

LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS

Executive Summary

The *Leadership Journeys* project, used interviews to gather information and stories from 60 resident leaders across the country. Interviewees ranged in age from their teens to their seventies, and most were in some way connected to the *Making Connections* initiative.¹ The interviews focused on the leadership journey's of the interviewees, what motivated them to take on a leadership role and what sustains them in their efforts.

Key Themes and Implications

The following themes and implications for practice emerged from the interviews:

- **Who's Got It: *Attributes that make a difference.*** A successful resident leader is usually an individual who encourages open communication, by both talking freely and listening well, in addition to being personally invested in his or her community. But while there are common attributes among community leaders, leadership is also about each individual's particular strengths, skills, goals, and passions. Many strong community leaders don't describe themselves as leaders at all, and many bring their religious faith to their roles as leaders.
- **What it Takes and What it Gives: *The costs and benefits of activism.*** Community activism demands heavy commitment, which can come at steep financial, mental, and emotional costs. Minimizing those costs while increasing benefits for community activists can help retain leaders for the long term.
- **Passing the Torch: *Family and activism.*** Many activists are motivated to engage in community change work because they observed their parents engaging in this same work. But activism can come at a cost to the family, both in terms of time and energy. More consciously thinking of how to engage families in social change effort provides an avenue not only to help parents to nurture a love of activism in their children, but also to work at minimize some of the negative impact that activism can have on family life.
- **A Community of Change: *Sharing a sense of activism.*** The feeling that they're not alone, that others are involved, can help strengthen and sustain individuals engaged in community change. Fostering networks among activists provides a strong defense against burnout.
- **The Importance of Place: *Attachment to community.*** Connection to place matters, and many resident leaders find motivation in their long-term

¹ In 1999, the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched Making Connections, to improve outcomes for families and children in tough, impoverished neighborhoods. The initiative connected families to economic opportunities, strong social networks, effective services, and consistent support.

attachment to the communities they live in. Training leaders and engaging community activists should build on those attachments.

- **The Politics Within Community: *Conflicts and struggle*.** Resident leaders are deeply rooted in the politics of their own communities, and conflicts that sometimes arise from political undercurrents can derail change efforts. Strategies to deal with these conflicts include acknowledgement of the problem, basic fact finding, outreach to factions, investment of money, and time in conflict mediation.
- **Overcoming Adversity: *Challenges can lead to hope*.** Trauma and experiences of hardship are key factors that motivate leaders in community change efforts. Initiatives should be prepared to provide opportunities for resident leaders to process trauma and heal its wounds.
- **Challenging Oppression: *Activism Against Injustice*.** Each community's sense of history influences its commitment to change and what work can be done within that community. Community history, including the stories of local racial and ethnic groups, as well as those of individuals, should be integrated into leadership development programs.
- **The Support Structure: *Mentoring and support groups*.** Many successful leaders can trace the beginnings of their community involvement back to one individual mentor or support group. There is a need to create supportive outreach structures that repeatedly invite individuals to take leadership roles. Also important are creating structured mentoring relationships between seasoned and emerging leaders, and developing connections between leaders and anchoring community organizations.
- **The Road Ahead: *Training that supports growth*.** Leadership training programs can play a role in helping individuals develop skills, creating a framework for their thinking about community change, affirming them as agents of change, and providing opportunities to network. But while leadership training is important, it is not as crucial as personal experience in grounding and motivating community leaders. Initiatives should work with resident leaders to help them identify their growth and development goals and create individualized plans to meet those goals.

Inside Leadership Journeys

For each of the ten common themes listed above, there are individual leaders' stories and comments, which vividly illustrate the topic and suggest implications for practice. *Leadership Journeys* was written for those involved in community change initiatives, those involved with leadership development programs for community leaders and community activists. It translates the lived experience of resident leaders into concrete suggestions to ensure that residents play an active and effective role in improving their communities and the lives of children and families.