Learning from the Journey

Reflections on the Rebuilding Communities Initiative

This paper is intended to reflect on and capture the "lessons learned" in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI). The Cornerstone Consulting Group, a national human services firm with a background in health, social services, and community development, was asked to capture RCI from the vantage point of those who lived it — Casey Foundation staff, technical assistance providers, lead agency executives and staff, and community residents who came together to create RCI.

Over the past months, we have had the pleasure of meeting and talking with dozens of RCI participants. They have welcomed us to their meetings and candidly shared their thoughts, experiences, and feelings. The heart and soul of this report, and the numerous direct quotes contained within, are drawn from their reflections.

RCI participants often speak of their eight years of involvement in RCI as a journey. They describe the hills and valleys, the frustrating barriers and the victories won, the personal growth they experienced, and the personal sacrifices they had to make. They talk about what has been accomplished in their communities — and a great deal has — but more than anything else, people in the RCI family talk about learning. They talk about personal learning, learning at a community level, and learning at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Like a lot of life's journeys, the best path to follow was not always clear for RCI. The Initiative experienced twists and turns, forks in the road, and more than a few surprises. The available road maps and travel guides were only sometimes helpful, because, in truth, no one as yet has fully figured out the single best way to rebuild long-neglected, impoverished communities.

One lesson of RCI has been that help and support across communities can make the journey a lot more fruitful. The purpose of this paper is to share some of the learning from the Rebuilding Communities Initiative with a very broad audience, including policy makers, funders, academics, community-based organizations, and others. Most important, we hope that learning from RCI will make the journey a little easier for the many local groups engaged in community rebuilding efforts across the country.

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Background

The Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI), launched in 1994, is described by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as a

> …seven-year initiative, designed to provide the supports needed to help transform troubled, economically disenfranchised neighborhoods into safe, supportive, and productive environments for children, youth, and their families. The Foundation works in partnership with community-based organizations on comprehensive strategies to reverse social isolation and disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods.

RCI was built on a theory of change articulated as follows:

> A comprehensive rebuilding effort to revitalize distressed neighborhoods that employs the strategies of reinvestment in social and economic infrastructure, and political self-determination through collaborative neighborhood governance, can contribute to the sustainable development of neighborhoods and improved life experiences for children and families.

The Foundation described RCI as including six "critical areas of change":

- Maximizing the capacity and impact of neighborhood resources and institutions
- Establishing effective neighborhood-based human service delivery systems for children, youth, and families
- Developing capable and effective neighborhood collaboratives to which governance authority could be devolved
- Improving availability of affordable housing and the social and physical infrastructure of neighborhoods
- Increasing public and private capital investments in neighborhoods
- Building resident power

The development of RCI at Casey marked a departure from earlier work in several ways.

- First, RCI was focused at a neighborhood level, while much of the Foundation's previous grant making had been at a city or state level.
- Second, RCI was not defined by or limited to any one specific problem, such as academic failure, teen pregnancy, or delinquency. Rather, it was intended as a comprehensive initiative with a locally determined agenda for change.
- Third, of the several Casey initiatives in play in the early 1990s, RCI was most open to local variation in specific goals and strategies. RCI was built on the principle that people living and working in impoverished neighborhoods knew a great deal about their own circumstances, and had within their communities much of what was needed to achieve revitalization. Local self-determination, in the Initiative and beyond, was seen as an important part of the RCI approach.

RCI came at a time when efforts to rebuild low-income communities were highly visible and widely discussed. In 1993, amidst much fanfare and backed by enormous financial resources, the federal government designated 105 distressed communities as Empowerment Zones or Enterprise Communities. Through the work of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and other national intermediaries and local community development corporations (CDCs), investors were coming together and building new houses, starting new businesses, and transforming the face of neighborhoods that had been considered hopeless for decades.

While encouraged by the progress in physical development and by efforts to spur re-investment in low-income communities, many experts with a human development orientation felt that bricks and mortar improvements were not enough. Investments in *human* infrastructure -- in the people that lived in low-income communities and the institutions that served them -- were seen as equally or more important.

In addition to growing optimism about turning neighborhoods around physically, much of the discussion in the field was becoming focused on the concept of "empowerment" of individuals and communities as a key component in anti-poverty and community revitalization strategies. The influence of John McKnight was greatly felt during this period. In 1993, McKnight's book, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets,* was published and widely read. Numerous public and privately funded initiatives were criticized during this era for being either "deficit oriented" (defined by problems as opposed to strengths or assets), and/or "top-down" (designed by persons external to low-income communities rather than the residents, leaders, and institutions that made up the neighborhood).

Rather than imposing an entirely new initiative in low-income communities, RCI's strategy was to build on the progress that already had been made in neighborhood revitalization. Five strong neighborhood-based non-profits, deeply rooted in their communities and with strong track records of success, were funded for an unprecedented seven years. They were offered a wide range of technical assistance and asked to lead a bottom-up, neighborhood-defined effort that would result in improved conditions.

The lead organization for the rebuilding effort in each of the communities is the Foundation's grantee. They are:

- The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (Boston, MA) for the Dudley Street neighborhood in Roxbury/North Dorchester
- Germantown Settlement (Philadelphia, PA) for the Wister, Southwest Germantown, and Chew-Chelton neighborhoods of Lower Germantown
- Marshall Heights Community Development Organization (Washington, D.C.) for neighborhoods in Ward 7
- NEWSED Community Development Corporation (Denver, CO) for the La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood in West Denver
- Warren/Conner Development Coalition (Detroit, MI) for neighborhoods in Eastside Detroit

To be selected for RCI, a community had to have a balance of needs and strengths, an existing revitalization process, and a strong community organization to lead the rebuilding process. It also needed a core of people who were, or who could become, strong leaders, as well as a variety of "stakeholders" who could become engaged in the rebuilding process. It was not the Foundation's intent to *initiate* neighborhood change, but rather to join with the communities in hopes of expanding and enhancing efforts already underway. Casey intended to build on the strengths of community development organizations, and to support them as they expanded their scope to take on a role in child and family services and supports. In a sense, the intent was to marry Casey's child and family system reform work with community-based development.

RCI was scheduled to last for seven years[1] and occur in three phases: planning, capacity building, and implementation. The Casey Foundation provided funding as well as a wide range of technical assistance and other supports. Representatives from the communities and the Foundation met throughout the Initiative and a Rebuilding Communities network was fashioned. The sites, not in competition for limited slots, shared ideas and perspectives, and in some instances exchanged visits. An overarching evaluation was conducted by the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning.

It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate the RCI or to compile a definitive list of all the things that RCI communities have done. However, it is important for readers to get a sense not only of what RCI participants have learned, but also what RCI has accomplished. Therefore, throughout this report readers will note references to accomplishments in one or another site. These references are intended to be illustrative. For purposes of this paper, it suffices to say that positive changes are apparent in all of the RCI communities, and that the RCI lead agencies were most often at the center of these changes.

There were, certainly, some areas of disappointment during this time as well. Many aspects of the RCI work took longer than expected, and insufficient resources, beyond the Casey grant, were a constant problem. Staff turnover, a frequent challenge in non-profit work, made continuity problematic. In some communities even success brought a new set of problems, such as gentrification. But by all accounts, the RCI years were good ones for the neighborhoods. Progress was noted in a number of areas, including physical infrastructure, social infrastructure, human service delivery, information management, leadership development, and community capacity.

In this paper we identify important "lessons learned" in the Rebuilding Communities Initiative. These lessons are rarely about wholly new, recently learned information. To the contrary, more often they are a confirmation and strengthening of long held beliefs. Participants are coming away from RCI with an enhanced appreciation of the difficulties of making community change, an enriched set of beliefs about what it takes to succeed and a continuing faith in the capacity of communities to rebuild themselves.

