

# Creating a Platform for Sustained Neighborhood Improvement

INTERIM FINDINGS FROM CHICAGO'S NEW COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

## Executive Summary

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TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY



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## **Interim Findings from Chicago's New Communities Program**

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## Overview

Distressed urban neighborhoods face challenges on multiple fronts, but most efforts to confront these problems work in isolation of one another. The New Communities Program (NCP) is an exception, helping selected Chicago neighborhoods develop partnerships to address challenges involving employment, education, housing, and safety in a comprehensive, coordinated fashion. In each community, a local intermediary brings together organizations to plan and then to implement varied improvement projects. A 10-year, \$47 million MacArthur Foundation initiative developed and managed by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago), NCP emphasizes this relational approach by building collaborations as a “platform” for broad and sustained improvement, even as local conditions change.

MDRC leads the NCP evaluation with collaborators at the University of Chicago’s Chapin Hall, Metro Chicago Information Center, and Wayne State University. This interim report focuses on NCP’s rollout and early implementation years, examining community conditions, how local groups worked together, and projects completed through 2008. The report shows that NCP has successfully managed planning and implementation of many different projects to help address varied local problems. Its findings include the following:

- **Community conditions.** NCP was implemented in neighborhoods facing varying degrees of economic disinvestment and population change. Quality-of-life trends were consistently improving in NCP neighborhoods during the early years of planning and implementation (2003-2005), showing greater local investments and generally falling crime rates. However, by 2006-2007, some NCP neighborhoods were seeing increases in foreclosures, and NCP’s designers began to adjust their strategies to contend with the growing economic downturn.
- **Initiative management.** As the managing intermediary, LISC/Chicago successfully facilitated grants to organizations, offered technical assistance, mediated community conflict, and enforced accountability among partners.
- **Implementation.** Local intermediaries successfully developed quality-of-life plans and implemented about 750 projects in multiple domains: education, workforce development, housing, and social services. Most of these projects were small — around \$25,000 to \$50,000 — but some were able to leverage additional resources, especially in the area of housing and commercial real estate development.
- **Collaboration.** NCP helped community organizations form more trusting relationships and work together more successfully. However, improvements in relationships mostly occurred within neighborhoods, not *between* neighborhoods or with City Hall, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of local action.

Future reports will examine NCP’s adaptation to the changing economic climate and its longer-term role in supporting neighborhood improvements and will compare trends in NCP neighborhoods with those in similar neighborhoods that the foundation and LISC/Chicago did not target.



## Preface

Research on urban poverty, at MDRC and elsewhere, has revealed that the *concentration of poverty* — and an associated lack of access to good jobs, affordable housing, quality goods and services, and economic and political resources — presents special challenges for improving the economic prospects of people who live in low-income neighborhoods. Unfortunately, many efforts to address these problems are too narrowly focused and work in isolation from one another.

In 2003, the MacArthur Foundation launched one of the most ambitious efforts to improve conditions in distressed urban neighborhoods in the United States: the New Communities Program (NCP), a 10-year, \$47 million initiative. NCP is a comprehensive effort to engage community-based groups in selected Chicago neighborhoods to attack multiple problems simultaneously — in education, workforce development, housing, social services, and public policy. Managed by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago, NCP is based on the premise that lead agencies in each community can organize neighborhood stakeholders to create “quality-of-life” plans, leverage public and private investments (supported by “seed grants” from the MacArthur Foundation and technical assistance supplied by LISC/Chicago), and catalyze organized efforts to revitalize the community.

This interim report covers NCP’s early implementation years, focusing on community conditions, how local groups worked together, and projects completed through 2008. While not an evaluation of the impact of NCP, the MDRC study finds that the initiative did successfully manage the neighborhood planning process, which led to the launching of more than 750 individual projects, each funded by a grant of \$25,000 to \$50,000. Altogether, the initiative reported attracting approximately \$400 million in leverage through 2008 (mostly concentrated in a number of housing and commercial real estate development projects).

Even at this interim stage, the experience of the New Communities Program offers important lessons, which are described in detail here, both for designers and managers of other community initiatives and for individual communities participating in them.

