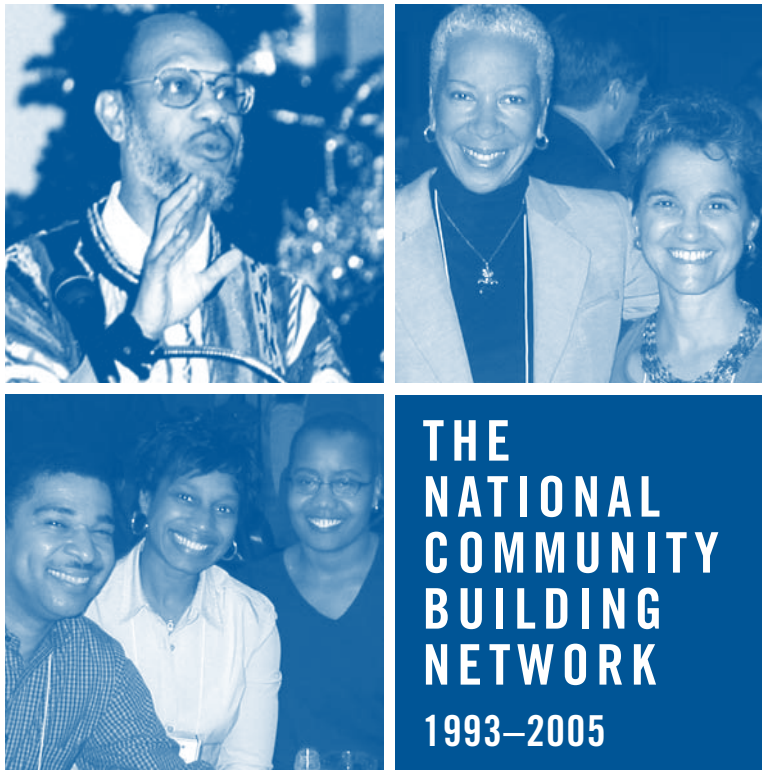


# **BUILDING** A COMMUNITY OF **COMMUNITY BUILDERS**



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## INTRODUCTION

For 12 years (1993–2005), the National Community Building Network (NCBN) served as a national hub of information, networks, and resources for “community builders”—people who are committed to reducing poverty and revitalizing low-income communities by empowering and partnering with their residents. At its peak, NCBN had more than 800 members from 200 organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. The Network’s members were notably diverse; they included grassroots activists, practitioners from community-based organizations, grantmakers, policy experts, researchers, and community organizers, and they represented an array of racial groups, religious faiths, and professional backgrounds.

NCBN emerged from the fractured world of social policy and intervention at a critical time. “Community building” was a relatively new and unfamiliar concept; its components and strategies were just taking shape, and its individual proponents often felt isolated and misunderstood. The national organization bolstered their resolve, honed their vision for change, and nourished their collective power. It became a tool for defining the “field” of community building, raising awareness of it, and developing its core principles. It helped to give community-building efforts legitimacy in the eyes of a broader audience. And, for the people on the front lines of community change, NCBN offered a much-needed vehicle for sharing knowledge, acquiring skills, and developing relationships with peers.

Along the way, NCBN leaders and members learned a lot about the challenges and potential of community-building efforts. By 2005, however, the community-building world had changed. The need for action had shifted from building awareness at the national level to supporting the work regionally and locally. Funders had shifted their attention from networking and relationship building to ensuring the efficacy of work on the ground. It was no longer clear that a national organization like NCBN was the best vehicle for serving today’s community builders.

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*“Community building isn’t a model or a separate field; people don’t say, ‘I’m doing community building.’ It’s a lens that applies to all areas of work.”*

— Emanuel Freeman

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And so the National Community Building Network came to a natural end, although the work of revitalizing low-income communities continues. This paper celebrates NCBN’s contribution by telling the story of the Network’s evolution, successes, and challenges. The insights presented here come from interviews with two dozen of NCBN’s founders, leaders, members, critical friends, and informed observers. These informants paid special attention to the lessons they learned from NCBN and their implications for community building in the future.

Chapter I, *Looking Back*, describes the social, political, philanthropic, and practical contexts that made a national community building network necessary. Chapter II, *Activities and Membership*, describes the population NCBN served and the core activities it provided. Chapter III, *NCBN's Strengths and Contributions*, highlights the value that the Network added to the work and experiences of the community-building “field,” individuals, organizations, initiatives, funders, and people outside the nonprofit and philanthropic world.

Chapter IV, *Lessons and Observations*, synthesizes what NCBN taught its members about promoting and supporting community building as an integral part of community change, nurturing a strand of social policy, serving the needs of a diverse and evolving membership, and sustaining a concept-based organization and its priorities. We conclude with Chapter V, *Looking Ahead*, which summarizes the current status of community-building efforts and suggests important next steps.

#### **WHAT IS COMMUNITY BUILDING?**

Community building is an approach to improving conditions, expanding opportunities, and sustaining positive change within communities by developing, enhancing, and sustaining the capacities and relationships of those who make up the community. This approach is applied in hundreds of communities and a host of fields including economic development, community development, family service, youth development, and public health. Community-building initiatives operate in urban, rural, and suburban communities across the United States and in other countries.

Community building is not a format for programs. It is a framework for addressing interrelated troubles—poor schooling, crime, bad health, unemployment and underemployment, family instability—that ensnare people in chronic poverty. Its practitioners believe that comprehensive, community-driven efforts offer the best hope for revitalizing neglected neighborhoods, especially in the urban core.

Community building also recognizes that escaping persistent poverty is as much about building relationships as it is about good services, programs, and institutions. Community building puts residents at the forefront of efforts to rebuild their neighborhoods. Community building is not done to or for neighborhood residents. It is done *by and with* neighborhood residents—with the residents as the dreamers, planners, and implementers of a collective vision for their neighborhood.

—Adapted from [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org)



## I. LOOKING BACK: NCBN'S HISTORY

**N**CBN's roots lie in the political, social, and philanthropic milieu of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when policy makers, practitioners, and funders were frustrated with our nation's lack of progress on the antipoverty and social justice agenda. Two decades had passed since the War on Poverty and, despite the fact that we had learned a great deal about how to help needy families and communities, we didn't seem to know how to put it all together and bring about significant transformation in our poorest neighborhoods. The mood grew more optimistic, however, as a handful of national foundations responded to the challenge. The neighborhood initiatives they developed, and the funders' desire for their work to have national significance and impact, led directly to the birth of the National Community Building Network.

### The Call For New Leadership and Innovative Measures

The era of social policy that preceded community building was marked by ambitious federal initiatives such as Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty. As NCBN's website explained:

*. . . [T]hese efforts instituted a number of federal programs that markedly improved the quality of life for millions of Americans. But, by the 1980s, pessimism about the efficacy of these programs and the ability of the federal government to effectively combat chronic, intergenerational poverty led many to declare that the war on poverty had been waged and poverty had won.*

The situation worsened during the new federalism of the 1980s, as government withdrew from its leadership role around reducing poverty and promoting equity. Communities had to find new ways to combat the growth of unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, and other conditions of poverty. But a few national and community funders, along with forward-thinking partners in communities, refused to concede defeat. Beginning around 1990, they developed a handful of multi-year, multi-city initiatives that incorporated the emerging concepts of "community building," including:

- **The Rockefeller Foundation's Community Planning and Action Programs (CPAP).** CPAP, which operated in Boston, Cleveland, Denver, Oakland, San Antonio, and Washington, D.C., organized community residents and helped them use data on poverty factors to build consensus for change and devise effective strategies. Local CPAP partners also worked to change the local, state, and regional policies that caused or perpetuated economic and social isolation.
- **The Ford Foundation's Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI).** NFI operated in Detroit, Hartford, Memphis, and Milwaukee. It featured prominent participation and decision making by the residents of targeted neighborhoods, in collaboration with local institutions that

could influence economic and community development. Strategies included revolving loan funds, small-business assistance, job placement, and housing programs. Community foundations served as NFI's local intermediaries, and the collaborative leadership councils included residents as members. Like CPAP, the initiative also spawned some new organizations to stimulate community outreach, organizing, and involvement.

