# How Place-based Partnerships Can Improve Communities

## Seven Key Functions of Place-based Partnerships

Advancing community-level outcomes over the long term requires that place-based partnerships[1] fulfill a variety of complementary functions. While this set of core roles may be covered by a combination of the backbone[2] and other entities in the partnership, the backbone typically secures the resources required to build and sustain each function and ensures that each function is filled; ultimately the backbone is responsible for keeping the partnership and partners within it accountable.

While we see these functions across all place-based partnerships, the relative importance of each, and the specific entity that fills it varies by community need, context, stage in organizational lifecycle, and **backbone structure**. For example, not all functions will be necessary (or possible) to fulfill in a newly formed place-based partnership. Instead, a nascent partnership may wish to initially prioritize community engagement and network building, communications, and partnership coordination, but consider organizing and advocacy in future years. Similarly, how a backbone engages in the function of organizing and advocacy for systems change will vary if the backbone is structured to sit within government or is a standalone nonprofit organization. This role will also look different if local elected officials support or oppose the efforts of the place-based partnership.

Below is a summary of key learnings on the functions needed within place-based partnerships to advance outcomes in communities, drawing from NFF's engagement with over 85 place-based partnerships nationwide. While there is no single "recipe" for building and managing a place-based partnership; defining key functions and who fulfills them is an important step in aligning stakeholders across a partnership and identifying opportunities and gaps in the pursuit of community-wide outcomes.

### FUNCTION 1: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND NETWORK BUILDING

**What this looks like**

Harnessing the power of bringing people together. Creating connections between community members and organizations. Building networks and convening community partners from different

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1 **Place-based partnerships** – networks of people and organizations in the same geographic area who work together to change systems, improve community outcomes, and achieve shared goals.

2 **Backbones** – structures comprised of a single or multiple organizations that fulfill several core functions and facilitate action and accountability across place-based partnerships.

sectors with intention and purpose to foster collaboration, set goals, and advance a shared agenda.

**How to do this well**

- All levels of staff at the backbone have and continue to cultivate skills in relationship management, meeting design, and facilitation. Meaningful capacity is dedicated to network building, including developing new ties with potential stakeholders and deepening relationships with existing community partners – consistently and over time.

- Touchpoints with partner organizations and community members honor and navigate the history of oppression, trauma, and racism in the community to "set a table" where all voices are welcomed, heard, and valued. Ample time is spent on building trust between individuals and engagement is structured in multiple ways to allow for different means of collaboration (both formal and informal) and the emergence of new ideas (e.g., group meetings, one-on-one conversations, town hall style forums, surveys and written engagement, participation of backbone leadership in existing community spaces).

- Participants are financially compensated at appropriate levels for their continued involvement.

## FUNCTION 2: VISIONING AND GOAL SETTING

**What this looks like**

Facilitating the creation of a shared vision for the community. Setting clear and measurable community-wide goals. Securing the buy-in of partner organizations and aligning them around common outcomes and goals.

**How to do this well**

- Visioning centers those most impacted by the systems being improved (e.g., students in the education system, individuals currently experiencing homelessness in the homeless response system, BIPOC individuals facing systemic inequities).

- The views, input, and expertise of partner organizations and community members are gathered and prioritized in a cohesive community strategy. Methodologies outside of dominant professional norms are used to surface ideas and set priorities (e.g., looking outside of the academic literature and research approaches to define relevant outcomes).

- Community-wide goals are specific, measurable, and time-bound and center equity.

## FUNCTION 3: PARTNERSHIP COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

**What this looks like**

Keeping all partners moving forward on a shared action plan to advance the collective vision. Holding the partnership accountable to community-wide goals. Facilitating the flow of information between partners. Communicating about the partnership's work to the public.

**How to do this well**

- Backbone develops a shared action plan for continuous advancement toward equitable outcomes, identifies associated resource needs (e.g. , budgets), and coordinates participation of partners to ensure progress on this plan. This includes assessment of strengths and contributions of partners, ensuring appropriate placement of needed expertise and staff, providing ongoing

oversight of service delivery, and the strategic use of data to guide the partnership's work.

- Backbone builds a data-oriented culture within the partnership to enable partners to understand what's working and what's not, and to adjust the partnership's ongoing work.