Of course, NCP and the participating neighborhoods, like the rest of the country, are now contending with incredible challenges posed by the current recession, including high unemployment, rising foreclosure rates, and government budget reductions. Future reports will focus on understanding how NCP adapted during the economic downturn, how the NCP model’s emphasis on community capacity may contribute to neighborhoods’ “resilience” or their ability to weather external shocks, and whether NCP plays a role in either supporting improvements in neighborhoods or dampening negative trends.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President





## Acknowledgments

This report has benefited from hard work and thoughtful contributions from funders, practitioners, reviewers, partners, and MDRC staff. From the beginning of the project, our funders provided substantive guidance, rooted in their experience as researchers and urban policymakers. Jonathan Fanton, former President of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Julia M. Stasch, Vice President of the Program on Human & Community Development, shaped the evaluation from its early discussions. Susan Lloyd was MDRC's first project officer and played a critical role in the architecture of the initiative and research stemming from it. Special thanks go to Craig Howard, who first directed the evaluation at MDRC and then became our project officer in his role of Director of Community and Economic Development. His vivid hometown knowledge introduced the team to Chicago and continues to serve as a touchstone for evaluation findings.

Community development practitioners and resident leaders from around Chicago gave researchers hours of their time and provided critical insights about their practice. We especially thank the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago) for transparency about the initiative. Andrew J. Mooney, Executive Director, Joel Bookman, Director of Programs, and Susana Vasquez, NCP Program Director, emphasize a culture of learning within NCP, greatly aided by its "scribes," led by Patrick Barry. We have valued the opportunity to think with them about NCP. Executive directors, NCP project directors, and NCP organizers at the 14 lead agencies were generous to share their many lessons with the field. Without their openness about their work and communities, this report would not be possible, and we are grateful to have learned from them.

This report has also benefited from the guidance of the Comprehensive Community Initiative (CCI) field. Anne Kubisch, Patricia Auspos, Tom Dewar, and Keith Lawrence at the Aspen Roundtable for Community Change served as reviewers at many different stages of the project, as did Prudence Brown, whose work has influenced the CCI evaluation field over time. Professor Michael Bennett at DePaul University provided helpful advice during research design.

Special acknowledgments go to our evaluation partners. George Galster, Clarence Hilberry Professor of Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, played a key role in helping conceptualize the quantitative component of this evaluation. At Metro Chicago Information Center (MCIC), Garth Taylor, former Executive Director and now Senior Research Fellow, not only provided all the quantitative data but also offered valuable insights on the evaluation findings. Melissa Kraus Schwartz and Krysten Lynn Ryba were the team's data liaisons at MCIC. At Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Katie Claussen Bell, Jiffy Lansing,

LaShaun Brooks, and Ben Roth allowed the evaluation to have a constant presence in the field. In addition to interviewing, Bell and Lansing took on data coding and database management, which served as the basis for the report's qualitative findings, and drafted selected analyses.

At MDRC, we have been helped by generous review provided by Gordon Berlin and Fred Doolittle, bringing their deep experiences in evaluation and the community development field to the project. John Hutchins contributed extensively to both review and writing processes. Cynthia Miller, Rick Hendra, and Sonya Williams offered valuable advice on quantitative analyses. On the MDRC research team, Albert Fang, Tatiana Homonoff, and Christopher Leake generated quantitative analyses over the course of the project. Nikki Ortolani took the lead on detailed NCP project analysis; Sarah Rich conducted important early field research; and Alexandra Brown ably served as report coordinator. Robert Weber edited the report, and David Sobel and Stephanie Cowell prepared it for publication.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

In 2003, the MacArthur Foundation launched one of the most ambitious efforts to improve conditions in distressed urban neighborhoods in the United States: the New Communities Program (NCP), a 10-year, \$47 million initiative. NCP is a comprehensive effort to engage community-based groups to attack multiple problems simultaneously — in education, workforce development, housing, social services, and public policy. Developed and managed by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Chicago (LISC/Chicago), NCP focuses on 14 neighborhood areas with varying challenges.<sup>1</sup> Through collaborative planning and implementation, NCP designers believed that community organizations, which too often work in isolation on narrow agendas, would come together to solve common problems and improve the quality of life in their communities — across a variety of outcomes.

