What is Community Network Building?

Community Network Builders foster and sustain locally-based networks of people who work together to create positive social, economic, and civic momentum that leads to inclusive local economies and vibrant communities. We do this by creating spaces that foster mutual trust among otherwise disconnected residents so that they can share their aspirations, resources, skills, and actions to improve their lives and communities.

Network Builders work to eliminate barriers to — and fear of — engaging in public life by building an environment that invites new interactions, encourages aspirations and maximizes the ability to establish and grow new connections designed to be mutually beneficial. That environment is intentionally built and is guided so people feel safe to take risks, speak their truth and reach across prevalent divides of class, sector, ethnicity, age, race, geography, generation and dominant traditions. This leads to increased cooperation and, ultimately, coordinated actions by those who would otherwise be disconnected. Community Network Builders are people who know how to lead this effort.

Community Network Builders work to identify, support and sustain natural networks in neighborhoods, towns and counties while challenging them to think in new ways and cross lines of difference — to bridge. This is a challenge but also an opportunity to create new functionality in communities. This work is not about getting institutions to collaborate but rather about a careful cross stitching of individual relationships that are 'surprising' and that begin to weave networks that wouldn't otherwise be weaved: intergenerational, cross-professional, neighborhood residents, leaders of large institutions, and of course, class, ethnic and racial.

This relationship-based approach has been explored simultaneously — and without cross planning — by approximately 25 organizations across the country over the last 30 years including: Community Renewal International (Shreveport, Louisiana), Lawrence Community Works (Lawrence, Mass.), Boston Rising (Boston, Mass.), Impact Silver Spring (Silver Spring, MD), Nexus Community Partners (Minneapolis, MN) and the Network Center for Community Change (Louisville, KY).

Why is Community Network Building Important?

Across the country, we are dealing with the consequences of the growing disparity in income between the rich and poor. People feel disenfranchised, forgotten by the systems of economy and government and hunkered down to protect what they have, blaming each other and fighting fiercely. People are challenged to create shared spaces — shared by people and organizations that have not and would not typically share space. So we are needed to cross traditional neighborhood boundaries, professional boundaries and institutional boundaries.

In the past, we've chosen to see and address social challenges in isolation of each other. Using the U.S. Government as an example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development focuses on providing affordable housing, the Department of Health and Human Services on social service programs to these same

neighborhoods, and the Labor Department trains residents as workers. Foundations, too, have taken this approach: grants for housing, hunger, education. However, at the base of all of these problems are people and their networks of support. Today, Community Network Builders are asking if there is a better way: How can we use new thinking about individuals and networks to address these challenges?

How an individual lives depends in large part on how that individual is tied into the larger web of social connections. Social networks affect economic and social outcomes for three main reasons. First, social networks affect the flow and the quality of information. Much information is subtle, nuanced and difficult to verify, so individuals do not believe impersonal sources and instead rely on people they know. Second, social networks are an important source of reward and punishment, which are often magnified in their impact when they come from personal relationships. Third, trust (the confidence that others will do the "right" thing despite a clear balance of incentives to the contrary) emerges, if it does, in the context of a social network.

We have seen over and over again that the transactional approach — that of providing pre-determined programs or resources on a time-limited basis — has been ineffective in terms of sustainability. By taking a network (or relationship-based) approach, we ensure that leadership is owned by the community members themselves, rather than by a nonprofit organization. The instrument of an organization in this scenario is a tool for fueling community leadership, one that must be shaped to the communities' desires. This is the opposite of traditional approaches where community members are seen as fuel for an institution.

Community Network Builders create new kinds of spaces and practices where people can connect and spark new ideas and action. They find and create lots of different spaces (indoor and outdoor places, gatherings, meet ups) that are welcoming to a wide range of people and that facilitate civil discussion, a mutual exchange of value, learning and co-investment. Community Network Builders offer useful opportunities to help people connect in the midst of a busy life and with people who are different than those they usually associate with.

When we intentionally rebuild the relational foundation of our communities, new solutions appear, ones that are fundamentally more likely to succeed because they emanate from the residents themselves. This is because residents start this process with the assets they control, the assets within their own reach...their own networks. This dramatically increases the creative capacity of residents to fashion their own solutions with trusted partners. Community network builders "link and leverage" those assets in new and creative ways. Chief among them: trusted relationships.

Networks don't occupy the same kind of institutional space in local communities as nonprofit institutions. In fact, community networks are made up of layers of connected relationships that interlace with a whole range of institutional connections; church, family, neighborhood, community organization – without getting in each other's way. The way that one can be a member of a health club and a church and a buying club and a sewing club – picking and choosing which to be invested in in a given week, this is the kind of layer the community network represents. Far from competing with local nonprofits, associations and CBO's, a healthy community network can feed these efforts with additional engagement, expanded networks, and people who are more informed and more skilled in effective participation.

What role does JCF play as a Community Network Builder?

JCF has the opportunity to help people connect across differences, build supportive relationships, engage in value exchange, generate action and co-create with each other. Our work is rooted in an essential bundle of activities and behaviors explicitly designed to create the force needed in the moment.

