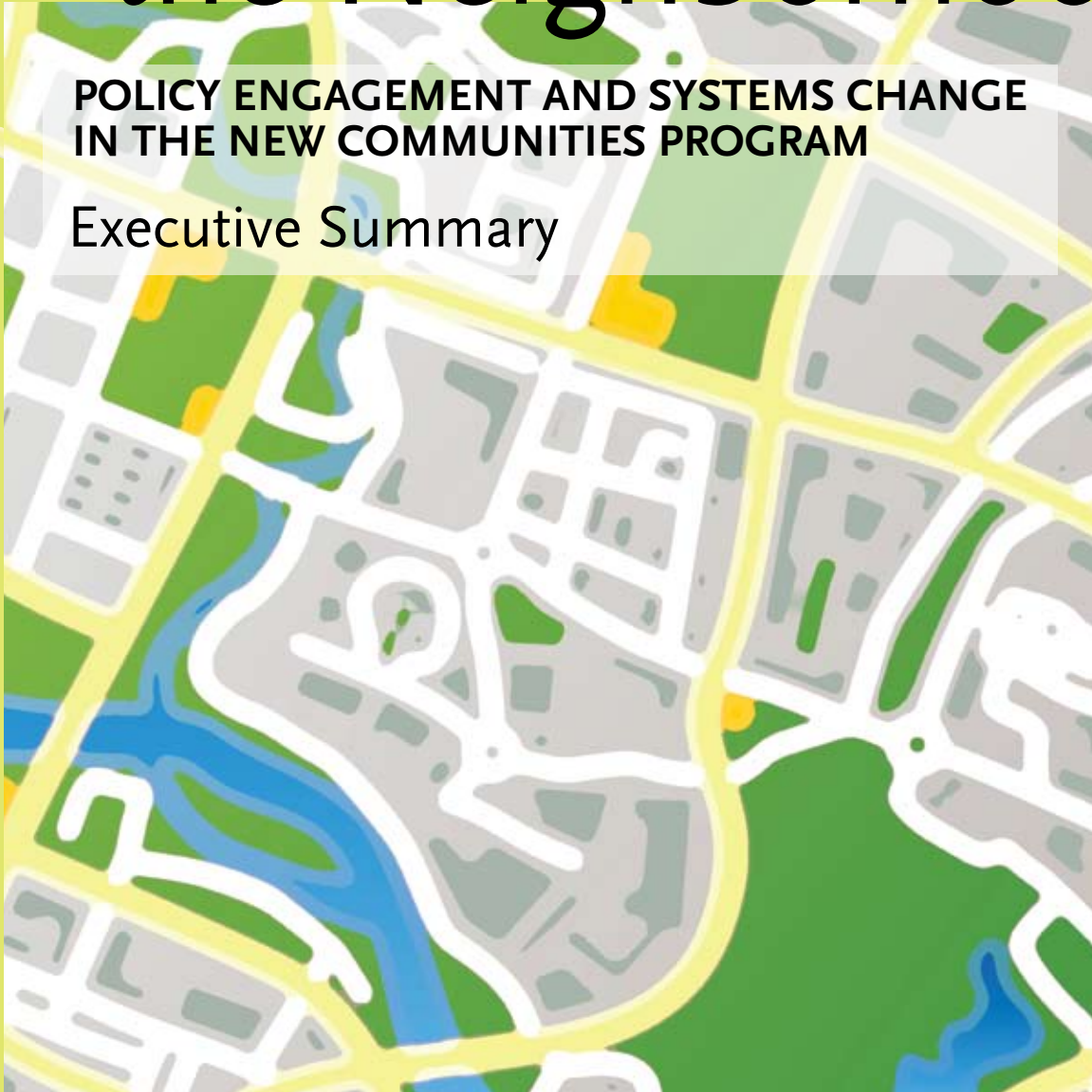


Beyond the Neighborhood

**POLICY ENGAGEMENT AND SYSTEMS CHANGE
IN THE NEW COMMUNITIES PROGRAM**

Executive Summary



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JUNE 2012

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Beyond the Neighborhood Policy Engagement and Systems Change in the New Communities Program