- **The Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative.** New Futures operated in Dayton, OH; Lawrence, MA; Little Rock, AR; Pittsburgh, PA; and Savannah, GA. It aimed to reduce the interrelated factors leading to poor outcomes for disadvantaged urban youth: school dropout, young adult unemployment, and teen pregnancy. New Futures mobilized residents and community institutions to make services more responsive to community needs and created local, collaborative governance groups to set priorities, choose strategies, and ensure accountability.
- **The Surdna Foundation's Comprehensive Community Revitalization Project (CCRP).** This project expanded the work of community development corporations from affordable housing to other community-building efforts. It gave technical and financial assistance, training, and staff support to four CDCs in the South Bronx, which tackled primary health care, education, youth development, and employment issues.
- **The Atlanta Project (TAP).** Created by former President Jimmy Carter, and co-sponsored by United Parcel Service and the Coca-Cola Company, TAP sought to revitalize 20 of Atlanta's most neglected neighborhoods. It established resident leadership groups to identify community needs and responses. Strategies included small business loans, job training, family and housing resource centers, an immunization campaign for newborns, and new community organizations.
- **The Chicago Initiative,** a collaboration instigated after the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles. The initiative began as a short-term violence prevention effort—pooling money to expand summer jobs and recreational programs for Chicago youth—but became a broader endeavor to address poverty. It brought foundations and community organizations together, with involvement by neighborhood residents as a key to local revitalization.
- **The Austin Project.** This citywide project, created by the late Walt Rostow and his wife, Elspeth, focused on social services, education, and economic and workforce development. It sought to reform systems and funding streams to prevent poverty, rather than simply ameliorate it, and it created opportunities and capacity for neighborhood-based decision making.

Unlike the federal government's anti-poverty programs, which were formulaic and narrowly focused, the new initiatives supported community organizations that worked on multiple issues and knew how to build on residents' strengths. Proponents called this new approach "community building." Community building was premised on the belief that residents of neglected and economically isolated neighborhoods were valuable agents of change who needed help rebuilding their connections to the larger society.

Community-building initiatives were more flexible than previous efforts, giving local partners a chance to develop new skills and strategies at their own pace. Although they promoted the same themes across sites, they allowed variation in how the ideas were implemented, to ensure that the changes were locally relevant. And they pursued comprehensive, rather than siloed, solutions.

## **Political, Practical, and Philanthropic Factors Sow the Seeds of Change**

A convergence of factors prepared the ground for NCBN. **Nationally**, the election of President Bill Clinton in 1992 gave social change advocates new optimism. Under Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, old and new anti-poverty strategies gained attention, including Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities and the Hope VI public housing revitalization program. New information about the nature of poverty, and new statistics on the long-ignored population that social scientist William Julius Wilson called the “underclass,” underscored the importance of improving social infrastructure in neglected communities. And, while everyone knew how hard it was to change the trajectories of long-disenfranchised people and communities, there was a widespread sense that it was *possible* to do so. “We felt we had learned from the mistakes of the past. The country was poised to try new approaches,” an observer says.

**Programs and practices**, meanwhile, were changing as the leaders and staff of community development corporations (CDCs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) realized that they needed to work smarter and better to achieve results at a scale that could withstand long-term socioeconomic pressures. This meant that CDCs couldn’t just build homes and create opportunities for small businesses; bricks-and-mortar solutions moved too slowly and reached too few people to revitalize an entire community. So some CDC leaders began to build out their operations into more integrated activities, such as housing plus economic development, services, community organizing, or education. Meanwhile, CBO leaders—many of whom were already involved in community mobilizing—were becoming more politically savvy. They began to forge partnerships outside low-income communities, especially with state legislators and directors of public assistance, human services, transportation, and other agencies.

Still, the nonprofit field remained fragmented, notes Anne Kubisch, NCBN board member and co-director of the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change: “You had some strong institutions but not coherence, because the funding came from different sources. There was insularity around actions, not comprehensiveness. That led to the treatment of symptoms, not an attempt to get at root causes.”

In **communities**, there was a growing demand for networks that would link the diverse array of community leaders, practitioners, organizations, advocates, and community groups. “There was a real desire to get outside the traditional siloed disciplines,” says Fabio Naranjo, who worked with nonprofit service providers and settlement houses before joining the MacArthur Foundation. Community residents and activists, meanwhile, had begun to insist on a significant role in rebuilding their own neighborhoods. Grassroots groups were growing more sophisticated, organized, and assertive than in the past—better (if not yet fully) able to work alongside CBOs, CDCs, and other program and service providers.



On the **grantmaking** side, community-focused strategies had caught the attention of some major funders. Jim Gibson, then-Director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Persistent Poverty Program, saw his foundation's Community Planning and Action Program as a way for community organizations to help mend the frayed social fabric, develop skills and capacities, and influence local policy—all in ways that were entrepreneurial, data-driven, results-oriented, and racially and culturally relevant. At the Annie E. Casey Foundation, program officers Sandy Jibrell and Garland Yates experimented with bypassing the intermediary organizations, working directly with grassroots resident groups and front-line practitioners of community change. And in the Ford Foundation's Neighborhood Family Initiative, as at other foundations, people began using the phrase “community building” to explain both their strategy and its intended outcome. “There was a sense that the whole field was shifting toward a comprehensive [community-oriented] approach, which everyone agreed made good sense,” a researcher recalls.

### **The Driving Force: Working and Learning Together**

Community building seemed like a good concept in the early 1990s, but few people understood how to translate the ideas into action. As interest in the approach grew, so did the demand for a way to swap ideas and innovations among work sites and across initiatives. Although each foundation had its own strategy for tackling urban poverty, and each initiative operated in different cities and cultures, all aimed at improving outcomes for children and families. All had something to teach and much to learn. And all needed to develop a new type of front-line practitioner—someone who had the capacity to look across social services and community development and to build an organic force for change within the community, a person who looked for mutually reinforcing opportunities and connections.

The closest match for these needs, at the time, was the community development framework promoted by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Enterprise Foundation. These national entities offered coherence, expertise, and opportunities for networking and information exchange that funders and practitioners valued. Increasingly, however, the community development field focused on the construction of physical buildings rather than on the social changes targeted by “community builders.” Concerned about that trend, program staff from the Rockefeller, Ford, and Annie E. Casey foundations convened representatives from their community-building initiatives (15 sites from the three foundation's initiatives), major social research organizations, and the funders' program staff for a discussion called *Building Strong Communities: Strategies for Urban Change*.

The conference occurred in May 1992. Although it was held in Cleveland, recent riots in Los Angeles—sparked by the acquittal of white police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King during his arrest in one of the city's poorest areas—infused the event with a fresh sense of urgency. Moreover, the deliberate mixing of funders, practitioners, and social scientists at the conference opened participants' eyes to the many ways that one might address persistent, corrosive poverty at the community level. Don Crary, then the executive director of New Futures for Youth in Little Rock, AR, and now a senior member of Casey's staff, later described the experience this way:

*[New Futures] had started with a very top-down collaborative model, [but] we met people at the meeting who had started at the neighborhood level and they were struggling with, 'How do we leverage money, how do we get attention from those at the top?'—questions we had already answered, at least to some extent. So it was clear [that] . . . we had to work in the neighborhoods and work at the system level; work with the movers and shakers and work with the residents. We had to be the bridge between those sectors. (The Eye of the Storm, 1998)*

Despite their differences, the conference participants all believed it was possible for poor communities to change course, that the “rotten outcomes” their residents experienced needn’t be inevitable. By building on the relationships forged in Cleveland across initiatives and foundations; by enabling more—and more meaningful—conversations between practitioners and funders; by expanding the group to include others with an interest in community building; and by using this new network to spread promising practices as they emerged, it just might be possible to give community builders a unified and influential voice.