In early 2006, the MacArthur Foundation engaged MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, to evaluate NCP. This interim report brings together qualitative and quantitative analyses to examine early NCP implementation processes and projects as well as quality-of-life trends within each of the NCP neighborhoods. To draw in-depth lessons, it focuses on six neighborhoods that represent a cross-section of the NCP communities. The report does not draw any “causal” conclusions about the NCP initiative’s effect on the trends in community outcomes observed.

### NCP Neighborhoods

The 14 NCP neighborhood areas in Chicago are varied, but two types predominate: (1) disinvested inner-city neighborhoods, facing recent population declines, large proportions of low-income residents, and relatively low levels of housing investment; and (2) neighborhoods that have experienced considerable growth in the last decade, are home to large and growing Latino communities, and have relatively modest levels of housing investment. To understand both the different contexts in which NCP rolled out and the targets of its interventions, the study examines a broad range of quality-of-life indicators for NCP neighborhoods and compares them with trends in similar Chicago neighborhoods that are not a part of the NCP initiative. This report provides detailed analysis of trends in community safety, housing market activity, and commercial vitality for both groups from before the initiative was launched through the 18-month planning phase and into the beginning of project implementation.

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<sup>1</sup>NCP is often described as serving 16 Chicago communities. However, these communities are located in 14 areas for the purposes of the initiative’s planning and implementation. Therefore, for simplicity’s sake, this report refers to these areas as NCP’s 14 neighborhoods.

- **Independent of NCP, quality-of-life trends throughout Chicago were generally improving at the start of the initiative, between 2003 and 2005.**

Almost all experienced declining crime rates, and, after peaking in 2002, foreclosure rates were down by 40 percent or more in one-half of NCP neighborhoods. However, even though quality-of-life trends were generally improving in all NCP neighborhoods, starting levels and rates of change varied significantly. This fact reflects an interest by NCP's architects to test the model in varied neighborhoods. While it is too early to assess the full effects of the current economic crisis on NCP neighborhoods, it is possible to examine selected trends during the period that immediately predated the current recession. In the period 2006-2007, for instance, NCP neighborhoods and non-NCP neighborhoods were starting to see a similar pattern of increasing foreclosures. Future reports will document more recent trends in neighborhoods, as foreclosure processes in Chicago have risen dramatically in the period since.

## **The Role of LISC/Chicago and the Lead Agencies in NCP Neighborhoods**

Most implementation action within NCP occurs at the neighborhood level. A "lead agency" in each community, which receives funding for staffing and other supports from LISC/Chicago, convenes other neighborhood groups to define a plan for local improvement. Developed over an 18-month period, the plan provides a blueprint for varied efforts to be accomplished over several years, in domains ranging from social services and education initiatives, to employment and economic revitalization programs, to community arts projects and affordable housing development.

In the time since the planning processes in each neighborhood have been completed, LISC/Chicago has dispersed hundreds of modest grants of \$20,000-\$25,000 to support specific projects identified in the plans. These "seed grants" are not always intended to cover the full cost of individual projects, and, therefore, community groups are responsible for using these grants to leverage additional resources for their projects.

Two key findings emerge about roles within NCP:

- **LISC/Chicago was able to manage grants flexibly, mediate community conflict successfully, and promote progress among NCP community partners. These capacities appeared to be important ones for initiative management.**

Community organizations valued the flexibility and speed with which LISC/Chicago provided seed grants and its technical assistance during planning and implementation. In some important instances, LISC/Chicago stepped in to enforce accountability by replacing grantees or

directing agencies to hire staff whose skills were more suited to the project. In other cases, it served as a mediator among community groups, where conflict might have derailed NCP processes. Both types of strategies were more likely to occur in neighborhoods marked by historic disinvestment, where mistrust was often especially high among community groups — although this was not universally the case, and other types of neighborhoods also experienced patterns of mistrust. LISC’s technical assistance role was more intensive during planning than it was during implementation, and some lead agencies would have preferred that LISC/Chicago played a more direct role in helping broker relationships with public officials, who were often critical players in getting projects off the ground.

- **While the lead agencies in the neighborhoods led successful planning processes, the implementation phase was more challenging for some NCP communities.**

Lead agencies engaged a broad range of stakeholders in their communities, helped build trust among groups who already knew one another, and contributed to the formation of new relationships among groups who had no history of working together. However, in historically disinvested neighborhoods in particular, the shift from planning to implementation sometimes proved difficult — especially in those places where fewer organizations had the capacity to implement projects.

