

## 2. Build the capacity of these communities

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—Alison Janus

For many grassroots funders, this work must involve much more than giving residents the relatively small amount of money they need to accomplish something—an after-school computer lab, a block-watch program, a clean-up campaign. These funders believe this work ultimately can and should be about building the capacity of a community's residents to change their lives and their communities.

Both the people who spoke in Chicago and those interviewed for this report talked quite a bit about why funders should care about building the capacity of the communities they support. The main reason is simply that greater capacity means that these communities can achieve more change.

People also talked about how they've helped communities build their capacity as well as which capacities they think are needed.

But a few people raised caveats, saying there is a fine line between encouraging communities to develop their capacities and pushing communities to do things that they don't necessarily think are important.

**A**t the Chicago meeting, the Woods Fund of Chicago's *Deborah Harrington* talked extensively about what her foundation had done to build capacity on Chicago's **South Side**. "Building capacity for us was to identify emerging leaders because a lot of community organizing is leadership development.

"We provided emerging groups with mentors—pairing people with experience with those who needed to learn how to navigate the landscape. We offered mini-grants—a pot of money for training, dollars for strategic planning and leadership development.

"We instituted a learning table—a safe space where groups could come together to build relationships and trust and talk about their organizing campaigns." To keep it safe, the Woods Fund wasn't at this table.

"They talked about how to connect community organizing to public policy development, and did a power analysis to find out

who they should be holding accountable in the community.

“They also did a budget analysis because the communities don’t have a sense of where the funding is.... It gave them a basis for creating some targets.” The groups at this learning table also got involved in other coalitions, Harrington added. “The learning table has empowered them.”

**S**everal of the people who were interviewed agreed with Harrington about the importance of building capacity. **Andy Helmboldt**, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, thinks building capacity is “the whole ball game.” He adds, “Building their capacity is another way of empowering them to feel like they have control over their own neighborhood. That they can make their neighborhood the way they want it to be and that there isn’t simply this ‘force’ over them that they can’t control.”

Indeed, **Jennifer Roller** says that The Wean Foundation has become so convinced of the need to build capacity that it changed its mission statement to reflect the fact that, “We are more than grantmakers.”

**Consuella Brown** of the Woods Fund of Chicago said that it is “extremely important to build capacity, to build institutions that are anchored in the community and are responsive to the needs of the people.”

**Alison Janus** of the Steans Foundation agrees, saying that funders need to make a long-term commitment to building capacity. “I don’t think we put nearly enough money into capacity building.” Too often, she says, funders will make a small, short-term grant to help a

## Alison Janus

**Program Officer,  
Steans Family Foundation**



Janus has worked in philanthropy for 13 years and been with Steans for the past three. She says that her work with Steans has been “appealing” because it was “hands on and not just a typical review of proposals.”

Janus says that only about 25% of her time is spent reviewing grants, which makes her current role “different than a traditional program officer.” Most of her time now is devoted to developing relationships and building capacity directly in the community, a shift she says “has really rejuvenated me.”

But community work comes with its own challenges. That’s why Janus found the “On the Ground” event in Chicago useful, because she had the chance to talk with others who share similar day-to-day struggles. “We could trade ideas and shore each other up,” she says. “I was inspired by the possibilities.”

group get training in a specific area. But the need is “more holistic and long-term. It is not solved in one grant.”

Janus thinks the goal is for community leaders and groups to build the level of knowledge and skills that will allow them to effectively push for the changes their communities need over the long period of time that change requires. Building this level of capacity in a community “is really important,” she believes.

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The Denver Foundation’s **David Portillo** also agrees about the need to invest in capacity building, but he says his Strengthening Neigh-



Bryan Echols explains how MAGIC—Metropolitan Area Group for Igniting Civilization—brought together African American youth and police to “demystify each other.”

borhoods program didn’t see this broader objective at first. “This has been a sea change for us. Originally we didn’t see the need to build the capacities of neighborhood leaders or groups in any way.”

Why the change? Portillo says it was an early evaluation of the Strengthening Neighborhoods program. The evaluation found that some people who received the small grants did fine. But many others “did not appear to have the skills to successfully engage others or carry through a project. The foundation decided that we needed to build skills in leaders who wanted help.”

