Managing information

Much of the rest of a CSO's responsibilities falls into this broad category, because an essential missing piece of most collaborations and community initiatives is the ability to organize, track, and communicate various kinds of information. A major reason that CSOs are more necessary and more successful in today's communities is due to advances in technology that enable information to be managed like never before.

In addition to communication about and between meetings, other examples of information management include:

- Keeping databases of participants in collaborations.
- Keeping databases of local services to clarify the structure of community systems.
- Hosting a management information system used by multiple service providers to track data about clients and services provided; such an MIS enables better case management for integrated services and better community-wide data collection for policy and funding decisions.
- Managing funding information by tracking grant opportunities, administering grants for collaboratives, and providing services to a local funder collaborative.
- Helping participants in collaborative groups use various collaborative technologies (listservs, document sharing, application service providers, and so forth) to keep information flowing across organizational and sectoral boundaries.

Serving multiple collaborations

While all of the services discussed so far apply to each collaborative group served by a CSO, a key value of the CSO is its service to multiple collaborations. As the only entity in the community charged with working in the shared space between the nonprofit, government, and business sectors, the CSO keeps its finger on the pulse of all community-level work. By knowing which people are involved in which collaboratives with which goals, the CSO can see and inform the community when activities are beginning to overlap, how decisions on one issue will impact another, when policy reform is going to be needed, and how funding can be re-organized to better serve the community. Also, as processes or data are learned through the work of one collaborative, the CSO staff can share this with another collaborative that will benefit from the same knowledge.

By serving multiple collaboratives, the community can also use the services of the CSO in more efficient ways. Instead of each collaborative group hiring its own staff or creating its own nonprofit—which may be more or less necessary at different stages of the collaboration's work—the services of the CSO can expand and contract throughout the life of each collaboration. As needs are greater in one group, the CSO can apply more resources there, and when that collaboration becomes more self-sustaining, the CSO can shift its focus more to another group—while still ensuring that the first group is progressing.

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NorthWay Community Trust: 67,000 Residents Develop Their Own CSO

The residents of thirteen neighborhoods on the northside of Minneapolis had endured a history of civic neglect followed by fragmented civic intervention. When the process to develop their own sense of civic democracy began, their asset map showed that nine different, and at times conflicting, economic development plans were being simultaneously “managed” for their benefit.

A report developed by the community revealed that the ethnically diverse North Minneapolis area could boast rising home values and a number of pioneering alternative schools. At the same time, the area, which is home to nearly 20 percent of the city's population, controls only 12 percent of its total household income and suffers from low levels of civic participation.

The residents, encouraged by the Northwest Area Foundation and facilitated by The Collaboratory for Community Support, developed a process of community dialogue and community review involving hundreds of local residents and scores of community action and planning meetings. This process led the residents to an appreciation of: 1.) the value of being more intentional about their own well-being; 2.) the importance of focusing on prevention and solutions over the demands of conflicting programs; and 3.) the leverage which comes from demanding accountability and alignment of services.

They designed and received funding for The NorthWay Community Trust, a new community support organization which provides governance and support for developing solutions which prior to this process of citizen democracy seemed outside the grasp of the community's own citizens.

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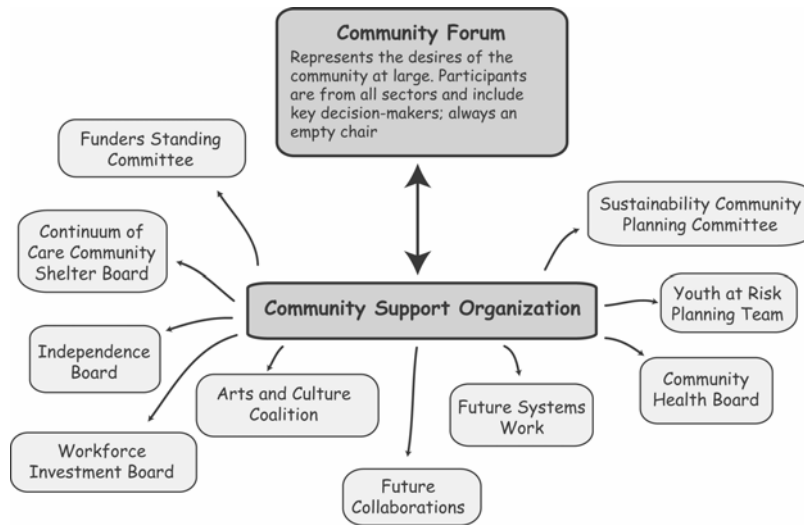
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How does a community support organization support citizen democracy?

