

Empowering Resident Leaders: Lessons from NeighborWorks' Community Leadership Institute

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empowering resident leaders

**Lessons from NeighborWorks'
Community Leadership Institute**



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More than 70 resident leaders from across the NeighborWorks network shaped this paper. In particular, Corey Thompson from the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, Jacoba Olivero from Lawrence CommunityWorks, Evangeline Best from Tampa Community Development Corporation, and Linda from Aeon, deserve an enormous thanks for sharing their stories and demonstrating what resident-driven, neighborhood change looks like. NeighborWorks leaders Sarah Parmenter and Juan Leyton shared insights from careers dedicated to empowering resident leaders. And David Luberoff and Chris Herbert at the Joint Center for Housing Studies served as mentors, providing guidance every step of the way. Thank you all for your constant support.

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Dorothy Richardson, the resident leader who established NeighborWorks' model of home loan assistance in 1968 (Source: *The Northside Chronicle*).

contents

- 4 Executive Summary**
- 6 Introduction**
 Convening NeighborWorks' Resident Leaders
 The CLI and the Need to Amplify Resident Voices
- 9 Scope of Study**
 Research Questions
 Methodology
 Overview of Findings
- 14 The Foundations of the CLI: Connecting the Literature and History**
 The CLI and the Historic Role of Resident Leadership in Community Development
 Calls Continue to Amplify the Voices of Resident Leaders
 The CLI Outcomes: Exploring Co-Production in Practice
- 18 What Comes out of the CLI? Patterns from Five Years of Action Reports**
 CLI Attendees Act After Their Experience
 CLI Attendees Form Community Partnerships
 CLI Attendees Leverage Local Funding
- 23 A Community for Seniors and People with Disabilities**
Case Study: Aeon, Minneapolis, MN,
 The Impact of a CLI Action Plan: Parkview SOUL
 Three Themes from Parkview Villa's Resident-Driven Initiatives
- 28 A Community for Latinx Immigrants**
Case Study: Lawrence CommunityWorks, Lawrence, MA
 The Impact of a CLI Action Plan: Lawrence's Resident-Led Marketplace
 Three Themes from Lawrence CommunityWorks' Resident-Driven Initiatives
- 33 Testing the Findings**
 Reflections and Recommendations from Resident Coordinators and CLI Participants
- 35 Conclusion**
- 38 End Notes**

“[At the CLI] We see organizations with people of color running things. You don’t see that every day in my community, but here you really see it. We see residents who have control.”

-Debra, CLI Attendee from Troy, NY

executive summary

Since 1993, NeighborWorks America has convened over 15,000 lower-income resident leaders at the Community Leadership Institute (CLI). The annual, three-day event equips community members with the tools, seed funding, and network of support they need to drive changes in their neighborhoods. Resident attendees come from across NeighborWorks’ network of affordable housing organizations, including more than 240 non-profits that house and support lower-income residents.¹ In teams representing their neighborhood associations and other civic organizations, they attend capacity building workshops, share experiences with fellow residents, and receive a \$4,000 grant to put towards an initiative for their community.²

From nearly three decades of large-scale resident support, the CLI stands out as the nation’s largest effort to amplify resident voices. **Residents call it “a transformative experience,”³ where they gather to “strategize” and “get re-energized.”⁴** NeighborWorks staff at the national level echo residents’ enthusiasm, describing the CLI as “their commitment to supporting resident leaders”⁵ and “the reminder for why we do what we do.”⁶ Despite these positive reviews, no research has explored the CLI’s outcomes, or sought to understand what the resident experience is like, what community initiatives have resulted following the CLI, or how resident leadership has been sustained. Such outcomes could offer lessons not only for NeighborWorks America, but also for urban planners, community developers, and affordable housing advocates building the capacity of—and collaborating alongside—resident leaders.

This paper offers the first review of the CLI, informed by conversations with more than 70 resident participants, qualitative and quantitative data from 493 participant questionnaires (or “action plans”), and case studies of two affordable housing providers—Aeon in Minneapolis, MN and Lawrence CommunityWorks in Lawrence, MA—that have sent several teams of resident leaders to the CLI. A literature review highlights the role of resident leadership in housing and community development and considers how planning scholars have long asserted the necessity for community members to take more active roles in planning, housing and community development processes. I draw parallels between the CLI model and recent literature on how planners and affordable housing developers must “co-produce” alongside racially and economically marginalized residents.

My findings, discussed in greater detail below, are:

- The CLI began as a **movement to re-emphasize the grassroots, community-driven foundations** of the NeighborWorks network, corresponding to national calls to re-assert the active roles community members should play in planning, housing and community development.
- The CLI illustrates **co-production in practice**. The collaborative decision-making model ad-

vocates capacity building and resource sharing with vulnerable community members.

- **CLI attendees act after their experience.** Over five years, 95 percent of CLI teams led a community initiative in the six months following their experience. The most commonly led initiatives are community building events.
- Far from one-off activities, **community building events often become annual festivals, monthly marketplaces, and other sustained initiatives** for relationship building and resource sharing.
- **CLI teams leverage local funds.** Over two-thirds of teams engage in local fundraising, and teams raised 2.4 times the funds NeighborWorks provided over the five years, a total of \$2.33 million.
- **CLI teams work alongside local partners.** Over five years, 493 teams worked with 1,689 partners, and the most common partners and regular financial supporters of CLI teams are non-profits and local businesses.
- **Three factors are critical to sustaining resident leadership:** i) active housing managers who support resident initiatives, ii.) opportunities for residents to convene alongside and make decisions with other residents, and iii.) a sense that residents have something to gain from their involvement (e.g., a feeling of belonging or a network of neighborhood support).

Resident leaders' stories—along with stories told by staff from affordable housing organizations with effective channels of resident decision making—suggest that a more equitable model of low-income housing is not an unattainable, nebulous goal for the future. It is a reality that resident leaders and affordable housing providers from whom we can learn are already undertaking, and a goal that the CLI is actively advancing.

“We had fellow residents interviewing other residents, asking each other what our neighborhood needs.”

**-Evangeline Best,
Tampa CDC Resident**



Evangeline Best, CLI attendee and chair of East Tampa Community Revitalization Partnership

i. introduction

Convening NeighborWorks' Resident Leaders

Evangeline Best has been here before. “We come here to strategize,” she explains, gesturing to the team of fellow resident leaders beside her.⁷ At 77 years old and five feet tall, Evangeline—a former teacher in public schools and prisons, a social worker, and a board member of the Corporation to Develop Communities in East Tampa, Florida—has long led initiatives to improve her community. In 2003, she started a neighborhood needs assessment for East Tampa, her lower-income neighborhood facing foreclosures, vacant and dilapidated buildings, aging infrastructure, and high crime rates: “We had fellow residents interviewing other residents, asking each other what our neighborhood needs.”⁸

Acting on her findings, Evangeline convened city officials, businesspeople and other community leaders with residents to create the East Tampa Community Revitalization Partnership. “**The residents involved became the mouthpiece to the city,**” she said.⁹ The group created a Community Redevelopment Plan for East Tampa with a proposal to leverage public funds to rehabilitate homes, repair infrastructure and clean vacant lots. In 2003, the City adopted the plan, and, from 2003 to 2009, collected over \$20 million in Tax Increment Financing funds spent in the neighborhood and invested another \$150 million. Implementing the resident-initiated plan, the City resurfaced roads, repaired stormwater projects, and created public-private partnerships to construct new affordable housing developments. Over 119 homes were renovated, 700 created, and crime rates fell by 31 percent.¹⁰ “It was the happiest time of my life,” she remembers, “to see people come together like that.”¹¹

Evangeline is just one of 800 transformative resident leaders invited to attend NeighborWorks America’s Community Leadership Institute (CLI), an annual, three-day training that supports and funds teams of resident leaders from community-based organizations across the US. Residents come from NeighborWorks’ expansive network of community development and housing organizations, including more than 240 community organizations that house lower-income residents.¹² The CLI is a chance for these residents to sharpen the tools they need to serve as leaders in their neighborhoods: residents attend courses in local fundraising, community organizing, engaging

youth leaders, and joining a board of directors, among other subjects. The institute is also a catalyst for community action: in teams representing their community organizations, residents create collaborative plans for their neighborhoods and leave with \$4,000 in seed funding to put towards their visions.

But above all, the CLI is a national celebration of resident-driven change, an opportunity for community members to share stories of successful initiatives they've led, sympathize with moments of frustration experienced across community organizations, and recognize and learn from the work of fellow resident leaders like Evangeline, whose efforts often go untold. **"We get to learn from just regular people, not formally trained individuals, just people who care about where they live,"** said Corey Thompson, who attended representing the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation in Boston. "I came back energized, ready to commit my efforts and my time to the neighborhood I'm in."¹³

A NeighborWorks America initiative since 1993,¹⁴ the CLI has trained and funded over 15,000 residents from NeighborWorks' affordable housing organizations, making it the largest documented effort to engage affordable housing residents in the US. New residents are invited to attend each year, nominated by their resident directors, engagement coordinators or other non-profit staffers. While Evangeline and other resident leaders come every year to share their stories, they bring new teams of residents with them every year. And the vast majority of resident attendees are people of color, representing communities of color: "We keep coming back because we see people like us in leadership," said Debra, an African American woman representing Troy Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (TRIP) from Troy, New York. **"We see organizations with people of color running things. You don't see that every day in my community, but here you really see it. We see residents who have control."**¹⁵

Tejano Center for Community Concerns, a NeighborWorks organization, welcomed CLI attendees at the Houston CLI. Outside of workshops, attendees visit and learn from affordable housing organizations and resident service providers in the area.



