



COMMUNITY FOCUS

The Future of Federal Place-Based Policy and Support to Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to review and make recommendations about the community-focused approach to federal policy and investments. Also known as “place based,” community-focused efforts have two objectives: 1) improve the integration, coordination, and customer-service orientation of federal support for communities; and 2) provide a framework for comprehensive solutions to interrelated challenges. This policy and investment strategy brings federal, state, and local organizations together with community members to break down barriers that prevent individual and community success. Because the design of community-focused programs is responsive to local needs and priorities, the results and strategies vary based on the location. In Southeastern Kentucky, for example, local community-focused leaders have achieved dramatic reductions in drug-related deaths while the rest of the country experiences tragic increases. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, community-focused efforts have resulted in the growth of several college-readiness indicators among historically underrepresented students. These and other examples make a compelling case to continue and scale this innovative approach at the federal, state, and local levels.



**BUILDING A
FUTURE
THAT WORKS.**

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This paper, prepared by a team from [MAYA Consulting](#) in partnership with [JFE](#), provides federal staff, philanthropic leaders, and other stakeholders with a set of findings and recommendations for amplifying and sustaining community-focused approaches into the future.¹ Based on more than 20 interviews with federal staff and community leaders, as well as a review of secondary research and reports about community-focused efforts, the paper is presented in four sections:²

1. [A brief history and current state of community-focused policies and investments](#).
2. [A summary of community-focused design principles](#).
3. [Profiles of four diverse communities and their promising practices](#). The promising practices include:
 - ▶ *Empower community leaders to exercise their power to act by following their lead in everything from design to evaluation of the community-focused strategy (West Philadelphia).*
 - ▶ *Pursue quick wins with the results framework to build momentum toward longer-term, systemic, population-level change (Sacramento).*
 - ▶ *Utilize the Promise Zone designation to capitalize on existing investments, drive results, and then evaluate progress using multiple methods (Southeastern Kentucky).*

- ▶ *Use community-focused investments to create the local infrastructure (the results framework, alignment among organizations, and resources) for change across sectors (Los Angeles).*
4. [Recommendations to sustain and scale the community-focused approach](#). The recommendations include:
 - ▶ *Continue and expand investment in customer service, data collection, and coordination of community-focused efforts.*
 - ▶ *Target communication with stakeholders around key elements of the community-focused approach, especially the results framework, community ownership, and public-private partnerships.*
 - ▶ *Create more peer-to-peer learning and mentoring opportunities among community-focused organizations.*

ORIGINS AND CURRENT STATE

As described in [Voices From the Field](#), community-focused initiatives began in the late 1980s. Funded by local and national foundations, the programs provided comprehensive support to communities.³ Breaking away from the antiquated strategy of treating communities and individuals as if they had separate and unrelated needs in the areas of health, education, safety,

and housing, the community-focused strategy recognized that these assets and challenges are interrelated. In addition, the new investment strategy operated “according to community- and capacity-building principles that placed priority on community engagement in and ownership of the work.”⁴

Inspired by these philanthropically funded investments during the next three decades, and in response to feedback from community leaders for more flexibility and support in addressing interrelated local challenges, federal agency leaders sought to create incentives for community-based coordination of federal resources as part of the [Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative](#) (NRI). Using [Results-Based Accountability](#)TM and other outcome-driven approaches, community members responded to this strategy by creating a results framework based on local priorities. From there, community leaders designed neighborhood plans through which they would strategically and systematically work toward reaching the goals they set.⁵ Federal grant programs (coordinated within NRI and which, in many cases, redirected existing federal funding streams) sponsored by the US Departments of Education, Housing and Urban Development, and Justice—described in detail in Table 1 below—supported these local plans. In an unprecedented way, federal programs responded to interrelated challenges across sectors (health, education, safety, etc.) with coordinated

support.