## **Building Community Capacity**

The NCP model promotes collective action by community groups to work together for local improvements. NCP designers believe that building networks of local groups is an important outcome in itself, because neighborhoods with strong networks are better positioned to weather hard times and seize opportunities in better times.

- **In different types of neighborhoods, community organizations formed more trusting relationships or worked together successfully for the first time as a result of NCP.**

In many communities, partners with no prior working relationship were connected for the first time through NCP. Interviews also provided substantial evidence of existing relationships being deepened through NCP. These new or improved relationships were formed even in challenging circumstances — as was the case in some neighborhoods where groups often started out mistrusting one another. NCP also helped improve internal divisions that were found to exist in both of the Latino neighborhoods studied, where more recent and more established immigrants sometimes clashed and where divisions between African-American and Puerto Rican residents was observed to be a problem during planning. However, not all NCP neigh-

neighborhoods were equally successful in creating functioning networks of community groups. The starting context — whether organizations started out skeptical or trusting of each other — played a large role in the nature of the eventual collaboration.

- **The new collaborations created by NCP sometimes attracted substantial resources to communities.**

Relationships formed through NCP sometimes brought substantial new resources to neighborhoods, especially when NCP helped create local collaboratives to apply for larger grants that small groups might not have been able to attract on their own. For example, in one community, NCP helped several neighborhood organizations apply for relatively large public health grants. In some ways, these new collaborations for funding provide the strongest evidence of NCP’s “working” in its intended mode, because they represent ways that the initiative has added value to existing networks.

- **Improvements in relationships mostly occurred within neighborhoods and not *between* neighborhoods or with City Hall.**

As might be expected from an initiative that emphasizes planning among community groups, most of the successful relationships described by participants were among local organizations and not with organizations in other neighborhoods, with city government, or with other large public or private institutions, such as banks, hospitals, or universities. Some lead agencies suggested that the initiative’s emphasis on local action and smaller projects meant that it missed an opportunity to connect to broader, Chicago-wide efforts initiated by larger players, like the city government or the school system.

## **Implementing NCP Projects**

The hallmark of NCP is to encourage neighborhoods to work on many local problems simultaneously in the effort to improve quality of life. By using relatively modest seed grants, the initiative hoped to spark larger efforts that would attract additional funding from other sources. And, in practice, the NCP communities developed and implemented plans that included hundreds of projects across four wide domains: education, workforce development, housing, and social services. Having said that, it is one thing to engage stakeholders in developing plans; it is another to carry out these plans — a transition in which earlier comprehensive community initiatives have faltered.

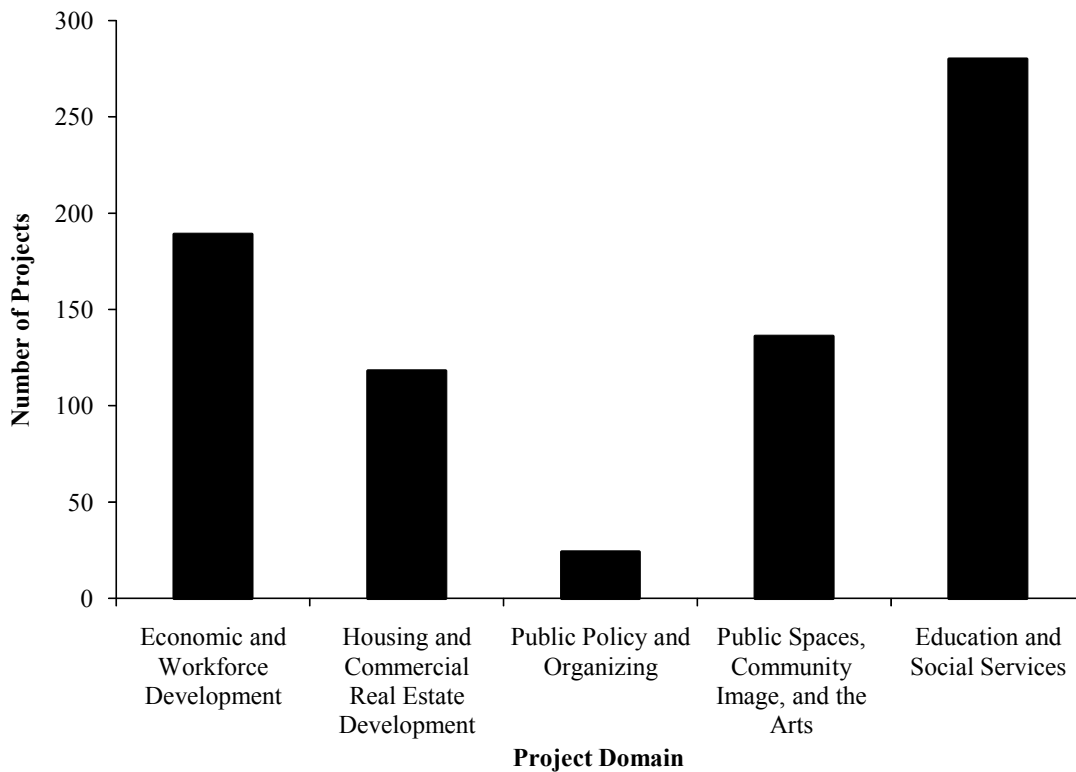
- **Overall, NCP successfully managed the transition to implementation, with 750 projects being supported in the areas of education, workforce development, housing, and social services.**