Despite positive participant reviews, support from NeighborWorks America staffers, and more than 25 years of investment in resident leaders, no research has explored the CLI model and its outcomes, or endeavored to understand what community initiatives have resulted from the effort or how the model of resident capacity building fits within a contemporary movement to effectively amplify the voices of marginalized residents. This paper draws on reflections from resident attendees before, during and after their CLI experience, as well as insights from literature on how planners and affordable housing advocates can effectively engage and amplify the voices of lower-income resident leaders, to indicate how the CLI seems to be an effective tool for resident engagement. While not a full evaluation of the program, my research suggests that this large-scale effort to empower neighborhood-based resident leaders has had remarkable results.

The CLI and the Need to Amplify Resident Voices

The goals of the CLI are familiar to scholars and practitioners of urban planning, housing and community development. Many affordable housing advocates and community developers want to bring resident voices to the forefront of neighborhood decision making. They want to create equitable channels for Evangeline, Corey, and other resident leaders to participate in the design, development and management of their housing. But as planning scholars have highlighted, **planners and community developers alike struggle to effectively engage lower-income residents, and often rely on outmoded engagement methods that fail to give decision-making power to marginalized residents.**

UVA Professor Barbara Brown Wilson, in her book *Resilience for All: Striving for Equity through Community-Driven Design*, characterizes traditional engagement methods as “useless to vulnerable communities,” marked by “imbalanced power dynamics, inconvenient locations, unclear marketing, and culturally inappropriate agendas.”¹⁶ Methods like town halls and community meetings leave little room for vulnerable residents to trust—much less become—decision makers within their communities.

Source of three photos : NeighborWorks America



CLI attendees volunteer with a neighborhood-based non-profit.



Residents share what they learned in workshops with other attendees.



Attendees go on walking tours led by local resident leaders.

Other scholars describe methods like town halls and community meetings as rarely giving communities of color the opportunity to “retain control” or “define desired outcomes” in planning and community development processes.¹⁷ Within affordable housing, the problem is further complicated by the large-scale nature of affordable housing assistance: lower-income housing providers, from public housing authorities to community development corporations, often serve hundreds, sometimes thousands of residents in one locale. How then might these housing providers more effectively collaborate alongside individual residents, ensuring the community members most affected by management, development and design decisions can meaningfully shape the decision making?

Since 1993, NeighborWorks’ CLI has offered a potentially effective step towards addressing this long-standing problem. The Community Leadership Institute annually trains and equips teams of lower-income residents with the resources and support they need to lead community-driven initiatives. One hundred teams of eight residents attend each year, for a total of 800 residents trained and supported annually. NeighborWorks staffers at the national level believe the CLI to be an effective engagement strategy, with one staffer calling it “the best bang for our buck in grant money we give out,”¹⁸ and another adding, **“this is how we put resources behind residents to develop plans to initiate plans.”**¹⁹ But the CLI’s capacity to foster resident-led plans and fortify resident leaders in lower-income housing remains unknown. As Mark Robertson, NeighborWorks’ former CLI director, explains: “So many people have attended [the CLI], so many people have been trained, so many have gone onto train others. We just don’t know how far the reach extends.”²⁰

ii. scope of study

This study explores the CLI’s reach by offering the first review of participant perspectives during their CLI experience and of the community initiatives resulting from it. I identify patterns following CLI experiences, including community initiatives attendees led, local funds they raised, community

Residents attend in teams of eight representing their neighborhood associations or other civic organizations (Source: NeighborWorks America).





Resident attendees participate in interactive workshops and collaboratively define their desired learning outcomes (Source: NeighborWorks America).

partnerships they created, and leadership positions they occupied within their community-based organizations. Case studies highlight two affordable housing providers, Aeon in Minneapolis, MN and Lawrence CommunityWorks in Lawrence, MA, where CLI participants later served as active leaders. In both non-profits, residents collaborated alongside property managers and resident coordinators to drive changes in their developments; their efforts can serve as precedents for a more equitable future for lower-income housing assistance.

While these insights directly benefit NeighborWorks America—both its core organization and network of community-based organizations—I seek to extend lessons to planners and affordable housing developers beyond NeighborWorks’ vast network. In situating the CLI within larger efforts to create more equitable planning and community development processes, I offer lessons in co-producing alongside residents often excluded in housing and community development processes: in particular, lower-income residents with intersectional identities.

Research Questions

The research first investigates the origins and purpose of the CLI, endeavoring to understand how the model corresponds to calls for planners and community developers to “co-produce” alongside marginalized residents, and then offers the preliminary review of initiatives resident attendees have undertaken following their CLI experiences. Seeking to learn from community members and NeighborWorks network staff who have attended the CLI, as well as from the staff members who have organized the institute at the national level, I examine NeighborWorks’ “cornerstone of continued commitment to support community leaders.”²¹ I ask the following questions:

1. What are the foundations of the CLI, and how does the model of resident engagement and capacity building fit into broader efforts to effectively engage residents in housing and community development?



Aeon's resident leaders and Aeon staff collectively make decisions at a "Resident Connections" meeting.



Residents gather at LCW's Nuestra Casa Community Center for the monthly marketplace (Source: Lawrence CommunityWorks).

2. What comes out of the CLI? What is the resident experience like, and what local initiatives, community partnerships and fundraising efforts do the attendees implement following their experience?
3. How is resident leadership sustained post-CLI? In community development organizations where CLI attendees continue to lead local initiatives in years following their CLI experience, what factors contribute to their long-term engagement?

Methodology

I rely on a four-part methodology—literature review, participant questionnaires, case studies, and interviews with CLI attendees—to answer these questions.

First, I review the literature on resident capacity building and engagement, alongside the history of NeighborWorks and the CLI, to see whether and how the CLI connects to theories of advancing equity in affordable housing development. The literature review examines the historical foundations of resident leadership within the US community development field and considers how affordable housing advocates and urban planners have, since the 1960s, advocated for giving community members greater control over planning and community development processes. Decades later, planners and community developers still struggle to reach lower-income residents. A survey of recent literature attempts to illuminate those methods that could more effectively advance social equity within planning, identifying and defining equity as a seemingly tenuous—but indeed deeply tangible—goal of redistributing decision making to historically disadvantaged residents.²² I identify parallels between the literature and the CLI, relying on twelve semi-structured interviews with NeighborWorks staffers at the national level to understand the foundations and purpose of the CLI.

I then analyze data from five years of questionnaires completed by CLI attendees to understand

the initiatives community members subsequently undertake. CLI attendees complete these questionnaires or “action plans” between three to six months after their CLI experience, and additionally completed a progress report one year later. The reports detail the community initiatives they led, as well as any community partnerships fostered and local funding leveraged. I identify patterns across action plans and progress reports from 493 teams, submitted 2012 through 2016, and delineate patterns in community partnerships, local fundraising and categories of resident-led initiatives. A closer look at the last two years of the questionnaires seeks to better understand the community building events and initiatives attendees led, offering examples of some of the recurring neighborhood initiatives and considering the incremental nature of the resident-initiated work. One contribution of this study is to analyze these questionnaires for the first time in a scholarly context.

Finally, I conduct case studies that delve into the work of resident leaders in affordable housing developments from two NeighborWorks network affordable housing organizations: Lawrence CommunityWorks in Lawrence, MA and Aeon in Minneapolis, MN. For these cases I rely on site visits, interviews and focus groups with 32 community members, observations of the CLI attendees working on their resident leadership council, as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviews with residents in common rooms and community centers of their developments. These two cases intentionally center perspectives of residents often excluded or unreachable in traditional engagement methods: in Minneapolis, affordable housing for seniors and people with disabilities, and in Lawrence, affordable developments predominantly home to Latinx immigrants. In both communities, CLI attendees remain involved as active leaders of their housing developments. I watched resident leadership groups meet, make decisions alongside their housing coordinators (NeighborWorks network staff) and implement community building activities, seeking to learn how CLI attendees might take on more active roles in decision making and be supported by their organization following their experience. Background on each organization illuminates an institutional commitment to resident leadership.



At the CLI, residents exchange stories and experiences over meals. These meals served as invaluable moments for me to learn from the work of CLI attendees (Source: NeighborWorks America).

To supplement the literature review, questionnaire analysis, and case studies, I highlight perspectives from CLI attendees, sharing stories from semi-structured interviews with resident attendees at the 2019 CLI and resident coordinators at the 2019 NeighborWorks Training Institute. Observing and interviewing people at the CLI served as an opportunity to discuss early claims with residents, pair research findings with personal anecdotes, and test the findings. The subsequent sections answer each research question one by one, first delving into the foundations of the CLI (literature review), then sharing what comes out of the resident experience (attendee questionnaires), and finally sharing factors that contribute to long-term resident engagement (case studies).