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Overview

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) emerged in the late 1980s to address the needs of disadvantaged neighborhoods through community development, collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs), and community participation. Most CCIs have pursued neighborhood-level activities rather than promoting changes in the policies and systems that shape neighborhoods' broader prospects for success. While there have been growing calls for CCIs to pursue policy and systems change more actively, their capacity and propensity to do so have yet to be carefully examined. This report explores policy and systems-change efforts and orientations in the New Communities Program (NCP), a 10-year, \$47 million MacArthur Foundation initiative developed and managed by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago). NCP operates in 16 Chicago neighborhoods through 14 local community organizations designated as "lead agencies" that work with other CBOs in their respective neighborhoods. The report is based on qualitative research that was conducted between 2009 and 2011 as part of a larger evaluation of NCP being conducted by MDRC in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and other researchers.

The report presents case studies of four lead agencies conducting policy and systems-change efforts to improve, respectively, state budget policy, mass-transit planning, commercial development, and bank foreclosure practices. It also examines LISC/Chicago's approach to policy and systems change and explores whether and how NCP could work more actively and intentionally in this arena.

Key Findings

- Key organizational and environmental factors influenced the agendas presented in the case studies, and strong alliances with elected officials and others were critical to moving them forward. The four lead agencies consistently preferred persuasion and collaboration over confrontation. Even when their agendas were modest, considerable perseverance and agility were needed to make progress. Yet, even when they did not achieve their initial aims, these efforts often generated unexpected benefits, such as new relationships with influential individuals and entities.
- LISC/Chicago has developed considerable capacity to broker resources such as funding and technical support on behalf of NCP community efforts by cultivating key relationships in the public and private spheres. It avoids traditional advocacy and rejects contentious tactics. It has built trust with influential actors and institutions by being useful to them rather than making requests or demands, and has generated opportunities to collaborate on developing policies and programs from the "inside," most notably in its relationship with city government.
- The MacArthur Foundation and some lead agencies have urged LISC/Chicago to develop a stronger policy posture and help orchestrate an initiative-wide policy platform that can leverage the potential combined influence of the NCP neighborhoods. This prospect raises questions about how to identify shared agendas, how to pursue collective action, and whether to form alliances with organizations that are more oriented toward an advocacy and systems-change role.

The NCP evaluation will end in 2013. Additional reports are planned on NCP's adaptation to the changing economic climate, its longer-term role in supporting neighborhood improvements, and trajectories in NCP neighborhood quality-of-life indicators.

Preface

The economic downturn that began in 2007 has placed new pressures on low-income households. It has also strained the neighborhoods in which many of those households are located — where foreclosures lead to increased housing abandonment, where already challenged schools contend with budget cuts, and where local businesses may be forced to close.

Because these problems are often concentrated within particular communities, neighborhoods may also inform policy responses to them. Under this country's system of federalism, states are sometimes called the "laboratories of democracy," in that they may experiment with bold, innovative policy solutions to social problems. Communities themselves may create additional "lab space," as neighborhood strategies to combat foreclosure, support schools, and increase economic development build a wealth of experiences from which to draw upon at the city and state levels. At the federal level, the Obama administration's Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods programs reflect this bottom-up approach to neighborhood change.

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) like the New Communities Program (NCP) — a large and ambitious CCI in Chicago, operated by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and funded by the MacArthur Foundation — are neighborhood-based interventions of growing preeminence in the United States. CCIs, which emerged in the late 1980s, have traditionally addressed the needs of disadvantaged neighborhoods through community development, collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs), and community participation. Recognizing that the policy, regulatory, and resource contexts play a useful, even definitive, role in the success of CCI efforts, community development experts have increasingly encouraged local groups to form connections not just with each other but also with government — to increase community participation in policy discussions in a way that brings residents' needs to the forefront and facilitates coordination between community-level activities and city and statewide initiatives. But how this vital work can occur — how to coordinate and collaborate with institutions beyond the neighborhood — is not always clear.