And so, in 1993, the National Community Building Network was born. In addition to the co-sponsors of the Cleveland conference—Rockefeller, Casey, and Ford—NCBN’s early supporters included the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, New York Community Trust, and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, all of which had comprehensive community-building initiatives in play.

## **NCBN’s Purpose and Approach**

NCBN’s mission was both simple and ambitious: **To promote and advance community-building principles, in practice and policy, to achieve social and economic equity for all children and families.**<sup>1</sup> Recalls Jim Gibson, now a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy:

*We aspired to bring about a national voice for what we perceived as a de facto critical mass of activity [that was] highly dispersed in communities around the country and inherently inchoate. We did not want a uniform blueprint for action; the diversity reflected important differences among and between communities. But we believed we should seek out . . . unanimity of opinions and make that case more effectively nationally.*

NCBN aimed to fulfill its mission “by increasing the number of community builders throughout the United States and by strengthening the capacity of people and organizations engaged in community-building work . . . to more effectively stimulate lasting improvements in the social, political and economic life of the communities in which they work.”<sup>2</sup> Some of NCBN’s designers held one more expectation: that the network would seek out and promote the positive contributions that grassroots organizations—which other organizations largely ignored—could make in their communities.

1. Accessed at [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org), October 2005.

2. *Ibid.*

NCBN's designers specified a four-part strategy for reaching their goals:<sup>3</sup> **Convene community builders** to share lessons, learn about promising practices used elsewhere, network with peers who face similar challenges, and celebrate their achievements. **Provide information and connections** to people and resources that can support community builders and their work. **Address policy issues** that affect community building, both by helping members respond to urgent situations and by building knowledge for advocacy over the long term. **Partner with other groups** designed to reduce poverty and increase social and economic opportunities in low-income communities, to gain access to additional expertise and experience. The extent to which each piece of the strategy played out, and the path it took, are the topics of Chapter II.

3. Adapted from [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org), October 2005.



## II. ACTIVITIES AND MEMBERSHIP: WHAT NCBN DID, AND WITH WHOM

NCBN began with 45 to 50 program staff from the 15 cities that, collectively, constituted *New Futures*, the *Neighborhood and Family Initiative*, and *Community Planning and Action Programs*; and staff from the supporting foundations. The Network grew slowly over the next decade, mostly by word of mouth. After peaking at 800, membership stabilized around 600.

Most of NCBN's early members were like-minded individuals affiliated with community organizations—either nonprofit ones involved with community housing, youth programs, job training, economic development, or community health; faith organizations that shared the community-building mission; or grassroots groups that worked to mobilize and organize neighborhood residents. In addition, NCBN attracted social researchers, evaluators, and analysts from universities and policy research organizations, such as the Urban Institute and the Aspen Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives, who were trying to understand community dynamics and their implications for complex community change. Representatives from the government and the private sector also joined, along with a growing number of people who lived in the neighborhoods involved in community change.

Junious Williams, Jr., CEO of Urban Strategies Council and an NCBN board member, describes the membership as “an evolving set of concentric circles” that changed as NCBN matured:

*Originally, it was . . . the people who were doing the work on the ground and the people supporting them. Over time, it expanded to include folks who were working with the funded organizations—a number of intermediary organizations that were providing various types of support. It kept building out [to include] anyone else who was involved in this work, in the communities and to some extent nationally, who might inform and learn from the discussion.*

The diversity of NCBN's membership appealed to people who wanted to erase programmatic boundaries. NCBN Board Member Sarah Gores recalls being “really energized” by that aspect of the organization. “I was just a couple of years out of college and excited about trying new things,” says Gores, who had been a community organizer for AmeriCorps and was interested in the nexus between youth leadership and community development. “What intrigued me was that NCBN was a national group of people but they were working at such a fundamental, grassroots level. Before I joined NCBN, I felt that community building had to happen from the ground up—and yet I struggled with knowing it also has to involve some higher-level leadership to make it sustainable.”

NCBN was poised to help Gores and others bridge that gap. Moreover, although the members had different priorities, techniques, and terminology, they seemed to share a consistent belief “in the power and potential of neighborhood residents to take charge of their own communities and their own lives.”<sup>4</sup>

4. Accessed at [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org).

Not everyone thought NCBN was as diverse as needed to be, however. Some members, like Garland Yates, were more concerned with mobilizing community residents to take action than with reforming services and systems, and they thought NCBN lacked a true grassroots perspective. “A lot of the players were very involved in communities but they were people with sizeable grants from the foundations, intermediaries who worked on policies at a regional or national level—not frontline practitioners,” says Yates, an independent consultant and former senior associate for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. He

### **NCBN’S PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING**

**Integrate community development and human service strategies.** Traditional anti-poverty efforts have separated “bricks and mortar” projects from those that help families and develop human capital. Each approach needs the other to be successful.

**Require racial equity.** Racism remains a barrier to a fair distribution of resources and opportunities in our society. Our work promotes equity for all groups.

**Value cultural strengths.** Our efforts promote the values and history of our many cultural traditions and ethnic groups.

**Forge partnerships through collaboration.** Building community requires work by all sectors—local residents, community-based organizations, businesses, schools, religious institutions, health and social service agencies—in an atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and respect. It takes time and committed work to make such collaboration more than rhetoric.

**Start from local conditions.** There is no cookie-cutter approach to building community. The best efforts flow from and adapt to local realities.

**Support families and children.** Strong families are the cornerstone of strong communities. Community-building efforts help families help themselves.

**Build on community strengths.** Past efforts to improve community life have too often addressed problems or deficits. Community-building efforts should build on local capacities and assets.

**Foster broad community participation.** Many community programs have become professionalized and alienated from the people they serve. New programs and policies must be shaped by community residents.

Source: [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org)

and others pushed NCBN to define itself more formally and deliberately as a structure for frontline workers and groups dedicated to working with neighborhood residents. And, over time, the membership base did shift to primarily those constituencies.

NCBN served its members through four main activities: the development of principles for community building; conferences and convenings; policy analysis, discussion, and advocacy; and training provided through various media.

## **Development of Principles**

When NCBN's early members met and discussed their ideas, it became clear that "community building" meant many things to many people. Not only was the concept broad, the language used to capture it varied widely. One of the first tasks NCBN tackled, therefore, was to clarify and promote some guiding principles for community building (see box on page 11).

It was exciting for NCBN members to finally capture on paper the elements most important to the people working on the front lines of community change—elements that more powerful players rarely recognized as legitimate. NCBN's development of principles was also a spirited process because it spotlighted the role of race, class, culture, and entrenched power in creating and maintaining poverty. "There was a little tension in talking about the notion of community change, but it was positive tension—the kind that happens when you exchange ideas and really get into the issues," a participant remembers.

The principles that emerged from these discussions, crafted into a statement by writer Joan Walsh, blended the best thinking from human services reform, neighborhood revitalization, and community organizing. The Network publicized the principles widely, infusing them into both public dialogue and private practice.