Overview of Findings

My findings, discussed in greater detail in the following pages, are:

- The CLI began as a **movement to re-emphasize the grassroots, community-driven foundations** of the NeighborWorks network, corresponding to national calls to re-assert the active roles community members should play in planning, housing and community development.
- The CLI illustrates **co-production in practice**. The collaborative decision-making model advocates capacity building and resource sharing with vulnerable community members.
- **CLI attendees act after their experience**. Over five years, 95 percent of CLI teams led a community initiative in the six months following their experience. The most commonly led initiatives are community building events.
- Far from one-off activities, **community building events often become annual festivals, monthly marketplaces, and other sustained initiatives** for relationship building and resource sharing.
- **CLI teams leverage local funds**. Over two-thirds of teams engage in local fundraising, and teams raised 2.4 times the funds NeighborWorks provided over the five years, a total of \$2.33 million.
- **CLI teams work alongside local partners**. A total of 1,689 over five years. The most common partners and regular financial supporters of CLI teams are non-profits and local businesses.
- **Active housing managers** who support resident initiatives, opportunities for residents to convene alongside and **make decisions with other residents**, and a sense that residents **have something to gain from their involvement** (a sense of belonging, security, a network of neighborhood support) are critical to sustaining resident leadership.

Dorothy Richardson stands alongside a local bank president in Central Northside Pittsburgh. (Source: *The Northside Chronicle*)



iii. foundations of the CLI: connecting the literature and history

The CLI and the Role of Resident Leadership in Community Development

In 1993, NeighborWorks held its first regional CLI as part of a movement to re-emphasize the role of resident leadership across its network of community-based organizations.²³ The initiative harkened back to the history of NeighborWorks, which began in 1968 with Dorothy Mae Richardson's charge to give residents in the Central Northside neighborhood of Pittsburgh access to loans to purchase and renovate their homes. Bringing together her fellow neighbors, Pittsburgh's business leaders and government officials, Dorothy worked with local banks and foundations to find loans for lower-income residents who otherwise could not access them. She created "Neighborhood Housing Services," the lending agency that soon spearheaded a national model of public-private financial assistance for low- to moderate-income homebuyers.²⁴ The Federal Home Loan Bank (FHLB), alongside the Department of Housing and Urban Development, replicated her model to bring lending services to 45 cities with "Neighborhood Housing Services, Inc.," later renamed Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation and, in 2005, NeighborWorks America.²⁵

At the time of Dorothy Richardson's movement, planning scholars were first advocating for community-driven processes to give residents "an active role in the process of deciding urban policy."²⁶ Sherry Arnstein's seminal ladder of participation—among the most cited literature in the planning field—called on planners and community developers to set a higher standard for participation, considering that engagement methods that delegate "citizen power" best amplify the voices of community members, while more conventional methods are comparatively limited in their ability to shift power dynamics.²⁷ Methods like town halls and public meetings merely inform and consult residents on decisions already made.²⁸ In the late 1960s and the 1970s, community-based planning theories remained salient, and grassroots coalitions like Dorothy's mobilized in response to urban

renewal and neighborhood disinvestment, driving the creation of many community development corporations within and outside of the NeighborWorks network.²⁹ Federal funds like the Community Action Programs directly supported the efforts of these neighborhood-based organizations.³⁰

But as federal funds diminished for direct neighborhood support throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, community development corporations and other affordable housing organizations sought partnerships with city government, philanthropy and private capital to find financial support. Many thus turned away from their roots in community organizing—often at odds with local political agendas—and leaders sought to corporatize, investing in local grocery stores and restaurants, risky investments for community organizations with already limited resources.³¹ By the 1990s, with the goals of 1960s community-based planning yet to be realized and the role of resident leadership in community development organizations fading, **NeighborWorks sought to re-emphasize its bottom-up, resident-driven foundations with the first regional CLIs.**³² These regional CLIs later expanded into the first national convening in 2008.³³

Calls Continue to Amplify the Voices of Resident Leaders

At the same time as NeighborWorks sought to highlight the work of resident leaders, planning scholars continued to re-assert the necessity for community members to take more active roles in planning, housing and community development processes. **Contemporary planning scholars have brought to light the need for city officials and private developers alike to recognize and collaborate alongside resident leaders.** Ryan Allen and Carissa Slotterback’s 2017 analysis of public engagement practices with Somali refugees demonstrated the exclusive nature of some methods of participation, and considered how planners struggle to engage with refugee and immigrant communities.³⁴ Karen Umemoto described challenges planners still face when engaging with people of different cultural backgrounds.³⁵ And more recently, scholars including Andrea Roberts and Grace Kelly, as well as Barbara Brown Wilson, have argued that conventional engagement methods rarely

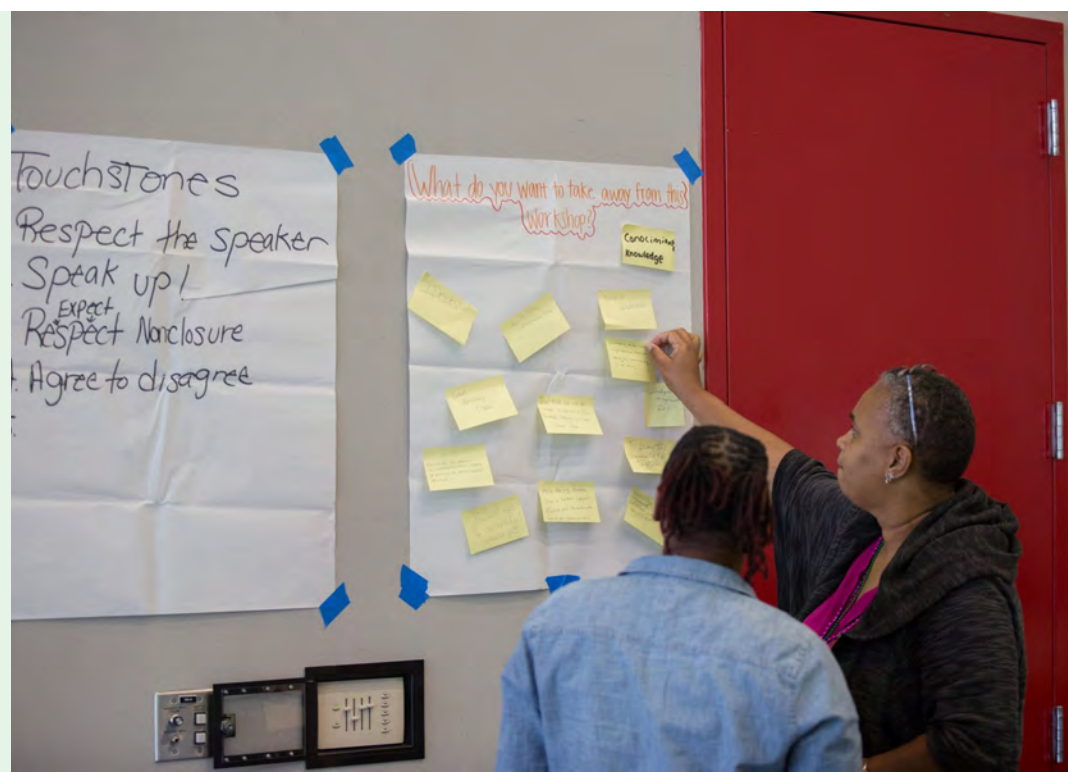


A photo of Dorothy Richardson NeighborWorks gives out the “Dorothy Richardson Award” at the CLI each year to honor and share the stories of transformative resident leaders.

give lower-income residents and communities of color decision-making power.³⁶

While some scholars have contended that Arnstein's 1968 ladder remains an effective framework for giving power to residents, others have deemed it overly simplistic, pointing to power imbalances that persist even when decision making is delegated to a group of resident leaders.³⁷ A special 2019 issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* celebrated 50 years since Arnstein's article by deepening these debates on participation, sharing more than a dozen articles that evaluated the state of participatory planning.³⁸ **Several scholars called for new methods of engagement to restructure power in planning processes, specifically aimed at amplifying the voices of youth,³⁹ people of color,⁴⁰ and community activists.⁴¹** Particularly relevant to the CLI, Jovanna Rosen and Gary Painter considered how power imbalances can persist even at the top of Arnstein's ladder. Delegated resident leadership teams or other groups given "community control" still experience limited opportunities to access resources, contribute to decisions outside of "predetermined topics" and collaborate alongside decision makers.⁴²

Rosen and Painter's article highlighted a more equitable process, the co-production model, that might address power disparities and effectively empower resident leaders. The model advocates a long-term approach to amplify resident voices in collaborative decision-making processes.⁴³ "Co-production re-envision and legitimizes citizens as active participants and knowledge holders," Rosen and Painter wrote, an objective that closely aligns with NeighborWorks' vision for the CLI. Their research offered evidence that may shed light on why the outcomes of the CLI could offer valuable lessons for planning practitioners: "Planning practice needs models that create more inclusive and adaptive processes to deconstruct the power and resource inequalities that prevent planning processes from building sustained community power."⁴⁴ Outlining what the co-production process entails, they identified connecting resident leaders to capacity building opportunities and then equipping residents with the resources they need (training, financial support, etc.) to access decision making. Below, I consider how NeighborWorks' CLI organizers seem to have put this model into practice with the CLI.