Decisions about how the CSO will be used in the community must be overseen by some kind of collaborative governance body, whether the board of an existing organization that is evolving into a CSO, or a newly created “community forum” that represents the desires of the community at large. Whatever kind of governing body is used, it must ensure that the CSO remains a servant to the community, even as it may behave as a leader for the process of collaboration. CSO staff convene regular meetings of this community forum to report on the work of the CSO and ask for guidance. The community forum is responsible for prioritizing the services of the CSO and ensuring that the CSO is adequately resourced to accomplish its responsibilities without compromising its impartiality to the programmatic dictates of funders. Ideally, the community forum would also be designed to include

representatives from the various collaborative governance bodies that are developed to guide improvement of each community system. Figure: The Community Support Organization in its Local Context shows how one CSO relates to the various collaborations it supports.

Figure: The Community Support Organization in its Local Context



The CSO acts as a servant to the community even as it sometimes leads the process of collaboration. This figure shows a CSO providing services to a number of systems and collaborations as well as the citizens within a community.

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Community Forum and Community Support Organization in Action

The Local Investment Commission (LINC)^{viii} is a 36-member citizen governing board focused on improving the lives of children and families in Kansas City and Jackson County, Missouri. The members are volunteers from the business and neighborhood leadership of the community, but they represent the community, not their own businesses or organizations; the Commission does not include providers or elected officials. Additional volunteers serve on standing and working committees, making up a community collaborative of over 700 residents. The work of the Commission is informed by a non-voting “Professional Cabinet” of nonprofit and government agency service providers, and a full-time staff provides the administrative and research support for LINC. Initial and ongoing support for LINC has come from the Missouri Caring Communities fund which was created through a collaboration of seven state departments—Social Services, Mental Health, Health, Labor, Education, Corrections, and Economic Development—to enable school-linked, neighborhood-based services. Other grants have supported LINC’s involvement in welfare-to-work, after-school care, new business development in the central city, and health care.

LINC’s mission is “to provide leadership and influence to engage the Kansas City Community in creating the best system to support and strengthen children, families and individuals, holding that system accountable, and changing public attitudes towards the system.” Since its inception in 1992, LINC has helped the community improve a variety of services and their outcomes. For example, their welfare-to-work efforts have filled 6100 area jobs since 1995, and over four-thousand former welfare recipients are still employed. In addition, LINC rescued the community’s before- and after-school child care program just before it was discontinued due to lack of funds; since then, over 6800 students have enrolled in such programs at eighteen schools.

LINC also helped decentralize the local Department of Family Services and relocate staff to neighborhood offices, and they have established over 45 school-based social service centers for children and families.

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Lessons Learned:

Community support organization dos and don'ts

The value of a community support organization lies in its ability to lead and serve simultaneously, to be neutral while at the same time challenging everyone to high aspirations, to work in a “no man’s land” between boundaries while remaining relevant to all sectors. Our research and experiences providing CSO-type services have demonstrated that these dual responsibilities can be tricky to balance, leading to procedural or policy recommendations that, at first blush, might seem counter-intuitive. Some suggestions for the staff and governing body of a CSO include the following:

1. DO focus everyone’s attention on the highest aspirations for the community. The galvanizing force of a problem-solving vision will not only secure your most passionate early participants but will serve to engage, over time, broader sections of the community.
2. DON’T let discussions revolve around least-common-denominator agreements. Your community deserves better than uninspired efforts at consensus. If it’s easy, it’s probably not sufficient.
3. DO post on the meeting room wall the goal and the process to achieve that goal. Continuous reminders of both the goal and process keep discussions on task and serve as a quick orientation for guests or new members.
4. DO ensure that each collaborative group develops and adheres to guiding principles (or “nonnegotiables”) and group norms.
5. DON’T be a passive facilitator of collaborative meetings. Being “neutral” is not the same as being passive. The CSO has a point of view, which is squarely focused on achieving the community’s goals and solving the problems. Its facilitation may well be neutral as to methods and means, but not to expectations. Challenge participants to rise to the occasion.
6. DO evaluate every collaborative meeting and share results with participants. No meeting is worth having if you are not evaluating whether its objectives were met. This evaluation need not be lengthy or time-consuming. It can be as simple as a three-question survey that asks both on-going “pulse-taking” questions to build trust and maintain momentum (“How would