NCBN's principles appealed to a broad set of practitioners across the country, says Ray Colmenar, vice chair of NCBN's board and now a senior program officer at the California Endowment. By distilling and promoting the principles, "the Network went from being a handful of similar initiatives to [an organization of] initiatives with defined principles and elements of community building, and a larger group of practitioners began to see themselves as community builders." Adds Sheri Dunn Berry, NCBN's long-time executive director, "It was the development and sharing of those principles that helped cement NCBN as an important entity."

## **Conferences and Convenings**

Beginning in 1993, NCBN convened its members and other community builders—first twice a year and then annually—for face-to-face discussions about their work and underlying values. The conferences, attended by 600 to 800 people, were held in cities involved in community-building activities, such as Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, New York, and Los Angeles. NCBN also held a few smaller, regional convenings on policy issues, such as equitable development and ex-offenders' re-entry into communities.

## ANATOMY OF AN NCBN CONFERENCE

A typical NCBN annual conference lasted three days. Day One began with preconference sessions on such practical topics as philanthropic trends in community building, communication strategies for policy advocacy, and activities designed to help young people and veterans of the civil rights movement understand each other's perspective on community change. Then, after a snack of cookies and coffee, the opening session began with a welcoming statement from NCBN's leaders and a keynote address.

After the opening speeches, which in 2003 included one by former community organizer and state senator Barack Obama, participants rode tour buses to a reception held at a strategically selected location. (Conference planners and participants preferred receptions to formal meals because they are more conducive to networking and because caterers from the community could provide much of the food.) At the 2003 conference in Chicago, for instance, planners chose Garfield Park, a redeveloping neighborhood, for the reception site.

Day Two featured a menu of about 20 interactive workshops, presented by NCBN members to their peers, punctuated by a sit-down luncheon with a speaker. The sessions clustered around a half-dozen themes such as "Overcoming Economic and Social Isolation," "Promoting Equitable Development," and "Using Technology to Build Community Connections and Social Capital." Workshop topics might include combating predatory lending, asset-based community development, mobilizing residents, and faith-based collaborations. Loosely structured, facilitated roundtable discussions offered a chance to address topics not on the agenda.

Participants dined on their own that evening, but NCBN organizers arranged dinner groups for those who came alone. "We were very intentional about making sure that people got connected, especially people who were shy and hadn't traveled a lot," explains Sheri Dunn Berry. "We recruited folks with good social skills to roam the rooms and reach out to people; we played ice-breaking games, like human Bingo. We provided conference 'mentors'—people who had been to two or more NCBN conferences—who would touch base with you after the sessions and go to dinner with you."

On Day Three, participants visited a local neighborhood—not by riding a tour bus but by taking public transportation to one of 10 walking tours that reflected one of the conference themes. At the 2003 conference in Chicago, for instance, locations ranged from the South Shore to Cabrini-Green, the West Side, Humboldt Park, and the uptown area. "We always talked with people doing the work in the community and we always ate lunch at a local restaurant," Berry says. "We would invite people from the community to eat with us and tell us about their neighborhood."

Back at the hotel, tour participants debriefed on the experience. The conference closed with a ceremony at which people shared what they had learned—followed, naturally, by one last reception.

NCBN's conferences emphasized networking—a valuable opportunity for people who often were the sole community builders in their professional or geographic area. “Getting to know people across the U.S. was important not just for me personally but also for my organization,” says Thomas Watson, co-founder of the Center for Participatory Change in rural North Carolina. “We were able to come into contact with funders, with nationally known, seasoned leaders . . . we were able to branch out.”

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*“There was an intangible feel at the conferences that we are all part of a larger movement.”*

—Sarah Gores

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The mentoring and mutually supportive relationships that formed at NCBN conferences paid off in many ways over the years, says Watson, whose membership led to a position on the Network's board and then a job with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In isolated areas like Appalachia, he observes, “there wasn't an opportunity to sit down with people like Anne Kubisch, Xav Briggs, Joe McNeeley, Gus Newport, Sheri Dunn Berry . . . who had been doing this work for a long time from lots of different angles, and who really cared about bringing along a new set of leaders.”

Networking also helped counteract the tendency to work only with organizations similar to one's own. “Maybe other people weren't doing anything like what you were doing, but meeting them broadened your perspective,” notes board member Eliza Carney, the former director of a nonprofit anti-hunger agency. “I was blown away by the first conference I went to.” Carney continues:

*The collection of people was so diverse, racially, age-wise, economically, and in terms of professional fields. I usually came alone, because my agency was very small, and I didn't know anybody. But you could just sit down at a table and people would talk to you. There weren't any cliques, as there often are at conferences.*

In one sense, the annual conferences helped to position the Network as a hub of new ideas. The planning process, which involved many NCBN members, became a forum for identifying innovative work. Conference sessions, meanwhile, were a place to explore the work from fresh perspectives—especially those of people working “in the field.” During one workshop, for example, some young people in the back of the room criticized the practice under discussion. The moderator recalls inviting them to join the panel, and they spent the rest of the session talking about ways to involve youth in community change.

Planners also tried to make the content relevant by using the host city as a laboratory. Many sessions took participants out of the hotel and into the community to talk with community leaders, residents, local funders, and government officials. “I didn't fully appreciate the human scale of community building until we started touring programs,” recalls Sheri Dunn Berry:

*We would put people on buses to go see the work, and we got them off the buses and into the heart of what was going on. It was very humbling to see what community building really looks like in action—and, as in the civil rights movement, how many unsung people were the engine for change.*



As NCBN's membership changed, however, matching conference content to participants' needs grew challenging. The conferences "were aimed at a common denominator," says one observer, and that audience increasingly featured new frontline practitioners. "Veterans [of the community-building movement] had to go elsewhere for substantive content and skill development . . . because there was a decision not to offer a bifurcated track," the observer says. Board member Emanuel Freeman, however, sees the issue slightly differently. The grassroots constituency "forced us to have discussions about practical things," he says. "For example, when we engaged in discussion about systemic change we had to recognize it is something organizations need to do locally and regionally rather than nationally or globally. We realized you can't always change things at the macro level."

### **Policy Analysis, Discussion, and Advocacy**

NCBN was still a new organization when, in 1995, Newt Gingrich persuaded the U.S. House of Representatives to adopt the Contract with America, a legislative movement that devolved authority from the federal government to state and local policy makers. Just a year later, the Clinton Administration spearheaded major reforms to the welfare system—and the optimism that had accompanied the election of 1992 faded. Both moves significantly reduced the federal role in poverty prevention and alleviation programs, and both had profound implications for people and organizations operating social and economic development programs in poor communities.

NCBN formed a policy committee and working groups to help analyze the changes, inform Network members of their potential impact, and advocate appropriate responses. NCBN also identified federal policies and programs, such as the Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community economic development program and the HOPE VI housing revitalization program, that showed promise for boosting the economic vitality of low-income communities while pursuing the goals and principles of community building. Local participants in these programs were invited to join the Network so others could learn from their experiences.<sup>5</sup>

NCBN developed several vehicles for sharing the knowledge, including an electronic newsletter, website, and listserv. Listserv members received frequent policy alerts about upcoming issues; examples of successful practices in use; and invitations to join online discussions on topics emerging as important at the community level, such as gentrification, displacement of poor residents, and land banking. The online dialogue about gentrification, in fact, was so active that it prompted convenings in

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*The listserv "was quite a learning experience, because the foundation world hadn't picked up on some of the topics yet. It was practitioners talking about what was going on all around the country. It was the real deal."*

—Fabio Naranjo

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5. Accessed at [www.ncbn.org](http://www.ncbn.org).

Denver and Kansas City where participants explored the concept of fair and equitable neighborhood development. The discussion “brought a lot of community builders to a common platform of understanding, because not all of them did development work,” observes Junious Williams.