Residents answer the question "What do you want to take away from this workshop?" (Source: NeighborWorks America)

The CLI Outcomes: Exploring Co-Production in Practice

Interviews with NeighborWorks staffers who organized the CLI at the national level demonstrated how they shared co-production's purpose to, according to Rosen and Painter, “deconstruct the power and resources inequalities.”⁴⁵ CLI organizers described their goals of “**putting resources behind residents**”⁴⁶ and legitimizing lower-income residents as knowledge holders. Juan Leyton, NeighborWorks' director of community building, explained that “We're debunking the myth that people from poorer communities don't have skills or interests and aren't connected to their communities.”⁴⁷ Paul Singh, vice president of community initiatives, said, “It's all about our commitment to resident leadership, to equip people with the skills, tools and inspiration they need.”⁴⁸ Others emphasized the goals of strengthening resident voices, recognizing and sharpening the skills they have, and providing them with the training and support they need to drive decisions in their communities.⁴⁹

Extending beyond shared goals to methods of implementation, CLI organizers and advocates of co-production support a similar model of training and sharing resources with community members who are typically excluded from decision making. Just as the co-production model promotes “intentional efforts to improve skills, knowledge and technical abilities” of community members,⁵⁰ so does the CLI offer skill-building workshops in English and Spanish covering topics such as “Fundamentals of Community Organizing” and “Managing a Volunteer Construction Project,” alongside classes that teach residents how to work with a board of directors or lead a local fundraising campaign.⁵¹ During her CLI experience, Brittany, a resident attendee from Minneapolis, described the CLI as a chance to gain new skills and abilities: “**[At the CLI] we're learning the tools to address these issues [in our housing development]. We have a lot of problems finding funding, not having enough volunteers, but we're getting to know other people with the same issues, asking them: 'how do you do it?'**”⁵²

Residents often attend alongside their housing staffers, including resident coordinators or building engagement staff. At the culmination of the three days, they collectively formulate problems facing their local communities and design their action plan, supported by a \$4,000 grant from NeighborWorks.



“We're debunking the myth that people from poorer communities don't have skills or interests and aren't connected to their communities.”

**-Juan Leyton, NeighborWorks
Director of Community Building**

Juan Leyton, NeighborWorks Director of Community Building, is one of staffers who annually organizes and directs the CLI (Source: NeighborWorks America).

Avenue CDC's annual "Sabor Del Northside" cultural festival began as a CLI action plan (Source: Avenue CDC).



iv. what comes out of the CLI?

Patterns from Five Years of Action Reports

To explore the preliminary outcomes of the CLI—including types of community initiatives led, amount of local funds leveraged, and type and number of community partners created—I searched for patterns across five years of CLI participant questionnaires or “action plans.” CLI attendees submitted their action plans at three to six months following their experience and a progress report one year later. I analyzed responses from 493 team questionnaires—one action plan and one progress report from each of the 493 teams—from 2012-2016. I also read in-depth 200 questionnaires from the 2015 CLI (in Louisville) and 2016 CLI (in Columbus) to gain a better understanding of the types of initiatives resident leaders implement.

This review revealed three broad themes: 1.) CLI attendees act after their experience, 2.) CLI attendees form community partnerships and 3) CLI attendees leverage local funding. I explore these themes below and highlight notable patterns within each.

1. CLI Attendees Act After their Experience

- Ninety-four percent of CLI teams led a community initiative following their experience. Over five years, 465 of the 493 teams who attended the CLI documented a community initiative.
- Teams led 517 action projects, primarily community building events (33 percent of projects), followed by resident leadership development (16 percent), neighborhood beautification (14 percent), and then a range of projects including educational and safety projects, among others.
- Far from one-off activities, the community building events often became annual festivals, monthly marketplaces, and other sustained initiatives for relationship building and resource sharing. Below, I offer examples of these types of initiatives, alongside instances of other common types of initiatives.

2. CLI Attendees Form Community Partnerships

- Teams worked alongside 1,689 reported community partners, an average of 4 local partners per team.
- The most common community partners are non-profits (30 percent), businesses (27 percent), and local government (17 percent).

3. CLI Attendees Leverage Local Funding

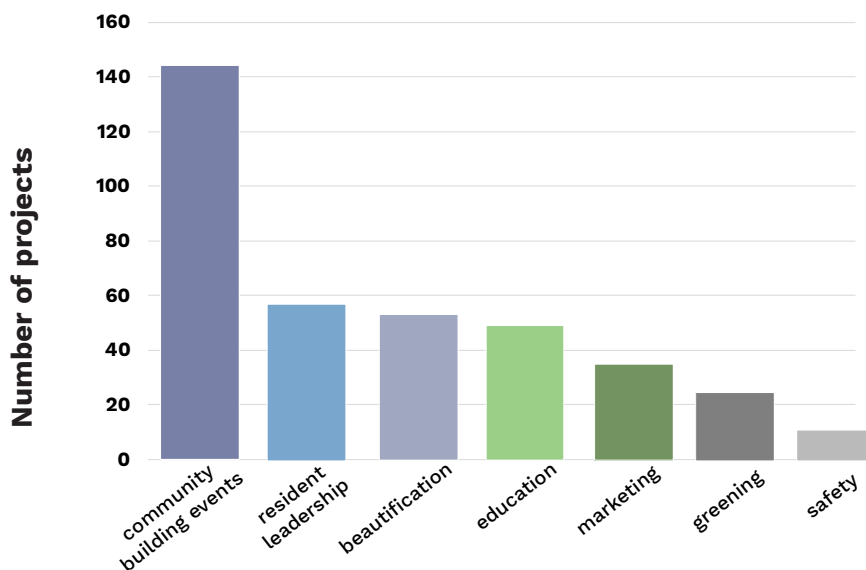
- Teams raised \$2.33 million over five years, 2.4 times the funding NeighborWorks provided. I looked only at the years NeighborWorks allocated \$2,000 per team, though this amount was raised to \$4,000 in 2018.
- While a small number of CLI teams raise more than \$10,000 or \$25,000 a year, over two-thirds of all CLI teams engage in local fundraising. A breakdown of funding amount raised over two years, 2015 and 2016, considers how many of the teams matched grants, doubled grants, and raised more than \$10,000 or \$25,000. Forty-one percent of teams at least match the NeighborWorks grants.

CLI Attendees Act After Their Experience

“The CLI is a way to move forward on what we wouldn’t be able to do on our own.” –Cindy, CLI Attendee from Quincy, MA⁵³

Ninety-four percent of CLI teams implement a community initiative after their experience. Although projects vary widely, they broadly fall into seven categories (in order of most common): community building events, neighborhood beautification, resident leadership development, educational programming, community marketing, greening, and safety. Figure 1 offers percentages of each category of community initiative reported from 2012-2016.

Figure 1: Types of Projects



The most common type of initiatives, community building events, were classes, festivals, resource fairs or other events for CLI leaders to convene and support fellow residents. Some participants recalled these as one-time affairs, such as an oral history celebration, but others described how the events became annual festivals, such as a revival of a yearly cultural festival. Many respondents recounted how the events served as regular, weekly or monthly gatherings, including a dinner series for youth and elderly residents, a monthly community resource or health fair, and cooking and sewing classes, among other regular programs. At the New Orleans 2019 training institute, NeighborWorks network staff further corroborated the ongoing nature of the community building event, sharing stories of CLI-initiated annual festivals or workshops that have continued for years after the inaugural event. CLI attendees also described their desire to implement sustained initiatives, saying “We don’t want a one-shot project,” and “You’ve got to follow up again and again.”⁵⁴

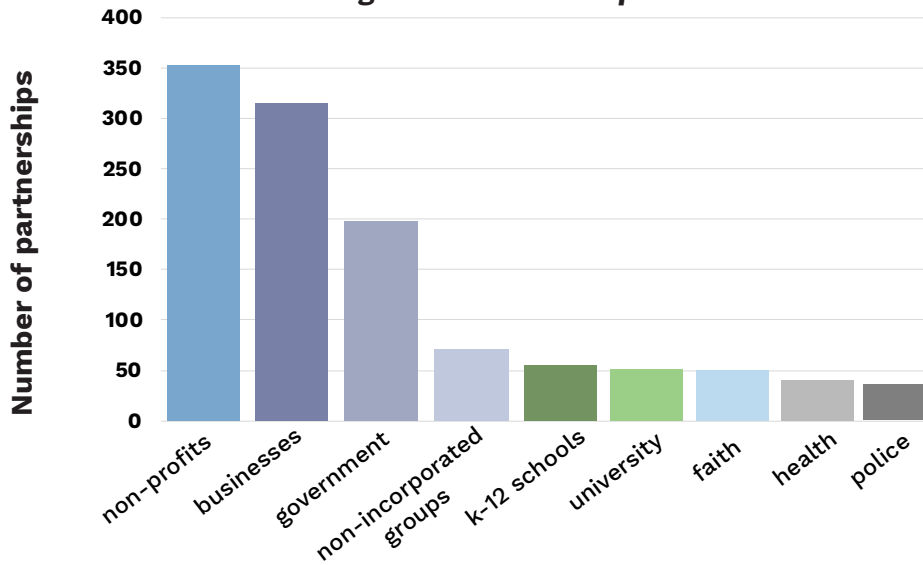
The second most common initiative was the resident leadership project (16 percent of action plans), described as workshops to build the skills of other residents, including youth leadership workshops and neighborhood-scale CLIs. Fourteen percent of projects were beautification initiatives: community trash clean-ups, public art murals, and community gardens, among other projects.