Summary of lessons learned

Through conversations with RCI stakeholders — Foundation staff, technical assistance providers, lead agency executives and staff, and community residents — and through thorough review of RCI documentation, the following emerged as key lessons of the Initiative:

LESSON ONE: RESIDENT EMPOWERMENT MUST BE AT THE CORE OF COMMUNITY REBUILDING EFFORTS. Creating a community constituency through leadership development and community organizing is an essential step and needs to occur during the planning stage of such initiatives.

LESSON TWO: THE NEED FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IS CRITICAL AND CONTINUAL. Initiatives grounded in community require new capacity-building approaches and tools. Structured learning processes, with communities fully engaged in the determination of technical assistance needs, management, and effectiveness, are critical in a comprehensive community-building initiative, as is the recognition that the optimum learning sequence is not always a linear one.

LESSON THREE: ACTING AS LEAD AGENCY REQUIRES BALANCING COMPETING ROLES AND INTERESTS. It poses difficult challenges both within the organization and in the community. The challenge of leadership requires unprecedented effort, considerable organizational growth in personnel and programming, and the development of new skills and relationships.

LESSON FOUR: IT TAKES A LONG TIME, AND A LOT OF TIME EVERY DAY, TO REBUILD COMMUNITIES. Rebuilding communities by changing hearts and minds through broad community participation and resident empowerment is a much slower and more time-intensive approach than rebuilding a community solely with bricks and mortar.

LESSON FIVE: PARTNERSHIP BUILDING IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT WORK. Conflicts are inevitable when building partnerships that bring together a wide range of public and private institutions and community agencies. It is as difficult to establish and maintain effective partnerships within communities as it is with external groups.

LESSON SIX: POWER DYNAMICS BETWEEN FUNDERS AND GRANTEES CAN BE GREATLY LESSENED, BUT NEVER COMPLETELY ELIMINATED. Increasing opportunities for mutual understanding of the respective contexts in which the communities and foundations operate promotes communication that may help mitigate the inherent power differential between grantor and grantee.

Lessons learned: *discussion*

Resident empowerment must be at the core of community rebuilding efforts. Creating a community constituency through leadership development and community organizing is an essential step and needs to occur during the planning stage of such initiatives.

Resident empowerment emerged as both a central theme and major accomplishment of RCI. While never absent, resident empowerment became ever more prominent and perhaps pre-eminent as RCI unfolded. Resident empowerment is a complex concept and is used as shorthand for a great many linked activities: community organizing, resident engagement, capacity building, leadership development, and other involvement and empowerment strategies leading to increased opportunities for residents of low-income communities to determine their own and their community's future.

Empowered residents:

- play leadership roles in community rebuilding efforts;
- feel ownership for the community rebuilding effort and are perceived by others to be the owners;
- collaborate effectively with other investors to plan, implement, and measure community rebuilding; and
- gain strength through collective self-advocacy.

Early Foundation descriptions of RCI were more focused on improved service delivery, attracting capital, devolution of authority to local governance entities, improving physical infrastructure, and other related goals than on resident empowerment. In 1993, the description of RCI was closer to a "community-driven" than a "resident-driven" model of change.[3]

Early in the Initiative's history, the Foundation described RCI as including five "critical areas of change":

- Maximizing the capacity and impact of neighborhood resources and institutions
- Establishing effective neighborhood-based human service delivery systems for children, youth and families
- Developing capable and effective neighborhood collaboratives to which governance authority could be devolved

- Improving availability of affordable housing and the social and physical infrastructure of neighborhoods
- Increasing public and private capital investments in neighborhoods

The sixth critical area for change — building resident power — was added later, at the suggestion of the sites. Yet by the end of the Initiative, when asked to identify the single greatest accomplishment of RCI, the vast majority of participants described the increased involvement, capacity, power, and influence of residents.

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"Resident empowerment is the only answer for how these communities can come back — if you don't believe that, you shouldn't be in community development, you should be a banker.[2]"

— *Lead agency executive director*

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Going even further, many RCI participants see resident engagement and empowerment as not just one of several important facets in community rebuilding, but rather as the key to the achievement of the others. In this view, efforts at devolution, capital formation, infrastructure building, and collaboration should start with, and are dependent on, resident empowerment. One participant suggested that RCI has been about "shifting the paradigm of how to combat poverty and revitalize poor neighborhoods, moving away from institution-directed efforts and toward resident-directed efforts."

For the RCI lead agencies, adopting an empowerment strategy meant giving way and allowing resident leadership to come to the fore. Some suggest that they had to learn how to step back, to give up ground in order to allow residents to share power and take on leadership opportunities. The critical difference, one executive director said, was "letting it happen"

"When you actually see resident empowerment you see people without formal authority gaining confidence in their collective ability to alter events." —RCI local coach

"The vision of what is possible has been expanded…" —Community resident

"We're talking about a way to unfold the ability of an entire community to make decisions together." —RCI director

"RCI sites pushed themselves to be really clear about what they mean by using the term 'resident-led.' What does it look like, how do we measure it, how do we nurture it?" —Lead agency executive director

rather than "making it happen." Another noted, "We are not inventing or creating leadership—we are removing the barriers needed to allow leadership to flourish."

Yet, at the same time, these agencies were responsible and accountable for results. The challenge was to figure out how to fulfill the lead agency's responsibility to Casey, other funders, and other constituencies while giving control to residents.

Giving up power, even to residents, is particularly difficult for community organizations whose history is about gaining power and influence in hard fought battles with entrenched interests. Stepping back, allowing others to lead, allowing others to fail, was challenging to all and required changes in the operation of the lead agencies themselves. As one participant put it, "You have to ask yourself whether there is room for more leaders in your organization."

In some instances, RCI communities addressed issues of resident empowerment by creating new structures through which the voices of residents could be heard and their power felt. For some, toward the end of RCI, these independent resident organizations were seen as the primary legacy of RCI. While communities see value in resident-led groups, the transition of these groups from an advisory capacity to becoming a structured entity has not been easy. As one resident noted, "agencies have resisted the growth of these resident-led governance structures." An executive director explained, "My board was (initially) horrified at having this other entity we would have to contend with."

In other communities, the change was less about formal structure than about changes in attitudes and day-to-day practices. Some resident advisory committees, initially passive, became a driving force in community decision-making processes. Some residents, included in decision-making processes for the first time, were initially unable to use their newfound power effectively. As one resident member of an RCI governing board noted, "the steering committee was too passive and trusting. At first, we didn't probe enough." Over time, however, both residents and staff learned that "healthy tension at meetings—which is to say that the residents' agenda does not always match the organization's agenda— is a good thing. It's good to see healthy disagreements."

RCI raised expectations about accountability in the broader community as well. RCI lead agencies, as well as other organizations in the community, became more aware of the value of reaching out to and including residents in meaningful ways. The practice of reserving large numbers of board seats for residents has made a powerful difference. Conscious efforts are being made so that "the balance of power is tipped in the favor of residents."

As a result, it was often reported that residents and resident groups now more frequently approach community issues with an expectation that they will be included in the processes that affect their lives. As one observer noted, "If they (residents) were involved at all, they were functioning as volunteers. Now they're functioning as owners."

If empowerment of residents is the outcome sought, it begins with *engagement*. Community residents have to be, first of all, active participants in the rebuilding effort.

RCI is certainly not alone in placing value on resident engagement; many recent community-based initiatives have worked to bring residents "to the table." Yet, despite the best intentions, many community-level initiatives find it difficult to achieve the level of resident engagement and empowerment they believe is warranted.

