

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Summary

The Partnership for New Communities

Focus, Follow-Through and Flexibility

By Prudence Brown and Tom Dewar



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall picture that emerges from the assessment is that of an organization that has earned widespread respect among relevant and diverse audiences

In the fall of 2008, The Partnership for New Communities sought an external assessment that would examine its performance and contribution to making Chicago's Plan for Transformation a success. The goal was to assess both what The Partnership had accomplished and how well it had functioned as a leadership collaborative and vehicle for philanthropic and civic support.

The overall picture that emerges from the assessment is that of an organization that has earned widespread respect among relevant and diverse audiences. The Partnership's demonstrated capacity to get important things done and its ability to work in partnership with a range of public, private, and nonprofit actors are embodied in Opportunity Chicago. This initiative filled important workforce gaps for public-housing residents, spurred innovation, helped build a shared data system, leveraged new partners and resources, and has begun to promote focused system change. Similar, if more modest, results characterize The Partnership's work in economic development and support for the goals of the Plan's mixed-income developments. To its credit, throughout its agenda, The Partnership has managed to maintain its independence and be a "critical friend" to the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), as well as to the other systems and sectors with which it is working to create opportunities for public-housing residents.

Substantial and broad support exists for continuing to insure full implementation of The Partnership's current lines of work. Indeed, The Partnership's focus and flexible implementation have served the organization well and should remain at the center of the work.

The national significance of the Plan for Transformation and The Partnership's role in supporting its goals, along with the sound platform that The Partnership has created, highlight the opportunity for it to move in ever-more creative and strategic ways.

INTRODUCTION

This report begins with a review of the scope and approach of the assessment. The next two sections address The Partnership's approach—what it has chosen to focus on and how it has implemented its work—and its organizational performance. Then the report examines three key elements of The Partnership's agenda—workforce development, economic development and business and civic support. The final section of the report looks forward and presents some options for possible next steps.

SCOPE AND APPROACH OF THE ASSESSMENT

Since 2003, The Partnership has brought together business, civic and nonprofit leaders to:

- Support the goals of Chicago's Plan for Transformation of public housing
- Stimulate large-scale economic revitalization of some of Chicago's most disinvested neighborhoods
- Promote the development of strong institutions that enrich community life and sustain mixed-income diversity
- Invest in the human potential of community residents

Providing a vehicle for stepping back from The Partnership's work to date, the assessment was charged with examining its "impact, governance, operational capacity and performance, and resource development."¹ The questions that guided the assessment focus on The Partnership's strategic priorities and accomplishments, the impact of its grantmaking and other strategies to build capacity and civic support for the Plan for Transformation, and its organizational performance.

The assessment is informed by two primary sources of data: document review and interviews. The assessment team reviewed selected documents and reports from The Partnership's Advisory Committee meetings, grantees, staff, evaluators, and partners. Sixty interviews were conducted with Advisory Committee members, key staff and funding partners, grantees, other government and philanthropic leaders, developers, public interest advocates, researchers and public-housing residents.

¹ This charge distinguishes the assessment from an evaluation of the Chicago Housing Authority or the Plan for Transformation itself, and from a rigorous impact evaluation of each of The Partnership's lines of work.

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Respondents felt that The Partnership had selected actionable strategies with specific goals and measurable results, thus avoiding the trap of trying to do too much in too many different arenas in a relatively short amount of time

THE PARTNERSHIP'S APPROACH

When it began, The Partnership was challenged to translate its broad mission into specific activities and define its niche within the larger political and organizational landscape. Required to address all the predictable organizational challenges of becoming an effective civic operation with grantmaking, fundraising and communications functions, The Partnership also faced substantial and informed skepticism about the CHA, and about anyone expressing a willingness to try and work with them. Remarkably, significant consensus emerged within the diverse interview sample about The Partnership's ability to address these challenges successfully and define what is broadly perceived as an effective approach. Respondents cite six particular strengths of The Partnership's approach:

CHOICE OF STRATEGIC PROGRAM PRIORITIES

The Partnership's decision to focus significantly on workforce, and to a lesser degree on economic development, makes sense to respondents. They note that The Partnership identified an unmet need among public-housing residents with low basic skills and other barriers to employment, a group that neither the CHA nor the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (MOWD) had been well positioned to serve historically. Further, the CHA's requirement that residents be employed in order to move into the new units in the mixed-income developments underscored the critical nature of workforce development for this group.