CLI Attendees Form Community Partnerships

“The community partnerships have taken on another level: we see police officers, local businesses, non-profits and others learning what it’s like to come together as a community.” –James, CLI facilitator⁵⁵

CLI organizers encourage attendees to form community partnerships to advance and sponsor their initiatives, and responses reflect that this happens. Questionnaires document a total of 1,689 community partners engaged, an average of four per team. These partners are often mentioned donating supplies or food or helping get the word out about a community event. They are more likely to volunteer their time if they can help share their mission with residents. Example partnerships include resource fairs that partnered with non-profits and local businesses to receive t-shirts and food, as well as a gardening competition that partnered with a local farmers market and non-profit gardening organization to invite regional farmers to serve as judges and share their work with the residents. Over the course of five years, CLI teams broadly identify the most often engaged community partners as non-profits (30 percent), businesses (27 percent) and local government (17 percent) (Figure 2). At the CLI, attendees describe the workshops as invaluable to learning how to find community partners; as one resident said, “We learn what community organizations out there could support us.”⁵⁶

Figure 2: Partnerships Formed



CLI Attendees Leverage Local Funding

“The mini grants may be small, but groups go on to raise significant funds.” –Mark Robertson, Former CLI Director⁵⁷

Over five years, nearly all CLI teams raised funds to supplement the grants they received from NeighborWorks. From 2012 to 2016, CLI teams raised 2.4 times the amount granted by NeighborWorks, a reported \$2,353,926 raised by 465 teams. Figure 3 compares the overall dollars CLI teams leveraged to the NeighborWorks grants. These totals exclude outliers reported by some CLI teams—for example, the reported fundraising of \$200,000 in partnership with several organizations to advance work outside of the CLI team’s initiative. Nearly all teams engaged in substantial fundraising, and a small number raised five-digit totals. Every year, ten or more of the CLI teams that completed projects raised \$10,000 or more in local funds, and at least five teams every year raised more than \$25,000. A distribution of funds raised by teams in 2015 and 2016 demonstrates how the majority of CLI teams, 70 percent, engaged in some form of fundraising (Figure 4).

Figure 3: CLI Team Funds Leveraged

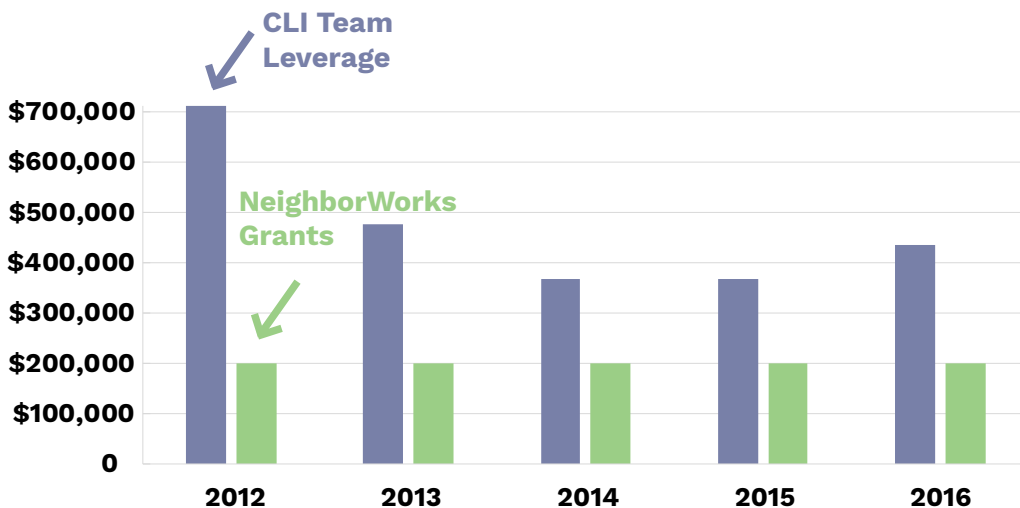
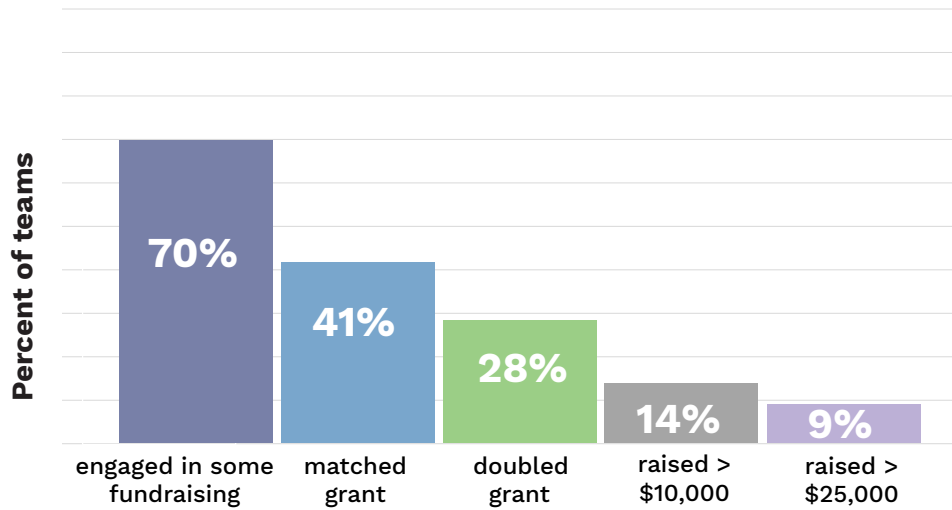


Figure 4: Distribution of Fundraising Across Team



Overall, I find the majority of CLI teams implemented community-driven initiatives, engaged community partners, and leveraged local funds. But the action plans provide little insight into the context of CLI attendee leadership: the staff support the CLI attendees received, the capacity for attendees to access decision making beyond their community project, the sustained engagement of CLI leaders in the years following their experience. Understanding the support and continued work of CLI attendees requires a closer look at a team's work in the context of its NeighborWorks organization. The following case studies seek to provide this closer look, profiling transformative resident leadership in Aeon, from Minneapolis, MN and Lawrence CommunityWorks, from Lawrence, MA. I delve into the work of CLI attendees still involved in resident leadership years after their CLI experience and explore how their housing organizations support them. These cases do not represent the work of all CLI teams and their respective community-based organizations; instead, they shed light on how CLI attendees, at least in some communities, continue to serve as leaders in their housing for years after their CLI experience, and how their housing providers actively create collaborative channels of decision making to effectively amplify their voices.

“If there’s something done around here, you’ll likely find one of us behind it.”

-Linda, Aeon Resident



Linda and her grandson, who take part in shaping Parkview Villa events and Aeon-wide decision-making.

v. a community for seniors and people with disabilities

Case Study: Aeon, Minneapolis, MN

Parkview Villa, a 146-unit affordable apartment complex owned and operated by Aeon, sits on the southwest outskirts of Minneapolis. The apartments are home to seniors and people with disabilities, including three cohorts of CLI attendees who continue to direct community initiatives.⁵⁸ On warm days, the resident leaders are right outside the front double doors, tending to the beds of vegetables and flowers visible to eight floors of apartments above. Some are circling the development, checking in on the trees and shrubs and they’ve planted around the building. Others are inside running bingo in the dining room, leading a cooking class in the kitchen or restocking the closets they turned into food pantries. Residents started these initiatives as part of the 2016 Columbus CLI action plan, “Parkview Support, Opportunity, Unity, and Life” (Parkview SOUL), a program that continues three years after its creation. **“Parkview SOUL has become a model for other Aeon properties,”** said Mary Ann Prado, Resident Connections Coordinator for Aeon, the affordable housing developer and NeighborWorks organization that manages Parkview alongside 56 other affordable developments across the Twin Cities.⁵⁹

Despite the large-scale nature of Aeon’s housing management—owning and operating housing for around 9,000 lower-income residents in the Twin Cities—the role of resident leadership and engagement is prominent in Parkview and across Aeon’s developments.⁶⁰ At Parkview, residents not only have the chance to build green spaces and nearby nature trails; they also run community programming, make decisions for their development alongside Aeon’s Resident Connections Coordinators, and regularly meet with resident leaders from other developments to identify and work through challenges facing their developments. But Parkview stands out from other Aeon developments for its CLI attendance: different Parkview residents have attended CLIs in 2016, 2018 and 2019, and these different CLI attendees all regularly meet.⁶¹ I profile the Columbus CLI action plan

in particular, as three years have passed to assess the impact of this plan and Los Angeles and Chicago CLI attendees have built on it in their own work. Years following their CLI experience, Columbus CLI attendees continue to be actively involved, still leading the initiatives they began as an action plan.⁶²