NCBN leaders also reached out to national leaders like Henry Cisneros, who had been involved with community-building work in San Antonio and served on the Rockefeller Foundation board before becoming Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and Peter Edelman, counselor to the Secretary of Health and Human Services. But the effort to influence federal policy had only minimal success, recalls someone who was closely involved:

*We felt the Empowerment Zones reflected some of the value of comprehensiveness, and we were hopeful we could build on that base in government to [promote] a multidisciplinary approach and to make the federal government more responsive. And what we found out was that the turf issues between key federal departments were powerful and not easily overcome, even with high-level interaction with agency officials. The culture didn't exist for that kind of collaboration. We also had delegations going to visit members of Congress, but . . . people weren't ready to give up [the] jurisdictions that existed in the House committees.*

## Training

After years of building members' capacity indirectly, NCBN leaders decided to offer explicit training that would orient newcomers to the concepts and principles of community building. In 2001–02, they hired consultants to develop “Community Building 101,” an informal workshop to be delivered at the annual NCBN conference. Technical assistance provider Marc McDaniel, who helped to develop the training, later converted the material into a formal curriculum that could be delivered as either a half-day session or an in-depth course spanning several days. Participants liked the course, but by the time it joined the NCBN toolbox the Network's funding had diminished and it never fulfilled its potential as a capacity- and field-building strategy.

For the first five years or so, NCBN's activities met a core set of needs for many community builders and attracted a growing membership. Nonetheless, the organization floundered as some of the community-building movement's key players disagreed over the Network's purpose. “There were two competing ideas about NCBN's central function,” explains Sheri Dunn Berry:

*The first was that we ought to primarily support the people who are doing this work so they could be more effective. That is, we wanted to help the helpers by giving them a peer support network and making sure they had tools and techniques for communicating, organizing, and developing policy.*

*The other strand of thought was that NCBN needed to impact policy in this country. Rather than focusing on being a feel-good network for practitioners, as an organization we should have been more dedicated to changing America through hard-hitting policy [work]. Of course, NCBN could have supported practitioners and done more to effect policy change, but not with the structure, funding,*

*and staff we had at that time. I didn't fully appreciate how many resources were needed to accomplish each of these goals. We were trying to do it all with too little, and it wasn't working.*

Around 1999, NCBN's board of directors went through a strategic planning process and ultimately concluded that NCBN was better suited to supporting practitioners than to engaging in policy advocacy—a decision that deeply disappointed some people. Several of the organization's original funders, who felt they already had adequate support networks, dropped away from NCBN. Simultaneously, a majority of board members decided that NCBN would better reflect the interests and concerns of frontline community builders if it invited more community activists, neighborhood residents, and grassroots organizations into the Network. These changes helped to shape NCBN's focus and contributions for the rest of the Network's existence.



### III. NCBN'S STRENGTHS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

People who knew NCBN well say that the organization was valuable at many levels: for the community-building field overall, for individuals and organizations, for community-change initiatives, and for people outside the nonprofit and philanthropic world.

#### Contributions to the Concepts, Values, and Practices of the Community-Building Field

NCBN helped establish the value of comprehensiveness and the importance of integrated programs. By insisting that we all seek the same outcome—strong communities—whether we are building houses, organizations, or leaders, NCBN helped people and organizations move from a narrowly defined, siloed approach to a broader and better-integrated view of community change.

NCBN codified and promoted the core principles of community building. The process for developing the principles was thoughtful and broadly inclusive. The principles themselves established important values for working in and with communities. And NCBN's emphasis on the principles created shared expectations for how community builders would operate and what outcomes they would seek.

NCBN put the concept of community building on the map. It broadened awareness that the social, civic, and political dimensions of community improvement are as important as programs and services. "Community building," once an obscure and poorly understood term, became ubiquitous in the social science canon. As the concept, principles, and language spread, they were taken up by a broad spectrum of scholars, public officials, community stakeholders, and philanthropists. And, as terms like "social capital," "diversity," and "empowerment" took hold in those arenas, NCBN helped to operationalize them on the ground.

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*"Community building was based on notions that were much more grounded in the local political economy than traditional community development was. It spoke more explicitly to issues of social capital, social networks, political empowerment, community mobilizing and organizing, and community authenticity in the outcomes of the work."*

—Darren Walker

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NCBN "alumni" infused community-building concepts into many organizations and activities. NCBN's members used what they learned through the Network to refine their work and their professions. Thus, for example, evaluations of community-change initiatives became less about a narrow,

methodological agenda and much more about capturing the complex human, social, and political aspects of the community-change process. Funders began to shift their focus from multiple short-term interventions to more strategic, long-term investments and from foundation-sponsored to foundation-supported change, leaving more room for local entrepreneurship and more chance for lasting success. Technical assistance became more about bringing various skills together in the service of community improvement than about bestowing drive-by expertise.

## Value to Individuals and Organizations

NCBN gave grassroots practitioners—an important but previously ignored and isolated constituency—their own forum for learning and professional growth. Hundreds of frontline participants expressed their gratitude, through conference feedback and personal notes, for having a forum where they could learn from their peers, share information, and receive validation for their work. Community change is hard and sometimes draining work. NCBN events, however, celebrated community builders and helped them feel like part of a larger movement. People found new jobs and even careers by talking with fellow members. They used their connections to get good ideas off the ground across the country. And, when their optimism flagged, members found comfort in NCBN’s unwavering position that community building works—even in places with few recognized experts, structures, or other resources. For many, the Network became a place to “recharge batteries.”

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*“The biggest way in which NCBN influenced my work was through the inspiration I got from meeting so many people doing wonderful work in communities across the country. It was the people and their stories and innovative approaches that I took away and utilized.”*

—Cheryl Casciani

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NCBN’s support was just as important for participants from well-endowed institutions that were new to community building. Sandy Jibrell, who joined the Annie E. Casey Foundation to work on its Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI) at about the time NCBN started, found that her participation in the Network bolstered the credibility of this new strategy within the foundation:

*The idea of drawing on best practices and data from the field is embedded in Casey’s family-building and system reform work. But community building wasn’t validated by a whole field of research, so I needed NCBN. I could bring back to the foundation the tenets and undergirding principles of community building and then talk about RCI in those terms.*

NCBN reduced the boundaries between people involved in social work, community development, and community organizing. As members realized that they were all working toward the same goals, and as they began to understand each other’s strengths and constraints, the differences among profes-

sions became less significant. “We began to have conversations across silos, using the common language of ‘community building’ and all that it encompasses,” recalls one participant. Another adds, “We moved from a discussion about bricks and mortar to a broader framing of how you work with the people who occupy the bricks and mortar.”

**NCBN brought grant makers and grant seekers together to learn from each other.** Where else could a CDC director from Appalachia or an activist from the poorest area of Detroit sit with a foundation president or a famous scholar for a candid conversation about mutual concerns? The conversations fostered a symbiotic relationship: Funders learned that they might have greater impact if they invested in people, programs, and projects they had overlooked or ignored in the past, while practitioners learned how funders make decisions and had a chance to influence their choices.

**NCBN made a diverse membership feel welcome and included.** The Network’s directors and staff were conscious of creating “a space that was very inclusive, with a great sense of community,” notes Ray Col-

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*“Before the convening, people didn’t want to cross racial or cultural lines. After three or four days there, it was different. People started sharing approaches across neighborhoods back here in Kansas City—things like how to get consensus, how to work with City Hall. You can’t buy that kind of change in a training session . . . They’re so much stronger now.”*

—Jerry Kitzi

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*“We were inspired by the successes we learned about at NCBN conferences and also warned about what not to do. We learned through other NCBN members the danger of going public with successes too soon, about being overly concerned about public relations.”*

—Eric Brettschneider

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menar. “It was very appealing to leaders and practitioners of color.”