This qualitative report attempts to fill the void by presenting four case studies that illustrate how local community groups worked to inform and change policies and systems in a variety of domains: foreclosures, commercial development, transportation, and state budget allocations. The neighborhoods examined in this study are all participants in the New Communities Program, which serves as an ideal reference point to examine CCIs' engagement with larger systems, and to offer new perspectives on what it takes to realize the promise of bottom-up policy solutions to some of this country's most intractable and pressing social problems. A final report, planned for 2013, will round out the evaluation of NCP and contribute to the dialogue about how community-based organizations can improve the quality of life in the neighborhoods they serve.

Gordon Berlin

Acknowledgments

This report has benefited from hard work and thoughtful contributions from funders, practitioners, reviewers, partners, and MDRC staff. Our funders at the MacArthur Foundation — Julia Stasch, Vice President of the Program on Human and Community Development; Craig Howard, Director of Community and Economic Development; and Alaina Harkness, Program Officer in Community and Economic Development — provided substantive guidance, rooted in their experience as researchers and urban policymakers. Community development practitioners and resident leaders from around Chicago gave us and our fellow researchers hours of their time and provided critical insights about their practice. We especially thank the staff from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) for their candid information and insights about the initiative. Andrew J. Mooney, LISC/Chicago’s former Executive Director; Susana Vasquez, its new Executive Director and former Program Director of the New Communities Program (NCP); and Joel Bookman, LISC/Chicago’s Director of Programs, all emphasize a culture of learning within NCP. We have valued the opportunity to think with them about NCP. Executive directors, NCP project directors, and NCP organizers at the 14 lead agencies were generous to share with us the many lessons they learned in the field. Without their openness about their work and communities, we could not have written this report, and we are grateful to have learned from them.

Beyond their critical role in designing and managing the research that forms the basis of this report, the rest of the evaluation team — Nandita Verma, David Greenberg, Marcia Festen, Alexandra Brown, and Hortencia Rodriguez — and other colleagues at MDRC, particularly Jim Riccio, John Hutchins, and Alice Tufel, provided critical guidance on the intent and shape of this report and insightful comments on earlier drafts. Hortencia Rodriguez served as report coordinator, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) developed in the late 1980s as an alternative to the community improvement model that had predominated since the emergence of community development corporations (CDCs) in the 1960s. By the 1990s, most CDCs had narrowed their focus from a comprehensive orientation that emphasized a multitude of neighborhood services to one that focused on housing and commercial real estate. CCIs, by contrast, sought to help disadvantaged neighborhoods by attending to a broader range of community needs, promoting resident participation and planning, and coordinating the work of community-based organizations (CBOs), including CDCs, which often play a central role. In practice, CCIs have tended to focus primarily on neighborhood-level planning, projects, and services, yet they are well aware of the powerful impact that policies, institutions, and market forces beyond the neighborhood have on their prospects for success. Many also recognize the importance of exerting influence in these spheres, although few have made this a central focus of their work. In recent years, there has been a growing call in the field for CCIs to engage more assertively and systematically in larger-scale policy and systems-change efforts, accompanied by a growing awareness that their capacity for such engagement is poorly understood.

The New Communities Program (NCP) provides a valuable opportunity to explore the policy and systems-change activities of a major CCI.¹ NCP is one of the largest contemporary CCIs in the United States, operating in 14 neighborhoods in the city of Chicago and funded by the MacArthur Foundation at \$47 million over 10 years (2002-2012).² This report explores, through the lens of efforts at the initiative level and through case studies of four NCP neighborhoods, the ways in which NCP engages with policy issues and influential actors and institutions in pursuit of both neighborhood change and broader systems-change goals. It investigates the extent to which NCP at the community and initiative levels seeks to engage with powerful individuals and institutions beyond the NCP neighborhoods in order to inform policy and help reform systems, the principal strategies it embraces in doing so, the obstacles and challenges it has

¹“Policy and systems change” is defined in this context as action geared to address issues that are relevant at the community level and that are strongly affected by the decisions or practices by city, state, or regional government as well as by private corporate actors. It may include, for example, efforts to inform *legislative policy*, influence the *flow of resources* and encourage public or private investment, or sway the *behavior of external actors* in the context of action moving forward.