To learn what these residents did following their CLI experience and how their leadership has been sustained, I conducted a focus group with seven CLI attendees; observed CLI attendees lead a Parkview resident meeting; watched CLI attendees review resident surveys results from across Aeon properties and suggest changes in management at an Aeon-wide meeting; took a resident-led tour of Parkview; and conducted semi-structured interviews with six CLI attendees. Based on the interviews, focus groups and observations, three factors seem to play a central role in sustaining resident leadership: engaged resident coordinators who support the work of the leaders, opportunities for CLI attendees to learn from and make decisions alongside other residents, and a sense that residents have something to gain from their involvement. Former CLI attendees shared how transformative resident leadership does not happen in a vacuum. Support from Aeon’s Resident Connections Coordinators who amplify resident voices, assist their initiatives, and recognize the value of these residents, is critical to sustaining their leadership.⁶³

The Impact of a CLI Action Plan: Parkview SOUL (Support, Opportunity, Unity, Life)

On a visit to Parkview Villa on a July afternoon, the presence of resident leadership is immediately apparent, not only in the outside gardens and green spaces built as part of the CLI action plan—including eight garden beds, a blooming flower patch in the center of the traffic circle, numerous trees and shrubs—but in continued resident ownership of these spaces. Ken, a resident who attended the Columbus 2016 CLI, points out every bush, tree, and flower planted and cared for by resident leaders. He also shares how you don’t have to have a green thumb to drive community initiatives at Parkview Villa: inside, residents installed a food pantry they restock weekly, a salad bar in the dining hall, and a treadmill for a new fitness room, and they implemented monthly and



Resident leaders from across Aeon properties meet regularly with Aeon staff.

weekly programming including bingo nights, cooking classes, a walking club, a textile club, yoga and fitness classes, a safety committee, indoor gardening opportunities, movie nights, and diversity training alongside local police.⁶⁴ They are also the driving force behind large-scale community events, like the National Night Out. “If there’s something done around here, you’ll likely find one of us [resident leaders] behind it,” said Linda, a resident and CLI attendee.⁶⁵ “If there was a front porch of our Parkview Villa, we’d be sitting on it,” said Ken; **“we’re the people other residents come to if they have ideas, if they have problems, if they want to get something done.”**⁶⁶

These resident-driven community programs all began in 2016 as a part of Parkview SOUL. Following the host of SOUL initiatives, resident leaders reported an increased sense of ownership of and connection to their development, and residents surveyed across the development reported an increased sense of community-wide safety.⁶⁷ In a progress report submitted to NeighborWorks in February 2018—one year after receiving the seed funding to implement their initiative—Columbus CLI attendees mentioned their chance to “meaningfully drive programming, come together, and work to shared goals to improve quality of life at Parkview Villa.” They described critical community partners leveraged, including the University of Minnesota Extension Office, Anoka County Police, Minneapolis’s Midtown Farmers Market, and the local parks department, among others.⁶⁸

Three Themes from Parkview Villa’s Resident-Driven Initiatives

What keeps Parkview Villa’s resident leaders involved years after their CLI experience? What sustains their leadership and allows them to drive influential changes? The following themes emerged and are discussed in further detail below: engaged resident coordinators who support the work of the leaders, opportunities for CLI attendees to learn from and make decisions alongside other residents, and a sense that residents have something to gain from their involvement.

The group of resident leaders and Aeon staff at the CLI in Chicago



1. Engaged housing managers who support resident leaders' initiatives and amplify their voices

Resident Connections Coordinators regularly meet with residents, connect them to critical resources like local partners and property managers, and bring them into Aeon-wide discussions. "On-staff housing managers take steps to make sure they're accessible, to make appointments with us," said one resident.⁶⁹ Others emphasized the importance of such hands-on, engaged staff: "It's hard when you have to rely on the doers, the most empowered residents, to keep pushing their own initiatives. **But having the support [of Resident Connections Coordinators] means we as residents aren't left doing this work all alone; we can count on Aeon's help.**"⁷⁰ Others questioned the purpose of pushing for more active resident leadership and community-driven projects without staff support: "Why should we do the work if Aeon isn't working with us?"⁷¹

Mary Ann Prado and other staffers who coordinate Aeon's Resident Connections program regularly organize resident leadership meetings, recruit residents to come join the discussions, and assist residents in implementing the projects and programming that comes out of these meetings. They simultaneously take a backseat, allowing residents to lead the discussions and implement their ideas. But to Parkview Villa's resident leaders, staffers like Mary Ann make the work possible: "Mary Ann makes us believe we have a voice," said one resident; "without her, I wouldn't be here."⁷² Others agreed, adding "Mary Ann makes everyone's day, makes all of this possible." Another affirmed, "None of us would be here without her."⁷³ A fourth resident leader mentioned her influence: "She makes me believe I have value."⁷⁴ One described the importance of Mary Ann's simply acknowledging the work these resident leaders do in leading community events: "Every time I put on a bingo night, she says thank you."⁷⁵

2. Opportunities to learn from, share experiences with, and make decisions alongside other resident leaders

Mirroring aspects of the CLI, Parkview Villa's resident leaders have opportunities to meet with resident leaders from other Aeon developments, share lessons from their efforts and learn from developments that may be facing similar challenges. They convene regularly, grandkids and children sometimes in tow, to learn from different Aeon resident leaders, contribute to Aeon-wide decision making, and share a meal. "We get to learn how other residents solve problems," said one resident.⁷⁶ Another added, "**Meeting with these other residents means we aren't alone. We can have open dialogues and communication with other residents who have faced similar problems.**"⁷⁷

The authority Aeon gives its resident leaders is noticeable, especially when watching Parkview's resident leaders share their experiences alongside residents from other developments and discuss challenges facing their development alongside Aeon staff. Aeon's Resident Connections Coordinators served as facilitators, putting out pens and sticky notes and asking resident leaders open-ended questions. They made sure quieter voices were heard, but still allowed residents to lead the discussion. Residents discussed challenges facing their developments and community building events they were leading, and they analyzed resident surveys from across Aeon's properties to quantify resident engagement, safety and feelings of ownership.⁷⁸ They described these opportunities to learn from other residents, not only in meetings with other Aeon properties but also at the CLI, as foundational to their leadership.⁷⁹

“[At the CLI] we learned from other residents we could relate to,” said one resident.⁸⁰ Residents collectively remembered examples: a team of residents who bought their own property together, others who remodeled their housing, some who created a network of community gardens.⁸¹ One described interacting with other residents as “the best part” of their experience and others nodded in agreement.⁸² Collectively, the group described the small moments at the CLI—the meals with other residents, hallway interactions, roundtable discussions while waiting for the seminar to start—as critical moments of sharing and learning from people who could understand them.⁸³

3. Residents have something to gain: a sense of security, belonging, and friendship

It’s hard to imagine what motivates Parkview Villa’s resident leaders to become actively and regularly involved, restocking the food pantry they started, tending to the gardens they built, planning multiple events at week for their development. But with her grandson in her lap, Linda explained why her involvement is not a thankless task: “Personally, I have friends now,” she said, motioning to fellow residents around her: **“I met all these people through this group. They’re people I know can help me, people I can count on, people who make me feel like I belong. I think that’s really what people need.”**⁸⁴ Another resident described the benefits of being involved: “It creates a sense of stability, a sense of safety.” Another said the group “became my connection to the outside world.”⁸⁵ Others, still, described the sense of security that came with joining the group. One resident recounted moving to Parkview Villa after being homeless for years. Experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, she stayed inside her apartment: “No one knew I lived here,” she remembered. “But for the first time, because I joined this group, I found people who made me feel like I’m in a safe space.”⁸⁶

Aeon resident Janet Simmons received the 2017 “Dorothy Richardson Award.” She successfully led a movement to preserve her apartment complex, 99 affordable units, from being purchased by a market-rate developer (Source: NeighborWorks America).



“Being involved has allowed me to be a link on a chain of a network of people helping people.”

-Jacoba, Lawrence CommunityWorks Resident



Resident Jacoba Olivero serves on the board of directors for Lawrence CommunityWorks (Source: Lawrence CommunityWorks).

v. a community for Latinx immigrants

Case Study: Lawrence CommunityWorks, Lawrence, MA

In the center of downtown Lawrence, MA, just a few blocks north of City Hall, sits Our House/ Nuestra Casa Community Center, a former Catholic school repurposed into a bustling hub of full-time resident support. Running its front desk is Jacoba, a CLI attendee, resident board member, and daily volunteer who moved from the Dominican Republic to Lawrence in the 1980s.⁸⁷ She has led community building events and volunteered for Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW)—the community development corporation that owns and operates 230 units of affordable housing in Lawrence, MA—for ten years now.⁸⁸ “I explain every program we have,” she says—no easy task when the community center hosts a wide range of programs daily, several often happening at once in multipurpose rooms throughout the building.⁸⁹

Free or low-cost and accessible to the public, there are family asset building and homeownership courses, workforce training programs, leadership development classes, English as a Second Language classes, citizenship preparation courses, college preparation programs, summer camps and after school activities for youth, and childcare, among countless other programs.⁹⁰ Behind many of these programs are active resident leaders, some of whom attended the CLI, who train other residents, invite friends and family to LCW programs, and connect residents to social service providers in the area.