2. Throughout this document comments by participants in the RCI experience — from the Casey Foundation, the five community sites, and the organizations brought in to help or evaluate — are inserted in the text to add texture and a sense of the participants' views and passion. In many instances, the quotes were selected for inclusion because they were representative of the views of numerous RCI participants. In all cases, the quotes are drawn from face-to-face or telephone interviews or from one of two cross-site meetings held in 2001.
3. "Community driven" suggests that neighborhood institutions, such as CBOs, CDCs, schools, churches, and businesses, working together, would have greater decision making power than downtown business interests, city hall, and local government. "Resident driven" suggests that those institutions and others are responsive and accountable to the priorities and views of community residents.

While engaging residents is difficult, RCI communities have been unusually successful in this area, and, upon reflection, participants offered a number of thoughts on what has worked for them. They note a number of factors believed to be important to a successful engagement strategy:

- Focusing sincerely and systematically on empowering residents.
- Engaging in continual community organizing
- Working on issues seen as having the potential to make a real difference for the community
- Seeing to it that people have important things to do, not just meetings to attend.
- Matching community members' skills with volunteer roles.
- Assuring that there is a sense of shared ownership
- Carefully selecting the issues to focus on when creating a community project or campaign.
- Making sure the agenda is truly coming from the community, in part by building mechanisms to elicit feedback from a broad public.

RCI communities found that keeping community members engaged was an ongoing challenge and the key to their community rebuilding success. Their experience was that successful *engagement* is inextricably tied to adopting a philosophy and approach that is *empowering*. Residents come to the table, and stay there, if they perceive that they are critical decision makers and their presence is needed.

Learning how to create a new environment, one that is more resident driven, g of new skills and approaches. Thus "capacity building"—building the individual and organizational capacity needed to work together effectively in new ways—was at the heart of RCI.
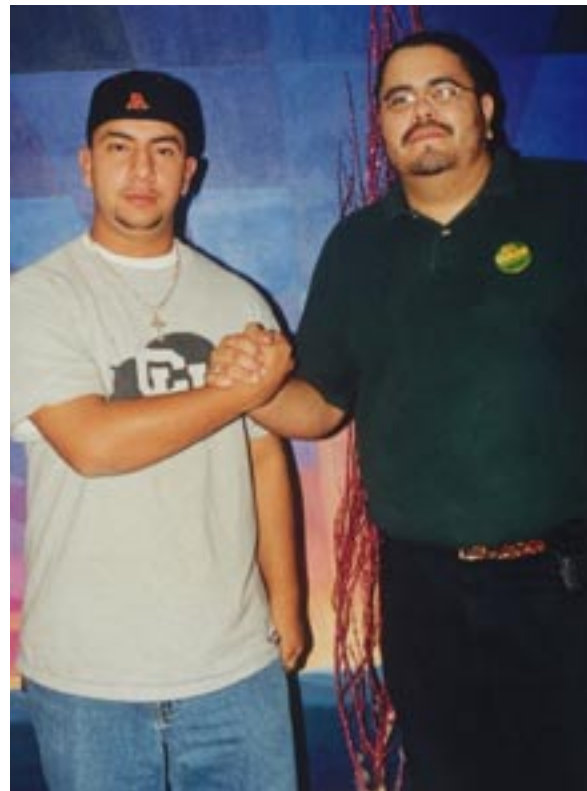
The need for capacity building is critical and continual. Initiatives grounded in community require new capacity-building approaches and tools. Structured learning processes, with communities fully engaged in the determination of technical assistance needs, management, and effectiveness, are critical in a comprehensive community-building initiative, as is the recognition that the optimum learning sequence is not always a linear one.

Although residents and lead organizations had previously come together in the RCI communities to accomplish significant things, both Foundation and community representatives believed from the beginning that considerable learning and capacity building would be a major feature of RCI. The Foundation provided a range of support to the communities throughout RCI's three phases, including cross-site workshops, project-specific technical assistance, and local coaches.

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"We think we know this stuff, and we do. The problem is what we know isn't necessarily what we need to know."

— *Lead agency staff member*

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Most notably, the Foundation explicitly acknowledged the need for capacity building by structuring RCI to include a capacity-building phase, rather than moving directly from the planning phase to the implementation phase. The kind of fundamental changes the communities and the Foundation were seeking required an additional step in the process that would enable each community to build the capacity of its leaders and organizations. Capacity building is a key feature of RCI that sets it apart from other comprehensive community initiatives. Building the capacity of residents, institutions, stakeholders, and others in the community helps them develop the skills, knowledge, technical resources and more to carry out the community's ambitious rebuilding plans.

By the scheduled end of RCI, it was clear that the net gains in community capacity were considerable. Across the sites, RCI participants saw their communities as stronger and more capable than they were at the beginning of RCI. The strengthened capacities were reflected in:

- New attitudes toward community development, most notably a greater capacity to engage in comprehensive community development processes that are more responsive to the community
- Greater ability to use data, technology, evaluation techniques, and outcomes planning in future community-building work
- Stronger infrastructures with which to continue community-building work
- New ways of thinking about and treating residents within agencies
- Enhanced skills among staff in community-based organizations
- Stronger relationships between neighborhood institutions and external power groups such as government, foundations, and business
- Improved community image and greater ability to attract resources and political attention
- Stronger lead agencies with more staff, better management systems, and expanded resources

Looking back, many participants now feel that "getting the technical assistance right" was an important early struggle. The Foundation and communities learned what worked through trial and error, with certain approaches working well in different places at different times. The difficulty in getting the technical assistance (TA) right has been ascribed to a number of factors:

- For some technical assistance providers, working with community-based organizations was a new and different experience. Issues of style, pace, and trust had to be negotiated before significant progress could be made. Relationship building was a key to success; the technical assistance providers needed to become known and trusted before the content could be engaged.
- For many communities, the challenge of managing an array of suddenly available, free technical assistance was unlike any previous experience.
- Communication and coordination between and among technical assistance providers may have been inadequate, and the communities now suggest that they did not feel there was synergy among the various technical assistance providers.

- In some instances, technical assistance was provided in a content area — education, juvenile justice, etc. — before the sites were ready to use it. Later on, when the sites felt a need for technical assistance in these areas, the process was far more effective.
- Perhaps most importantly, the technical assistance needs and priorities of the RCI sites were as varied as the lead agencies and communities themselves. Because RCI strove to be community-defined, there was no single set of accomplishments to be achieved and no single set of skills to be mastered; each site was moving along its own idiosyncratic path at its own pace.

Early on it was clear to all participants that RCI was calling on lead agencies, residents, and others to take on new challenges and, in some instances, to enter new fields and environments. It was not surprising that no one had the ready capacity to take on this initiative and just do it. RCI was heading into uncharted waters, and participants needed to be better prepared for the voyage.

> "There were things that the Foundation knew before the sites were ready for them."
> —Foundation staff

> "I thought the Foundation was very much learning right along with us." —RCI director

> "In the beginning, the TA kept coming…at points it was too much. It was always about figuring out how to use these gifts and how to use them well." —RCI director

> "Resident leadership development has to be intentional and integrated into everything you do. It's both an end and a means to an end." —RCI director

In hindsight, some RCI participants now wish that more of the early focus of the Initiative had been on leadership development, community organizing, and fund raising. Some wish there had been a pre-planning training and capacity-building period that focused on relationship building, skills enhancement, and similar activities to get ready for planning.

Others note that, realistically, no one could have taken the time away from normal duties to engage in a pre-RCI institute and there is something to be said for learning by doing. The RCI lessons, they suggest, are not the stuff of workshops but rather of day-to-day experience.