A review of the community-focused strategies by the Forum for Youth Investment described the approach as “funding, flexibility, technical assistance and other support to help selected sites forge integrated approaches to community transformation that cut across individual programs, departments, and sectors.”⁶ For example, recognizing that students’ struggles in school reflect interrelated challenges in the home and the community, Promise Neighborhoods facilitate partnerships between local school districts and community- and faith-based organizations. This program from the US Department of Education supports strategies that strengthen families, provide job training, improve housing and safety, and address health disparities to ensure support for children and families during and outside of school hours. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (hereafter referred to as “HUD”) also launched the [Promise Zones](#) initiative. While designed to be integrated across sectors, Promise Zones do not provide new funding but rather give the program’s designees preference points to access and coordinate grants across multiple government agencies. A Promise Zone designation also brings the benefits of five AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTAs) annually, a federal community liaison, and technical assistance from 13 federal agencies.

Table 1: Federally Funded Place-Based Programs⁷

Community-Based Initiative	Lead Agency	Case Study Locations with This Program	Overview
Promise Zones (PZs)	Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) US Department of Agriculture (USDA)	West Philadelphia, Sacramento, Southeastern Kentucky, Los Angeles	Promise Zones are designed to be integrated across sectors. They do not provide new funding but rather offer designees preference points to access and coordinate grants across multiple government agencies. A PZ designation also brings the benefits of five AmeriCorps VISTAs annually, a federal community liaison (from HUD or USDA), and access to resources provided by 11 federal agencies.
Promise Neighborhoods	Department of Education (ED)	West Philadelphia, Southeastern Kentucky, Los Angeles	Promise Neighborhoods facilitate partnerships between local school districts and community- and faith-based organizations. This program from ED supports strategies that strengthen families, provide job training, improve housing and safety, and address health disparities to ensure support for children and families during and outside of school hours.

Community-Based Initiative	Lead Agency	Case Study Locations with This Program	Overview
Choice Neighborhoods	Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	West Philadelphia, Sacramento, Los Angeles	<p>Choice Neighborhoods Planning and Implementation Grants enable local leaders, residents, and stakeholders in communities with distressed public housing or HUD-assisted housing to revitalize this housing and develop and implement strategies to address additional neighborhood challenges. Examples of these strategies include: replacing distressed housing with “vibrant mixed-income communities, leveraging investments to develop new retail and businesses, turning around failing schools, strengthening early education, preventing crime, improving transportation, ensuring basic neighborhood assets, and increasing access to jobs.”⁸</p>
Innovations in Community-Based Crime Reduction (CBCR, formerly the Byrne Criminal Justice Initiative)	Department of Justice (DOJ)	West Philadelphia, Southeastern Kentucky, Los Angeles	<p>The CBCR program works to reduce crime and improve community safety using data-driven, cross-sector approaches within neighborhoods experiencing hot spots of violence and serious crime.</p>

Community-Based Initiative	Lead Agency	Case Study Locations with This Program	Overview
Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth (P3)	Department of Education	Sacramento, Southeastern Kentucky, Los Angeles	<p>The P3 initiative provides communities with the flexibility to use funding across multiple federal programs. Participating agencies include the Departments of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, Justice, and Housing and Urban Development, along with the Corporation for National Community Service and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The flexibility allows the agencies and their local partners to assist young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who face challenges in employment or educational outcomes due to past or present homelessness, foster care enrollment, or incarceration.</p>

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

These community-focused initiatives reflect a theory of change that interconnected supports in the areas of education, housing, health, and safety will significantly increase community success. As indicated by research and interviews with practitioners, the design principles of community-focused strategies include:

1. *Starting with results by first setting goals, defining indicators of success, and deciding upon solutions and strategies to improve the indicators and results;*
2. *Improving the customer-service orientation of federal support so communities have greater access to and more flexibility in their use of resources, as well as points of contact in federal agencies to be responsive and help them navigate bureaucratic systems;*
3. *Prioritizing community ownership, including by supporting neighborhood leaders to access their power and to lead design, implementation, and evaluation of community-focused efforts; and*
4. *Supporting partnerships (including between the public and private sectors) in communities and incentivizing cooperation with stakeholders from different fields by virtue of their design and through the use of preference points.*

COMMUNITY FOCUS— PROFILES OF PLACES

The four case study locations explored in this paper that exemplify these design principles are [Philadelphia](#) (hereafter referred to as the “West Philadelphia Promise Zone”), [Sacramento](#) (the “Sacramento Promise Zone”), [Southeastern Kentucky](#) (the “Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone”), and [Los Angeles](#) (the “LA Promise Zone”). Each of the four locations—representing diverse geographies, demographics, assets, and challenges—features a Promise Zone designation, along with one or more of the federally funded place-based programs described in Table 1. Prior to each profile, the paper highlights a promising practice from each site.