²NCP is often described as serving 16 Chicago communities. However, these communities are located in 14 areas for the purposes of the initiative’s planning and implementation. Therefore, for simplicity’s sake, this report refers to these areas as NCP’s 14 neighborhoods. For more detail on the structure of the initiative and findings from its early implementation phase, see David Greenberg, Nandita Verma, Keri-Nicole Dillman, and Robert Chaskin, *Creating a Platform for Sustained Neighborhood Improvement: Interim Findings from Chicago’s New Communities Program* (New York: MDRC, 2010).

faced, and the results achieved by those efforts to date. The report is based on qualitative research conducted between 2009 and 2011, which involved in-depth interviews with NCP staff and their community partners and influential allies in the four case-study communities. Interviews were also conducted with the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) — the community development support organization that shaped, supports, and manages NCP — and with the MacArthur Foundation, leaders of neighborhood or citywide nonprofit organizations, public agencies, corporations, and elected officials or their key staff. This study is part of a larger evaluation of NCP conducted by MDRC (a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization) in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (a social policy research center) and other researchers.

The Initiative-Level Context for Policy and Systems Change in the New Communities Program

Most CCIs have focused their efforts on planning, development, and service provision inside the community rather than on trying to influence institutions and policymakers beyond the community. However, these actors and systems can play substantial roles in neighborhood change, often beyond the reach of any one CCI. For example, city government can shape policing strategies, enforce housing and building codes, and support small business improvement programs. State government is often a major funder of social service initiatives and makes important decisions about income support programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Among many other roles, the federal government creates guidelines for banking investments and influences how banks have responded to the foreclosure crisis. In the private sector, large housing and commercial retail developers can often transform neighborhood landscapes, and local hospitals and industry can make decisions about employing local residents.

To the extent that CCIs have focused on engagement with such larger systems, they have worked mostly to attract resources (funding, technical assistance, and so forth) to community efforts rather than focusing on broader policy change or systems reform. This tendency arises partly from the sorts of organizations that drive CCI action on the ground, which are primarily development- or service-oriented nonprofits rather than social movement or advocacy organizations, and partly from structural constraints such as shrinking resources, dependence on project-based funding, and the proclivities and preferences of the funders that support CCIs.

The New Communities Program is unique among CCIs primarily because of the central role that intermediary organizations play in carrying out its mission at both the neighborhood and initiative levels. Within each NCP neighborhood, a community organization that is designated as a “lead agency” has been responsible for developing an initial “quality-of-life” plan with broad community input and for implementing the plan and coordinating community partners to that end. At the initiative level, LISC/Chicago serves as a “managing” intermediary or-

ganization that has played a central role in shaping the initiative overall and in supporting and guiding its ongoing implementation.³

Although LISC/Chicago's functions are in many ways typical of those served by most community development intermediaries, its role is significantly more expansive with regard to initiative management, oversight, and resource provision, as well as in mediating between neighborhood efforts and systems-level actors and institutions. Since adopting a comprehensive approach to community development in the late 1990s, LISC/Chicago has sought to change the way community development is done in Chicago — to improve the way relevant individuals, agencies, and organizations are aligned and interconnected and to change the orientation of major institutions from a top-down development approach to one that emphasizes community planning and priorities in shaping policies and interventions. In this sense, LISC/Chicago has pursued a certain kind of systems-change agenda, though rarely advocating for particular policy positions or pushing specific systems-change goals. In the service of this agenda, its approach to engaging with and changing policies and systems has been intensively focused on relationship- and trust-building with influential leaders and decision-makers, prioritizing consensus and collaboration, and rejecting more assertive postures and contentious tactics as counterproductive. Its preferred mode of policy influence is to operate from the “inside,” by taking what it calls “opportunistic” advantage of situations in which it can work with its allies in the broader system to secure resources for the community. Such “collaborative resource brokering,” as LISC/Chicago calls it, can then provide the opportunity to contribute to and help shape the ways in which policies and programs are developed and implemented at the systems level — by, for example, city government or major philanthropies — in order to benefit the neighborhoods with which it works. Beyond this, LISC/Chicago provides a range of supports (such as funding, technical assistance, and relationship brokering) to individual NCP lead agencies in their pursuit of policy and systems-change agendas as these may arise out of community planning processes — including those lead agencies that target specific policy agendas and embrace confrontational advocacy tactics — so long as the community remains in the vanguard of those efforts.