Given its desire not to drive the Initiative, the Casey Foundation struggled with when to introduce issues and technical assistance, and often second-guessed itself. In later years, the Foundation became less self conscious and tentative and "learned just to put stuff out there." One site representative noted, "What worked best was when Casey presented their thoughts and opinions to the sites in a way that shared what they knew and understood, but in a non-prescriptive way."

Foundation-community relationships improved and TA was put to better use when the Foundation devised a different management system for TA. At first, TA providers met with only the Foundation to discuss the communities. But this process was revised and twice-a-year meetings were held with each site, AECF, OMG, and the TA providers. In this way, the communities were no longer the _target_ of TA and the _subject_ of discussion, but were fully engaged in the determination of TA needs, management, and effectiveness. In addition, the Foundation urged TA providers to break out of traditional roles and to envision _the initiative_ as their client and to work for the success of RCI.

TA providers were accountable to both the Foundation and the communities. The TA providers signed agreements with the communities and reported to them, not just to the Foundation. The Foundation and the communities together developed standards for TA providers. This built community capacity to select TA, negotiate contracts, and manage consultants. One community representative saw this as an example of the "Foundation walking the talk."

In consultation with communities, and over time, RCI turned to or developed a number of innovative capacity-building strategies and tools intended to meet the unique needs of the Initiative. Of these, three stand out: transition monitoring teams, local coaches, and the engine of change.

Transition Monitoring Teams

RCI's comprehensive scope and its ambitious outcomes made leadership development—at the lead agency, community, and individual levels—a priority. Consultants worked with each of the lead agencies around organizational development, sometimes leading to changes or clarity in structure. Recognizing the strains and demands on lead agencies, RCI placed a good deal of emphasis on organizational development assistance for the lead agencies and their community partners.

Helping executive directors of two lead agencies to better manage change was the impetus for the creation of the transition monitoring team (TMT).

Developed by consultant Bill Link of Management Assistance Group, the TMT design was based on the work of William Bridges, a business consultant who has written extensively on managing transitions and the human side of change. The TMT structure helped the executive directors of Warren/Conner in Detroit and Germantown Settlement in Philadelphia to gauge the impact of their decisions on their organizations. To accomplish this, each organization established diverse teams of employees, containing a mixture of upper management and others, trained in a process of examining issues assigned by the executive director. The TMT was empowered to think through these issues and make recommendations to the executive director. Use of the TMT process increased staff participation in the change process, while providing management with advice and guidance about the likely impact.

Local Coaches

Several communities used consultants known as "local coaches." These were consultants from the community who were paid by the Foundation, but selected by the lead agency. Although the Foundation originally envisioned that the coaches would focus primarily on organizational issues, their roles varied significantly at each of the sites. Many communities valued their coaches for "holding up a mirror to them," that is, helping the sites to clarify their organization's mission,

structure, and strategies as well as various aspects of the Initiative, including the site's RCI plan.

Consultants who were familiar with the history and politics of the community brought maximum value to the local sites because the learning curve was sharply reduced. In addition, in some cases, because the lead agency was able to select the consultant without Foundation influence, the relationship between the agency and the local coach was strengthened. In at least one instance, however, the coach's familiarity with community politics made it difficult for the coach to remain, or be perceived as, neutral.

Coaches worked better in some communities than others. When they worked best, they helped the local RCI effort to stay on course. The coach, because he or she did not have operational responsibility or authority, could stay focused on the bigger, more fundamental picture, and sometimes serve as "the conscience" of RCI. As one RCI participant noted: "It's important to have people not directly engaged in service delivery help you look at things."

Engine of Change

During the capacity-building phase, the Foundation introduced the concept of the "engine of change" to serve as a framework to strengthen the overall focus and direction of the communities' RCI plans. By identifying an engine of change—the facet of the overall effort that was the key to making it all work—sites were able to prioritize their efforts.

Communities responded to the engine of change framework in different ways. For some, the result was significant reorganization of their RCI plan to elevate one component as their site's signature project. For others, the engine of change was a challenge to develop a stronger understanding of the relationship of various Initiative components to the whole of RCI. And for still others, although the framework inspired less tangible or obvious responses, it was valued nonetheless for spurring the sites to think deeply about how they planned to accomplish their RCI goals.

Not everyone found this tool to his or her liking. For some it had an "air of artificiality to it," but for most it served a valuable purpose. "The introduction of the engine of change," one observer noted, "got everyone thinking more strategically; everyone became clearer about connecting activities to outcomes."

In addition to the development of these new tools and approaches, RCI's design required that two areas of capacity building receive particular attention: _resident leadership_ and the _use of data_.

Resident Leadership Development

Much of the work of RCI was directed toward shoring up the social fabric of the five communities. This, in turn, led to significant changes in residents' attitudes about their individual and collective power, as well as in increased knowledge and skills about how systems work. Residents from each of the five RCI sites have vividly described the strengthening of community networks as evidence of improved social infrastructure -- a critical area of change for the Initiative. In many ways, gains in the social infrastructure of these communities—including residents' increased sense of belonging to their community and trust in their neighbors—were among the most valued outcomes for RCI participants. Among the most important changes noted were in residents' beliefs about their own power and ability to influence the future of their own community.

RCI called on residents to play a greater role in community decision-making than residents in impoverished neighborhoods are usually afforded. The capacity challenge, if community efforts were to be resident driven, required an understanding of what knowledge, skills, and tools residents need to be effective leaders. Thus, the RCI capacity-building agenda was not just about organizational development, but encompassed personal development as well.

In one community, RCI "helped us to see leadership development as the engine of change that will drive what we are trying to do here. It has helped us gear the community up for thinking together and then moving together…gearing the community up for learning how to learn."

A number of organizations focused on developing "toolboxes" and "leadership institutes" with the express intent of building community leadership. For example, Warren/Conner in Detroit created the "Neighborhood Toolbox, " an integrated set of activities focused around education and other issues. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston designed a leadership development program – called the Resident Development Institute -- incorporating the organization's learnings about community change and leadership development. And Denver's NEWSED created a leadership development course available free to neighborhood residents of all ages. The multi-session course used an exploration of cultural and community history as the foundation for leadership training.

RCI also made a large investment in tools to help residents think strategically. One executive director noted that, "residents need extra training, increased skills, and understanding, but the work was progressing faster than we were able to develop resident capacity." DSNI's Resident Development Institute is its signature project. The need for resident leadership forced DSNI, which had traditionally developed leadership through involvement over a period of years, to "compress all of [its] institutional memories and learnings in such a way as to shorten the learning curve for the development of new community leaders." DSNI moved to this strategy because it found that it could not produce enough leaders, fast enough, through informal mentoring and experiential learning.

In many ways, the focus on capacity building and leadership development "helped folks realize how much they already knew." Residents learned new skills, to be sure, but they also realized that they brought important information and skills with them. The increase in confidence is apparent in talking with residents: "We realized we actually don't need experts to tell us what we want. The whole notion of economic development, for example, wasn't a mysterious black box but something we could get our arms around."

Use of Data

RCI is based on the belief that information is power, and the Initiative placed significant demands on the lead agencies to collect, utilize, and manage large amounts of community data on a number of levels. Internally, the lead agencies found they had to develop their organization's capacity to use computers — a sometimes painful first step — before they were able to input collected community data. A next, equally painful, step was using information to inform program development and service delivery. Germantown Settlement, Marshall Heights Community Development Organization, and NEWSED took this step, developing integrated intake systems for their human service delivery initiatives.