West Philadelphia: Neighborhood Leaders Set the Agenda and Lead the Charge

Promising Practice: Empower community leaders to exercise their power to act by following their lead in everything from design to evaluation of the community-focused strategy.

Federally supported, community-focused work in West Philadelphia began in 2011 when the community earned a Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant and a Byrne Criminal Justice Initiative grant. To secure these investments, resident-led community development organizations, including [Mount Vernon Manor](#) (with the “We are Mantua!” Transformation Plan) and the [People’s Emergency Center](#) (with the “Make Your Mark” neighborhood plan), created neighborhood plans that outlined the needs of their respective neighborhood communities and set an agenda for action. Equipped with funds and technical assistance from federal agencies, neighborhood leaders focused their work on the areas of housing, safety, and public health. They built new partnerships, established governance structures, and implemented strategies to improve the lives of community members.

THE PLACE— NEIGHBORHOOD PRIDE AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP DRIVE ACTION

West Philadelphia has one of the geographically smallest Promise Zone areas, with 35,315 residents living adjacent to the prestigious University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University. Still, its community members face entrenched challenges, including unemployment, crime, housing vacancy, and poor education outcomes.⁹ According to the West Philadelphia Promise Zone Community Health Profile, 19 percent of Promise Zone residents report that they do not have health insurance; housing in the Promise Zone is four times more likely than the rest of Philadelphia to be categorized as “most distressed”; and 21 percent of the land in the area is vacant, which has been linked to destabilized neighborhoods, illegal activity, and environmental contamination, as well as increased health and safety risks. Building on the leadership and partnerships of Mount Vernon Manor and People’s Emergency Center, as well as the governance structure and strategies established through early NRI grants, Philadelphia applied for and received a Promise Zone designation in 2014. The mayor’s Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity leads the Promise Zone work and is a critical partner

in the 2016 Promise Neighborhoods grant, which was awarded to Drexel University.

ACTION FOR EARLY LEARNING PREPARES STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Through the Promise Neighborhoods grant, Drexel partnered with the School District of Philadelphia (six public schools located in the West Philadelphia Promise Zone) and the City of Philadelphia (which provides data support) to launch the [Action for Early Learning](#) initiative. Focusing on early childhood health and education, this effort is improving the quality of educator training, expanding access to educational materials, and working directly with parents as their children's first teachers. Results include 20 West Philadelphia early childhood education teachers receiving Child Development Associate certification, the Book Depot Program distributing 11,000 children's books in the neighborhood, and the Parent Child Home Program providing in-home kindergarten-readiness programming to 25 West Philadelphia families.

FROM SURVEY SUBJECTS TO SURVEYORS—THE “PROMISE ZONE RESEARCH CONNECTION”

The Promise Zone's leaders have demonstrated commitment to involving community members in their work,

especially through both data collection and analysis. The Promise Zone Research Connection (PZRC) is a group of residents who are building relationships between community members and professional researchers. Participating with institutional review boards, neighbors provide researchers with community input, specifically as it pertains to survey instrument design and recruitment strategies. Drexel University's Urban Health Collective and Children's Hospital of Philadelphia have offered staff support in service to PZRC participant training.

