

# **Building Community Capacity to Use Information:**

**A FRAMEWORK**

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October 1997

National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

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## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>ASSESSING COMMUNITY INFORMATION CAPACITY</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS AVAILABLE IN THE COMMUNITY</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>BUILDING SKILLS TO USE INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY USE OF INFORMATION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>ENDNOTES</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>ANNEX A: INFORMATION CAPACITY IN DENVER</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>ANNEX B: DENVER NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (NLP) TRAINING</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>ANNEX C: AN ACTION PLAN FOR DENVER</b> .....	<b>11</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP)<sup>1</sup> has long recognized that building the capacity of the leaders and residents of poor neighborhoods to use information effectively can powerfully enhance the community-building process. How can such capacity be built? To many, the first thing that comes to mind is training. However, NNIP has recognized that a broader range of local institutional infrastructure (institutions and established processes) is needed if training is to pay off.

For example, the training on information use provided by the Piton Foundation relies on a whole series of steps that precede it: building reputation in the community, recruiting participants, and training them in other key areas such as conflict resolution and meeting management. These are necessary just to prepare them for training in using information. Once Piton does the training, another whole series of supports follow, including further training in areas such as public speaking and communicating with impact as well as hand holding through their first few difficult attempts to actually use information in their own community-building efforts. The information training curriculum alone is not enough.

In building capacity to use information for community change, a series of steps suggest themselves around which NNIP plans to develop protocols and practices. They are (a) assessing community information capacity, (b) strengthening the social and technological communications networks available in the community, (c) building skills to use information for community change, and (d) providing technical assistance in support of community use of information.

## **ASSESSING COMMUNITY INFORMATION CAPACITY**

All communities possess an assortment of informational assets, skills, and opportunities that need to be understood and supported. The Piton Foundation implemented a process in a few neighborhoods in Denver to assess their information capacity and while sharpened thinking led the foundation to assess a neighborhood's information capacity somewhat differently, the results were instructive (see Annex A). We believe that assessing a community's capacity should include the following:

### **1. *The communications capacities of the neighborhood.***

- Does the community have a local neighborhood newspaper?
- Are there places where people in the community routinely post local news?
- Do city officials hold routine meetings in community? If so, who and how many attend?
- Are there meeting places in the community where people can come together to discuss common issues?

- How is information distributed at present in the neighborhood?
- 2. *The technological assets the community possesses.***
- Is there public access to the Internet? If so, where? Who and how many use it?
  - Is there Internet training or support available within the neighborhood?
  - Do neighborhood organizations have a presence on the Web?
  - How many households in the neighborhood have personal access?
  - Are key institutions technologically equipped (e.g., computers, software, modems)?
- 3. *Information skills possessed by people in the neighborhood.***
- Who uses neighborhood information at present?
  - What information do they use and how do they get it?
  - Is information training/skill building locally available and, if so, where, from whom, in what way, and at what cost?
  - Do neighborhood residents and Community Based Organizations produce their own data (e.g., community assessments, asset maps, nonprofit evaluations)? If so, what tools do they use or have they developed, what data are produced in what form and how often, and what skills have they acquired in the process?
- 4. *Emerging issues or new opportunities present or anticipated in the neighborhood that have or could have an information focus.***
- What is happening in the neighborhood that presents a real information need?
  - Is there currently an information strategy connected to that information need and, if so, is it sufficient?

All of these factors together constitute a neighborhood's information capacity—capacity to gather information, use information, and communicate information to others. We should not assume that neighborhoods are “capacityless.” In many instances, they simply have not put the assets they possess to coordinated or best use. Helping communities assess their unique information capacity would be of great service and allow strategically targeted interventions to follow.

## **STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS AVAILABLE IN THE COMMUNITY**

The assessment of the community's information capacity will undoubtedly point to key social and technological communications networks available in the community. An asset-based approach recognizes these strengths and works to connect them, make them available to others, strengthen them as necessary, and expand them as needed. These may include the following:

### **1. *Increased access to the Internet.***

- Open up existing Internet locations to the public (e.g., in public schools).
- Expand public Internet access sites in community institutions and service organizations (e.g., libraries, employment programs).
- Provide simple and fun Internet training at no or low cost.
- Provide simple and user-friendly access to neighborhood information on the Internet (e.g., neighborhood indicators, community announcements and events).
- Help community-based organizations develop a presence on the Web.
- Help city agencies better link their Internet sites for ease of use by residents.
- Connect neighborhoods to each other through the Internet for easy exchange of information and knowledge.