The Case Studies: Neighborhood-Level Efforts to Influence Policy and Systems Change

The four case studies in this report focus on the NCP neighborhoods of Chicago Southwest, Auburn Gresham, Quad Communities, and Humboldt Park. The selection of these neighborhoods is based on the variation they represent along a few key dimensions, including their stra-

³Founded in 1979, LISC is a national organization with 30 urban offices and one rural office that seeks to build sustainable communities by expanding investment in real estate, increasing family income and wealth, stimulating economic development, improving access to high-quality education, and supporting healthful environments and lifestyles. See www.lisc.org.

tegic orientation to policy and systems change, their neighborhood contexts, the organizational capacity of the lead agencies, and how they engage in relationships with other community organizations and players.

Chicago Southwest is an ethnically diverse area on the southwest side of the city, with significant Hispanic, African-American, and white populations. The Chicago Southwest NCP is co-led by the Greater Southwest Development Corporation (GSDC) and the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). These are large, well-established community organizations that have collaborated since the 1980s. The focus in this report is on SWOP, a community organizing group that is atypical of CCI vehicles in having a strong background in policy and advocacy, particularly in housing and mortgage-lending issues; it also has strong allies among elected officials and has informed legislative policy accordingly. Of the four case studies, this NCP agency has been by far the most active in the policy arena, with the most ambitious agenda. Beginning in 2007, SWOP has tried to stem the tide of local home foreclosures by pressuring mortgage-holding banks to adopt more accommodating loan-modification practices — a daunting challenge given that the consolidation of the financial sector left large national and global banks like JP Morgan Chase and Bank of America holding the bulk of such obligations. Although SWOP is capable of confrontational tactics, it has pursued this effort primarily by trying to partner with the banks to develop a local pilot venture aimed at helping residents who are threatened with foreclosure. An initially promising process with Bank of America in 2009-2010 — the focus of this case study — was ultimately frustrated by a combination of constraints imposed by federal legislation and the bank's own systemic dysfunctions. After a tactical shift, a new opportunity developed with Citibank in early 2011. Although these efforts have yet to bear direct fruit, they have helped SWOP to forge important new alliances and gain new prominence in the ongoing search for solutions to the foreclosure crisis.

Auburn Gresham is a small, predominantly African-American neighborhood on the southwest side of the city. The Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC) is a small organization that was founded shortly before NCP was established. While its work has been generally neighborhood-focused, it has also pursued a long-running campaign to persuade Metra, the region's largest commuter rail carrier, to open a station on the rail line running through Auburn Gresham — a seemingly unlikely prospect given Metra's historic focus on suburban ridership. It did so with the backing and assistance of several politically prominent allies. While meetings with Metra proved unproductive, one of GADC's allies — the area's state senator — eventually helped it shift its focus from lobbying Metra directly to working with the Illinois Department of Transportation. In 2010, this approach paid off with \$20 million in state funding commitments, a victory won partly through persistence and partly because of longer-term shifts in national and regional transit policy toward providing better urban services. This is the only one of the four neighborhood-level efforts that (as of early 2012) has achieved its original policy aims, although the others have had some results that may bear fruit over time.