FOCUS ON ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

Respondents felt that The Partnership had selected actionable strategies with specific goals and measurable results, thus avoiding the trap of trying to do too much in too many different arenas in a relatively short amount of time. They point to The Partnership's ability to develop a grantmaking approach that adds value rather than duplicates the array of strategies and projects supported by other funders in Chicago. Several mentioned the nontraditional use of philanthropic dollars to create incentives in the Find Your Place in Chicago initiative as an example of a nimble

use of capital to fill strategic gaps. One long-time observer of civic change efforts in Chicago observed that what strikes him the most about The Partnership is “its willingness to choose a few important things, and stick with them,” avoiding the tendency to “over-reach.”

EMPHASIS ON LEVERAGE AND PARTNERSHIPS

The Partnership clearly appreciated the rich and complex ecology in which it needed to carve out its own niche and operate. Respondents applauded its efforts to establish strategic relationships in the public, private and nonprofit worlds, build on opportunities for strengthening and leveraging existing efforts, and create momentum and learning across sectors. At the same time, it also convened a wide range of advisers, including some from organizations initially cautious or hostile about The Partnership.

HIGH VALUE ON QUALITY AND ROLE OF DATA

The Partnership’s results-oriented approach with clearly articulated accountabilities puts a premium on good data. Respondents cite The Partnership’s role in building capacity and systems to collect and analyze data and in establishing a data-driven culture surrounding its work.

The Partnership has managed to maintain its independence and be a “critical friend” to CHA ▲

INDEPENDENCE

The Partnership faced many “opportunities” to lose its power as an independent civic player. Nonetheless, respondents perceive that The Partnership has managed to maintain its independence and be a “critical friend” to CHA, as well as to the other systems and sectors with which it is working to create opportunities for public-housing residents.

TIME-LIMITED HORIZON

Although no one was sure how long it would operate (and no one suggested that its end should come anytime soon), respondents did understand The Partnership’s tenure to be time-limited. The result is that they viewed the enterprise as less likely to undergo significant mission drift over time or to “morph” into something else that might produce a sense of competition among other nonprofits.

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

The Partnership is an unusual organization, combining elements not often found operating together. It is a funding collaborative in which some funders contribute resources to a pooled fund that covers core operating costs, and some funders contribute resources to a pooled fund that covers costs of particular projects (e.g., Opportunity Chicago). It is a donor advised fund that is guided by an Advisory Committee that cannot officially approve grants but, instead, makes recommendations for action by The Chicago Community Trust. The Advisory Committee is made up of some, but not all, of the funders, as well as other key civic leaders who contribute to The Partnership in non-monetary ways. These characteristics make it hard to identify organizational counterparts elsewhere against which to compare performance. Most funding collaboratives with pooled resources do not involve non-donors on their boards and in their decision-making processes; many civic groups organized to address a particular issue don’t create pooled funds, and the same is true for most affinity groups of funders.

Although unusual in its governance and operation, The Partnership has generated widespread praise for how it functions as an organization, reflecting an unusual consensus across groups that have different experiences with and perspectives on grantmaking and funder dynamics

Although unusual in its governance and operation, The Partnership has generated widespread praise for how it functions as an organization, reflecting an unusual consensus across groups that have different experiences with and perspectives on grantmaking and funder dynamics. Respondents attribute this positive reputation to the following five factors:

HIGHLY COMPETENT AND RESPECTED STAFF

The Partnership's lean and focused staff are commonly viewed as deeply devoted to the organization's mission, relentless in the pursuit of results, and consistent in the high standards they set for themselves and their partners. Respondents view staff as "comfortable navigating complex political terrain" while operating in a very professional manner with all constituents.

EXCELLENT QUALITY AND STYLE OF EXECUTION

Good ideas and intensive effort are not enough if execution is weak or misses the opportunity to engage potential partners and build momentum. Respondents report that The Partnership's staff "don't come to a conversation with all the answers" but are "respectful and eager to learn" while generating confidence that to the extent possible they will take effective action based on the results of the conversation. The process of developing Opportunity Chicago illustrates this stance: initial misconceptions about the workforce capacities and needs of CHA residents were supplanted by a vehicle—the Strategic Advisers Group—through which deep expertise from a variety of sectors was used to inform The Partnership's ultimate approach and engage relevant players in overseeing implementation. The work reflects the capacity to use experts well, to work through an intermediary (in this case, the Chicago Jobs Council), to make sure

implementation is tightly coordinated, and to build in accountabilities to monitor clearly defined milestones and deliverables.

FLEXIBLE, TRANSPARENT, HELPFUL GRANTMAKER

The Partnership was able to establish its grantmaking function in a short amount of time and with flexibility that grantees appreciated. Consistent with the qualities mentioned above, many grantees reported that staff are responsive to their concerns, helpful in connecting them to useful people and resources, and consistent and clear in their expectations. "More than with any other funder, we can tell them where we are experiencing barriers and problem-solve together about how to address them."