### **2. *Increased forums and opportunities for residents to gather to discuss community issues and hear and exchange information.***

- Encourage decision-making bodies (e.g., zoning, school boards) to meet in the community rather than in downtown locations.
- As neighborhood indicators are updated each year, encourage community forums to discuss what is learned.
- With either Internet access or other technological advancement, take the data into the neighborhood for gatherings either on specific topics (e.g., welfare reform) or in general to answer neighborhood questions.

### **3. *Increased strategies for the dissemination of neighborhood information.***

- Encourage local neighborhood newspapers to include an annual or more frequent column presenting neighborhood facts.
- Work with large city/state newspapers to use neighborhood data to tell neighborhood stories.
- Prepare simple neighborhood-specific fact sheets about the neighborhood in general or on key issues of interest to the community.

## **BUILDING SKILLS TO USE INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE**

In many communities, understanding how to use information is a larger problem than access to information. In the absence of a proficient group of residents ready and able to receive whatever information is available, even the best information is a fallow promise. Skill-building strategies should provide for the following:

1. ***Training on information decision-making and use.*** (See description of the Piton Foundation approach in Annex B.)
  - Provide training on basic information access and use, including how to identify information needs, utilize technology, find information, access the media, and develop communications strategies for the dissemination of information to the community.
2. ***The institutionalization of information capacity in neighborhoods and in key neighborhood institutions.***
  - Develop a training-of-trainers model to build the capacity of local experienced users to serve as trainers for others as they access information.
  - Work with trusted neighborhood institutions to develop their institutional capacity to produce information for and about the community and to communicate that information to others.

## **PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY USE OF INFORMATION**

Regardless of training availability and the quality of available neighborhood information, community members will continue to encounter difficulties in accessing information and in identifying creative new ways to meet the community's information needs. A need remains for the following:

1. ***A clearinghouse for the collection and cleaning of administrative data.***
  - A single agency or organization should assume responsibility for the development and routine update of a comprehensive neighborhood data bank of administrative data.
  - Periodically assess the community's information needs to ensure that the information needed is available or can be made available.

**2. *The provision of technical assistance to communities in the use and production of neighborhood data.***

- Provide hands-on technical assistance to neighborhood efforts that require access to and use of neighborhood data.
- Assist neighborhood leaders in the identification, modification, or development of neighborhood information production tools (e.g., asset mapping, community surveys).

**3. *Strategies to collect and share the experiences and stories of other information producers and users.***

- Develop a searchable database of the information collection, use, and production experiences of others (to include, as appropriate, case studies, instruments, guides, research diaries, etc.).

These four strategies—assessing community information capacity, strengthening social and technological communications networks, building skills to use information, and providing technical assistance in support of community use of information—are not separate and distinct. Rather, they are interconnected and interdependent. An outline of the Piton Foundation’s current plan to build infrastructure along these lines is provided in Annex C.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. NNIP is a partnership between the Urban Institute and seven local partners that operate neighborhood-level information systems to serve community building and policy development in their cities: the Atlanta Project, the Boston Foundation's Boston Persistent Poverty Project, the Center for Urban Poverty and Social Change at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, the Piton Foundation in Denver, the Urban Strategies Council in Oakland, the Providence Plan, and the DC Agenda Project in Washington, DC. See *Democratizing Information: First Year Report of the National Neighborhood Indicators Project* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1996).

## **ANNEX A**

### **INFORMATION CAPACITY IN DENVER**

#### ***A Review of the Information Capacity in the Nine Neighborhoods Served by the Neighborhood Leadership Program***

***Communications capacities are strong but informal.*** Denver has a number of local, neighborhood-based newspapers. Some are weekly, others monthly. Some have an intentional geographic focus while others have an ethnic, language, or other focus, though residents still use them to obtain local news. Each neighborhood has strong word-of-mouth communications. The pulpit is a crucial means of communication about local events, tragedies, and opportunities in each of these neighborhoods. Churches also serve as key places for community postings and for community meetings. Bulletin boards are checked frequently by residents "in the know," though it's not clear how someone gets to be "in the know." Meeting places abound but meetings about the neighborhood are frequently called by people considered "outsiders" (people who live and sometimes work outside the neighborhood) by residents. Attendance tends to be narrow. Strong neighborhood associations exist in all of these neighborhoods but they are not necessarily viewed by residents as a place to turn for objective information. City Council members hold regular (though not frequent) meetings in the community but usually the same people attend. Agendas do not necessarily reflect what the residents want to talk about. Other city functions (e.g., zoning) are rarely heard in the neighborhood. The neighborhoods are asset-rich in communications, but these communications are informal by nature, uncoordinated, not used to their full potential, and frequently used more by outsiders than by residents themselves.

