

Backbone Structures of Place-based Partnerships

Backbone structures¹ are at the core of place-based partnerships². In addition to fulfilling key functions to advance community-wide goals, these structures are responsible for facilitating accountability across the partnership, including of partner organizations and community members. In our work with over 85 place-based partnerships, we observed five distinct backbone structures, each with its own set of benefits and drawbacks. Ultimately, the optimal backbone structure for a place-based partnership will depend on local context, community priorities, leadership, existing community networks, and available resources. It is also not uncommon for a place-based partnership to transition from having one backbone structure to another over its lifecycle. For example, a project spinning out from a structure nested in a foundation to an independent nonprofit entity to have greater independence and control of resources, or a government agency developing a partnership structure with a nonprofit to deepen community engagement. Below we've summarized five common backbone structures, including benefits and challenges associated with each, as well as tips for funders who are supporting or seeking to support a place-based partnership with this type of backbone structure.



Structure	Description	Benefits	Challenges	Tips for Funders	Examples
Nonprofit entity	Stand-alone 501(c)(3) organization.	Structure is well understood by funders, giving greater access to philanthropic grants and individual donations. Full control over goals and objectives. Can be perceived in the field as more independent than other structures.	Infrastructure, board, reputation often “built from scratch.” May have more limited resources than other structures, particularly at the start.	Fund for long-term viability by providing multi-year support without restrictions, allowing for surplus generation to manage cash flow and build reserves.	Community Center for Education Results

¹ **Backbones** – structures comprised of a single or multiple organizations that fulfill several core functions and facilitate action and accountability across place-based partnerships.

² **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.

Structure	Description	Benefits	Challenges	Tips for Funders	Examples
Government agency or department	Housed in city, county, or regional government. Dedicated in part or in full to achieving particular outcomes in the community.	Access to infrastructure within the larger government, such as HR, data, IT. May have more reliable funding and/or ability to access funding not available to other structures. Usually has strong convening power.	Lack of flexibility to hire and fire staff or engage in certain activities, like lobbying. Slow bureaucracies. Subject to leadership change and operational disruption with shifting political winds.	Expect to be the only source of innovation funding.	Homeless Impact Division (Nashville)
Project of another entity	Housed in an institution of higher education, a foundation, United Way, and/or fiscally sponsored.	Reputation of the parent entity can bestow credibility and access to financial resources. Can utilize existing infrastructure like office space, data collection, accounting, and HR.	Limited independence to act, or the perception of limited independence by the field. Often little ability to expand or customize infrastructure. Nested structure may limit funding available.	Fund to cover related costs of host entity (e.g., HR, accounting, etc.) in addition to project. Provide maximum flexibility to the project.	Boston Opportunity Agenda
Partnership between government and nonprofit(s)	Formal or informal arrangement where each partner has distinct roles and oversight responsibilities, and works in coordination to facilitate outcomes.	Each partner can leverage their unique strengths and take actions the others cannot (e.g., government partner can navigate bureaucratic processes; nonprofit partner can access flexible funding and engage in advocacy).	High level of coordination and communication required between partners. Leaders must have strong trust, mutual respect, and appreciation for what each can achieve, which is often cultivated with sustained engagement.	Take note of the role(s) each partner plays to determine where to direct funds. Consider funding all partners simultaneously to achieve shared goals.	Bakersfield-Kern Regional Homeless Collaborative
Coalition	Multiple entities organized to carry out the work of the backbone structure.	Many areas of expertise represented within backbone structure. Can advance strategies when resources for collective efforts are quite limited. More often seen in small or rural communities.	Coordination can be extremely difficult and time-consuming. Participants are typically not dedicated to the effort full time, sometimes leaving gaps in engagement.	Coalitions are expensive. Consider funding all participants to “stay at the table” and contribute.	Home Again West Texas

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.