This PZRC arose after researchers (seeking survey data on the impact of federally supported, community-focused interventions in the Promise Zone) experienced challenges when soliciting information from residents. The PZRC seeks to build the capacity of residents to understand research and discern how to disseminate the surveys in a meaningful way. Thus far, they have revealed one major source of community residents' trepidation: though they are often asked to provide survey information, residents are not privy to the reasons behind the surveys nor to where the information they share will go. Researchers are being more transparent and helping community members understand the research process by creating community research boards. This allows researchers to share results and receive feedback directly from residents. As a result, community

members are demonstrating great interest in these results. Due to the high volume of requests for data on crime statistics and community revitalization by residents, one Philadelphia AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer is working on developing an app that will allow community members to access such data points on demand.

HARNESSING STRENGTHS— THE PATH FORWARD

Present from the outset, strong resident leadership is a hallmark of community-focused work in West Philadelphia. To amplify the successes of these neighborhoods and streamline their work across the city, the Promise Zone leaders are scaling the approach to other communities. Philadelphia is often referred to as a “neighborhood city,” meaning people operate within their own neighborhoods, rarely reaching outside of their communities. The West Philadelphia Promise Zone has helped cross neighborhood lines and bring people together in partnership to improve community health and well-being. The expansion of their impact beyond the geographic boundaries of respective neighborhoods will ensure more children thrive in a healthy, safe, and stable community with access to great schools and strong community supports.

Sacramento: Trust through Transparency About the Long Game

Promising Practice: Pursue quick wins with the results framework to build momentum toward longer-term, systemic, population-level change.

With the support of the [Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency](#) as the lead organization, the City of Sacramento earned its Promise Zone designation in 2015. The Sacramento Promise Zone’s community goals focus on increasing economic activity and educational opportunities, improving health and wellness, and facilitating neighborhood revitalization. While the initiative has seen strong results in the first few years in the areas of housing and job training, the community-focused leadership and partners are clear that deep and sustainable change will take the full decade of the Promise Zone designation.

PLACE AND PARTNERSHIPS— FOCUS ON EDUCATION, HOUSING, AND JOBS

In Sacramento’s Promise Zone neighborhood, 34 percent of the 127,000 residents live in poverty, 63 percent of children read below grade level, the unemployment rate is 19 percent, and life expectancy is 72 years (versus 79

years outside of the zone). Since its designation, the Promise Zone has formed partnerships with more than 60 organizations and secured more than \$60 million in grant money. The Promise Zone also features both Choice Neighborhoods Implementation and Planning Grants, as well as a Performance Partnership Pilot grant designed to improve outcomes for disconnected youth.

The Sacramento Promise Zone has achieved initial success, especially related to economic development, housing, and job training. The Jobs Plus Center (funded by the Jobs Plus grant, awarded to the City Housing Authority by HUD in December 2015) has provided job training and successfully secured employment for 100 residents of public housing. Aligned with this effort, the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency created the Welcome Home Program to provide 25 homes to families from low-income backgrounds, and a total of 76 homes are slated to be renovated and sold. To provide more mentors and exposure to real-world learning opportunities for the neighborhood's children, the Promise Zone's leaders partnered with the National Society of Black Engineers and the Sacramento Municipal Utilities District to create the Summer Engineering Experience for Kids Program. The three-week program prevents the so-called "summer slide" by offering 300 third- through fifth-grade students

opportunities to solve problems and create products while learning engineering concepts alongside engineers from similar socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. The Promise Zone also participated in the Twin Rivers Unified School District Early Childhood Education Task Force and has created a Community Nurse Corps, in which registered nurses work toward a bachelor's degree while interning with a community-based organization working with underserved populations. Both efforts improved progress toward the health and wellness goals of expanding access to healthy food, promoting physical activity, increasing access to health care, and reducing African American child deaths.

BIG GOALS DURING THE NEXT 10 YEARS

In addition to the early progress in health and education, the Sacramento Promise Zone's goals focus on increasing economic activity, improving job training and placement, and general neighborhood revitalization. With ambitious goals like these, Tyrone Roderick Williams (the Sacramento Promise Zone director) asserts, "It is of the utmost importance to operate with understanding and transparency around the fact that this is a 10-year initiative." He advises leaders to focus their efforts strategically in the short term in order to ensure capacity to deliver outcomes in the long term. To assess their impact over time, the Sacramento Promise

Zone is partnering with the [UC Davis Center for Regional Change](#) to create a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the community-focused effort. This framework, says Williams, “is informed by extensive research on evaluating complex community change initiatives, the emerging ‘Collective Impact’ model for collaboration, and interviews with stakeholders in Sacramento’s Promise Zone.” Sacramento’s early focus on quick wins in job training and placement, affordable housing, and early learning is building momentum to set up the community to take bold action and make significant improvements to its education and health outcomes.