**NCBN provided a national audience for local organizations.** NCBN was a place where practitioners could get feedback, demonstrate how their work fit in with other initiatives, and build a national following.

**NCBN helped members hone their skills, knowledge, and capacities.** Planners viewed the annual conference as a tool for professional development; workshop topics covered the spectrum from “using dialogue to make change” to mobilizing faith institutions and converting community developers into community builders. Respondents to post-conference surveys said they acquired many practical techniques from NCBN, including

family/study circles, Dialogue in Action, Walk a Mile, and the People Map (a tool for youth organizing).

NCBN “enabled me and my organization to think outside the box,” explains Emanuel Freeman, the president and CEO of Germantown Settlement:

*For example, one convening focused on sustainability issues. Now, foundations have a predetermined timeframe for certain changes, but the reality is that things don't happen that way in the real world. So we had a discussion about engaging in more strategic planning [for] ways to sustain our initiatives once they get started. That dialogue led us to . . . relationships with people who had dealt with [sustainability] challenges in their cities and neighborhoods. And out of that came a more aggressive and tailored effort to consciously develop the capacity to sustain this work over the long haul.*

Similarly, membership on NCBN’s board of directors was a chance for grassroots practitioners to learn professional leadership skills. Unlike many other organizations, NCBN allowed any member to run for election to its board. As a result, the Network’s board was always more diverse than that of any other national organization, in terms of race, age, geographic location, political ideology, expertise, and so on. Moreover, people who were elected to NCBN’s board became more skillful and effective governors.

**NCBN facilitated learning and bonding within organizations.** Some directors brought large groups of staff to NCBN conferences, which made it easier to apply new ideas after returning home. Jerry Kitzi,

#### **NCBN INTERACTIONS WERE CANDID AND EYE-OPENING**

The experience Fabio Naranjo had at his first NCBN conference may be typical. Naranjo, now a senior researcher at the Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions at Florida Atlantic University, was a program officer at the MacArthur Foundation when he attended his first NCBN conference. “It knocked me off my socks,” Naranjo recalls:

*The first day I sat at a table where everyone else was from CBOs and CDCs. They started pounding on me. It was relentless. They said, ‘People in the foundations don't understand what's going on in the real world. We're struggling out there but resources aren't going to the people doing the real work.’ And that actually felt good, because frankly there are plenty of people in the funding community who are wasting time, energy, and resources . . .*

*I came back to MacArthur very energized. It pumped me up for the work I was doing in Chicago. [I became] more demanding within MacArthur to make sure we were true to what we were intending to do—to work with CBOs that were doing good work but had not received resources.*

former chair of NCBN's board and former vice president of the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, arranged for almost 100 people from Kansas City, MO, to attend an NCBN conference. The participants—including CBO staff, neighborhood residents, a community activist, and a church pastor—met before the conference to talk about what to expect and what to look for in conference sessions. During the conference, they went out of their way to meet new colleagues but also emphasized their bond by wearing matching t-shirts. After the conference, Kitzi's group met again to discuss what they had learned.

## **Value to Foundations and their Initiatives**

**NCBN enabled funders to interact directly with practitioners.** Through the Network, funders heard how their actions played out in communities, from community members. Many subsequently realized that it wasn't enough to invest in a system reform model if the neighborhood served by the system was unsafe or in decline. By connecting their broad, national, or systems-level work to the reality of what happens on the ground, funders strengthened their analyses and their programs. "NCBN urged us, as we were thinking about our work with legal, civil rights, and employment organizations, to be mindful of the importance of community-based institutions," notes Darren Walker, director of domestic programs for Rockefeller.

**NCBN helped to infuse community-development initiatives with the principles and terminology of community building; it encouraged people to look not just at poor communities' deficits but at their strengths.** As funders began to recognize the resources, ideas, and hopes within communities that are building blocks for change, foundations' models for community change became more asset-oriented. The principles honoring authentic local ownership, equity, sensitivity to racial and cultural issues, and the voice and participation of neighborhood residents took hold in many initiatives.

**NCBN incubated new and better strategies.** In the early 1990s, several big community-change initiatives existed but people weren't distilling, sharing, or learning from their experiences. NCBN turned a spotlight on what was happening and what it meant, and it encouraged the designers, funders, and implementers of initiatives to rethink and refine their approaches.

As an example, Gibson points to the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness in Washington, D.C., whose leader was an early participator in NCBN. She made sure her staff attended Network events and absorbed the sense of experimentation and entrepreneurship that prevailed. The Partnership subsequently helped to develop a national coalition against homelessness and an information management system that matches the needs of homeless populations with available resources. "Without NCBN and the exchange of ideas, the intellectual ferment, I don't think they would have been exposed to those ideas," Gibson says.

**NCBN promoted the idea that community building means investing in both people and places.** The notion that child, family, and community outcomes are intertwined spread across the foundations that participated in the Network.



## Contribution to Perceptions Outside the Nonprofit and Philanthropic World

NCBN participants have mixed views about the extent to which their organization influenced perceptions of community building outside the nonprofit and philanthropic world. NCBN did create a language and framework for thinking about community work and for incorporating its principles into a variety of agendas. The shift in thinking that occurred among practitioners probably contributed to changes in the curricula of schools of social work, says researcher Prue Brown, a former program officer for the Ford Foundation.

“They may call it leadership development or empowerment, but practitioners are much more aware now of looking at how communities work,” Brown says. And people who worked in the communities near NCBN conference sites experienced some lasting effects. For example, the process of planning for a conference created new relationships among local practitioners that generally lasted well beyond the conference.

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*“I’m not sure a whole bunch of people have adopted a true community-building model, but I think a lot of people found it useful in understanding what they want to get done.”*

—Garland Yates

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Still, it’s hard to trace major impacts of NCBN beyond the immediate circle of members and conference participants. As Junious Williams acknowledges, “We tended to focus on the choir, and they were already in the house of worship. Broader outreach didn’t happen. . . . Even with community organizers, we should have built much better bridges.”

## IV. LESSONS AND OBSERVATIONS

**F**rom its inception until its end, the National Community Building Network was all about learning—from challenges and mistakes as well as from successes. In that spirit, we offer the following lessons.<sup>6</sup>

### What it Takes to . . . Promote and Support Community Building as an Integral Part of Community Initiatives

**Lead with principles.** NCBN’s persistent emphasis on the principles of community building persuaded many groups to adopt the approach explicitly; many more absorbed the principles by osmosis. As a result, funders began to incorporate community-building practices into their initiatives at the most fundamental level. The MacArthur Foundation’s work in Chicago is a good example: The foundation involved community organizers in a multi-million-dollar grant to LISC for housing development, to ensure that the work had a community-building element.

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*“Be very clear about what the values are. Put them out front, and make sure they’re always adhered to.”*

—Thomas Watson

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**Take a multifaceted approach.** In addition to providing conferences and services for members, NCBN worked closely with such established institutions as LISC, the Enterprise Foundation, Jobs for Justice, the Aspen Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives (now the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change), and the Corporation for Supportive Housing to spread the principles and strategies of community building. A multifaceted approach is especially important when the concept being promoted lacks empirical evidence of its ability to produce tangible outcomes, as community building did. In that environment, an observer notes, “Certain kinds of audiences and strategies are off the table. You can’t go to [a traditional funder] and say, this is the model for practice that’s the best. All you can say is, if you want to do community building, here’s *how* you do it.”