Dedicated to providing more than affordable housing to its predominately Latinx residents, Lawrence Community Works grounds its commitment to the city’s predominately Latinx neighborhoods in community-engaged housing development, resident capacity building, and community organizing. The resident-driven community development corporation has helped build three playgrounds on formerly vacant lots in addition to its lively community center and housing stock. Resident leaders have played a role expanding LCW’s footprint, too, successfully advocating for LCW to continue purchasing, renovating and repurposing former mills into additional affordable apartments.⁹¹

The resident leaders work closely alongside LCW staff: a team of 25 meet regularly with staff, many additionally serving as board members, and collectively take part in the non-profit's decision making. They call themselves "Weavers" because they weave together community members—their neighbors, their family members, their church—with LCW's valuable resources and support.⁹² Residents can receive training to become Weavers after getting involved in the LCW network, attending and volunteering at LCW events. While LCW already actively trains these leaders, the 2017 Los Angeles CLI served as a chance for eight Weavers to share their work and strategize with resident leaders across the nation, to learn skills like public speaking and fundraising, and access additional funds and training necessary to create a fully resident-driven monthly marketplace.⁹³

"Los Weavers son los conectores" (The Weavers are the connectors), explained Jacoba.⁹⁴ Alternating between English and Spanish, she explained, **"We bring more people to the organization, help them find English classes, citizenship classes. We're here to share resources, to build connections."**⁹⁵ Like the active Aeon leaders, the Weavers survey other residents, collectively identify and tackle challenges facing their neighborhood, and make decisions alongside the LCW staff.⁹⁶

What drives Jacoba, among other LCW residents, to remain committed to building community in Lawrence eight years after joining the organization and two years after attending the CLI? To find out, I conducted a focus group with twelve Weaver team members, observed in person the 20-person Weaver team lunch and meeting, as well as the marketplace preparation and other events at the Lawrence Community Center, and interviewed three Los Angeles CLI attendees.

The Impact of a CLI Action Plan: Lawrence's Resident-Led Marketplace

Over homemade plantains and patacones, roasted chicken, rice and beans, the Weaver team meeting begins. Around 20 residents have gathered in LCW's community center to share a meal, check in with one another, and report out on the initiatives they are working on. They do this twice a month: after taking time to catch up over food, the Weavers go around one by one to update the team on the projects they are leading. They've led workshops for special needs people, support groups for young mothers, financial coaching, neighborhood clean-ups, after school dance classes, and events just for conversation and food.⁹⁷ A team dedicated to turning vacant lots into park spaces reports on installing benches, planting flowers and painting trash cans.⁹⁸ Though many share programs and projects they've directed, some report instead on how other residents and the LCW network have supported them: the opportunity to buy their first house, find a job, find childcare or support for their aging parents. There's a warm round of applause after each resident shares their story.

Following the 2018 CLI in Los Angeles, the CLI team of Weavers has also directed the cornerstone event that connects community members to these programs and other opportunities for LCW support, the Marketplace.⁹⁹ Around 50 residents attend the monthly Marketplace, where they not only exchange goods like school clothes and furniture, but also learn about opportunities to join LCW's workshops and training programs. Businesses attend, too: they come to share job openings, post available shifts and network with community members. Non-profits and social service providers arrive with information about their available resources. Hailed as LCW's "signature networking event" and the emblem of its "relationship building approach," the Marketplace plays a crucial role



Through the monthly marketplace, residents convene fellow community members to share resources like job opportunities, homeownership classes, among other resident services (Source: Lawrence CommunityWorks).

in weaving community members to resources.¹⁰⁰ “La marketplace abre las puertas” (The marketplace opens doors), said Wanda, who joined the Weaver team after attending the Marketplace.¹⁰¹ After serving as a resident leader and volunteer, Wanda accepted a job for LCW as a network engagement coordinator. The Marketplace brought her to LCW: **“Ahora puedo ayudar CommunityWorks. Me ayudo a mi”** (Now I try to help CommunityWorks—they helped me).¹⁰²

Three Themes from Lawrence CommunityWorks’ Resident-Driven Initiatives

From interviews with, and observations of, Lawrence’s CLI attendees and staff members, I found strong parallels between LCW and Aeon’s structures of resident support and decision making. The field visit made it clear that the CLI had an impact on attendees, still actively serving as resident leaders two years after their experience. Below, I explore the same three themes through accounts from Lawrence’s leaders: the support they received from their CDC staff, the opportunities they had to make decisions alongside other residents, and the network of support they received in return.

1. Engaged resident coordinators who support Weaver team initiatives and amplify their voices

“Every decision Lawrence CommunityWorks makes, we run by this team of resident leaders first,” said Johanny, a staff volunteer coordinator.¹⁰³ Johanny, like many staffers at LCW, began her work for LCW as a volunteer in the community center. Other staffers like Wanda started on the Weaver team before becoming full-time staffers, working **“para la comunidad y de la comunidad”** (For the community and from the community).¹⁰⁴ Collaboration between LCW staffers and resident leaders

is so close that, as an outsider, it's nearly impossible to distinguish who at the community center is on staff and who serves as a resident leader. Residents are given the same value and authority as staff members in meetings. They share the same ownership of the space, cohabitating Our House in multipurpose rooms by the staff offices.

Resident leaders are the driving force of the organization, and nowhere is this commitment more evident than in Our House: daily there are warm meals for residents and staff, available alongside the wide range of resident support programs throughout the building: SAT prep classes in one room, daycare for younger children in another, financial literacy programs in the next.¹⁰⁵ Staff lead many of these programs, providing expertise in workforce training, homeownership, asset building, and work alongside Weaver leaders to implement others. Former Massachusetts State Senator Susan Tucker, who represented Lawrence, described LCW's commitment to supporting and uplifting resident leaders: "Instead of doing things to people and for people, they do things with people."¹⁰⁶

2. Opportunities to learn from, share experiences with, and make decisions alongside other resident leaders

As at Aeon, residents described the chance to join a network of residents supporting other community members as critical to their sustained engagement with LCW, and those who went to the CLI identify the chance to learn from other resident leaders as the highlight of their experience. **"We learned from people working to clean up their city, survey other residents, and help organizations in their neighborhood,"** explained a Weaver and CLI attendee.¹⁰⁷ Another said, "We listened to people who worked in other communities, learned from so many people from different cultures."¹⁰⁸ The CLI team made a commitment to learn from as many other residents as they could at the CLI, and bring lessons back to the Weaver team: "Everything we learned there, we brought back to this team, shared it all with this group," said one attendee.¹⁰⁹ They shared stories back for Weaver team members, who make all their decisions collaboratively. As Jacoba described, **"Todo es sobre rela-**

Residents meet and share experiences in small groups at the Marketplace (Source: Lawrence CommunityWorks).



ciones” (It’s all about relationships).¹¹⁰ Building relationships with a team of residents who understand, support and share resources with one another is a core motivation for staying involved for Jacoba: “Being involved has allowed me to be a link in the chain of a network of people helping other people.”¹¹¹

3. Residents have something to gain: a network of neighborhood support

Just as residents at Parkview Villa stay involved for a sense of security and belonging, so do residents at LCW remain active leaders because of the support they receive in return: “There’s my life before and my life after Lawrence CommunityWorks,” explained Martin, a Weaver and CLI attendee. “Here, I’ve received the training, the financial coaching I needed to buy my first house. I’ve achieved things all thanks to the people I met here, the relationships I built.”¹¹² In fact, Martin noted, he even got his job through the contacts he made at LCW.

Other residents recounted how LCW made it possible for them to purchase their first home, find a job, and access daycare and educational opportunities for their children.¹¹³ They collectively shared a sense of responsibility to their community: to support the vast network of residents who all supported them. “¿Porque no a ti mismo?” (Why not do it by yourself?), asked Wanda, who immigrated to Lawrence in 2014 from the Dominican Republic: **“Por varias razones: porque no tenemos la oportunidad solo. Así lo hacemos todos juntos”** (For many reasons: because we don’t have the opportunity alone. So we do it all together).¹¹⁴

Back at the front desk, Jacoba attributed her active LCW engagement and leadership on the Weaver team to finding “joy and purpose”: “I live alone, I don’t have anything to do at home. But every day I wake up, I come to volunteer, and I’m happy.”¹¹⁵ She stays involved because she sees residents who recently moved to Lawrence in need of the same support she once needed: “I [see] people who were like me when I first arrived; new to this city, with no knowledge of English, in need of guidance and social support. I [feel] as though I have so much to offer my community, and [being involved is] my opportunity to fulfill a lifelong dream to do social work and help my community.”¹¹⁶ Jacoba, Martin, Wanda, and many other LCW residents and active leaders stay engaged to reciprocate the support they’ve been given, or, as Wanda explained, **“Nos ayudamos en vuelta”** (We help in return).¹¹⁷



Residents leaders at the CLI in Chicago. “The best part is talking with people in similar positions,” said a resident from Brockton, MA.