Southeastern Kentucky: Counties Partner Together Across a Rural Region

Promising Practice: Utilize the Promise Zone designation to capitalize on existing investments, drive results, and then evaluate progress using multiple methods.

In January 2014, HUD designated Southeastern Kentucky as the first rural Promise Zone. The [Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone](#) spans more than 3,000 square miles and eight counties (Bell County, Clay County, Harlan County, Knox County, Leslie County, Letcher County, Perry County, and Whitley County) in the Southeastern corner of the state.¹⁰ This region has a long history of poverty, exacerbated by the opioid crisis and the recent decline of the coal industry. Unlike urban designees that are supported by HUD, rural Promise Zones receive support from the USDA. John Johnson, who has served as the federal community liaison since 2016, works with the Promise Zone coordinator and federal desk officer to improve communication and partnership with other federal agencies and state partners.

Despite the vast geographic space of the Promise Zone, community members have found solidarity in the work of the

Promise Zone partners. Community leaders and federal partners have involved residents across disparate localities by demonstrating how they can make greater positive impact by working together to tackle the issues that have challenged their communities for generations. According to the 2017 Interim Evaluation Report for the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone, some of these challenges include low postsecondary attainment, unemployment, and population decline.

THE WORK—PROMISE ZONE AND PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD

Community and federal partners in the Kentucky Promise Zone serve as a model of effective communication and collaboration. The USDA's federal liaison to the region attributes the successes of the Promise Zone to the communication modeled by local leaders. He notes that, when working to improve the greater good among people from disparate towns, counties, and regions, community and federal partners have a heavy task to do in building consensus. The Strategic Goals of the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone reflect a broad set of shared priorities, including economic development, access to broadband internet and cell phone service, postsecondary education, health, and transportation improvements.¹¹

Services aligned to these goals as a result of the Promise Zone effort include federal

Health and Human Services staff and their local partners working together to address substance abuse, obesity, and health care. Their strategy includes training and technical assistance for community members, as well as funding to provide Accountable Health Communities screening services to Medicaid and Medicare beneficiaries in their homes. The USDA partners with the London Area Office to revitalize downtowns, expand broadband availability to residents, and increase local and regional food capacity. Their work includes employing new economic development directors in Perry and Harlan Counties, extending technical assistance to bring increased broadband access to residences, investing in farmers markets, food supply chains, and FARMACY (a healthy food prescription program), and increasing the number of community and home gardens. The federal and local education agencies partner with HUD to provide funding to assist homeless youth, who number roughly 3,700 in the Promise Zone area.

THE SOLUTION—RESULTS FRAMEWORK SETS STAGE FOR SUCCESS, EVEN WITHOUT NEW MONEY

In addition to the Promise Zone designation, the region also features three Promise Neighborhoods implementation grants, supported by Berea College's [Partners for Education](#), a CBCR initiative,

and a Performance Partnership Pilot grant. While the Promise Zone—supported by the [Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation](#) in partnership with the eight counties—began with only 12 partners, they now have 91 partners working together to improve education, housing, economic development, public safety, job opportunities, and public health. Upon receiving their Promise Zone designation, the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone team decided to use the US Census as the foundation for its results framework. According to the Interim Evaluation Report completed by Policy Management Associates in 2016, community leaders and federal partners achieved results in several areas, including education—high school graduation rates increased by 42.9 percent, from 49.4 percent in 2014 to 70.6 percent in 2016; housing—the number of occupied housing units increased by 60 percent more than the state average; and health—the drug overdose death rate decreased by 52.3 percent (while the statewide rate of drug overdose deaths increased by 29.5 percent during the same period)!¹²

Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone leadership attributes these improvements to their efforts to convene local leaders, facilitate cooperation and a focus on a key set of results, and then get out of the way. The mindset is that, when partners bring ideas for initiatives to the table, the community-focused leadership’s role is to offer support and guidance and then

help the partners to implement their vision. One local practitioner made the case for the power of the Promise Zone designation, even though it does not come with any money. According to the practitioner, preference points on federal grant applications encourage cooperation, while lump sums of money can sometimes lead to divisive competition for funds. The Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone proves that community-focused initiatives can succeed in rural settings.

PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT—THE PATH FORWARD

Similar to the leadership in Sacramento, the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone leaders take the long view. Reflecting on their progress to date, community leaders and federal partners point to their results framework to answer key questions: How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?¹³ The results indicate that the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone is on the right track, but its leaders are careful in describing their approach to measuring results and continuous improvement. Dreama Gentry, the executive director of Partners for Education at Berea College, describes it this way: “By stepping deeply into work that is place based and focused on improving population-level indicators, we do let go of knowing, at a level that would make many (traditional) researchers happy, which specific interventions move

the dial.” She continues, “What we can do is continually review program-level data as we provide services to see if there is a shift in the outcomes. This Plan-Do-Study-Act form of continuous improvement leaves us confident that what we are doing is having an impact.” This perspective is valuable when considering the impact of a community-focused strategy overall. As modeled by the Kentucky Highlands Promise Zone, using a results framework, a strong theory to connect activities to results, and multiple evaluation methods are all best practices for evaluating the impact of community-focused initiatives.¹⁴



Los Angeles: Strength through Partnerships

Promising Practice: Use community-focused investments to create the local infrastructure (the results framework, alignment among organizations, and resources) for change across sectors.

With the support of the [Mayor's Office](#) and the [Youth Policy Institute](#) (YPI), the City of Los Angeles earned a Promise Zone designation in 2014—one of three urban communities nationwide to receive this first-round designation. Becoming a Promise Zone catalyzed development of the community-focused framework and the infrastructure that has ultimately driven improvements across a number of social sectors, especially education. The LA Promise Zone Partnership (including federal partners, local institutions, nonprofits, and community organizations) has secured more than \$242.9 million in federal grant money—through 56 grants from 13 federal agencies—to improve outcomes in the areas of economic activity, education, neighborhoods, and public safety. The impact of this coordination and multi-faceted support is most apparent in education outcomes: since 2014, graduation rates, college readiness rates, and student acceptance to the University of California system have increased steadily.¹⁵

THE PLACE AND PRIORITIES

As described in the [Los Angeles Promise Zone Strategic Plan](#), the Central Los Angeles–based community is comprised of five ethnically and linguistically diverse neighborhoods: Hollywood, East Hollywood, Pico-Union, Westlake, and Wilshire Center.¹⁶ At the time of the designation, the LA Promise Zone included 165,000 residents, of whom 60 percent were Latino, 20 percent were Asian-Pacific Islander, 16 percent were white, and 4 percent were African American.¹⁷ The community faced several challenges related to educational opportunity and quality of life. Thirty-five percent of the population lived below the poverty line, 25 percent survived on less than \$15,000 per year, and 35 percent of the population over the age of 25 had not earned a high school diploma. The LA Promise Zone Partnership’s leadership team acknowledges the interconnected nature of these challenges and explains in their mission statement the strategic decision to focus on education as both a lever of change and primary metric to measure success: “Our work recognizes the importance of high-performing schools and quality education programs, public safety, housing affordability, and economic opportunity as essential elements of healthy neighborhoods.”