STRONG ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP AND SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT

The Partnership's Advisory Committee of 15 leaders from diverse sectors has expertise, credibility, and access to people and institutional networks that can leverage resources to support the goals of the Plan for Transformation. Unlike many civic enterprises that start out with significant energy but lose steam over time, The Partnership has been able to keep its Advisory Committee members at the table for the last five years. This sustained engagement has fostered trust and enabled the group to serve as a constructive sounding board for CHA leadership.

THE CHICAGO COMMUNITY TRUST AS A HOSPITABLE, CAPABLE "HOME"

Locating The Partnership as a donor advised fund at the community foundation is seen by respondents as an effective way of minimizing conflicts over ownership or burdening the enterprise with the "baggage" of a host organization that is part of the political fray. Its peer funders see the Trust as usefully "breaking new ground" on the theme of mobilizing civic and business support to address a challenging urban problem.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The workforce development "system" in Chicago is complicated and can be resistant to change. Many observers note that it tends to be dominated by large and politically safe programs that largely serve people with fewer challenges, and better prospects, than most public-housing residents. It is also a system that has gone through a long series of reforms which for the most part have fallen below expectations. The Partnership chose to focus on workforce development because of its obvious potential payoff for public-housing residents, with about three-fourths of its total grantmaking budget going to this priority. The main vehicle for this is Opportunity Chicago. The Partnership has been a lead partner in the development and implementation of this five-year, \$25.9-million dollar collaborative initiative with the stated goal of placing 5,000 public-housing residents. Launched in 2006 it has placed more than 3,900 residents as of July 2009.

The Partnership entered this field and chose to do things that are widely perceived as being a "good fit" for public-housing residents

ENTERED A CROWDED FIELD CAREFULLY AND EFFECTIVELY

Being a newcomer brings with it a certain degree of skepticism from practitioners, policy makers, and observers alike. Nevertheless, The Partnership entered this field and chose to do things that are widely perceived as being a “good fit” with the interests of public-housing residents. Respondents also praised the choice to work with and through existing groups, such as the Chicago Jobs Council, who have the working knowledge and relationships to make change more likely. One of the principal advisors for this work noted, “they chose areas to work in and their grantees well...they sent a message of wanting to make a real difference in terms of what would help public-housing residents.” To its credit, The Partnership has been consistent and clear about both its focus and specific goals.

“They chose areas to work in and their grantees well...they sent a message of wanting to make a real difference in terms of what would help public-housing residents”

PROMOTED INNOVATION AND FILLED REAL GAPS

The Partnership has promoted the development and expansion of transitional jobs, contextualized literacy, and “bridge” programs. Some of these practice changes take more time, require some trial-and-error to see what works and for whom, or involve elements that address personal issues and family challenges, for example. Respondents we spoke with believe that it has invested wisely in innovations and program elements that change the mix, and move the system toward these residents and their prospects. Further, they point out that its grants have identified elements that have the potential to help reform the system. Increasingly, consideration is being given to ways to institutionalize good changes.

IMPROVED DATA AND KNOWLEDGE BASE

Data problems in this field are notorious and long-standing. The Partnership commissioned an evaluation, and along with it, helped to improve the quality of data. By taking the evidence seriously, and by listening to people describe the challenges of their work, they helped make the connection between improving data and a better knowledge base. One transitional jobs provider told us that by having better data it was “able to pinpoint issues, and make adjustments.” In this case, good data showed that the kinds of personal and family set backs that often force clients to fall behind or drop out are not always predictors of failure. This grantee chose to assure clients that “once you start with us, we will stay with you, working to resolve issues.” Data showed how this patience and flexibility could actually pay off in the long-run. Wide acknowledgement that the shared data systems now in place points to a real system change already accomplished.

LEVERAGED RESOURCES AND BROUGHT PARTNERS TOGETHER

Locally, The Partnership has worked in close collaboration with the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, CHA and the nonprofit workforce providers. The Partnership’s central role in Opportunity Chicago is perceived by most as an accomplishment in its own right. Its investment of \$5 million has brought in an additional \$18 million from other sources, including \$5 million from the State. Nationally, The Partnership’s work in this area has also leveraged resources and attracted the attention of national policy-makers and funders. For example, the new National Fund for Workforce Solutions² committed \$450,000. The Partnership’s investments in workforce development are perceived by most of those we spoke with as being “smart,” and are showing promise in terms of initial reports on impact.

CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

While The Partnership has helped shift the workforce system toward serving public-housing residents, and people like them, and while it has supported work that introduced and tested approaches that seem to work, questions remain about how these innovations and practices will get incorporated into the existing system going forward. This is especially important if these interventions turn out to be more expensive in time and money, as they often are.

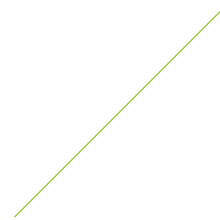
The Partnership’s investments in workforce development are perceived by most of those we spoke with as being “smart,” and are showing promise in terms of initial reports on impact ▲

² The National Fund for Workforce Solutions is a new national fund that seeks to “help local initiatives move low-wage workers into careers and meet employers’ needs for skilled workers,” with funds from foundations, businesses and the U.S. Department of Labor.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the area of economic development, The Partnership has identified some strong grantees and partners, and has worked with them to leverage resources and relationships to the benefit of “targeted communities.” Although it represents a smaller portion of the overall grantmaking budget, work in this area is showing important results. Its grants have focused on three commercial “corridors” where seven mixed-income developments are now underway: Cottage Grove and South State Street on the South Side, and Madison Avenue on the West Side.

Partnership funds have been used creatively to make some initial investments that make a proposed retail project, potential location or context more attractive



SET THE STAGE, ADD VALUE

These grants to help set the stage for development, or to stimulate next steps where some activity has begun, have had modest and specific success. In recognition of the difficulty of getting initial business commitments into a disinvested area or commercial

corridor, Partnership funds have been used creatively to make some initial investments that make a proposed retail project, potential location or context more attractive.

SUPPORT SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

In support of this overall economic development priority there have also been grants for small business development, both through city-wide and neighborhood intermediaries. Some of these are seen as groups that have proven track records but which were not previously (so) interested in these community areas, in particular, or in these prospective workers. Thus, The Partnership’s grantmaking has helped to shift the focus of existing organizations and players, and some respondents indicated that this has helped position these neighborhood areas and people for greater attention going forward.

ADAPT DEVELOPMENT MODELS

In search of benefits for these mixed-income developments, and public-housing residents, in particular, The Partnership has found and supported work that tries to adapt existing development models. Work in these three corridors has explored the potential of Green Initiatives, transit-oriented development ideas, employer-assisted housing – and others. All represent the kind of new thinking that The Partnership has tried to feature in its economic development work. It has also supported efforts to “brand” commercial corridors that serve as market areas for the new mixed-income developments in order to help create a fresh start and new identity for areas that have been negatively labeled in the past.

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CONNECT DIVERSE RESIDENTS AND LOCAL BUSINESSES

Some work in the three community corridors also tries to bring together residents and local business interests in a spirit of identifying mutual interests, such as public safety and beautification. Some respondents noted that from these “openings” can flow connections and support, such as word-of-mouth support for retail and small business “neighbors” who play an active role in developing an area’s quality of life, as well as employment opportunities.

Respondents pointed out that the grants in this area, although modest, have often made a useful impact ▲

CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

There is widespread concern about the dramatically changed economic conditions and a growing alarm about the chances for finding ways to keep some of these developments in the “running.” Recent efforts by The Partnership to assist in the promotion of Find Your Place in Chicago (essentially a \$10,000 incentive for prospective home buyers) have been very well received by developers, and have shown an impact in terms of interest and initial commitments to own a home in these mixed-income developments.

To date, economic development has clearly been a second-level priority, in terms of both resource commitment and emphasis. Still, a number of respondents pointed out that the grants in this area, although modest, have often made a useful impact. Informed respondents note that in order to have a greater impact, the grants would have to be much larger. Thus, we heard no case for dramatically increasing the resources for this area.

BUSINESS AND CIVIC SUPPORT

The Partnership has done a good job thus far in mobilizing people and resources in support of the goals of the Plan for Transformation. The degree and type of support appears to have been appropriate to the phase of the work now being completed.

Impressive is the fact that Advisory Committee members are already asking how they might do more or different things in the future

STRONG ENGAGEMENT BY PARTICIPANTS

Members of the Advisory Committee have not just come at the beginning, but they have continued to do so. Our interviews with them found them knowledgeable about The Partnership and its commitments, and very much willing to continue to contribute in concrete ways that help advance the work, spread the word, and maintain real focus on what can realistically be achieved. This level of commitment is a real accomplishment. Even more impressive is the fact that Advisory Committee members are already asking how they might do more or different things in the future.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

When this work began, most business and civic leaders in Chicago did not think much about the issues of public housing at all, and if they did think about it, they were skeptical about the CHA and its Plan for Transformation. One of the most noteworthy accomplishments of The Partnership is the degree to which this has changed. By establishing its identity as an independent force, and by demonstrating its capacity to listen, plan, focus, join with others, act, and respond to issues and challenges as they came up, The Partnership has helped change the perceptions of key leaders across the City in a positive way. It has also helped mobilize support.