Quad Communities is an overwhelmingly African-American area on the near south side of Chicago, comprising the eastern half of the city's historically black Bronzeville district. Bronzeville has recently experienced both incipient gentrification and the displacement of large numbers of low-income residents under the city's Plan for Transformation of public housing,⁴ which razed high-rise, low-income housing complexes, redeveloping them as mixed-income developments and relocating thousands of families to these developments, to subsidized housing in the private market, or to other public housing properties, primarily through housing choice vouchers. The Quad Communities Development Corporation (QCDC) was created to serve as the NCP lead agency in Chicago's Fourth Ward, operating within its boundaries, working out of the local alderman's office and forming close alliances with local elected officials.⁵ Its primary focus has been on commercial retail development, and in early 2010 it began to craft a coordinated development plan for a retail corridor running through the Fourth Ward and its neighboring Third Ward, to support the city's public housing plan. Its strategy focused on gaining support from elected officials, particularly that of the Third Ward alderman, whose stamp of approval was needed for the geographical expansion beyond QCDC's original Fourth Ward boundaries. Commercial real estate development proved to be a contentious issue in the Third Ward, and QCDC ultimately changed course to collaborate with the Bronzeville Alliance, a newly formed community planning group, where it is serving as the commercial development specialist in a broader effort to revitalize the area's three main retail corridors.

Humboldt Park is a large west side neighborhood in Chicago consisting of a longstanding Puerto Rican community to the east and a predominantly African-American population to the west. The NCP lead agency is the Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation, a large, well-established CDC with a housing and economic development focus, but the Humboldt Park NCP functions largely as an organizational collaborative — a “taskforce” with over 70 member organizations, mostly in the social and health service fields. The group was focused primarily on community-level activities until the 2007 financial downturn caused a state budget crisis, with delayed payments to service agencies and budget cuts that taskforce members experienced as a threat to the viability of the entire NCP enterprise. Via well-placed political allies, they were able to present their arguments for the value of Humboldt Park service agencies to the new Illinois Secretary of Human Services, who was particularly interested in their collaborative structure and actively helped them develop their argument. While the secretary had little leeway

⁴See www.thecha.org/pages/the_plan_for_transformation/22.php.

⁵The Chicago City Council consists of 50 aldermen, one elected from each of 50 wards to serve four-year terms. Wards are periodically redistricted in response to population changes, and they overlap unevenly (and are never coterminous) with the 77 Community Areas that are used for planning purposes by the City of Chicago and upon which the NCP neighborhoods were largely based. Most NCP neighborhoods are therefore represented by more than one alderman.

to tailor funding decisions to a particular neighborhood, the effort helped taskforce members to build new alliances at the state level and left them, collectively, with a new commitment to pursue policy and advocacy and a greater confidence in their ability to do so.

Initiative-Level Policy and Systems Engagement

Although LISC/Chicago does not engage in conventional issue advocacy or pressure tactics, it does seek to influence policymakers and institutions through more collaborative means. When the collaborations and partnerships that LISC/Chicago has developed with systems-level actors and institutions give rise to opportunities to shape policies and programs from the inside, it exercises this influence to make those actors and institutions more favorable toward its community partners and responsive to their development priorities. This approach has been particularly salient in LISC/Chicago's relationship with Chicago city government, which has deepened over the course of the initiative. From the outset, the city was highly receptive to NCP as a vehicle for community planning, with then-Mayor Daley instructing relevant departments to meet with NCP lead agencies and provide city supports. Subsequent program-oriented collaborations have strengthened the relationship. In 2007-2008, LISC/Chicago helped the city, on very short notice, to develop a set of neighborhood-focused plans as part of its bid for the 2016 Olympics. After being asked to implement a city-funded summer youth employment program in one NCP neighborhood in response to high-profile youth violence in 2007, LISC/Chicago gained the city's trust by implementing successively larger programs in multiple neighborhoods in subsequent years. The organization was directly involved in helping the city prepare its application for stimulus funds under the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program, a program of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that was formed to help stabilize communities that have experienced foreclosures and abandonment. And after working with the city's Department of Information Technology to develop demonstration projects for increasing Internet access in NCP neighborhoods, the city asked LISC/Chicago to take the lead in developing and writing the city's application under a 2009 federal broadband initiative for underserved communities.