**Reduce barriers to participation.** NCBN was accessible and welcoming, not just to program directors and staff but to everyday community leaders. The site visits and networking activities at conferences brought people together without regard to their social or professional status. The diversity represented on workshop panels was genuine, not “tokenizing.” And the Network heavily subsidized the cost of membership and conference attendance for a significant number of people, making it possible for people from the smallest organizations and remotest locations to participate.

6. These lessons and observations do not represent the consensus opinion of all NCBN members, or even of the entire NCBN board. They are distilled from the views of an assortment of NCBN directors, staff, members, observers, and critical friends.

**Cultivate the next generation of leaders but keep pace with the needs of current ones.** Too often, an NCBN board member notes, “We stick to our own cohorts and the folks we already know. It’s important to create space for those who are just beginning this work to connect with the seasoned leaders.” NCBN did that quite well. According to some observers, however, it did not do as good a job of keeping pace with those leaders’ progressive development. “Over time, the veteran community builders stopped coming to the conferences . . . partly because we made the decision to keep the workshops relevant to people just coming into the field,” notes Junious Williams. “Organizations remained supportive, but they were sending their newest staff.”

**Stay in it for the long haul.** It takes time to improve the social and economic fabric of neglected communities; to address issues of justice, power, and respect; and to transform behaviors and conditions. Therefore, community building demands a sustained effort.

### **What it Takes to . . . Leverage the Power of a Network**

**Develop a systematic agenda for policy analysis and advocacy.** Principles and relationships, while important, will not affect social policy unless people apply them to an agenda for change. During NCBN’s early years, when community building still was an emerging concept, the Network’s singular focus on defining principles and sharing knowledge made sense. It may have been a mistake, however, not to take the next step: connecting the learning and sharing to a policy agenda. NCBN’s listserv involved many scholars and generated robust, interdisciplinary conversation, but it never could “convert social capital to political capital,” as Ray Colmenar puts it.

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*“There were flirtations with policy positions and issues, always done with some ambivalence. The policy stuff was always interesting, but it was challenging to find a position that everyone supported.”*

—NCBN Board Member

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In 2001 and 2003, NCBN members formed a policy committee and workgroups to address such issues as voting and enfranchisement, gentrification, and equitable development. But the Network’s diverse members could not reach consensus on a policy position. And, without a disciplined process for analysis and advocacy, NCBN wasn’t able to share its insights with policy makers and other national thought leaders in any systematic way.

If NCBN had pursued policy change more strategically, it might have lost some members, especially those who worked for public agencies, Junious Williams concedes. However, the move might have attracted a vital alternative audience: people skilled at building a support base around a specific issue. With such a base, NCBN could have acted more effectively when policy-change opportunities occurred. During the first Clinton Administration, for example, when Vice President Gore and HUD strongly supported the idea of community building, “we should have been able to capitalize on [the concept’s]

currency . . . to get it embedded as a way of doing business,” Williams says. Instead, “We couldn’t capture the wave.”

**Partner with other organizations that have capacity and credibility for policy advocacy.** Some people believe that the overriding commitment to practitioners blinded NCBN’s leaders to the importance of developing ties to the people and organizations that fueled the policy world. Outsiders viewed NCBN as an activist organization, not as a key part of the knowledge-building apparatus, an observer says:

*NCBN would have had more impact on policy as an umbrella organization that also included, say, PolicyLink, the Aspen Roundtable, the research world, and the activist piece . . . .It is totally legitimate to focus just on practitioners, and it is a lot to ask of an organization that doesn’t have a lot of clout to take on both [the practice and policy] agendas. But it is awfully hard to write off the need for policy change. The constraints on practice are so policy-driven.*

NCBN did collaborate with a few organizations such as PolicyLink for issue-specific projects, such as a regional convening on gentrification and another on criminal justice issues. But it did not have ongoing partnerships that could give the Network more clout and expertise in the policy arena. By the time the board discussed that option, NCBN was nearing its end.

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*“The community building field has always been schizophrenic because two agendas drive it. One is about community policy, which has roots in the civil rights movement. The other is about changing social outcomes; it is programmatic and has roots in measuring outcomes and in professionalized service delivery. It’s more like an industry than a movement.*

*“It enriches the field to draw on both, but sometimes they compete with each other. I don’t think the field ever consistently generated a good response to people who posed the challenge, ‘This thing that you’re doing on Monday that mobilizes people to go down to the mayor’s office—can you utilize that same strategy on Tuesday to get kids vaccinated?’”*

—Xavier da Souza Briggs

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## What it Takes to . . . Serve a Diverse, Evolving Membership

**Help the organization evolve to match membership changes.** The environment in which community change occurs is always shifting, growing, and diversifying. The same was true for NCBN’s membership. To keep the Network aligned with its members, board members and key staff should have engaged in strategic thinking and problem-solving exercises on a regular basis—and they didn’t. For example, says Anne Kubisch, “It became very clear that . . . the people who would benefit the most really had to have a more engaged role in leadership. Rather than having one conference every year, we needed a more regional approach that enabled people to interact more often and to talk about regional trends and patterns.” However, that would have required more organizational capacity for local outreach and support and for developing regional campaigns around key issues—resources and expertise that NCBN chose not to acquire.

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*“We didn’t move with the field once it had the principles. We didn’t distill the highest levels of practice [for experienced community builders]. We never said how to address and support local community development. We never even articulated our own niche, networking, very well.”*

—NCBN Board Member

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**Involve as many people as possible from each participating organization or community.** Community builders come and go—in nonprofit organizations as budget cuts and burnout take their toll, and in neighborhoods as residents move on. The greater the number of people who understand and use community-building strategies, the more likely it is that the work will survive. Thus there is an advantage in having many collaborators attend the same learning and networking events together.

NCBN responded to this need by keeping dues very low and by heavily subsidizing conference costs, including travel and lodging. These practices enriched the conferences because they opened the door to people who lived and worked in the very communities under discussion. In some locations, they also helped to create a critical mass of people who viewed themselves as community builders.

**Codify the extent of your responsibility to members and share the information with funders.** NCBN’s generous subsidies to members were, in fact, subsidized by the Network’s funders. But NCBN leaders had increasing trouble underwriting conference costs for cash-strapped members, which many viewed as a valuable, if expensive, part of the Network’s strategy. As NCBN’s original funders left their posts or grew tired of advocating for the Network within their foundations, NCBN’s budget shrank—yet the organization kept subsidizing attendance until its resources were gone. “The problem was in not making it clear to funders that this was part of what we were doing,” a board member says.

## What it Takes to . . . Sustain a Concept-based Organization and Its Priorities

**Recognize that networking and peer learning are a fragile basis for sustaining an organization, and attend to that issue up front.** Ralph Smith, senior vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, supported NCBN and continues to be concerned about how much, and how well, the philanthropic field improves its knowledge, tools, and practices. Smith notes that NCBN illustrated both the potential and the pitfalls of such an endeavor. “It’s a fundamentally good idea to find ways for learning from the people engaged in these initiatives,” he says. “But the challenge for us is to figure out how to build sustainable communities of practice.”

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*“It’s very hard to sustain networks that aren’t necessarily about developing tangible, quickly manifested products. And that’s not what NCBN was about.”*

—Darren Walker

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### **Establish a clear and multifaceted identity.**

NCBN excelled at bringing people together for networking and relationship building, promoting a set of principles, and appealing to a broad array of people working in communities. Over time, however, the organization was pigeonholed as “the group that just does convenings.” Some people believe NCBN should have taken a harder line in establishing its identity as an organization that cared about specific issues and policies—perhaps by commissioning papers and other products to augment the networking.

**Market the organization’s ideas broadly and effectively.** If a community applies the NCBN principles to its work, what happens differently? How do local individuals and organizations experience “community building”? Mainstream constituents who may not be at the table, such as organized labor, need the answers to these questions before they will jump on the community-building bandwagon. NCBN leaders say they never met the challenge of marketing to a mainstream audience.