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Federally supported, community-focused work began in Los Angeles several years prior to the LA Promise Zone designation when the US Department of Education awarded a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant to YPI in 2010, establishing a Promise Neighborhood in two communities in the City of Los Angeles, East Hollywood and Pacoima.¹⁸ The momentum created by the collective action of YPI and the US Department of Education catalyzed further collaboration between the Los Angeles community and federal agencies.¹⁹ The resulting grants—from the Department of Justice and HUD—cast a wider and deeper net of support across the city. These investments empowered Los Angeles children and families to succeed not only in improved schools but also through increased safety in their homes and neighborhoods.²⁰ Furthermore, each of these grants established task forces and working groups which met regularly, setting the stage and establishing the foundational partnerships for even broader collaboration and impact for what would become the LA Promise Zone.

THE PROMISE ZONE DESIGNATION— COORDINATING ACROSS THE COMMUNITY

The LA Promise Zone is now led by an unprecedented network focused on shared results for the community. According to Erich Yost, HUD’s community liaison in Los Angeles since the 2014 designation, the above-mentioned intersecting grants laid the groundwork for collective impact and “created the framework for the cradle-to-college-and-career focus” that now drives the work of the LA Promise Zone. The LA Promise Zone’s meeting and governance structure focuses on a collective-impact model using Results-Based Accountability as a disciplined way of thinking and taking action for the initiative. With their focus on results, the LA Promise Zone’s leadership has found success in not only securing grant money to support their work but also in using that money to make improvements to local infrastructure, which is creating change across sectors.

The City of Los Angeles received another Promise Zone designation in South Los Angeles (South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone, or SLATE-Z) in 2016, which has catalyzed its own unique place-based plan. The LA Promise Zone was awarded additional Promise Neighborhood and CBCR grants to support communities not previously served by other grants. These awards illustrate the strategic vision of the LA Promise Zone to saturate specific

neighborhoods with federal funds and programs.

The LA Promise Zone’s community-focused, targeted strategy has not only improved the region’s success in securing federal investments but, more importantly, created a comprehensive strategy and bolstered its ability to meet the community’s multifaceted needs. This included prioritizing education outcomes by working with the Corporation for National and Community Service’s AmeriCorps State & National grant program to provide college-readiness support to students in the LA Promise Zone. Furthermore, graduation rates and college acceptance rates have dramatically improved in the LA Promise Zone. Since 2014, college readiness rates have increased 34 percentage points (from 31 percent in 2014 to 65 percent in 2018), and high school graduation rates have increased from 78 percent in 2014 to 90 percent in 2018. At the STEM Academy of Hollywood in the LA Promise Zone, more students were accepted to the University of California in 2017 than in the previous 10 years combined. Because many of the students come from low-income families struggling to pay for college, the LA Promise Zone expanded its outreach efforts to provide the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program and helped residents with the Earned Income Tax Credit and the California Earned Income Tax Credit, which help low-income individuals and families save

money. According to the 2015 report for the LA Promise Zone, since 2006, the VITA program operating out of just one of its partners—the Koreatown Youth and Community Center—has helped more than 12,000 families secure \$9 million through filing tax returns, much of which, according to anecdotal evidence, is being reinvested in education.

LOS ANGELES'S PROGRESS AND PATH FORWARD

The LA Promise Zone demonstrates the power of effective partnerships to transform communities. Partnerships have increased from 50 to more than 75 since the designation, along with more than 100 supporting organizations, including philanthropic groups. A local practitioner from Los Angeles advises that bringing philanthropic organizations to the table early on as partners in the development of the concept creates buy-in that can lead to later investment. This is true of the investments by LA n Sync (at the California Community Foundation, originally at the Annenberg Foundation), a collaboration of foundations, academic partners, and corporate partners that has contributed matching funds for federal grants for the LA Promise Zone and also provides technical assistance. These and other investments are fueling the community-focused approach in Los Angeles to drive improved outcomes and durable partnerships for the long term.



THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY-FOCUSED POLICY—FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT THE WORK

Since its inception by philanthropy in the 1980s, the theory of change that drives community-focused work has asserted that, with interconnected support of a community in the areas of education, housing, health, safety, and others, overall community success will improve. These case studies, informed by quantitative and qualitative data sourced from community reports and interviews with federal staff members and local practitioners, illuminate the success happening across the country.