NCP was developed to spark comprehensive community improvements, and analysis of program annual reports suggests that NCP did, in fact, create a successful system for identifying and supporting projects in multiple domains. Figure ES.1 presents the number of projects reported through the auspices of NCP from 2002 to 2008, by domain: about 750 total projects, with nearly 300 coded by the evaluation to be in education and social services; over 180 in economic and workforce development; nearly 120 in housing and commercial real estate development; and more than 130 in public spaces and the arts. With some significant exceptions, historically disinvested neighborhoods attracted fewer projects than other neighborhoods, in large part because there were fewer organizations able to implement projects.

**The New Communities Program**

**Figure ES.1**

**Number of NCP Projects, by Domain, Totaled Across Neighborhoods (2002-2008)**



SOURCE: MDRC analysis of lead-agency annual progress reports provided by LISC/Chicago.

NOTE: This analysis includes NCP projects reported to have received support grants from LISC/Chicago, non-LISC investments, other kinds of support, and projects that do not list any funding or support.

- **NCP was less successful in catalyzing projects focused on informing public policy.**

Although some NCP communities made significant efforts to inform public policy, public policy organizing did not on the whole become a focus of NCP, with fewer than 30 efforts so coded by the evaluation of the 750 total (Figure ES.1). Policy work may become more important for NCP neighborhoods as government struggles to develop new responses to current economic shocks. Since public funding for government-sponsored initiatives represents a potential funding source — eclipsing even significant foundation-sponsored initiatives — this area may be important for NCP’s ability to influence neighborhood trajectories and for its longer-term sustainability.

- **While most seed grants did not attract additional investments, NCP neighborhoods overall were reported to attract substantial investments, especially in the area of housing and commercial real estate.**

NCP was structured to leverage additional funding through small seed grants, whereby a pilot program might later attract resources from a larger funder. However, most grants did not report attracting additional resources, even if not every grant was intended to do so. Figure ES.2 shows the proportions of grants that were reported to have achieved additional investments, by amount: 58 percent of seed grants attracted no additional investments; 25 percent attracted less than \$50,000; and 6 percent attracted \$50,000 to \$99,999. A small number of grants were responsible for the majority of leverage: 4 percent of grants attracted between \$1 million and \$15 million.

Some community partners felt that the size and short-term nature of the seed grants made it particularly difficult to attract additional resources. Unsurprisingly, many community partners were interested in seeing larger grants and more help from LISC/Chicago and from the MacArthur Foundation in intervening to ensure that additional funds followed them. At the same time, overall, the initiative reported attracting approximately \$400 million in leverage through 2008, a substantial amount of additional investments. While most occurred in the realm of housing and commercial real estate development — where a planning grant could attract a large construction loan — investment was also achieved in other areas, such as social services and education, where leverage is often more difficult to obtain.

