

*Governance Structures:  
A Brief Highlighting Examples and Best Practice*

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## Best Practice Brief for Governance Structures

Goal: An institutional structure that leads to productive activity, invites broad resident involvement, allows for long term strategic planning, is tailored to neighborhood strengths and conditions, provides links to broader structures and institutions, yet allows for accountability and a consistent voice.

Sometimes what counts as best practice depends on local conditions and capacity, with each option coming with a set of trade-offs. This brief describes the governance structures that have been used in other comprehensive community initiatives, attempts to apply them within the context of the Skillman Good Neighborhoods Initiative (GNI), and then follows with a list of pros and cons. The brief ends with a few key decision points and closing observations.

### Options/Illustrations:

#### 1. Select a lead agency

The Annie E. Casey Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI) took this approach. Starting with the priority of choosing a local partner to provide local leadership and knowledge, funders identified a community-based organization with initial capacity and a record of accomplishment to help facilitate their effort. For more information see <http://www.aecf.org/publications/rciplan/index.htm>.

Application: At the end of the GNI five meeting process, local agencies in each neighborhood would be asked to submit a proposal, explaining their vision and capacity for taking over the reins of the initiative. Skillman, perhaps with resident input, would consider these proposals and select one or more lead agencies. The lead agency could then request technical assistance to fulfill their role and provide leadership opportunities in collaboration with residents and other stakeholders. They would also be charged with developing the overall strategic plan for the community as well as creating capacity to implement the plan and gathering data to evaluate it.

### Pros and Cons:

- PRO-This would build upon existing structures and expertise rather than creating something new from scratch.
- PRO-There would be a clear organization responsible for leading the process and properly utilizing funds that is accountable for results.
- CON-There may not be a community-based organization in all six communities that is a viable choice to assume this role.
- CON-Given that this choice was not made early on the process of selecting neighborhoods, any agencies not selected may feel resentful and become less likely to participate further.
- CON-A large amount of time and funding would need to go into developing the lead agency to grow into its new role and gain the

necessary capacity to lead the selected community strategies. Some residents and organizations that have become engaged might lose interest in the interim.

## 2. Convene voluntary task forces

There may not be one clear large-scale community initiative example of this structure, but there are several potential models. One example is the National Alliance to End Homelessness that supports communities throughout the country in creating 10-year plans to end homelessness. For more information see <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pub/tenyear/>. Another example is the Blueprint for Aging that was created by a group of interested people and agencies in Washtenaw County working together to plan strategies to meet the needs of a growing senior population and their caregivers. In this effort, five workgroups met monthly to create a plan and vision for the future. For more information see <http://www.blueprintforaging.org/>.

**Application:** At the end of the GNI five meeting process, when there is a goal and a few key strategies, workgroups can be formed to plan around these strategies. Residents that participate in the workgroups would be eligible for workshops and leadership development opportunities. Non-profit organizations that participate in the workgroups would be eligible for capacity building assistance and in-kind services (grant writing, legal support, etc.) As an incentive, a portion of grant funding might be reserved to support plans created through this process.

### Pros and Cons:

- PRO-This would probably allow for the greatest amount of overall participation. Anyone can participate in their area(s) of interest and provide input to the process.
- PRO-Workgroups would be organized around specific strategies already selected through the community meetings so that the desired outcome of each committee would be clear.
- PRO-There would be natural outlets for training and technical assistance in specific topical areas.
- CON-With no one entity responsible for creating an overall plan, the committees might come up with conflicting approaches or think about their mandates too narrowly
- CON-Those not participating in the workgroups might become disengaged, particularly if a lot of time transpires during planning and decision-making phases.

## 3. Appoint a Board of Directors through community-wide elections

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) took this approach. Because the Boston neighborhood is ethnically diverse with many different ideas and histories, this organization holds a community-wide election every two years to provide

ongoing leadership. The DSNI Board currently is comprised of 34 members. These include 16 Residents from the whole area, 5 Nonprofit agencies representing the Health and Human Service fields from the core area, 2 Community Development Corporations from the core area, 2 Small Businesses from the core area, 2 Religious Organizations from the core area, 3 Youths from the core area (ages 15-18), 2 Nonprofit organizations or groups from the secondary area, and 2 Residents appointed by the newly elected board. Although the elected Board is an important representative and planning body, everybody is invited to community meetings, so there are many opportunities for all interested residents to contribute to decision-making. For more information see <http://www.dsni.org/>.