Based on the successes in West Philadelphia, Sacramento, Southeastern Kentucky, and LA, there are promising initial results to support this theory of change. Since most of these initiatives have only been underway since 2014, and institutional pressures against these positive trends have pervaded communities (in some cases for decades), more time and effort are needed to assess (using multiple methods as described in the Southeastern Kentucky case study) just how effective community-focused work can be. Given the progress evident to date, the community-focused approach to investment and support should be sustained and strengthened. To do so,

this paper recommends support from federal policymakers, philanthropy, and community leaders in several areas.

- ▶ **Continue and expand investment in the improvement of customer service, data collection, and coordination of community-focused efforts:** The design principles of this strategy—prioritizing responsiveness to customers, using data to drive decisions, and coordination across sectors—are worthy of additional federal and community focus and investment. These are atypical activities for federal investments. Nevertheless, community-focused funding must continue to support these strategies. Resourcing this capacity frees up practitioners to focus on the important work they must do to set the broader strategy and provide direct services. Consistent with this area for growth in the federal community-focused approach is the need to be more customer-service oriented and to support local practitioners in navigating federal programs and staff. Many local practitioners stated that they often encountered difficulty finding all the current available resources to support their efforts and knowing to whom they should reach out within a given agency to access said resources. Furthermore, the procurement and dissemination of data about the

progress and achievements of these community-focused approaches could help spur further support for and investment in them, sustaining community-focused efforts in the future. West Philadelphia is a model for engaging the community to lead this work.

- ▶ **Target communication with stakeholders around key elements of the community-focused approach, especially the results framework, community ownership, and public-private partnerships:** Local community-focused practitioners need support in communicating their work to new and existing policymakers and federal agency leaders so that these decision makers are aware of the benefits of the work. Results of community-focused initiatives demonstrate that the approach does improve the well-being of communities and should therefore continue, but the community-focused strategy also can be difficult to explain. The results framework, the level of community investment, and public-private partnerships resonate with a diverse group of stakeholders and are differentiating factors of the approach that are easier to explain. For example, the community-focused approach began in the private sector through philanthropy, and public-private partnerships continue in the form of

local match and other investments (as evidenced in the LA Promise Zone). In the words of one local practitioner, “We need to be able to illustrate the benefits of these initiatives to the federal and local stakeholders, including elected officials.”

- ▶ **Create more peer-to-peer learning and mentoring opportunities among community-focused organizations:** A powerful opportunity for national philanthropy would be creating and facilitating a peer network through which leaders of community-focused initiatives could share best practices. At present, there exists little opportunity for sharing among practitioners across initiatives (e.g., between Promise Zone, Promise Neighborhood, and Choice Neighborhood), even as they work toward similar goals. Creating a peer network through which practitioners could share their successes, struggles, and ideas would streamline the work and help all staff work more effectively on behalf of their communities. Such an idea was also proposed in the Transforming Government, Transforming Communities report issued by the Forum for Youth Investment in 2016. Beyond strengthening the broader learning network, local leaders who are in the earliest stages of the community-focused approach

would benefit greatly from using a portion of grant funding to create a mentorship relationship with more experienced community-focused practitioners. Both local and federal staff members acknowledge the challenge of community-focused work generally and the burden of meeting grant requirements specifically. To mitigate some of these challenges, those organizations that are new to a community-focused strategy would benefit from the support of organizations who have years of experience. This also would more quickly scale the promising practices from sites like the ones profiled in this report.



CONCLUSION

Leaders working in communities with systemic challenges see on a daily basis the interconnected barriers faced by local residents. They know from experience that barriers to productive lives faced by vulnerable community members cannot be treated in isolation. A community-focused strategy is responsive to this reality and offers a different approach. Unlike previous attempts to fund individual programs, a place-based, community-focused approach leads with results, prioritizes customer service and community ownership, and builds the infrastructure for action across sectors. Since its inception by private philanthropy 30 years ago, this strategy has achieved strong results in education, community development, and public safety. Strategic investments in communication about the approach and in core elements such as data collection, as well as stronger peer learning, will sustain and scale this community focus long into the future.

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ENDNOTES

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