## **Selected Lessons for Policy and Practice**

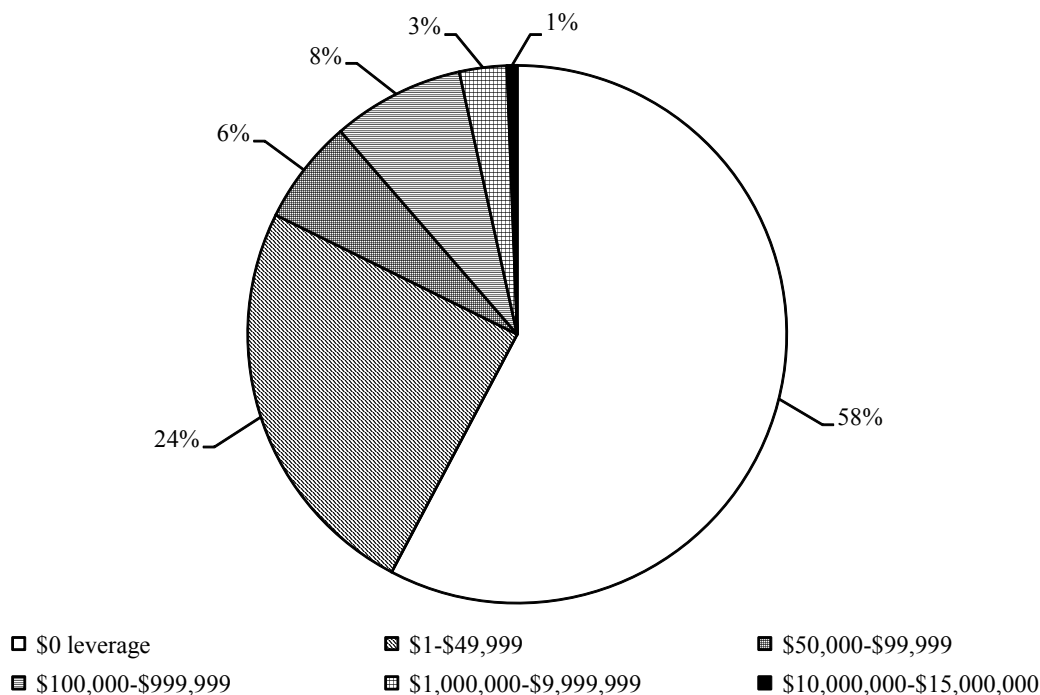
The NCP experience is particularly relevant for communities launching initiatives that rely heavily on partnerships among neighborhood organizations or that emphasize coordinated



## The New Communities Program

Figure ES.2

### Percentage and Amount of Non-LISC Investments (2002-2008)



SOURCE: MDRC analysis of lead-agency annual progress reports provided by LISC/Chicago.

NOTES: This analysis includes nearly 500 NCP projects with LISC grants of \$1 or greater and non-LISC investments ranging from \$0 to \$15 million. LISC grants are project support grants given by LISC/Chicago to NCP projects. Non-LISC investments serve as indicators of additional dollars leveraged by NCP neighborhoods. Percentages may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

and comprehensive action. This report offers lessons both for designers and managers of such initiatives and for individual communities participating in them.

### Recommendations for Designers and Managers of Community Initiatives

NCP's structure was meant to reflect lessons learned from past initiatives that did not work. To avoid conflict between funders and implementers, NCP made LISC/Chicago the manager of grants and the direct contact with local organizations. To address the critical issue of moving from planning to implementation, where so many past initiatives have faltered, NCP recognized that successfully implementing a variety of projects needed to draw on more than a single organization. Accordingly, it vested local agencies with the responsibility of identifying

other capable actors and ensuring that they complete the projects identified in plans, largely through seed grant support. These types of groups are called “intermediaries.” Several insights for funders, program designers, and managers emerge from these experiences.

- **Intermediary structures can support comprehensive community action by many different local groups.**

NCP architects decided to invest overall management in each neighborhood within a single agency, charged with reaching out to community partners, so as to achieve organizational efficiencies without alienating other local groups. It also relied on LISC/Chicago as “managing intermediary,” both to facilitate grants and to promote accountability through the initiative. The variety and number of projects implemented through NCP demonstrates that this type of two-part intermediary structure can support comprehensive revitalization activities. (The overall success of NCP’s intermediary structure also likely benefited from existing strengths of LISC/Chicago and local Chicago organizational networks.)

