



# Building Sustainable Communities

by Joe Vaughan  
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Illustration: Kirk Lytle

Looking out from the steps of the Hope Street Family Resource Center in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, you see a bustling playground, well-maintained homes, and neighborhood youth painting a mural or on their way to after-school tutoring. The building behind you, a stately old schoolhouse, has been renovated to house Connecting for Children and Families and 110 affordable child-care slots.

The old schoolhouse in this mill town has witnessed many changes over the years: manufacturing that came and went, buildings that were abandoned, rising crime, pervasive hopelessness.<sup>1</sup> Today the Hope Street Family Resource Center is the literal and figurative crown jewel of a community's revitalization.

Travel 20 minutes to Providence's Olneyville neighborhood, and the story is the same. Here a bike path winds along the Woonasquatucket River and over the gentle hills of a new park. Not long ago the land was strewn with trash, a haven for prostitution and drug use, a place children were sternly warned to avoid. Today it is lined with brightly painted apartments and homes built by Olneyville Housing Corporation (OHC). The playground is full—while residents work in the community garden and youth leaders teach neighborhood children about bike and canoe safety.

Woonsocket and Olneyville have much in common, including strong community development corporations (CDCs) with established track records of successfully

implementing a comprehensive community development agenda. With each success, that agenda grows to include a broader array of strategies for tackling persistent poverty, poor educational outcomes, and lack of economic opportunity.

Each CDC has a history of leadership in collaborating and partnering with residents and community organizations, making them ideal candidates for a Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) initiative called Sustainable Communities.

## A New Model for Comprehensive Community Development

Since 1991, the Rhode Island LISC office has helped community organizations such



A bike ride in the Olneyville section of Providence. Photograph: Olneyville Housing Corporation

as these to develop stable neighborhoods. At first, the efforts focused on supporting CDCs as they worked to stem neighborhood disinvestment and physical decline through construction of affordable housing.

Over time, Rhode Island CDCs, like CDCs nationwide, began to address other issues—deteriorated commercial areas, high crime levels, and a lack of high-quality

child-care facilities. They found themselves doing more activities and taking a holistic approach to supporting communities. To the core business of affordable housing development, they added youth programs, child care, commercial revitalization, and more. But as programs grew, so did stresses on resources and staff.

As Jim Capraro of Chicago's Greater

Southwest Development Corporation says, "CDCs were becoming a one-man band ... Sure, all the notes get played, but it doesn't always sound too good." What was needed was a new approach, one that marshaled a community's resources behind a common vision and got everyone playing together.

Sustainable Communities, modeled on Chicago's New Communities Program, is one successful strategy. Starting in 1999, Chicago LISC and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation built a comprehensive revitalization initiative using resident-led, planning-based projects and programs to improve the quality of life in targeted neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

Then in 2007, Rhode Island LISC was identified as one of 10 LISC sites where conditions looked ripe for replication of the New Communities model. While still responsible for raising funds locally, the 10 sites now receive technical support and some implementation grants. Five core program objectives define the goals:

- Expanding investment in housing and other real estate—In Rhode Island that means continuing to invest in the revitalization projects of Olneyville Housing Corporation and NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley (NBRV);
- Increasing family income and wealth—ensuring that the efforts result in improved quality of life;
- Stimulating economic activity, locally and regionally—connecting targeted neighborhoods and their residents to the regional economy and beyond;
- Improving residents' access to education, training, and family services—including health care and lifelong learning opportunities; and
- Fostering livable, safe, and healthy environments—including safe streets, recreational amenities, community art programs, and environmentally sound buildings.

Rhode Island LISC selected Olneyville and Woonsocket as pilot sites on the basis of their significant track records. Representatives of the groups traveled to Chicago to study the program there.

The visit helped leaders identify core activities: investing in an anchor agency and in a community-driven, comprehensive quality-of-life plan (a *community contract*); giving financial support to a relatively easy *early action project* to build momentum and garner community buy-in;



Students enjoy the art center in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Photograph: Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation

making a multiyear commitment to support the projects and programs that the community identifies as priorities; emphasizing outcomes and awarding investment capital on a competitive basis; providing communications support so as to spread the local story and thus attract more resources; and building on lessons learned.

When groups like OHC and NBRV agree to act as lead agencies for a program like that, they understand that they are committing to a process that will profoundly affect their organizations and communities. For its part, LISC recognizes that other regions will differ from Chicago and that local conditions will require the organization to be flexible. LISC's role is mainly to be supportive and to provide financial and technical assistance.

## Implementation

The Rhode Island groups worked together to mold the Chicago model into a comprehensive community development initiative tailored to local needs.

In Olneyville and Woonsocket, the process started with the hiring of two full-time Sustainable Communities coordinators (employees of the lead agencies) whose primary responsibility was to build neighborhood coalitions and advance the process. After they assembled a core group of committed residents and neighborhood stakeholders, LISC provided trainings and helped people to identify approximately 100 leaders in each community. These leaders included directors of nonprofits, school principals, business people, clergymen, and activists. They will be interviewed to identify the community's SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).

The first goal of the interviews will be to ensure that the lead agency has a deep understanding of neighborhood issues. But equally important, engaging a diverse group of leaders and listening to their concerns ensures that the process will reflect the real needs and wants of the community. That in turn should trigger a cascading effect as enlightened self-interest motivates key stakeholders to enlist their own constituencies and resources.

Once the interviews are complete, CDC staff and a LISC planning consultant will collate the data and report back to the community. When Chicago's Greater Southwest Development Corporation made its report, it invited the 100 community leaders to a neighborhood meeting. As many as



Olneyville Housing Corporation's Riverside Gateway. Photograph: Olneyville Housing Corporation

140 people responded to the invitation, and more than 250 attended. The 100 community leaders had brought others in, moving the process moved forward.

Attendees in Rhode Island are now forming working groups to find solutions to the problems identified. Community residents and leaders will work together to forge a community contract. The contract will differ from a traditional planning document in enumerating solutions only if there is a group or agency that agrees to be held accountable for implementation. The community contract is explicitly not a wish list but an agreement between committed parties to follow through on achievable and practical programs for the common good. The active outreach will mean that the organizations and individuals with the capacity to make those commitments will already be involved.

## Looking Forward

Rhode Island LISC is making a multiyear commitment to provide financial and technical support for the implementation of the projects and programs identified in each community contract. With its sophisticated "community ask," the community contract presents a powerful case to donors and will help LISC in its efforts to attract additional support.

In the short term, the organization is committing a pool of money to provide fast

and responsive support to small-scale projects or programs identified early on. The lead agencies will distribute early-action grants on a competitive basis to projects identified by the community, thus demonstrating a financial commitment that should build excitement for the process.

Adopting the Sustainable Communities strategy challenges LISC and its partners to evolve their approach to community development. They will need to expand their networks, forge new partnerships, and harness the power of communities to work together. Intentionally and strategically building positive connections and focusing the available resources will make neighborhoods stronger and more resilient, trigger large-scale improvements, and create safe, healthy, and sustainable communities.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See "Thinking Holistically: Woonsocket Neighborhood Development Corporation," *Communities & Banking* 16, no. 4 (fall 2005): 14-17, <http://www.bos.frb.org/commdev/c&b/2005/fall/woonsocket.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.newcommunities.org>.