The Casey Foundation had more experience and a richer understanding of the uses of data to move a community agenda than did the lead agencies. Metis Associates, the Foundation's primary contractor for data and management information system development, worked with the RCI communities, each at its own pace, to explore data and information needs and to develop enhanced capacities. Most agree it was slow going at first.

As one participant noted: "I wish we as an organization had really paid attention to building an infrastructure before we did. The community wasn't ready. The agency wasn't ready. People weren't comfortable with what computers did. We had to go through a long planning process to determine we really needed to get into data. It was not a top priority, and it was not communicated as if it were. But now we're focusing on the data."

Although it was clear that the Foundation hoped the communities would jump on the data/technology bandwagon, resistance was apparent from the outset, and it manifested itself in different ways. In some cases, it was the typical resistance many adults have to learning new skills, particularly in mysterious areas like data management and computers; while for others, the data agenda seemed like just one more thing on an already too crowded plate. Some lead agencies and partner organizations were very understaffed and had significant personnel turbulence, which affected continuity, relationship building, and rate of progress.

Developmentally, and in terms of their own priorities, most lead agencies were not ready to delve into data issues from the first year of RCI. It took at least five or six years for some RCI communities to become interested in tackling data issues. Yet, despite the slow start, remarkable progress was eventually made in this area:

- New staff was hired to focus on data and information systems
- Up-to-date equipment was purchased and staff trained in its use
- Agencies involved in direct services installed client-tracking systems
- Communities utilized asset inventories and community surveys

Looking back, it seems that this capacity-building area was one in which progress was highly dependent on building relationships between the site and the technical assistance provider, operating within the timeframe of the site, and developing work plans that are mutually agreed-upon by the site and the technical assistance provider.

Acting as a lead agency requires balancing competing roles and interests. It poses difficult challenges both within the organization and in the community. The challenge of leadership requires unprecedented effort, considerable organizational growth in personnel and programming, and the development of new skills and relationships.

Trying to foster change at a neighborhood level carries with it both advantages and challenges. For an external funder, establishing a partnership with an entire neighborhood is particularly difficult. Neighborhoods do not exist in the formal sense that cities, counties, or school districts do. There is no formal infrastructure, boundaries are often vague, and there are no official leaders—no "mayor" with whom to cut a deal, no budget that can be reviewed to get a sense of neighborhood plans and priorities.

If it were possible, some funders would choose to engage directly with the "community" itself, instead of going through agencies and institutions. From that wish flows a set of philosophical questions and practical problems: Who is the community? Who represents the community? Is it residents, people who work in the neighborhood, local institutions, or all of these and more? There is nowhere a funder can send the check and be sure that it is received by the authentic community. And it is unclear who is accountable for community decisions or actions. Unable to engage the elusive community itself in any practical way, external entities need some sort of structure—a lead agency, coalition, collaborative—to act as a proxy for the "community."

The design of RCI depended heavily on the work of a community-based organization acting as a lead agency. Rather than seeking to create coalitions or collaboratives, as previous Casey Foundation initiatives had done, RCI asked key community organizations to be the catalyst and focal point of an emerging community process. The Foundation expended considerable time and resources to identify a pool of likely candidates: it conducted reconnaissance on dozens of organizations, conducted interviews, reviewed proposals, made site visits, and selected the five organizations[4] that became the heart of the Initiative.

In its search for lead agencies, the Foundation considered a number of factors, including an organization's track record. The Foundation wanted seasoned groups that already had been successful. In addition, the Foundation looked hard at each prospective organization's standing in the community. Ideal organizations would not only be in the community, but also of the community. Finally, the Foundation attempted to assess each prospective lead agency's ability to lead a community-driven effort.

Despite the prior accomplishments of the community-based organizations selected to be lead agencies, the Foundation discovered that, for even the strongest community-based organizations, an initiative such as RCI required unprecedented effort, considerable organizational growth, and the development of new skills.

Among the most difficult challenges lead agencies faced was learning how to balance their organizational needs and priorities with their role as an RCI convener and catalyst. Day-to-day, the lead agencies felt competition for time and resources. Some lead agencies reportedly spent a lot of time defining the lines between RCI and the overall organization. The underlying problem was difficult: if the lead agency so incorporated RCI that the agency and the Initiative were indistinguishable, then it might appear that RCI was "agency owned" rather than "community owned." If, on the other hand, the lead agency maintained a distance from RCI, it might appear to be insufficiently committed to the effort. In some agencies, the practical problem sometimes came down to how much staff time should be dedicated to RCI.

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"Being the lead agency for RCI changed the boundaries of this organization."

— Lead agency executive director

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The use of RCI finances was a hot button issue as well. Lead agencies were in a position to strongly influence how RCI funds were spent. Looking back, some RCI participants now believe that "the first instinct of the CBOs was to secure as much of the Casey dollars as they could for their own shop and to make sure the planning stage focused on issues of importance to them, in essence using Casey money to bring activities to fruition that they had always wanted."

In hindsight, some suggest that success in the dog-eat-dog world of community development requires a set of characteristics that are antithetical to being the selfless facilitator of a community-driven process. One participant saw this as design flaw in RCI: "Casey selected five organizations that have all been around for a number of years, that have very strong management styles and executive directors, and they said to these organizations 'you should collaborate'. That's asking them to go totally against what they are as individual organizations."

Others believe that the lead agencies *needed* to become stronger in order to shoulder the primary responsibility for RCI. One resident's view is that "to date the benefits may have accrued to the agency. But my sense is that in five years the rewards of that investment will have a far more profound impact on my community."

> "One of the challenges for CBOs is to not get too far from who we are and who we're serving."
> —Lead agency staff member
>
> "RCI put us inside the community in ways we never had been before." —Lead agency executive director
>
> "For quite a while the change process was managing us." —Lead agency executive director

Still others find fault with the Foundation's willingness to let community processes play out unchecked and suggest that "if we were to re-do RCI today, the Foundation should prescribe a percentage of the grant that could be used towards the lead agency and require that the remainder be spent in the community."

In addition to issues of time and money, RCI lead agencies had to carefully balance their roles in the Initiative and in the community. As the most visible RCI participants, lead agency staff found themselves in the role of "representing" the community even though RCI was billed as a "resident-driven" initiative. One executive director felt that this was a difficult position: "We are a corporation, and we have self-interest. We are not 'the community' and shouldn't be viewed that way."

Playing a lead agency role stretched the capacities of the organizations and their leaders. One executive director noted "there's a piece of leadership to understand what role a lead agency needs to play and when." While another reflected that "we have always been headed by a strong leader with a fighting spirit. When you have that personality, when it's time to negotiate or back down, it's not always the easiest thing to do." Yet, as was noted, "Executive directors have to be strategic and intentional in the use of their personal power."

RCI came to some lead agencies at a time when they were poised to expand both their organizations and scope. For others, RCI spurred such growth. Almost without exception, the budgets, staffing, and visibility of RCI lead agencies grew during the RCI years, sometimes several fold. The effect of rapid expansion on an organization can be draining, and RCI

lead agencies experienced such growth while at the same time leading a community change process.

Managing RCI required the lead agencies to change, to a greater or lesser extent, "who" they were. One executive director noted that he "hadn't expected that community building would involve *all* aspects of the organization." Being a lead agency required some organizations to enter new fields (human services, for example) while others needed to reach out to a broader community than their traditional constituencies. For some lead agencies, RCI was the catalyst leading to a re-examination of their relationship with community residents and other community organizations. For one lead organization -- the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative -- the task of engaging residents and being a resident-led organization was familiar and characteristic of the organization's pre-RCI work.