Application: At the end of the GNI five meeting process, each neighborhood would be charged to elect a Board of Directors representative of the community. The Board would become the voice of the community, working with the community organizer to continue engaging residents, refining strategies, and overseeing the work of the initiative. As an incentive, the Board could be given money each year to plan activities and provide evidence of any progress being made toward the selected goal.

#### Pros and Cons:

- PRO-This would allow for greater resident participation. Those running for election will have to take time to think through their ideas and plan for their campaign. Those voting will be informed of various alternatives and have a voice in the process. Those elected to the Board of Directors would have a mandate to work in the neighborhood's interest.
- PRO-Within neighborhoods that have distinct ethnic communities or competing interests, seats can be set aside to represent each group (i.e. seats set aside for Hispanic representatives, Black representatives, Arabic-speaking representatives, Hmong representatives, for-profit organizations, health and human service organizations, etc.).
- PRO-With regular elections every 2-3 years, there would be opportunities for leadership change and representatives that are not strong can be replaced.
- CON-Given that Board members are likely to have a wide range of ability and experience, there will still be a need for continued training and technical assistance, as well as guidance from the community organizers and funders.

4. Utilize a local foundation to convene a collaborative board that oversees initiative activities

The Ford Foundation's Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI) utilized this approach. In each of their neighborhoods, the community foundations were responsible for hiring a project director and recruiting representatives to serve as the governing body of the

collaborative. This body was composed of neighborhood residents, business owners, and civic-minded professionals from both within and beyond the target neighborhood, and helped plan and monitor the implementation of NFI. Over time, most of the collaboratives incorporated as separate non-profit organizations to take on implementation responsibility.

Application: At the end of the GNI five meeting process, the Skillman Foundation and/or some subset of its GNI Team partners could recruit representatives to serve on a collaborative governing body that includes residents, business representatives, and other public and non-profit professionals. This collaborative body would be responsible for planning, setting goals, and organizing each community around a clear vision that includes concrete programs and activities.

Pros and Cons:

- PRO-Each community would have a mechanism through which to quickly build upon the goal and strategies announced and celebrated at the fifth large community meeting.
- PRO-There will be a clearly identified set of community representatives to provide input and feedback to the initiative and assume leadership roles, but some authority will remain with the Skillman Foundation until a clear plan and vision has been established and approved.
- PRO-During the planning period there will be time to establish trust and verify capacity before handing decision making authority off to a separate organization.
- PRO-There will be time for neighborhood residents and those with less experience with formal planning processes to gain comfort and capacity through participation.
- CON-There will be an indeterminate gap before an implementation phase begins. For some, the planning period may seem to draw out too long.

Although more than one of these governance strategies could be used in a particular GNI community, being clear about whom is responsible for what aspects of the GNI work going forward is critical. Before any of these governing strategies can be successfully implemented, a few key decisions would need to be made. These would include:

- Determining the function of the governing body: to meet regularly (once or twice a month) for detailed planning or to serve as an oversight board that approves plans and directions.

- Delineating the “charge” for which the body will be responsible (i.e. putting in place a process to gather ideas and make proposals or for products such as a plan of action or new programs).
- Detailing the role of organizational representatives including incentives and expectations (i.e. should representatives be expected to have authority to make commitments on behalf of their institution).
- Deciding what resources will be provided to the body.

In addition to the structure of this governing body, a few other issues might be considered. For example, what will be the relationship between this body and the Skillman Foundation, the other organizations contracted to contribute to the Good Neighborhoods Initiative, and the community at-large. Also, careful thought about how to gather the right mix of key constituents so that the body can work effectively within their neighborhoods. This might involve including public officials and other relevant power brokers as well as sufficient numbers of residents so that they can make useful contributions.