- Backbone develops and regularly disseminates accessible messaging on the partnership's progress both internally (i.e., between partners) and externally (i.e., through website, annual report, newsletter, etc.).

## FUNCTION 4: FUND DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCE ALIGNMENT

**What this looks like**

Securing financial resources aligned with partnership goals and action plans. Managing and directing the flow of funds across the partnership toward activities tied to outcomes. Handling fundraising, resource management, and financial reporting to sustain both backbone operations and the participation of partner organizations and community members.

**How to do this well**

- Responsible party within the partnership has the technical expertise and systems to secure, blend, and braid funding from various sources and with various restrictions, pass through funding to community partners, track budgets to actual spending, facilitate grant and contract reporting, and ensure funding compliance across partners.

- Backbone cultivates a portfolio of funding that includes **unrestricted/flexible resources** and those expressly available to **support backbone operations**.

- Secured funding is sufficient to ensure partners are appropriately and regularly compensated for their participation and not expected to "volunteer" their time. This is particularly important for engaging nonprofits whose restricted funding sources otherwise limit where staff can spend their time as well as individuals with limited financial means.

## FUNCTION 5: MEASURING COMMUNITY-LEVEL IMPACT

**What this looks like**

Managing shared systems for collecting and analyzing community-level data. Utilizing data to help the community understand and track its progress toward shared goals over time, to engage in continuous improvement, and to make the case for funding.

**How to do this well**

- Measurement of community-level impact includes data, sources, and methods that are mutually agreed upon by partners as sound and important to the community, center equity, enable understanding of system performance and progress toward achievement of goals and outcomes, and are necessary to satisfy funding requirements.

- Partnership employs staff with the necessary technical skills to enable effective utilization of data to support partnership goals. This may include facilitating data sharing across partners, conducting data collection and analysis, monitoring data quality, translating data into actionable insights, and coaching partners on using data to inform their work.

- Responsible party develops and maintains mechanisms for community-wide reporting and review

of outcomes (e.g., a public-facing dashboard or regular community review meetings). Data analysis and reports examine inequities in outcomes, including by race.

## FUNCTION 6: BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

**What this looks like**
Collaborating with community partners to help them build and strengthen lasting practices, capabilities, and systems that support the advancement of community outcomes.

**How to do this well**
- Areas for capacity building are responsive to the needs and interests identified by partner organizations and community members. Backbone uses data to spot opportunities for improvement (either at the community level or for individual partners/service providers/ community members).

- Partnership leverages the expertise of individual partners as well as opportunities to access relevant funding and to build capacity available through broader, aligned efforts (e.g., via national networks of place-based partnerships and collective impact efforts, such as **Built for Zero** and **StriveTogether**.

- Partnership stays current on learnings and strong practices in the relevant fields locally and nationally.

## FUNCTION 7: ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

**What this looks like**
Coordinating a range of efforts to align policies, organizational practices, public opinion, and funding allocations with the outcomes sought by the place-based partnership.

**How to do this well**
- Backbone leans into its particular strengths and is aware of relevant limitations (e.g., bans on lobbying activities for nonprofits). For instance, governmental entities might best be positioned to "advocate from within" to align public dollars with partnership goals or change bureaucratic processes to advance outcomes, whereas backbones structured as coalitions might best support get-out-the-vote efforts for candidates that are aligned with the partnership's legislative objectives.

- Backbone develops a collective advocacy agenda for the partnership, initiating and securing funding for organizing and advocacy activities that make change and hold that change long term.

- Partnership connects to the advocacy work of broader, aligned efforts (e.g., state-wide coalitions of nonprofits, national networks of place-based partnerships).

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

**Nonprofit Finance Fund** (NFF), with the support of **Ballmer Group** and in collaboration with **Community Solutions** and **StriveTogether**, embarked on a two-year project to understand how backbones of place-based partnerships operate and to gain insights into the factors that impact their sustainability and success in driving community-level outcomes. This project included analysis of data on over 80 place-based partnerships across the country, interviews with over 85 individuals from 30 of those partnerships, and in-depth consultation with 5 backbone organizations. This resource is part of a toolkit designed to support the work of practitioners within existing place-based partnerships, communities contemplating starting a place-based partnership, and funders that invest in these efforts. **Click here** for more information and to access the toolkit.