While the RCI lead agency role might have been a stretch for the CBOs, neither consultants nor participants could identify an entity better suited to anchor this sort of initiative. In all cases, despite the five lead agencies coming from very different traditions, they all shared an RCI experience that was transformative. Lead agencies signed on to be the catalyst for bringing change to their communities, perhaps under-appreciating how much their own organizations would be changed.

The RCI experience tells us that organizations in a position to lead comprehensive community initiatives should:

- Anticipate that peer organizations and community residents will benefit from repeated clarification of lead agency role and initiative goals. This is especially important if the lead agency takes on a new and/or different community role than in the past.

- Minimize opportunities for miscommunication and discord by formalizing partnership agreements, especially ones that involve the exchange of money for services.

- Keep all departments and staff members of the lead agency in the loop of the initiative, regardless of their level of direct involvement, by developing strategies for systemic communication. This helps minimize internal organizational resistance to change as well as lays the groundwork for future unforeseen synergies.

- Be conscious of lead agency structure and remain open to modifying it based on the needs of the initiative.

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4. See Appendix for organization names and contact information.

It takes a long time, and a lot of time every day, to rebuild communities. Rebuilding communities by changing hearts and minds through broad community participation and resident empowerment is a much slower and more time-intensive approach than rebuilding communities solely with bricks and mortar.

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"Seven years is not a long time to change a history."

— Lead agency executive director

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Inevitably, any "lessons learned" paper written about a community change initiative must acknowledge time as an important factor, and this paper is no exception. Time is the scarcest of resources, and those involved in creating initiatives consistently underestimate how much of it is needed to achieve the ends desired.

The first and most frequent observation about time is that the conditions of impoverished neighborhoods cannot be turned around in the relatively short lifespan of a foundation initiative. In RCI's case, the changes envisioned are of the most fundamental sort -- changing attitudes, perceptions, and relationships; enhancing grassroots capacity and leadership; changing the way community institutions define themselves and relate to one another; and changing a wide range of external factors that affect the community – and are only beginning to become noticeable in the communities.

RCI participants point out that the price for broad participation and resident empowerment is a slowing down of decisions and actions that, in a less inclusive environment, could have been achieved more efficiently. As is often noted, democracy is not an efficient process, and community level democracy is no exception. "It's not efficient, and it's very costly in terms of process—constant organizing to keep the community aware. It would be so much easier to do it differently," one participant noted. Yet, this time investment is necessary if the process is to be truly community-owned and sustainable.

In addition, some suggest that the Casey Foundation underestimated the amount of time it would take to shore up lead agency management and program operations so that these CBOs could effectively lead the process. Despite an extended planning period and a capacity-building period, some lead agencies feel that they have only recently reached the point where they can be most effective.

Contributing to the slow pace of the Initiative were language issues between the Foundation and the lead agencies. According to one Foundation representative, a lot of time was wasted while sites grappled with the meaning of terms such as "governance," "planning" and "organizing."

In addition to the many years it takes to begin to see real changes, it also must be noted that it takes a significant amount of time each day to carry out a community change initiative like RCI. Resident engagement is a particularly time-consuming process. A Detroit resident noted that, "Detroit is a city with very little history of support, collaboration, and coalitions around anything other than short-term issues. Because of that, the amount of daily support, mentoring, and follow-up required is exhausting."

Working in partnerships and collaborations is time consuming as well. One RCI participant from Washington noted that, "You never know the amount of resources in people and time it takes. Ninety percent of our time is spent in meetings. All these collaborations slow people down."

Another aspect of the time crunch is the amount of time it takes – nearly always underestimated -- just to be a participant: to attend conferences and meetings, to engage in technical assistance events, to be evaluated, to meet and greet the streams of people coming to visit, to respond to inquiries from other communities interested in what you are doing, etc. In addition, many RCI participants said they had difficulty finding time to carefully consider issues while running on the daily treadmill of demands. They were unimaginably busy before RCI began, and during RCI they often found themselves

"Can't think, must work." —Lead agency executive director

"Some things have to play out in their own time in their own way." —RCI director

"We ought to measure this initiative 10 years from now." —RCI Local coach

overwhelmed and stressed. Hence, the semi-comic phrase "Can't think, must work" often heard at one RCI office.

Much of the work of an initiative like RCI calls on top individuals in the lead agency to be actively and visibly involved. Executive directors of the lead agencies were often in a quandary—if they tried to extricate themselves and delegate to others in the organization, it might look as if they were not fully committed. Yet, if they tried to be personally involved all or most of the time, they found it difficult to both run the agency and lead RCI.

Finally, it must be noted that RCI was an extremely broad and comprehensive initiative. Service delivery improvements, governance structures, resident empowerment, capacity building, infrastructure improvements, attracting capital, building data systems, developing partnerships, building political connections, were all on the agenda, and all demanded time, attention, and resources. While no one would suggest that any of these issues are unimportant, and no one would deny that many are closely linked, the question of whether it was just too much has arisen in numerous

discussions. "The number of items that the RCI sites needed to address set up unrealistic goals of what the outcomes should be," suggested one executive director. While another observed, "I remember thinking in 1993 that this is too much, but what an incredible opportunity to try it!" At the end of the Initiative, however, and despite the enormity of the task, the consensus of the RCI participants was that pretty much everything on the list needed to be there.

What should be done about the time issues -- about how long it takes and how much daily effort it takes? The RCI participants recognize that there are no easy solutions. They seem to accept that fundamental change is a long-term endeavor. Their frustration is that others do not always realize the difficulty and complexity of their work, and may have unrealistic expectations and fail to recognize and appreciate that progress is being made. The RCI experience does provide some suggestions for managing the time issue:

- Explore the use of structured, time management tools that help lead agencies and communities prioritize their work and tie activities to outcomes.
- Foundations should carefully consider when to introduce a new tool into an initiative.
- Be aware of the ways in which historical contexts in communities can accelerate or retard the change process

Partnership building is extremely difficult work. Conflicts are inevitable when building partnerships that bring together a wide range of public and private institutions and community agencies. It is as difficult to establish and maintain effective partnerships within communities as it is with external groups.

The RCI design envisioned that lead agencies would help to catalyze communities and attract a wide range of actors "to the table," including government, business, clergy, and non-profit organizations. The hope was that this constellation of organizations/sectors would come to "own" RCI in combination with residents. It also was hoped that the RCI load -- carried initially in each community by the lead agency -- ultimately would be carried by many institutions.

This portion of the agenda proved even more difficult to accomplish than expected and, in some instances, the sites were not able to fully realize their aspirations in this area. Lead agencies and other proponents of RCI confronted a lack of trust, a lack of clarity, and conflicting self-interests that impacted the ability to build partnerships. In one view, the RCI grant intensified existing dysfunctions in the local power structure. Some local RCI participants indicated that they found it easier to connect with government agencies and with organizations outside the community than with organizations with deep roots in the community.

In some communities, the problems encountered while forging partnerships had their roots in the fierce competition that exists among community agencies for very scarce resources. As noted earlier, the perception in some communities was that the RCI lead agencies could have shared the Casey resources more fully. One participant noted that "the grant created big problems because everyone thought they'd get their fair share of the money."

For some of the lead agencies, an expanded scope of involvement proved problematic as well and came into conflict with partnership development. When community development corporations, for example, became more involved in human services, they viewed themselves as becoming more comprehensive in their approach. Those who were already involved in human services, however, saw this as encroachment on their turf. One participant noted that, "a lot of opposition from peer groups arose because they resented us jumping on the human services bandwagon when we had no history/credibility in doing this."