- you rate today's meeting for increasing our understanding of this issue?") and teachable moments that underscore goals or requirements ("How would you assess your participation in tonight's meeting?"). An evaluation also provides a confidential forum for participants to express concerns which can arise at each meeting.
7. DO provide safe harbors for stakeholders to explore their positions before going public. In an open community forum, it is natural for a group of providers or funders or other stakeholders to feel the need to defend their past actions. This defense of the status quo spotlights points of contention rather than points of agreement. The larger progress toward a shared aspiration can get stuck or derailed if the stakeholders aren't given a chance to deal with this potential scar tissue outside the spotlight of a community forum.
 8. DON'T let the group be held hostage to "those who should be here." Collaboratives usually get stuck early in the process because the desire to get everyone around the table supersedes discussion of goals and undermines the confidence to act before the synergistic force of a shared aspiration can take hold.
 9. DO develop an expectation for broader and broader community engagement.
 10. DO keep an "open chair" at all meetings. By this we mean both the physical place to sit but also the commitment on the part of the collaborative and CSO staff to orient and support whomever sits in the chair.
 11. DON'T let the need to build trust keep groups from taking action. A classic passive-aggressive posture to keeping the status quo is to "embrace change" but delay action by a need to "build trust." No better foundation for sustainable trust could be laid than by taking successful action, together.
 12. DO expect the collaborative to test all proposed actions against the goal or aspiration. There is no easier way for a group to get hijacked to irrelevance than to act on meaningless or marginal items. The time, talent, and passion of the members of a collaborative are a rare and fleeting resource. Invest it wisely.
 13. DON'T let a perceived lack of resources curtail the group's aspirations. "How the work is organized" must take precedence over funding matters, because until you see the path to where you are going, much money can be wasted in wrong turns. Conversely, once the path is clear, many new sources of support can present themselves.
 14. DO provide well-organized research and data (for example, practices from other communities) to inform decision-making. The CSO must ensure that it is providing information—normative and strategic—to enable intelligent decisions. But it must also be mindful not to inundate or obfuscate.
 15. DON'T be led into the business of capacity building for individual organizations. Be clear that the focus of the CSO's responsibility is on systems change for community solutions. Clearly, technical assistance for individual organizations is necessary for strengthening a community, but providing such services is work for others. The work of the CSO is across organizations and sectors.
 16. DON'T confuse respect with low expectations. For a collaborative to achieve its goals, each participating organization will be expected to change the way it does its work and interacts with other organizations. A balance must be struck between preserving individual strategies while holding everyone to standards that will assure the community's desired outcomes are accomplished.

17. DO expect the collaborative to set deadlines and keep to them. Engagement, momentum, and achievement are all more likely if there is a creative pressure to keep moving.
18. DON'T underestimate the value of technology. Failed efforts at collaboration are often blamed on lack of information, communication, and follow-through. New technologies can alleviate these potential pitfalls as never before.
19. DON'T underestimate the need for broad engagement in all stages of implementing new technology. Potential users at all levels of the system must be included in planning, design, and deployment.
20. DO prepare CSO staff and governance bodies for balancing the servant/leader and facilitator/challenger roles. All the other DOs and DON'Ts depend on skilled support, leadership, and service.

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- i Schorr, Lisbeth, Sylvester, Kathleen, and Dunkle, Margaret. (1999). *Strategies to Achieve a Common Purpose: Tools for Turning Good Ideas Into Good Policies*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership, p. 23. (Available online at www.policyexchange.iel.org/pubs/.)
 - ii Aspen Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives. (1997). *Voices from the Field*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute. (Available online at: www.aspenroundtable.org/voices/index.htm.)
 - iii Bruner, Charles. (1996). *Realizing a Vision for Children, Families, and Neighborhoods: An Alternative to Other Modest Proposals*. Des Moines: National Center for Service Integration, p. 51.
 - iv Project study drawn from "Communities of Interest" project for Washtenaw County Government. Robert Guenzel, County Administrator. The Collaboratory for Community Support, consultant: www.comnet.org/collaboratorycs
 - v Connor, J. A., and Kadel-Taras, S. (2000, December). *Organizing Community Work to Reach Solutions*. PNNOnline (www.pnnonline.org).
 - Connor, J. A., and Kadel-Taras, S. (2000). *The Community Support Organization: Linking Not-for-Profits to Community Impact*. *The Not-for-Profit CEO Monthly Letter*, 7(8).
 - vi Case study drawn from NCCC web site: www.nccsf.org, and interview with Ed Schoenberger, NCCC President, January 26, 2000.
 - vii Case study drawn from the Peninsula Community Foundation web site: www.pcf.org, interview with Foundation President, Sterling Speirn, February 5, 2001, and interview with Peninsula Partnership Director, Jennifer Sedbrook, March 14, 2001. For additional resources and recommended reading, visit The Collaboratory's web site at www.comnet.org/collaboratorycs and see the reading list at www.comnet.org/collaboratorycs/SW697.html.
 - viii Case study drawn from LINC publication: *LINC in Brief*, LINC web site: www.kclinc.org, and interview with Gayle A. Hobbs, Executive Director, February 2000.

