



Key Characteristics of Exemplary Community Development Programs

Community development is a broad term that encompasses many aspects of community organizing and empowerment. Accordingly, community development programs can focus on many different projects depending on the needs of the community.

PHMC interviewed experts from The Enterprise Center (TEC) and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) to better understand characteristics of successful community development programs. Both organizations have a long history in the Philadelphia area and are experienced in working with faith-based organizations.

The findings presented here apply in general to the structure and overall mission of organizations that do community organizing and development work, whether their projects are focused on bringing a grocery store to the neighborhood, creating more affordable housing, or improving the economic viability of a corridor.

Key Characteristics

Leadership: It is extremely important for community development programs to have strong leaders who have a clear vision of organizational mission and goals. As community development can encompass many different projects, it takes a dedicated leader to stay focused on the long-term outcomes of the organization. Additionally, successful leaders must have the capacity to manage several different types of partners, including business, legal, political, housing, fiscal, and others that are necessary for community development programs. Leaders of community development programs must be well-connected in the community that they serve, particularly with business leaders who drive economic development in communities.

Volunteers: Many community development programs rely on volunteers to donate their time and expertise to the project. Most commonly, volunteers will serve on the board and provide business, fiscal, or legal expertise to the community-based organization. However, the project cannot depend on volunteers for its long-term goals, since volunteers do not have to stay committed to the project, especially if it has a long time frame.

Mission: The mission of the community development program must be clear and specific. It must be developed from the needs of the community, and activities relevant to the mission should be measurable. Without concrete goals, it is easy for organizations to drift into many different directions without achieving any demonstrable progress.

For congregations, the mission of a community development project may not appear to align with the spiritual mission of the congregation. It is important that faith leaders understand how a project can fit in with the congregation's own spiritual mission in order to build support and buy-in from their congregations.



Planning: Community development projects tend to be costly, requiring substantial economic and human resources. Because community development initiatives are so resource intensive, it is extremely important to develop a strategic plan for any initiative and bring all the partners to the table from the very beginning. A well-thought out strategic plan can immediately show whether or not an organization has all the necessary resources and partners available to accomplish the goal.

Community relations: Like any other community-based program, community development programs must be rooted in the community. Community members should be part of the advisory board or decision-making committee to provide their perspective on the project. Town hall meetings and other open house methods to involve community members are extremely helpful to make planning and project activities transparent to the community.

While congregations may have good relationships with their own members, it is especially important for faith-based groups to involve all members in the community when embarking on a community development project. Congregation members do not always come from the community where the organization is located, and they may have a different idea of what the community needs. In fact, the surrounding community may have some negative perceptions of the local house of worship, so these perceptions must be addressed before starting any project. One respondent commented that it is difficult for some leaders to tackle this issue when internally, they see themselves in a different way compared to the rest of the community. Involving all community members will result in more commitment from the community towards achieving the goal.

Collaboration: Since community development projects are typically large-scale, comprehensive projects, like bringing a grocery store to a neighborhood or building more affordable housing, it is critical that expert partners from different fields collaborate on planning and operations. Leaders from business, law, politics, local government, urban planning, fiscal management, fundraising, schools, health, arts, and other fields that may be specific to the project must be at the table to discuss different issues that come up in community development.

It is especially important for faith-based organizations to be a partner with representatives from these different fields, since they typically do not have expertise in all of these areas. However, spiritual leaders sometimes harbor a prejudice against working with business leaders because they feel that businesses do not need any help or support or that “they can fend for themselves.” Also, learning and utilizing business principles and methods may be foreign to their traditional ways of operating a house of worship. Cultural differences between faith-based organizations and private for profit entities may make it difficult for some organizations to work together. Though they may not have the technical expertise in community development issues, faith-based organizations can bring a valuable community perspective, and with help from appropriate experts, can help guide planning and serve as a liaison between developers and the community. It is more effective for



congregations to “be at the table” and “be supportive of the larger [community] mission”, rather than leading their own development projects.

Commitment: Community development projects typically are multi-year projects that require significant manpower and funding. Successful organizations must be prepared to see projects through from start to finish.

For congregations with limited resources, it may be frustrating to have such a long time period before results can be seen. In these cases, it may be advisable to work on some smaller projects to keep momentum and enthusiasm for the project high during slower times.