Another difficulty noted in partnership building with other community agencies was the "800-pound gorilla" factor. Several RCI lead agencies noted that they were, in some instances, by far the strongest, best funded, most respected

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"Programs like this are good on paper, but RCI presumed an element of good faith (among agencies) that does not exist in this community."

— *Resident*

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community-based organization in their area. While this positions the agency well in building relationships with external forces—funders, business, and government—it can get in the way of alliances with agencies inside the community. One executive director said, "Our organization continues to struggle with the perception by peer organizations that it dominates a significant level of resources." Another suggested that an agency with dominance in the community should use its position: "What I'm beginning to understand is that it's not a good thing or a bad thing. It is what it is. That we are considered an 800-pound gorilla is part of community

change. It is a fact of life. Now the question is what are we going to do with it?"

An additional barrier to effective partnerships was presented by an uneven commitment among community agencies and institutions to resident leadership. For the RCI lead agencies, the partnership with residents was the first and most important partnership to be built. But other participating organizations found that more traditional inter-agency collaboration and coordination processes did not always fit well with the more deliberative, resident-engaged processes. One lead agency executive director, reflecting on how differently his organization relates to residents as compared to other community organizations, noted, "Tensions developed around partnership and resident leadership. It has happened because we've had partners who've said 'it's getting really hard to deal with you guys.'" A positive outcome of RCI has been that resident participation on the boards of community agencies and in community discussions is now expected and becoming increasingly commonplace.

Beyond the boundaries of the immediate community, the Casey Foundation envisioned active governmental participation in RCI. Part of the RCI agenda was to address the "disparity between the needs of distressed neighborhoods and the response of central governments." The Foundation hoped to link "neighborhood residents' reinvestment agendas and city governance strategies for those neighborhoods…to make those one in the same." While RCI communities have not yet

reached that level, there are encouraging signs of strengthened ties between these communities and government.

One lead agency executive director noted, "Being part of RCI brought cachet, recognition, attention, and access to a wider range of policy makers and decision makers at the local, state, and federal levels of government." It was suggested that RCI

"We have a community-based organization for every tree—and if you have been to Germantown you know that we have a lot of trees!" —Lead agency executive director

"Money anoints…" —Foundation staff member

"In this community we are the 800-pound gorilla." —Lead agency executive director

and its lead agencies were seen as valuable to government officials because of the access it provides to community members. In at least one RCI community, both the local government and the governor's office were interested in figuring out how to better connect with neighborhoods. Another participant believes that as a result of RCI, "government and the city are more willing to work with neighborhoods on their agendas."

Some participants feel that the kind of partnership that Casey initially envisioned between neighborhoods and local governments is "unlikely". Rather than seeking a full partnership, some feel that they have accomplished a good deal by increasing communications with government officials and, in some instances, getting government partners to the RCI table.

RCI asked lead agencies to become catalysts in their communities for changing the ways human services are conceived, delivered, and evaluated. This was a challenge for the lead agencies, which for the most part came from histories that focused heavily on making physical improvements in the community, such as housing rehabilitation and business development. One participant saw little gain on the human services agenda: "We ran into lots of problems because government and social workers have a lot invested in the status quo. You have all these people invested in seeing you fail. This was the lesson of devolution and system reform."

Nonetheless, some communities made impressive gains in their efforts to alter the public and private human service systems in their neighborhoods. Despite the high degree of difficulty inherent in this agenda, some lead agencies, such as the Marshall Heights Community Development Organization in Washington, DC, and NEWSED in Denver, CO, spearheaded service delivery collaborations that successfully brought together a range of service providers to identify new ways of working together and delivering services. Other organizations, such as Philadelphia's Germantown Settlement, note that RCI caused their organization to rethink its structure to improve the ways various divisions relate and interact with each other.

Coordinated, comprehensive interagency case management approaches, such as Denver's PATCH system, formed the basis of several RCI communities' human services delivery reform efforts. Although each community brought a unique mixture of agencies to the table, each worked within a framework designed to address holistically the needs of children and families. This framework utilized a team approach in which staff from multiple agencies work together, share information, and jointly track results.

In addition, almost all of the agencies instituted "mini-grant" programs, which involved residents in determining needed services and distributing funds to both individuals and organizations.

Overall, the RCI effort in those communities most involved in this work:

- Enhanced inter-organizational collaboration in human service delivery,
- Increased lead agency intra-organizational collaboration related to human service delivery, and
- Increased resident awareness of, input into, and governance of, service delivery.

The RCI participants sought to build partnerships in order to get critical work done. The accomplishment is not that a partnership has been formed, but that a partnership has been formed that will lead to the accomplishment of a goal. As one lead agency executive director said, "I've come to think of partnership as a methodology...Partnerships must be purposeful (whether internal or external)—and they cannot be based on a grantor's requirements."

Establishing and maintaining the myriad partnerships needed to support a community rebuilding agenda is crushingly difficult work. Yet RCI communities made great strides over the course of the Initiative. One participant said, "RCI has meant increased opportunities for richer programming because

of the level of collaboration among service providers. It's easier to connect with service providers now because there's a linkage that came from RCI." Beyond the immediate gains, RCI communities believe they have become models for their cities. According to one participant, "Things we have done here have allowed this neighborhood serious benefits, and what we have done here has made the city more responsive to other neighborhoods."

The Casey Foundation and RCI communities learned that building partnerships is complex work. More specifically, they learned that:

- The key to developing partnerships is multi-level, simultaneous relationship building – resident to resident, residents to non-residents, staff members to staff members, board members to civic organizations, organizations to organizations, and so on.
- Major foundations can help develop sustainable partnerships by connecting initiative partners to systems at the state and federal levels.
- At the community level, partnership building needs to be both strategic and inclusive. Initiative leaders need to be clear about the reasons why they seek to partner, be thoughtful about ways of reaching out to potential partners, and understand that numerous factors — culture, prior history, etc. — can sometimes undermine the best intentions.

Power dynamics between funders and grantees can be greatly lessened, but never completely eliminated. Increasing opportunities for mutual understanding of the respective contexts in which the communities and foundations operate promotes communication that may help mitigate the inherent power differential between grantor and grantee.

In designing RCI, the staff of the Casey Foundation sought to establish a grantor-grantee partnership that, to the extent possible, minimized power dynamics. RCI was decidedly *not* a "top-down" or "funder-driven" initiative in which low-income communities were asked to carry out a plan developed by the Foundation. The goal of minimizing the power dynamics between funder and community was seen as a critical component of an initiative intended to find ways of releasing community residents' authentic voices, ideas, and energy.

RCI was broadly defined by the Foundation, but this definition left ample room for local shaping, priority setting, and community-inspired variety. In this way, Casey moved away from a demonstration project model towards a community support model; and, throughout the Initiative, Casey staff tried mightily to reduce the grantor-grantee power imbalance.

The Foundation tried to lessen power dynamics in a number of ways from co-planning technical assistance with the sites, to the use of "local coaches", to working with the sites to define the role of evaluation. Though none of these methods were perceived by all parties to be effective in lessening the power differential, each was perceived as more or less successful, depending on the community. For instance, the Foundation agreed to pay for each community to hire a local coach steeped in transformational/organizational change skills. Sites were free to select their own coaches from the community provided that the coaches function as "mirrors" to the sites. The Foundation had hoped that the coaches would serve as a non-threatening means of reinforcing Foundation values, but because the role of the coaches was so loosely defined, the use of local coaches became a contentious issue that actually worked against building a strong grantor-grantee bond in some communities.

