5. Look for ways that this work can add up to broader social change

> *"My view is that turning neighborhoods from helpless to empowered is in itself a major system change—when residents feel they have control over their lives."*
> —Andy Helmboldt

A concern voiced by many people in Chicago involves how working in specific low-income communities can bring about change in systems and political and economic forces that impact these communities.

"Sometimes a place-based strategy is not effective when broader forces are affecting an area," is how one person put this. "How do you understand that organizing is local but, if it's not connected to something larger, it can miss the mark?

"Small grants can isolate or work against larger systemic change if they simply stay small and don't link to the issues that drive what is happening in that community."

Another person had a similar concern. "I've been doing this work for 12 years and have not seen progress—people are getting farther behind. More people are poor today.

Neighborhoods and schools are more segregated than ever.

"There is a problem if our work is not thoughtful about who is poor and how systems dictate who is poor. It's not just about individuals choosing to be poor. Grassroots grantmakers need to be careful about funding these little block clubs."

The six people interviewed for this report shared this concern about how this work in communities adds up to larger social change. But they all thought that it could. And while there were similarities in their thinking about how this work leads to change, people also had very distinct perspectives about this issue.

One person thought that change in individual residents was in itself system change because these individuals will now function differently within the systems that affect their lives.

Another person's perspective was that big picture policy changes only matter if they actually change the lives of people living in these communities: in essence, all change is local.

Still another person focused on the need for the funder to expand its role in order for social change to happen, doing things like engaging other funders in this work and facilitat-

ing relationships between community people and, say, city agencies.

What roles should a funder play in helping this work in communities add up to broader social change? This question generated a lot of discussion at the Chicago meeting.

One funder said that foundations should push community groups to think about larger system change. "We need to fund groups that we can envision will produce some potential policy change later as they mature. We want to see policies change, so one measure of success if when we see this. We don't fund a group that doesn't have the intent for larger policy change. We want to see groups move their work to the next level."

Another person thought the role of the funder is to *educate* people about system change. "Telling people what to do is different than educating them. One of the strongest barriers to system change is that people don't know what it is. If we could educate rather than being directive or pushy, then people could theoretically make their own decisions. People don't get energized about systems change unless they understand what it is for."

Another participant said something similar: "Our role is to train people to look at power. It's political education."

But, another person asked, can a funder push communities too hard to focus on system changes? "What if we push too hard and it stops looking resident-led? Our support for community organizing and small grants doesn't always match up. If the small

Andy Helmboldt

Resident volunteer on a neighborhood grants program committee, funded through The Battle Creek Foundation

Battle Creek, a city of 50,000 in Michigan, is small enough for people to gain a good sense of the community as a whole. Yet Andy Helmboldt says that serving on the resident grants program committee has given him a "stronger feeling" of how the city is "connected."

"I get a small glimpse into what life is like for others in different situations—yet we're all trying to live within the same system," he says. While Helmboldt realizes that all residents supposedly have access to the same resources, he questions "why it's working for me and not this other person?" Grassroots grants, he concludes, have the potential to even the odds—"It's helping people feel we are all in the same boat."

While fairly new to grantmaking, Helmboldt could relate to the struggles that participants shared at the "On the Ground" gathering in Chicago. "The scale might be different, but these are struggles that everyone has," he says. "Going and seeing what others are doing is empowering and confidence building."

grants strategy is just to support resident-led projects, but those projects aren't focused on systems change, what should a funder do? At what point does it stop looking like resident-led change and more about foundation-led change?"

But what exactly is "system change?" Several people raised variations of this question, suggesting that the kinds of changes that individual leaders experience are part of a process of system change. "System change is a process and not an outcome or a destination," said one person. "We can't get there quickly. We arrive with every step we take…every single deliberate act to say we're going to go about it in a different way."

"System change is about people feeling they have personal control over their lives," explained another participant. "Ultimately it's to help people feel they have more control. If people are taking control over their lives, they are creating system change."

Andy Helmboldt, the resident volunteer for The Battle Creek Foundation, agrees that the process of empowering residents of struggling neighborhoods *is* system change. "My view is that turning neighborhoods from helpless to empowered is in itself a major system change—when residents feel they have control over their lives."

Helmboldt doubts that neighborhood funders and organizations can do much to achieve big picture changes in economic and political systems. But they can build the capacity of individuals and neighborhoods to feel they have some control in the systems that affect their lives. "You are accomplishing a system change if people behave differently in that system."

Jennifer Roller of The Wean Foundation also thinks that building the capacity of in-

dividuals is a critical part of this work. "I am realizing that developing folks is part of the process of getting to capacity. As one of the presenters in Chicago pointed out, the capacity exists, but they are under the radar. Part of my role is to identify these people.

"Incremental changes in people over time may have to be enough. So maybe this year they are a member of the block watch, then next year they are speaking on behalf of the block watch at a public meeting."

This is exactly the process through which this work leads to larger changes, believes the Woods Fund's *Consuella Brown*. She offers one example that reflects the long period of time that the Woods Fund has been doing this work in neighborhoods.

"We had a group whose only goal was to get a new playground at a school. Then you fast forward ten years later and they went up against the Chicago Transit Authority to get a train line restored and are now moving into affordable housing, getting parents engaged in local school councils and joining a coalition of

other community organizations on TIF (tax increment financing) accountability.