These developments illustrate LISC/Chicago's favored means of exercising policy influence through building direct relationships with and fostering access to policymaking and implementation at the source. By helping the city secure new funding streams, it has brought resources to NCP communities and strengthened its ties to the city, responding consistently to the city's needs and requests while studiously avoiding requests or demands of its own. Without directly or primarily aspiring to influence policy, its increasingly intimate partnership with city agencies has enabled it to exert a measure of influence on specific policies and initiatives. LISC/Chicago describes this approach as policy influence "from the inside out" — by being directly engaged in the planning and implementation of these city proposals and initiatives it has been able to exercise a quietly formative influence over them. Its principal objective in doing so

has been the promotion of specific community priorities and of community-driven agenda setting in general.

A second mode of engagement in policy influence that is congruent with LISC/Chicago's basic orientation is to support policy agendas that originate with community groups by providing resources and brokering relationships. Of the four case studies presented in this report, it has played this role more actively in the Auburn Gresham and Chicago Southwest efforts than in Humboldt Park and Quad Communities. Where such efforts have led to conflicts between NCP community organizations and LISC/Chicago's systems-level allies, it has tried to improve communication and promote consensus, but steered well clear of being implicated in more assertive or confrontational advocacy tactics. Beyond such single-neighborhood efforts, LISC/Chicago has also supported a few multi-neighborhood projects with policy or systems-change dimensions where these have arisen within particular areas of initiative activity. But with regard to developing initiativewide policy objectives, it has expressed general skepticism as to the prospects for unanimity, and has generally not sought to mobilize cross-site activity toward such ends.

The question of whether LISC/Chicago's strategic orientation to policy and systems change is optimal or adequate for NCP at this stage of its evolution has recently emerged as a question of debate within the initiative. The MacArthur Foundation and some lead agencies have urged LISC/Chicago to develop a stronger policy posture and help orchestrate an initiativewide policy platform that — with the experience of a large constellation of neighborhoods behind it — can promise more substantial reform. LISC/Chicago has recently shown some willingness to make policy and advocacy a more integral part of the initiative if this is a priority for lead agencies. In response to Chicago's transition in 2011 to its first new mayor in 25 years, it also experimented with developing an initiativewide issue agenda. Yet it continues to signal significant reluctance to adopt a more assertive role with regard to policy issues and systems change.

Conclusions

At the community level, the case studies that are documented and analyzed in this report exhibit some broadly shared features, illuminating the general pattern of policy and systems engagement by CCIs on the ground:

- **Organizational characteristics and features of neighborhood context are key background factors in determining whether, where, and how NCP lead agencies will develop a policy agenda, while more contingent events often play a pivotal role in setting such efforts in motion.** For example, the economic downturn and concomitant threats to social service funding provided an unlooked-for catalyst for advocacy efforts in Humboldt Park.

- **Strong alliances with policy-level actors have proved crucial in providing the initial access that is necessary to launch such efforts, and sometimes to generating the leverage that is necessary to succeed.** QCDC's strong relationship with the local alderman, for example, provided critical access to other political decision-makers, and GADC's political allies were instrumental in securing state funding for the Auburn Gresham transit station.
- **The organizations studied have tended to pursue nonconfrontational tactics that are oriented toward persuading powerful actors to accommodate their concerns.** Even Chicago Southwest, for example, while willing to engage in confrontation as needed, used such tactics as a last resort when more collaborative approaches faltered.
- **Although the NCP lead agencies' ambitions tend to be modest, the odds against succeeding in these efforts are significant; perseverance and agility are necessary but by no means sufficient conditions for success.** This can be seen, for example, in Metra's rejection of GADC's transit advocacy, or in the difference in size and clout between a community organization like SWOP and the national and global banks that they targeted.
- **Even when they are unsuccessful in their initial aims, however, these efforts can often generate important unexpected benefits.** Such benefits take the form of new relationships and alliances, as well as enhanced confidence in the organization's capacity to operate in this arena, as was the case in Chicago Southwest and Humboldt Park.