- **Governance of community initiatives should anticipate how to deal with mistrust among local organizations, particularly when moving from planning to implementation.**

NCP’s comprehensive community planning was a vehicle that allowed different groups to become involved and rally behind initiatives, especially when given opportunities to access major new funding sources as a result of their participation. However, in many (but not all) historically disinvested neighborhoods, mistrust sometimes derailed implementation efforts. In these situations, mediation by LISC/Chicago and the full engagement of respected local leadership were sometimes required to ensure that groups could continue to work together after planning.

- **Funders and initiative managers can help leverage additional resources by engaging the public, private, and foundation sectors and by informing public policy.**

While most NCP seed grants did not leverage additional resources, substantial leverage was achieved in a few cases. In these examples, LISC/Chicago helped to foster connections between NCP sites and actors in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors who were well positioned to provide additional resources or leverage political influence to support NCP activities. Much of this brokering work occurred within the philanthropic sector and was aided by the MacArthur Foundation. For example, LISC/Chicago worked with the Atlantic Philanthropies to bring comprehensive intermediate-school and extended-day services to NCP neighborhoods. These actions often resulted in substantial new resources to neighborhoods; many participants wished to see LISC/Chicago and the MacArthur Foundation engage in more such brokering.

- **After planning and start-up, managers of community initiatives will need to retain the authority and resources to enforce progress and to mediate among local interests.**

Within NCP, LISC/Chicago had a major role in ensuring that community groups received technical assistance, either directly or through consultants. Although this role was particularly intense during planning, it did not end at that point. For instance, in several disinvested neighborhoods, LISC/Chicago intervened to transfer the designation of lead agency to a new organization from a low-performing one.

- **For neighborhoods where no natural convening organizations exist, managers should consider creating new intermediaries.**

At the start of NCP, designers identified two neighborhoods where a new intermediary needed to be created. One of these organizations — Quad Communities Development Corporation — became one of the most successful within the initiative in supporting relationships and attracting additional resources to its neighborhood. It should also be noted that a number of factors seemed to make a difference within Quad Communities, foremost being strong local political support. Establishing new neighborhood intermediaries consumed considerable time and resources on LISC's part.

### **Recommendations for Community Practice**

The report profiles six NCP neighborhoods in depth: four that successfully advanced relationships and leveraged new resources through NCP and two that did not appear to do so effectively. The contrast among these six communities reveals factors potentially associated with success.

- **Comprehensive planning does not in itself ensure coordinated action. Lead agencies should delegate some projects to partners, while also creating opportunities for collaborations among them.**

Lead agencies were encouraged to make their planning process both comprehensive and inclusive. However, local participants in open planning forums did not necessarily remain engaged with NCP. Even those who stayed with NCP long enough to receive a grant did not continue to work with other groups in the initiative. As a result, lead agencies needed strategies to keep groups involved in NCP and working with each other. The most successful lead agencies employed several approaches to build stronger relationships and complete more projects: (1) identifying projects that other individual organizations could complete, (2) creating collaborations among several community organizations in an attempt to attract major new sources of funding, and (3) carrying out a limited number of projects on their own.

- **When working in neighborhoods marked by historic disinvestment, consensus-building must be balanced with concrete action around implementation.**

In two neighborhoods characterized by mistrust among local players and a lack of capacity to implement projects, the two lead agencies initially adopted very different approaches. One tried to distance itself from large institutions, such as the local bank or community college, and worked almost exclusively with smaller community groups in an effort to build their capacity. However, these small groups were not always ready to take on projects, resulting in stalled implementation efforts. The other neighborhood agency tried to take the lead on many projects itself but did so in a way that was not perceived by others to be inclusive. Over time, both communities took on elements of each other's strategies — taking on some projects themselves and empowering smaller community groups to do others — resulting in the improvement of local relationships and an increased ability to complete projects.

## **Looking Forward**

The current recession and the challenges it poses for the NCP model will form an important backdrop for framing the study's research questions as the evaluation moves forward. Future reports will focus on understanding how NCP adapted during the economic downturn, how the NCP model's emphasis on community capacity contributes to neighborhood "resilience" or ability to weather external shocks, and whether NCP can play a role either in supporting improvements in neighborhoods or in dampening negative trends.

## About MDRC

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

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

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

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

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