Identifier of Members

The JCF Team can go out into diverse groups to find community members who are willing and interested in trying new ways to change their communities and new ways to engage others in doing so. We spend large amounts of time and effort to find and build relationships with those who have demonstrated a desire to get engaged, to take action to make the world a better place. We commit ourselves to being their friend and partner. We get to know their other friends and partners and we begin to seed growing networks around them and provide space for them discuss their aspirations for their lives and their communities.

Interconnector

JCF can then organize events/spaces that allow for these individuals and groups to meet and begin building relationships among themselves. These are small-scaled, tailored spaces that are built on the principles of mutual support, collective accountability, and meaningful value exchanges. Today it is so much harder for people to find those spaces to really connect well and we don't spend enough time or attention to make sure when it does happen, it happens for effect. If people are not feeling free to speak their minds or that it's safe to get more involved or that it will pay off if I come back to the meeting or the program next week — then there is little we can do to change their minds. So, for these gatherings, it is crucial that every detail is paid attention to.

Facilitator of Action

As people and groups get to know each other and share their aspirations, new ideas start to form about actions they want to take together. They work together on various social, economic, and or civic projects that align with their deepest aspirations for their families, the network, and the larger community. JCF listens and partners to ensure the guidance and forms are there as needed to translate these ideas into action. Because the orientation is to work through networks of relationships, the concrete activities that emerge to support this work need to be more flexible, with less boundaries and exceedingly adaptable. To maintain the integrity of and commitment to true network leadership, we listen as the new conversations spur new priorities and opportunities and we remain prepared to help facilitate the resulting action the network members decide upon.

Steward of Positive Network-Focused Environments

As this work happens among network members, a new community is built, on that has re-discovered its own functionality and power. A community that is populated with this kind of connective infrastructure will have a higher degree of self-determination, will be able to do lots more with the less they are left with, will be populated by more people who have a actionable sense of their own power, and will have the aggregate and collective power to stand up for itself in a regional and global economy.

The leadership/stewardship role in a network like this creates a fundamental challenge to the leader to work to diminish his/her own real and perceived positional power in order to create space for others to lead, create and engage. As stewards of these intentional spaces, we must lead from within. Which means we must fully inhabit these spaces ourselves and practice; expose our own questions and vulnerabilities and work to diminish the impact of positional power on the co-investment process. This is the primary set of acts and behaviors that is the leverage to pry open spaces where trust can be established and rule.

JCF will work in environments where mistrust — especially among traditionally under-represented communities — is heightened and the pain of being invisible and diminished is palpable and present in many people and therefore in most of our interactions. It takes radical acts of surrender to counteract these forces and we as

leaders surrender first; surrender control, pre-conceived notions about what will work, pre-determined views about the outcomes that will result. JCF helps remove the power relationships and power-driven dynamics that usually drive decision-making and outcomes in other community spaces and get in the way of genuine co-investment.

Storyteller

As the network grows, more people are engaged from diverse communities and more actions are taken. A critical role for JCF, then, is to continually reflect back to the network members the identity and accomplishments of the larger network as it grows and changes. JCF can collect and synthesize activities in order to shape a driving story line about who we are as a community, where we have been, where we are now and where we are going. We can do so in ways that are resonant, that help "locate" the network in its moment of opportunity. We share a genuine expression of the energy of the network members so that it serves its purpose as the driver and locater of action. The story we tell must be resonant and be connected to the truth that our people experience and witness. If the story doesn't hold, its power to locate and motivate is diminished. We do this anecdotally and by aggregating and illustrating the "net value" of the network environment to programmatic and other outcomes through indicators like retention, effective use of resources, leverage, mutual support and so on.

We also consistently communicate to those outside the work — funders, potential partners — the paradigm shift that is happening through a relationship-based approach to community change. We develop the language and imagery needed to make a compelling and clear distinction between Community Network Building and other interventions and why Community Network Building is needed now. The task is to generate a broad partnership willing to work closely to develop and disseminate a powerful new approach in an environment characterized by skepticism, a short term outcome orientation, and an unwillingness to commit the resources needed to do this well.

Shepherd of Network Growth and Values

With success, JCF's role expands from 'opening up space' to 'protecting space'. The role is to protect this kind of 'connectivity space' when the network is successful and gets busy producing the programs and projects and campaigns that inevitably and quickly grow from all of the co-creation happening. The need for these spaces does not diminish with network growth, but the ability to protect and sustain them becomes more challenging and complex. JCF can also play an important role in identifying and addressing network efficiencies and capacity, such as financial management and administration for network activities as needed.

The role also includes ending things that need to be ended: closing out the programs, committees and other remnants of yesterday's innovation. In a moment where people might be feeling the chaos and vertigo of shifting conditions within the network, we often over-react. And if we over-react with new structure we risk creating bulk and putting in place structures that degrade our ability to adapt and respond. If left to happen with no guidance, the requirements of the institutional aspects of the network will dominate and the network approach will be overtaken by the needs of JCF as an institution. As a shepherd of the network, JCF counter-acts this drift by actively cultivating processes that prevent concentration of power and decision making. It is critical to build and maintain only the provisional structure needed to get the job done — no more and no less. And that this is what will keep the network nimble and flexible and authentically reflective of the aspirations of current members.

www.JCFgives.org | 360.385.1729 | EIN: 841682682

Mailing Address: PO Box 1394, Port Hadlock, WA 98339 | **Physical Location:** 63 Julian Street, Glen Cove, Port Townsend