Although at the initiative level LISC/Chicago has been more consistently systems-oriented than most of its predecessor CCIs, the primary focus has been on community-level activity and the development of projects and programs in response to particular community needs and priorities. This is an orientation that is, in many ways, hard-wired into the structure of CCIs and the institutional contexts that frame action within them.

Three key questions and issues can be posed with regard to the recent debate within the initiative as to whether LISC/Chicago's approach to policy and systems engagement makes full use of NCP's potential:

- **Issue identification.** Despite their differences, NCP neighborhoods face some similar challenges and are affected by many of the same political and institutional forces. These challenges (with, for example, public education, public transportation, affordable housing, unemployment, and safety) may provide an opportunity for collective planning and for shaping a cross-community change agenda.

Being more intentional about identifying collective issues may require support for a set of particular inputs (such as information and data analysis), processes (such as cross-site planning), and capacities (such as dedicated staff in lead agencies at the initiative level) that are currently not in place.

- **Cross-community organizing.** Because NCP, unlike many CCIs, has the advantage of significant scale and citywide scope, there is a significant potential to move beyond cross-site issue identification and assessment to collective action. This potential raises strategic and tactical questions about the choice of key actors, allies, roles, and targets, and to what extent (and in what combination) to pursue mobilization or negotiation, collaboration or contention, insider or outsider approaches. Leveraging the potential collective influence of NCP neighborhoods acting on behalf of a sizeable constituency around policy or systems-level issues requires careful planning, and raises questions about how best to catalyze, organize, and enact a collective agenda. Such cross-site organizing is unlikely to get done without dedicated capacity to pursue it.
- **Broader alliances and division of labor.** Not all organizations are well positioned to do direct advocacy work or to be equally effective at the tactics it may require. At the same time, NCP may have unrealized opportunities to craft broader strategic alliances with organizations that are engaged in policy advocacy and systems-change work regarding initiativewide concerns, allowing for a productive division of labor among organizations. For example, a number of organizations in Chicago take community mobilization and policy advocacy aimed at particular areas — such as housing, education, and transportation — as a central part of their mission and are connected to broader coalitions operating at different levels to try to effect policy change and shape systems reform. LISC/Chicago, the MacArthur Foundation, or some broader combination of NCP leaders may benefit from engaging more intentionally with these actors. They could, for example, play a more direct role in some of these coalitions, participating in their meetings and contributing to their campaigns. Or they could remain more distant but seek to intentionally support, inform, or otherwise connect to the lines of work in which they are engaged. In these ways, they may be able to reinforce the effect of these organizations' and coalitions' independent advocacy in ways that may have important impacts on NCP communities.

The implications of these considerations have relevance beyond NCP to CCIs and community-building initiatives more broadly. Particularly in the context of multisite initiatives, they suggest ways in which it may be possible to leverage initiative structure and reach toward greater impact through cross-neighborhood alliances and advocacy on behalf of a broader constituency than that of a

single neighborhood. But even in the context of a single community effort, they suggest the importance of intentionality in framing community-building efforts more explicitly with reference to the structural conditions, higher-order actors, and processes that promote or constrain communities' ability to effect change. They also suggest the value of considering broadly the range of tactics (including assertive and contentious ones) that are available to them, and of framing responses in the context of a broader set of relationships and alliance building.

The evaluation of NCP will continue through 2013, and additional reports are planned on NCP's adaptation to the changing economic climate and its longer-term role in supporting neighborhood improvements. Future reports will also present quantitative and qualitative research and will compare trajectories in NCP neighborhood quality-of-life indicators with each other and with those in similar neighborhoods that are not part of this initiative.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.