**W**hich skills should foundations try to build? How? Portillo says that The Denver Foundation developed a training program that could meet a broad range of needs. “Sometimes people want to know more than how to run a meeting. They want to know how they can impact policy at a city level. A short class in facilitation is not always enough. There is a hunger for more, and so we started providing it.”

Part of The Denver Foundation’s training involved bringing leaders together to learn from each other. “A leader’s capacity to imagine change is propelled when they can learn from other neighborhood leaders about what they have accomplished,” Portillo explains.

The foundation hired consultants to conduct a lot of this training, though Portillo thinks that a foundation should hire staff “with an eye to providing capacity building. The more in-house training you can do, the better you will be able to weather future recessions.” Portillo thinks that the fact that some community foundations are hiring former organizers

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—Jennifer Roller

The on-the-ground meetings are kept small so that “people could get to know each other as peers, partners on the journey,” explained Janis Foster.



to run their neighborhood programs is a good thing since they usually have experience building the capacity of neighborhood residents.

In relation to which skills, the Woods Fund’s Brown agrees with Portillo about the need to think beyond simply teaching people how to facilitate a meeting. She thinks building the capacity to analyze is critical. “Organizations and communities need the ability to assess what is going on politically. Who holds the power strings or the purse strings?”

Brown thinks organizations also need the ability to raise money and to tell their stories effectively. And they need to evaluate their work, not so much in the traditional sense of evaluating how many people they served and what outcomes they achieved, but evaluating their thinking and their process for achieving change. “That is far more informative than the outcome.”

Groups also need the capacity to “build their base by cultivating and training leaders,” Brown thinks. Roller agrees: “The burning issue is inclusion. We can identify people who are the exception and are involved in things. But we forget there are many others who need

to get involved.” For her, “giving opportunities to younger people to get involved” is especially important.

For **Lisa Leverette**, who works with The Skillman Foundation, the key capacity is the ability of “residents to work together.” She explains, “It’s very important to build capacity in the community to work together because that is where the kids spend their time. The goal is to improve the lives of youth. Communities need to be able to organize themselves around their children and advocate for them.”

**B**ut can funders be too prescriptive about which capacities communities need to develop? **Reginald Jones** of the Steans Foundation thinks the answer is yes. “We are the majority foundation in this community, so capacity by whose standards? If we impose our own definition, there can be a certain amount of tension.

Instead, Steans focuses on identifying capacity that already exists in a community like North Lawndale. “We can’t necessarily build capacity. We have strategies to promote re-

sources that enable leadership, but one of the biggest challenges is that it has to be from the inside out.

Jones thinks that groups receiving Steans' grants can build their capacity and develop other sources of funding.

"If you are being successful in building capacity, you would see that groups become savvier in managing their operations, diversifying their funding base and not relying on one funder."

While the Woods Fund does more to build capacity, Harrington also recognizes the limits of what foundations can and should do in these communities. "It's about ownership. We're talking about people owning their own change. The best thing for a funder is to identify talent and see their theory of change and help them articulate that. They have the idea. But maybe they haven't thought it through in terms of what will work.

"We need to provide them with the tools they need and then get out of their way. There is so much deep and abiding wisdom at the community level and we need to see

## Jennifer Roller

**Program Officer for Urban Affairs and Neighborhoods, The Raymond John Wean Foundation, Warren, Ohio**



Jennifer Roller says that her hiring is "a prime example of building capacity." A lifelong resident of Youngstown—one of the communities where Wean targets its work—she says her "presence at the foundation is an example of putting your money where your mouth is."

"I grew up in Youngstown and have seen the community change. What is relevant to me is that the foundation is putting people behind its message. It's good to be a part of that in an area where people feel disenfranchised. I'm a part of something really positive."

Fairly new to her work with Wean, Roller anticipated the "On the Ground" gathering in Chicago as a time when she could "meet others. . . and hear about practical things like lessons learned and best practices from development to implementation."

While her expectations were met, she also came away with an unexpected awareness—that many of the programs she was learning about "were modeled after ones influenced by individuals who now work at Wean."

them as the experts. We just shepherd and support them and then use our ability as a convener."