**Be reflective. Take time, early and repeatedly, to discuss and agree on what the organization will and won’t do.** Sheri Dunn Berry now advises start-up nonprofit groups, and one of the first things she tells them to do is to reduce their many worthy goals to a manageable list. “There was so much hope invested in NCBN, we really thought we could do a lot of big things all at once and achieve success with all of them right away,” Berry explains. “We bit off way more than we could chew . . . and when it turned out to be much harder than we thought, there was disappointment.” Among other things, leaders should think creatively about what it will take to sustain their organization—a discussion that, ironically, NCBN’s leaders had about “the field” but not about their own entity.

**Be entrepreneurial.** Sustainable organizations tend to be leanly staffed; focused on a discrete, agreed-upon agenda; nimble and flexible in their approach; and well-aware of their internal strengths and limitations. In many ways, they have the structures and dynamics of a successful business. NCBN, however, did not meet those qualifications. Instead, several board members say, there was a “complacency” and

“self-indulgence” that kept the organization working at a pace and level of intensity too subdued to ensure sustainability.

**Diversify the funding base aggressively, sooner rather than later.** For most of its existence, NCBN relied on a handful of national foundations to pay its bills. By the time NCBN disbanded, conference fees, corporate sponsorships, and individual donations covered about twenty percent of the organization’s expenses. Unfortunately, those new funding sources provided too little support, too late in the game. When the major funders’ priorities changed, the Network had no other large contributors in the pipeline. NCBN might have avoided financial woes by building a broader base of financial support sooner, although that isn’t easy to do for an organization composed of budget-strapped local projects.

**Mobilize the organization’s board around the issue of financial stability.** NCBN board members learned the hard way that leaders must attend to the financial situation before it reaches a crisis and alternative strategies are no longer an option. They also advise recruiting board members periodically who work for other funders and can advocate for the organization from within.

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*“Leaders of entities like NCBN . . . can never see themselves as simply presiding over available resources. If they don’t know how to affect the continuity of those resources . . . then they may be presiding over the organization’s demise.”*

—Jim Gibson

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## V. LOOKING AHEAD

In its heyday, NCBN filled a void. It took an idea that meant all things to all people and gave it a distinctive connotation. It sought consensus around the principles of community building and then espoused the values until they were widely accepted and deeply embedded. It raised issues of race and culture, making them a recognized aspect of social policy rather than an afterthought. It gave fledgling community builders knowledge and leadership experience, preparing them to become the nonprofit and foundation leaders of today. And it gave local practitioners information and ideas, leading to better choices and products.

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*“NCBN’s decline is not a bad thing; it’s an indication that we’ve grown up as a field and a movement. We no longer need an entity to shepherd us. We’re capable of carrying on at a higher level.”*

—NCBN Member

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NCBN also touched people’s spirits. Sheri Dunn Berry says it most eloquently:

*There was palpable joy at our events, a sense of optimism, a sense that we could really tap into the best that everybody had to offer and make some core difference in the way this country deals with . . . people of color, poor people, people who are not educated, and people without power. We created an environment in which not only did those people matter to us but we could make them matter to everybody.*

Nonetheless, circumstances change. Most of the half-dozen national foundations that pioneered community-building initiatives in the 1990s have moved in other directions, taking their money with them. Meanwhile, leaders of local and regional foundations, organizations, and governments have become increasingly involved in community building. In many cities, for example, the housing agency has become the Department of Housing and Community Development, and the mayor has liaisons who work directly with neighborhood leaders, businesses, and residents.

“We’ve gone from a focus on how cities are organized to . . . an emphasis on implementation and transformation,” Sarah Gores notes. “Rather than trying to change the way business is done, now we have to actually *do* the business,” and that requires more local and regional leadership.

Long-time practitioners and advocates of community building are both optimistic and concerned about its future. They are heartened that it is now common practice to include community residents in change efforts (although the quality of involvement still varies); to take a comprehensive, integrated approach;



and to work across programmatic boundaries. There also are strategies and priorities in play today that don't necessarily announce themselves as community building but fit the bill, such as equitable development or civic engagement. "The prognosis for the future is great if someone is able to connect the dots between the community-building agenda and the civic-engagement agenda," says NCBN Board Member Diane Bell McCoy. "In many respects, the disconnect is related to class: community building was related to the poor and disenfranchised, whereas civic engagement is much more related to middle- and working-class citizens."

Angela Glover Blackwell, an early and influential member of NCBN, takes the theme of connecting to broader trends even further:

*With globalization firmly established and the growing trend of "for-profit" or "venture" philanthropy, the economic and funding climates have changed. We can't undo this reality, and we can't ignore it. As community builders, we must connect our local struggles to the global context, and advocate for an equitable focus on people and place along with markets.*

Still, many community-building advocates worry that funders want more market-based strategies than community building can provide; that local governments have absorbed too many budget cuts to consider a new policy agenda; and that, without NCBN around, policy makers and funders will revert from a comprehensive approach to a programmatic one and from a participatory approach to one that is heavy-handed and top-down.

Some, like original NCBN Board Member Ralph Crabbe, worry that no organization or group of individuals is willing to examine the history of community building and talk about what should be done differently to address the enduring issues of poverty and marginalization. "I don't think the field is positioned in any way to strategically address those issues," Crabbe says. Others say there are well-positioned groups that emphasize policy and/or the philanthropic role, but none that attract a large grassroots contingent.

Glover Blackwell is especially aware that "leadership development remains critical:"

*Funders, community builders, and others in the field need to be aggressive about building leadership capacity in low-income communities and communities of color—particularly at the state level, where the pipeline of community-based leaders narrows yet so many important policy and resource-allocation decisions are made.*

Other NCBN members, like Eric Brettschneider, executive director of Agenda for Children Tomorrow, mourn the loss of a venue for face-to-face interaction. "There is a tendency to rely on the Internet for networking and communication and social ties," Brettschneider says. "That, by itself, is not satisfying. Each of your constituents needs to feel that their personal agenda is being pursued, respected, and satisfied."

And so there is still much to be done and supported. NCBN’s leaders, participants, and observers list these priorities for the next phase of work:

- Infuse community-building principles into local policies and practices.
- Apply the community-building values and networks that NCBN fostered to a policy agenda.
- Strengthen local and regional organizations to ensure an infrastructure that can move the policy agenda forward.
- Work to reconcile the two agendas that drive this field: community empowerment and service/system reform.
- Develop the knowledge, capacities, and experience of the next generation of leaders through local and regional networks and learning opportunities.
- Collect and disseminate evidence that community-building strategies work.
- Cultivate partnerships among organizations and across sectors, locally and regionally. Capitalize on the growth of community development corporations and the fact that city governments have become more aligned with community-building strategies.
- Find an alternative national platform to keep community-building issues and campaigns in the public eye. (No single organization is in line to assume NCBN’s role although several could take on portions of the work, including the Advocacy Institute, ABCD Institute, Center for Community Change, Grantmakers in Social Change, PolicyLink, and National Organizers Alliance.)

NCBN came to an end, but it succeeded in achieving its mission. And that is important, because the concept that NCBN promoted transformed people as well as neighborhoods. As Fabio Naranjo observes, “Community building takes the genie out of the bottle [forever]. Once people have a chance to exercise leadership, they’re going to make sure that when things change it’s for the better. And their families and communities are better off for it.”

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*“Community building succeeds when it is the glue, the strength in a community that ties together all of the other efforts made toward community improvement. When that is recognized, then community building will be an established and viable force.”*

—Sandy Jibrell

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