***Technology is weak but welcome to most residents.*** In these neighborhoods, Internet access is virtually unheard of (not absent, just unheard of). Few neighborhood organizations have access to the Internet; very few have Internet presence. All of these organizations feel like they're being left behind but don't know how to begin. For many of these organizations, computers are used only for word processing. Some have familiarity with other software, such as accounting packages, but even some of those who claim to use automated client tracking are doing little more than entering client data (when they find the time—usually for some grant proposal) into word processing software. Extra phone lines, modems, and advanced software are woefully inadequate. Given that all of these neighborhoods have an interesting mix of income groups, Internet access is far more common in the home. Those who have access use it primarily for e-mail; using the computer for research, creating personal or business home pages, and transporting data is rare.

Libraries throughout Denver's neighborhoods all have Internet access but very little instruction is available to help people get comfortable, and some of the equipment in the poorer neighborhoods is less than optimal. Public schools all have computer labs and most have Internet access but equipment and use vary. School computers are not accessible to the public. What is overwhelming is people's interest in getting onboard and joining the information highway. There is

a great deal of interest in the Internet as a tool for community revitalization. There is virtually no interest in taking on complex software applications (virtually anything that is not basic word processing comes under the heading of "complex").

***Information skills are varied and insufficient.*** We've graduated more than 100 persons with information access and use skills out of the Neighborhood Leadership Programs in our target neighborhoods. Some use information and enhance their skills regularly. Others use the skills less often or not at all. Graduates of the leadership program are viewed somewhat as experts in their community and are often relied on to present information, and explain what it means. They say that much of the information that gets passed around in neighborhood is myth and legend. People react to community issues anecdotally and then, if challenged, look for information that supports their anecdotal position (frequently by collecting more anecdotes).

Understanding how to use information is a larger problem than access to information. Information that is available in a neighborhood is freely passed around and there is a high value placed on it. Everyone we found who had ever had a copy of the poverty report, or the fact sheets we produced, or other neighborhood-specific information used it over and over again and knew right where to find it. They prefer what they have in hand rather than what they have to ask for. The neighborhoods have virtually no experience in producing their own information, though they speak of all the information they need. In the same breath, they decry outsiders coming in with their surveys and research projects. They trust that which they produce or over which they have some control, and place little value on anything else. Information use is inextricably linked to production.

***Emerging issues and opportunities have significant overlap.*** As you might expect in low-income neighborhoods, there are many commonalities in community concerns: education, welfare reform, access to jobs, safety. Communities see the return of public schools to neighborhood schools (following court-ordered busing) as a real opportunity in Denver, though what they would do varies considerably across neighborhoods and across schools. Welfare reform is a major concern, though it is not always voiced as concern for welfare families; it is sometimes voiced as fear of welfare families (taking their jobs, their child care, their subsidy). There currently exists no neighborhood strategy for connecting information to those concerns. While the actions a particular neighborhood may choose to take in light of these issues are, of necessity, unique, the information needs and strategies to communicate that information to others are very much the same. This suggests that a common information strategy can be developed for these common issues, but it must be developed at the invitation and discretion of each neighborhood. One final note—they are willing to "borrow" from other neighborhoods. In other words, a successful data collection technique or community meeting in one neighborhood is cause to try it in another, thus allowing strategies to be applied in more than one neighborhood.

## **ANNEX B**

### **DENVER NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (NLP) TRAINING**

**Session Topics:** The Neighborhood, Leadership, Self-Empowerment, Team Building, Conflict Resolution, Meeting Management, Resource Development, Use of Information for Community Change, Culture and Socialization, Public Speaking I, Public Speaking II, Communicating with Impact, Personal Development, Rights and the Law.

#### ***Use of Information for Community Change Curriculum***

It's difficult to understand the model we currently employ without first understanding a little of the history of this model. Originally envisioned as a combined curriculum in Resource Development and Information Access, the training was designed to provide participants with information on how to identify needs and establish resources to fulfill that need, including ways to gather, organize, access, and distribute information.

**Original Curriculum.** The original curriculum included (1) utilizing technology and computer systems, (2) becoming familiar with local, city, and state resources, (3) developing a speaker's bureau, (4) building a list of resources for funding, (5) accessing the media, (6) identifying information needs, (7) identifying sources of information, and (8) developing community calendars and newsletters.