Interestingly, the role the sites played in defining their relationships with the RCI evaluator, OMG, and evaluation data collector, Metis Associates, may have helped to mitigate the grantor–grantee power differential. The communities appreciated the ability to provide feedback to OMG and Metis, and from those conversations close, candid relationships developed between the evaluators and the sites. Often, the

evaluators served as a go-between linking the Foundation and the communities, sometimes clarifying language and roles, almost in the capacity of facilitators.

Most participants feel that the desire to create a distinctive relationship between the Foundation and the communities was fulfilled to a large extent, but somewhat incompletely and with great difficulty. While noting the many positive differences between RCI and other funder-grantee experiences, participants were quick to note that, as hard as everyone tried, there are many issues about power that simply will not go away.

Although Foundation staff had a genuine desire to empower, to not control, and to operate with the communities as equals, this desire was frequently complicated by an equally strong pull towards "making it happen" and the reality of being accountable for results. Casey staff and community representatives tried to operate on a level of personal trust and mutual respect, and largely succeeded in this. But no one was ever fully free of their institutional responsibilities; everyone came to this work with an institutional constituency to represent.

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"It is as much art as science. No one has the answer about how you do the dance between an intermediary and the community."
— *Foundations staff member*

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It would be disingenuous to suggest that the Foundation, or the lead agencies, came to RCI with no agendas, no institutional goals, and no differences of opinion. The ideal basis for RCI was not that all would agree all the time, but rather that each participant would openly display its agenda and communication would be clear. As one site representative noted, "There needs to be mutual understanding of the community context in which the CBOs operate, as well as understanding of the context in which the Foundation operates, as each seeks to achieve its goals."

The building of a true partnership was complicated by issues of trust, communication, and long established historical patterns about how foundations and communities are "supposed" to interact. In addition, other interests, in both

The Foundation, seeking to equalize the relationship further, told the sites upfront that it did not intend to end financial support to any community prior to the scheduled end of the Initiative. This was seen as a way to build trust in the Foundation and allow for a free exchange of ideas. Further, throughout the Initiative, Foundation staff and site representatives were frank and forthcoming about their disagreements and the periodic strain that discord placed on their relationships. They worked hard to "get comfortable with conflict" and reached unusually high levels of frankness.

In part, the distance between grantor and grantee is the result of individuals and the organizations they represent being in very different places. For a foundation, an individual community is one of a number of sites, in one of a number of grant programs, and the major goal is to learn from the experience. For a community, the stakes are very different, and the issues do not disappear or lose importance when the foundation grant ends.

The ending of RCI, unfortunately, placed the greatest strain on the relationships between the Foundation and communities. Many RCI communities hoped that Casey support would continue beyond RCI, in the form of inclusion in Casey's Making Connections program[5]. In fact, while RCI cities, and in some instances the same neighborhoods, were early participants in Making Connections, the Foundation elected not to use a strategy built around a lead agency in that program. Thus, RCI lead agencies either are not involved in Making Connections at all or not involved in clear positions of leadership.

As *Making Connections* became visible just as RCI was entering its implementation phase, some RCI participants feel that it undercut their momentum and seemed to write off RCI approaches/strategies prematurely. For some RCI participants, the way in which *Making Connections* unfolded felt like a repudiation of RCI work. For others, the overlap with *Making Connections* was only a part of a larger problem: the insufficiency of seven or eight years to do all that RCI promised, coupled with a difficulty, in some communities, replacing Casey funds with comparable funds with few restrictions. Perhaps any ending is a bad ending in an environment in which grantee-friendly funds are scarce.

Others suggest that a sudden ending of funding can be harmful, even when it's fully predictable. Rather than a "cliff effect," some prefer a more gradual reduction in funding. Many believe that there "should have been a plan for continuation from the very start," and some suggest that Casey should have required the communities to have such a plan in

place. As was true throughout this less-directive Initiative, "It was left to everyone to create their own futures."

Finally, some suggest that there is much more to be done and to be learned. "We should encourage foundations to continue documentation far beyond their grant to capture long-term outcomes. It would be a shame if we closed this out and what we learn is only what is available at this time."

the communities and at the Foundation, while not involved in the conversation directly, still influenced it. One long-term community participant found that "there were multiple voices coming from the Foundation and they didn't all say the same things." From the Foundation's perspective, many community voices were heard and taken into account.

For some RCI participants, culture is seen as an important impediment to improved Foundation-community relationships. Representatives from the Denver site felt that at times RCI—largely made up of African-American communities east of the Mississippi—missed a number of important cultural issues unique to western, Latino/Chicano/Mexicano communities.

Foundation staff, anxious for positive results as a way of validating the RCI approach, found themselves in a position analogous to that of lead agencies when dealing with resident groups. The conundrum was how to "give away" control while still hoping to influence events. For some, although the Foundation appeared "serious about not imposing things on people, [Casey's] 'suggestions' sometimes [didn't] feel like suggestions; the money—power—[was] always there, always part of the equation."

"Because of their desire not to lead, they [Casey] would seldom say things directly." —RCI local coach

"Money always colors the conversation… Sometimes a big check gets in the way of dialogue." —Foundation staff member

"The power of the money is so prominent…it's sad you can't have a relationship outside of the contract." —Foundation staff member

"The Foundation had a way of telling you what to do without telling you what to do. We figured out a way to be respectful without compromising what we do." —Lead agency executive director

"None of the local foundations are after these big ideas." —RCI local coach

"RCI has been genuinely supportive of the work that we do. It funded things that funders usually don't fund. This was 'community figuring out money.'" —RCI director

"Until Casey came along, we hadn't convinced any funder in any large way to focus on increasing community capacity. It may be easier to do so in the future as a result of RCI." —Resident

5. Making Connections is the centerpiece of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's multi-faceted effort to improve the life chances of vulnerable children by helping to strengthen their families and neighborhoods. This decade-long effort will include a three-year demonstration phase involving neighborhoods in 22 cities to promote programs, activities, and policies that contribute to strong families.

Appendix: RCI Contact Information

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative

John Barros, Executive Director
504 Dudley Street
Roxbury, MA 02119-2767
Phone: (617) 442-9670
Fax: (617) 427-8047
Website: www.dsni.org

Germantown Settlement

Emanuel Freeman, President & CEO
5538 Wayne Avenue, Suite C
Philadelphia, PA 19144-2308
Phone: (215) 849-3104
Fax: (215) 843-7264
Website: www.germantown.org

Marshall Heights Community Development Organization

Loretta Tate, President & CEO
3939 Benning Road, NE
Washington, DC 20019-3402
Phone: (202) 396-1200
Fax: (202) 396-4106
Website: www.mhcdo.org

NEWSED Community Development Corporation

Veronica Barela, Executive Director
1029 Santa Fe Drive
Denver, CO 80204-3950
Phone: (303) 534-8342
Fax: (303) 534-7418
Website: www.newsed.org

Warren/Conner Development Coalition

Maggie Desantis, Executive Director
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Reflections On The Journey

Dedicated to assuring that residents and local
institutions have the power to determine the
future course of their communities, the Rebuilding
Communities Initiative represents a breakthrough
in the relationship between community building
efforts and philanthropy. Participants worked to
build local capacity, establish partnerships, alter
service systems, and bring needed resources to
their communities. In many ways, RCI is leaving the
five target communities far better prepared to face
the challenges ahead.

A lot was learned along the way and a great deal
more remains to be learned. The RCI experience
is ongoing – community building was occurring
in these neighborhoods before the formal start of
RCI; it took great leaps forward during the course
of the Initiative, and it will continue -- albeit under
changed circumstances -- after the Casey funding
has ended. So it is, perhaps, appropriate to think of
this paper as capturing some of the lessons of RCI
so far. The full story, complete with deeper, more
complete lessons, may be a generation away.