Staffing Place-Based Partnerships

In order to advance community-level outcomes, place-based partnerships[1] must fulfill several **key functions** – community engagement, goal-setting, strategic use of data, and coordination of funding, among others – that rely on people to move forward. Regardless of backbone structure, location, and issue area, most place-based partnerships engaged in this project reported inadequate funding for staff as the primary challenge in advancing their work. We observed this standing in the way of three key actions identified by place-based partnerships as essential to achieving and sustaining outcomes:

Hire Sufficient, Dedicated Staff in Key Roles

A majority of place-based partnerships engaged in this project have a designated **backbone[2] structure** responsible for providing oversight and holding partners accountable to community-level outcomes and goals. **Partnerships highlighted how having staff who are wholly dedicated to working on behalf of the *partnership itself*, rather than on behalf of a single partner within the collective, is essential to driving community-level outcomes.** For example, one **Built for Zero** community that recently invested in dedicated leadership to oversee its place-based partnership described that decision as a turning point in moving its work from responding to crises to ending chronic homelessness.

Even in cases where dedicated, paid staff comprise backbone leadership, **a lack of adequate funding frequently constrains backbone organizations' ability to run and sustain important operations**.   For example, several members of **StriveTogether's Cradle to Career Network** identified additional data, fundraising, and human resources capacity as necessary areas of investment. Backbones characterize additional expertise and bandwidth in these areas as highly impactful; not only do such investments alleviate existing constraints on staff's limited time, but they enable backbones to establish the expertise, systems, and processes they need to mature their operations and practices and expand their partnership's work.

Offer Competitive Compensation

Partnerships also elevated the need for staff in key backbone roles to be paid competitively and fairly for their partnership-related responsibilities. Even in our engagement with Built for Zero

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

partnerships with dedicated backbone leadership, we observed that some functions were fulfilled on an essentially "volunteer" basis because they were performed on top of an individual's existing, full-time role. Communities noted several risks inherent in this approach, including staff burnout, gaps in accountability, and losses of institutional knowledge and relationships with key stakeholders when staff change positions or retire.

Several of the StriveTogether backbones we've worked with have found it challenging to provide competitive compensation for paid roles. This challenge is particularly acute for data-related roles, directly inhibiting their ability to consistently attract data talent, retain those employees, and effectively sustain their partnerships' data capacity. In our research on a sample of StriveTogether backbones, we found that in 2020, **backbone pay for data and research roles was typically lower than salaries available for similar roles in the same geographic area**. Although our analysis[3] indicated that the median gap between market and backbone data pay was 12%, one-third of backbones surveyed offered data salaries that were at least 30% lower than those paid elsewhere for similar roles in the same metro area. As a result, backbone organizations are often limited to hiring data staff who are more junior or who have the financial resources to absorb lower pay, and turnover among these employees is high.

Backbone leaders point to **inadequate funding as the primary obstacle – specifically, a lack of sufficient flexible funding to cover the costs of core backbone functions like measuring community impact with data**. However, addressing the compensation gap is not simply a math problem. Backbone leaders also report **grappling with issues of equity and fairness related to increased data compensation**. Because backbone data staff are often paid more than colleagues in other roles (our analysis indicated an average of 19% more), several leaders raised concerns about the negative impact that unilaterally increasing data compensation could have on organizational morale and culture. Raising data salaries to market rates would widen existing compensation gaps between data and other essential backbone roles. While our analysis focused on data roles specifically, we suspect further research would reveal the need for wage adjustments more broadly across roles within backbones.

Engage and Employ People with Lived Expertise

People with lived expertise in the issues place-based partnerships strive to address hold deep, first-hand understanding of both the challenges of local systems and what works best to improve outcomes for communities. This lived expertise is vital in driving outcomes that are equitable and responsive to community-wide goals. As one Program Director from a Built for Zero community shared, "Our data shows that our case managers with lived experience are our most effective in securing permanent housing for clients." Although place-based partnerships represented in NFF's research with Community Solutions agreed on the importance of engaging those who have recently or are currently experiencing homelessness, they universally noted gaps in their ability to do so. This is no surprise, given that most systems in our communities value "intellectualized" knowledge like classroom learning that leads to degrees and credentials over "experiential" knowledge like direct engagement with systems and services.

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3 All compensation data in this analysis were self-reported. StriveTogether cannot verify the validity of individual entries. StriveTogether asked for salary data by role type (i.e., Data, Communications), but not broken down by role level. Therefore, some entries may have ranged from, for instance, a manager salary to a vice president salary in that role type. StriveTogether did not specify that only full-time employees' salaries should be considered. Therefore, some ranges may have included a salary for a part-time employee. Because partnerships were asked for "salary" data, it is unclear whether the ranges provided can be equated with total compensation. It is more likely that the numbers provided do not account for bonuses, benefits, or other forms of compensation. The data analyzed is not meant to take the place of an official compensation study conducted by a certified compensation professional.

Meaningfully and equitably engaging individuals with lived expertise in the work of place-based partnerships requires changing the way systems and organizations operate, including leaders committed to fostering shifts in culture, and funding for the time and capacity required to initiate and sustain change. While no partnership we engaged with believes their community is far enough along in these changes, several leaders, including those with lived expertise, shared examples of bright spots where they are making progress:

- **Employing people with lived expertise in roles across the place-based partnership**. Opportunity lies in bringing community members' lived expertise to the forefront of the partnership by employing them in a range of roles, from front-line service delivery to administration to advocacy. To enable this shift, explicit hiring parameters (such as licensing requirements) and implicit hiring norms must be updated to eliminate barriers to individuals most impacted and prioritize lived experience as a highly valuable credential.

- **Providing adequate support and training for staff with lived expertise**. To ensure that staff with lived expertise are as effective in their positions as possible, place-based partnerships must consider the specific training and support needed to help them navigate the potential physical, mental, and emotional challenges of the work – for instance, by centering trauma-informed approaches in the workplace.

- **Offering fair compensation and supports for the work of people with lived expertise**. Whether they're providing expertise and input when attending meetings in an advisory capacity or working in a paid position within a place-based partnership, people with lived expertise must be fairly paid for sharing their knowledge and contributing to the work of the partnership. In addition to monetary compensation, offering other forms of support such as childcare, transportation, training, and technology is essential to fostering sustained engagement.

Progress on social issues depends on the right people doing the work. Changing the way we staff place-based partnerships requires asking questions like: How can we connect the people striving to realize great futures in the places they live and work? What would be required to secure and sustain the participation of the right people to deliver the ambitious goals we've set? How can we demonstrate a long-term, significant investment in the community where we aim to galvanize change?

The idea that people who contribute their time and expertise to tackle our most important issues should accept less money or other benefits than those in other sectors undermines the effectiveness of place-based partnership and impedes equity. Any serious commitment to place-based approaches must include an employment strategy that aligns with the partnership's community-wide vision.

> "People are the most important asset that place-based partnerships have as they work to realize community ambitions. Investing in people with the expertise, lived experience, and relationships to create lasting change is critical. Compensating them fairly should be non-negotiable."