**Modified Curriculum.** After not too long, we separated the Resource Development component of the training from the Information Access component. The curriculum then included (1) utilizing technology and computer systems, (2) identifying information needs, (3) identifying sources of information including local, city, and state sources, (4) developing a speaker's bureau, (5) accessing the media, and (6) developing community calendars and newsletters.

**Current Curriculum.** Not too long after, we further refined the training. Now called Use of Information for Community Change, the preliminary training focuses entirely on how to identify your information needs, including (1) identifying the problem or opportunity, (2) verifying the information: informing yourself about the scope, location, causes, and effects, (3) identifying what needs to change, (4) identifying who else needs to be involved (we call this the power of allies and adversaries), and (5) identifying the informational and communications resources needed to have an impact.

This preliminary training is followed by a series of hands-on workshops in which participants are gradually led through a series of increasingly complex informational problem-solving scenarios starting with a community's response to a negative newspaper article about their neighborhood (real articles abound each year when neighborhood crime statistics are released), a fictional attempt to respond to a call for help from a member of the community, and a real-life individualized scenario

developed in consultation with each participant. This last workshop is handled individually and worked on over time and is almost always a real issue or project that the participant is already engaged in the community. We are currently working with NLP graduates to develop "alumni" workshops on topics including Internet Access, Working with the Media, and Producing Community Newsletters.

### ***Using Information for Community Change: Case Study***

**Problem:** Last week a woman in your neighborhood called you up to ask for your help. She is a single working mother with two children: a daughter age 12 and a son age 15. Her son had just been expelled from school for fighting. Her son told her the fight was not his fault and that white kids never get suspended or expelled, only brown and black kids do. The mother took time off from work to meet with the principal of the school. The principal disagreed that brown and black kids were being disciplined any differently than white kids were. When the mother asked what her son was supposed to do about his schooling, the principal told the mother she could enroll him in another school if they would have him but because it was so late in the school year (it is now April) the principal didn't think another school would admit him. The principal told the mother she should just try to keep her son out of trouble. The mother said she worked during the day and asked how she was supposed to keep her son out of trouble if he was home alone all day. The principal said it wasn't her problem and told the mother she should have done something about her son's behavior before it got so bad that he had to get kicked out of school.

1. What is the problem? There are lots of ways to look at the story the mother told you. What do you think the issues are?
2. Is it really a problem? What information do you need to decide whether this is really a problem and to decide what you need to do about it?
3. If this really is a problem, what do you want to see changed in order to solve the problem?
4. Who else should be involved? The principal and the mother are already involved. Are there any others whose help you need or who you worry might get in your way?
5. What resources do you need to solve the problem? In addition to the information and the involvement of others, do you need anything else?

## **ANNEX C**

### **AN ACTION PLAN FOR DENVER**

***Move information capacity into three low-income neighborhoods.*** Up to three initial neighborhoods are targeted to move information dissemination, facilitation of use, and communication into trusted neighborhood institutions. These institutions are willing, though not necessarily able, to perform these functions. An individual capacity assessment of both the neighborhood and the institution will be performed and an institutional capacity-building phase implemented. Anticipated capacities to be addressed include communications, technology, and personal skill building in the production, use, and dissemination of neighborhood information.

***Use the Internet to increase community access to neighborhood information.*** The neighborhood database has been placed on a user-friendly website called Neighborhood Facts. This site includes neighborhood data summaries, histories, asset and substantive maps, graphs and charts, and a searchable database (by neighborhood, indicator, or year). In partnership with the City Planning Office, key public facilities in low-income neighborhoods have been targeted as advanced Internet access points for community use (e.g., libraries, schools, community and recreation centers). On-site, free, and friendly training has been developed to help local users access the Internet in general and Neighborhood Facts in particular. The three neighborhood information intermediaries will also become neighborhood Internet access points.

***Train neighborhood residents in information use.*** In addition to the Neighborhood Leadership Program, local neighborhood information intermediaries will be trained in a training-of-trainers model to teach others how to obtain, produce, and use local information for change. At some point, it is likely that these neighborhood information intermediaries will take over the training function entirely, including the Neighborhood Leadership Program.

***Serve as a clearinghouse for administrative data collection and technical assistance provider for information users.*** Continue to serve as the primary collection and data bank repository for Denver neighborhoods, including negotiating access to data, cleaning data, and sharing it in whatever formats are needed by the neighborhood information intermediaries as well as responding to requests of persons outside the targeted neighborhoods. In addition, provide on-going technical assistance to individual users as well as neighborhood intermediaries in the use and production of neighborhood data.