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LOOKING FORWARD: POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

The economic downturn and housing market decline pose a serious challenge to the financial assumptions on which the mixed-income developments are based. On the positive side, The Partnership's track record of accomplishments and, as important, the many productive working relationships that it has established in all three sectors create a strong platform for the next phase of work. This civic capital positions The Partnership to take on tasks and operate in ways that would not have been possible at the outset of its work.

Other factors shaping the context for The Partnership's work include: a new Administration in Washington adopting new program and funding opportunities and promoting new urban policies in support of such initiatives as the Plan for Transformation; Chicago's potentially successful bid for the 2016 Olympics; and a revised timeline that extends the Plan for Transformation to 2015.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

Substantial support exists for continuing current

lines of work with an emphasis on staying focused on existing mission and goals. At the same time, respondents encouraged The Partnership to try to create some synergy among its strategies and to develop approaches to sustainability as appropriate. Respondents also continue to endorse the values and approach that have guided The Partnership so successfully to date: its independence; its ability to work in partnership and leverage opportunities; its use of results data to refine strategy on an ongoing basis; and its transparency and clarity about accountability, both internally and with its partners.

Respondents differ somewhat in their views about what additional work, if any, The Partnership might take on next. The Partnership will need to consider many options as well as the consensus of its leadership about what is simply too important to overlook or risk being undone. We present the following options as we heard them, recognizing that they are not mutually exclusive but could be combined in any number of ways:

- Adopt a more intensive but focused policy agenda
- Select additional mixed-income developments for economic development work
- Expand the scope of The Partnership's approach in one or more of the neighborhoods with mixed-income developments
- Focus on building mixed-income developments where people want to live
- Convene a working group to develop creative financing mechanisms to keep mixed-income developments on track
- Provide support for community building among mixed-income residents

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Each of these options has organizational implications for The Partnership in terms of its role, partners, fundraising, and Advisory Committee membership. The current climate increases the chances that there will be a call “to save the day,” and thus, perhaps, to overreach. That is, to take on things for which The Partnership is simply not well positioned to do. Precisely because The Partnership is seen as a group of people and an organization that focuses, implements, follows

through and actually achieves a high degree of what it sets out to do, it might now be looked at to step in and “do” too much of what others might want, or need, in this crisis. At its core, however, what is most striking about The Partnership is how good it has been at figuring out how the interests of public-housing residents and the mixed-income developments can be advanced without being side-tracked or deflected into doing other things. It seems a very good moment to sustain and even strengthen that commitment and focus.

The Partnership’s focus, follow-through, and flexibility have served the organization well and should remain at the center of its work. These same qualities also suggest a readiness for adopting an increasingly bold and deep agenda in order to achieve maximum impact.

What is most striking about The Partnership is how good it has been at figuring out how the interests of public-housing residents and the mixed-income developments can be advanced ▲

REPORT AUTHORS

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From 1992-2007 Prue worked at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago where she co-directed its Program on Philanthropy and Community Change, an effort to build knowledge and stimulate learning for foundations and their partners involved in community change. Before Chapin Hall, she served as Deputy Director of the Urban Poverty Program at the Ford Foundation and, before that, on the faculty at the School of Social Work at Columbia University. She holds a BA from the University of Chicago and a MSW and Ph.D. in Social Work and Psychology from the University of Michigan.

TOM DEWAR

Tom Dewar now lives in Baltimore and is Co-Director of the Aspen Institute's Roundtable on Community Change. Before that he taught international and community development at the Bologna Center of the School for Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University (2001-2007); served as Director of Evaluation for the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago, Illinois (1998-2000); was Senior Project Associate at Rainbow Research in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and served on the faculty of the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, (1974-1996.) He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and Urban Policy from Northwestern University.

He has evaluated efforts to revitalize neighborhoods, re-integrate formerly institutionalized (and other labeled) people into local communities, provide targeted employment for lower skilled and less experienced workers, improve the integration of school and work, carry out peacemaking and conflict mediation, strengthen sustainable agriculture, and promote strong community organizing.

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The Partnership for New Communities is a fund created by leading civic institutions and businesses to support the success of the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, a sweeping effort to reinvent public housing. The Partnership raises money and invests it in economic development, community building and employment-related initiatives to bring about large-scale improvements to the neighborhoods most affected by public housing transformation.

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**The Partnership
for New Communities**
Civic Leadership for Chicago's Neighborhoods