"They have moved on to different issues, but it takes time. Funders keep asking organizations about their plans for getting into a broader movement and broader coalitions. But you can't take it to the next level until that organization sees the connection between the community level and the federal level."

Brown finds the journey of President Obama to be very interesting. When he was doing community organizing in Chicago, she says the project he was working on—Developing Communities Project—received a grant from the Woods Fund to cover his salary as an organizer. When he eventually ran for President, he used much of what he learned as a community organizer. His ability to win big in caucus states—which involved classic turn-out organizing—produced the small but critical difference in delegates that allowed him to win the nomination.

"Maybe his campaign is the answer to how things get scaled up. This may offer some interesting insights. It was basic community organizing that he learned on the south side of Chicago. So it can be done."

One key, Brown believes, is to get people to use the power of organizing to initiate change, not just respond to change. "The sad thing is that community building by its nature is reactive as opposed to proactive. If you are responding to forces outside of the community, how can you control the pace at which it happens? You are always responding.

"The key is how you get people involved in 10- to 15-year plans. We're trying to experiment with that ourselves."

One focus of such a long-term plan, Brown believes, is to better "frame" poverty. She regrets that, even with a former community organizer running, the issue of poverty disappeared from the presidential election. "We were not talking about poor people but about Main Street and middle class America. How did that happen?"

Alison Janus **of Steans has a different perspective about the potential for work on a neighborhood level to create social change, one that reflects her former job working on policy for the mayor.** "As I've gone through my career, while most people go more global, I got more specific. I think what happens in the community is where change starts."

She explains: "You could dream up programs, but if they weren't implemented, then what is the point? And if they don't solve community problems, what is the point? Work and daily connection in the community is what anchors us in meaning."

The very fact that residents of very low-income communities continue to work to improve their communities has an impact on funders like Janus, who says she sometimes struggles to not get too discouraged by the persistence of poverty in America.

"I see people who live in the community and do this work and it keeps me inspired—if they all left, I think it would be much worse."

For The Denver Foundation's *David Portillo,* **this work can add up to broader social change if funders expand their role.** The most important way funders can do

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this is by building the capacity of community leaders to bring about change. He says that his foundation didn't do that at the beginning.

"When we originally provided no leadership training at all, we shouldn't have expected broad systems change, nor would we be able to capture it if it did happen."

Over time, however, the foundation began "to move more resources to fund learning and skill development and organizational development that might give people the power to impact systems." He says both the leaders and the staff of community groups needed to learn how systems worked and how to "talk to people in power."

This in turn has "sometimes added up to significant changes." One example involves a group of parents that the foundation has supported over several years. These parents have convinced Denver's school system to put more money into special education and English language programs. "We've been intentionally funding and supporting this level of grassroots capacity for several years."

Not only has the foundation helped this group build its capacity, it also paid a national consultant to produce a position paper on these school funding issues, a paper which "helped credential" the parents' group, Portillo explains.

"At first we thought we probably shouldn't fund this, that it was moving beyond the neighborhood and not likely to have an impact. But we were wrong; we realized it did have a great impact."

The foundation has also played an intermediary role, using its connections and credibility to set up meetings with the leaders of an institution such as the local school district.

At other times, the foundation has helped maintain existing relationships between a city agency and an organizing group. When there is disagreement or tension—perhaps even a protest action—Portillo explains to city staff that this reflects "the dynamics of authentic relationship with the community. You can prepare them that this is not peaches-and-cream all of the time. To achieve social change, there must be some passion." This kind of passion, Portillo says, can make for very "complex relationships."

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>
> *—David Portillo*

For this work to add up to change, funders must not only be willing to play different roles, they must also make a long-term commitment to it, Portillo believes. "Strengthening Neighborhoods was initially a five-year initiative of the foundation, but had the plug been pulled then, there might have been some resentment or backlash in the neighborhood. We needed to be in this for the long haul, so after five years the board de-

cided this was part of the foundation's ongoing work.

"That is an important message to the community. 'We're here to have an impact.' Again, if you are only staffing this with a revolving door of junior staff and only funding block parties, you shouldn't expect your groups to have a social change impact. But if you are serious about these projects, then there is a chance for change.

"Some initiatives can create resentment when they are done. With a community foundation, there is the chance to be a permanent resource and partner in the community. We won't go away just because we don't see social change within the first year."

Lisa Leverette, who works with The Skillman Foundation, also thinks that this seemingly "little work" can add up to system change and that, "We have to get better at recognizing and evaluating this progress."

Again the key is the changes that happen to a community's residents, Leverette believes. "As community interacts more and becomes more organized, their voice can be used to affect change on a number of systems."

Another key is to not have grandiose expectations: that suddenly these neighborhoods will be cured of poverty.

"We can kill the life out of something when we set too many expectations," Leverette says. She compares work in these communities to work you do on an old house. "I think there are ways to make progress even if other things around you are falling apart. If I fix a plumbing leak in my house, then there will be another problem. That is the nature of life. We need to measure our successes as we accomplish them."

The problem is when people who don't understand the nature of change get impatient, Leverette believes. "'You mean we haven't improved the lives of people yet?!' That sets up people for failure.

"They think it doesn't work because they are jumping to the gigantic goal at the end. But you now have 24 people at your meetings when before it was only three. That is wonderful progress, but we diminish that.

"This is not about creating utopia. It's more like a series of little battles, not a big war. You win some and lose others."

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