vi. testing the findings: reflections, recommendations from resident coordinators and CLI participants

“The CLI provides support for us. But then we carry forward the connections we make.” –Joanne, CLI Attendee from Quincy, MA¹¹⁸

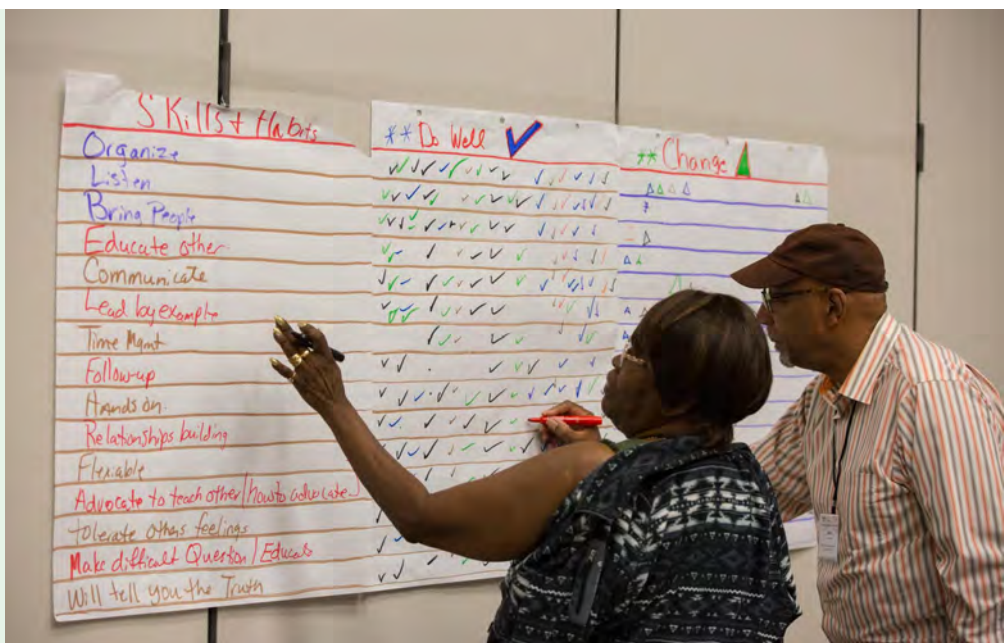
In the final stage of the research, I tested my findings through conversations and formal interviews at the 2019 NeighborWorks Training Institute (NTI) and the 2019 CLI. The NTI served as an opportunity to meet resident coordinators from across the nation, all gathered for NeighborWorks’ Community Building and Engagement trainings. I presented early findings to an estimated 75 resident coordinators. The majority had attended the CLI at least once and worked with CLI teams to implement their action plans following the CLI. Resident coordinators interviewed in the case studies, as well as others from across NeighborWorks network organizations, both corrected and corroborated the findings.

Findings from questionnaires and case studies broadly resonated with the coordinators. In particular, they echoed the long-lasting nature of the community building event and shared stories of CLI-initiated community festivals and resource fairs that continue years after a CLI experience.¹¹⁹ Reviewing the case studies, they verified their personal roles in motivating CLI teams, connecting them to other local organizations and helping them raise money. But they also corrected my early characterizations of the CLI as a training exclusively for affordable housing residents, point-

ing out that CLI teams include resident leaders from other community-based organizations, like larger neighborhood associations and churches. They supplemented the findings with other recommendations and frustrations, describing a “disconnect” between how NeighborWorks empowers resident leaders at the CLI and how the organization continues to support resident leadership following CLI experiences. **They suggested more structure for how CLI teams are supported, and more support for the resident coordinators and other network staff who work with CLI teams to implement their action plans.** Resident coordinators, they offered, should have access to the action reports from other CLI teams in order to find precedents and collaborators.¹²⁰

Lastly, I attended the Chicago CLI, where I interviewed 24 resident attendees, observed the capacity building workshops, and had conversations with over 50 other resident attendees throughout three days of meals, round table discussions and events to gain insight into the participant experience. Again and again, resident participants mentioned the role of a resident coordinator in bringing them to the CLI. They further described how the best part of their experience was the opportunity to learn from other resident leaders and find a network of support: “The best part is talking with people in similar positions,” said a resident from Brockton, MA, who asked to remain anonymous, and added, “I’m looking for my counterparts. I’m learning from other community leaders.”¹²¹ Joanne from Quincy, MA, agreed: “It’s all about the peer-to-peer exchange. The CLI is a mechanism to provide support for us, but then we carry forward the connections we make.” Joanne emphasized the network she received in return. “Now we know people who can support us, people who have been through something similar.”¹²²

Participant responses further deepened the case for the CLI as an example of co-production in practice. Understanding co-production, as Rosen and Painter define it, as “intentional efforts to improve skills, knowledge and technical abilities,” resident experiences aligned.¹²³ They repeatedly mentioned the skills and tools they gained. “I’m finding tools to address issues like not having enough funding,” said Brittany from Minneapolis,¹²⁴ and Jeremy from Quincy added, “This is my opportunity to learn concrete skills.”¹²⁵ Jack, a Brockton resident, emphasized, **“I came here to get the resources and tools I need to go back to my neighborhood and be an active participant in my community.”**¹²⁶ Co-production further involves resource sharing with residents. Connecting them to NeighborWorks’ seed funding serves as a step towards supporting their vision and sharing the organization’s resources.



Residents collectively share and determine the skills they want to develop during the workshops (Source: NeighborWorks America).

“I came back to the civic work I do rejuvenated, highly excited about participating in my community.”

-Corey Thompson, CLI Attendee from Boston, MA



Corey Thompson, resident leader of Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, advocates for more affordable housing in his neighborhood.

vii. conclusion

Returning to Communities

Three months after attending the Chicago CLI, Corey Thompson continues his leadership in Dorchester’s Codman Square neighborhood. He serves on the West of Washington Coalition, a neighborhood association that provides critical resources to residents and advocates for sustainable change, including safer streets, more affordable housing and energy-efficient apartments. He’s one of the resident advocates driving the development of an affordable housing complex in the neighborhood, and works alongside developers and fellow residents to create a plan for the mixed-use building with affordable apartments and ground-floor space for social service organizations. Throughout these initiatives, the CLI remains a foundational experience: “It was a truly transformative time for me,” he said; “I went there without any previous knowledge, with an open mind ... I came back to a lot of the civic work I do rejuvenated, highly excited about participating in my community. I can’t speak higher of that program.”¹²⁷

Corey and his CLI team are currently implementing their action plan, a campaign to honor the history of community activism in his neighborhood and form a resident vision for its future. With the seed funding, they will record resident ideas on what it means to keep their neighborhood affordable, to ensure “no one gets left behind.”¹²⁸ They plan to gather, tape, and screen resident viewpoints, and their goal is to amplify neighborhood voices at the City level. They will invite elected officials to attend screenings and hear community goals for their neighborhood. Ultimately, the team envisions the plan will “raise resident voices, surface solutions to existing challenges and center community as the pathway to empowerment.”¹²⁹ To Corey, the CLI was an opportunity to “get inspiration,” by learning from other residents and seeing examples of what other community organizations are doing. “It blew me away, the fact that we could be around like-minded people... I came back ready to commit my efforts and my time to the neighborhood I’m in. And that’s no joke.”¹³⁰

Corey, Evangeline, Jacoba, Linda, Mary Ann and Johanny are only some of the many community-based leaders working tirelessly to bring resident visions to the forefront of decision making within their housing developments and their neighborhoods. But such grassroots initiatives often



Attendees problem solve and share experiences with fellow residents.



CLI attendees go on a walking tour to learn about public art in Los Angeles.



Youth attendees share their vision for their neighborhood. Teams of youth attend the CLI each year.

go untold, despite decades of planning scholars seeking to understand how resident voices might be strengthened in housing and community development. From creating a food pantry in their apartment to turning local voices into a Community Revitalization Plan, their efforts suggest resident leaders can—and already do—drive changes in their neighborhood, particularly when given access to the resources, the training, and the network of support they need.

I began this research interested in the CLI as a unique and unexplored model for wide-scale resident engagement. What I found was an initiative supporting thousands of lower-income resident leaders, an annual celebration of neighborhood initiatives led by and for the community members all too often excluded in planning and community development. I learned from planning scholars who want to better amplify resident voices and residents themselves who are ready to be heard. While not a complete evaluation, my conversations with more than 70 resident leaders, and review of 493 CLI team action plans, suggest that the CLI has had several profound impacts. The program merits further study and closer attention by not only the NeighborWorks network, but also the wider community of scholars and practitioners seeking to bring residents to the forefront of decision making.

Questionnaires, or action plan responses, shed light on how nearly all CLI teams go on to lead an initiative following their experience, form relationships with community partners and raise additional funds. Forty percent of teams match the grant NeighborWorks gave them, while 14 percent raise more than \$10,000 after their experience. The case studies and supplemental interviews then showed that resident coordinators make the difference for sustained leadership following CLI experiences, demonstrating the importance of staffers and property managers who are equally committed to learning from and lifting up residents. Residents further shared their goal of learning from and making decisions alongside others in their development, as well as the importance of a “two-way street” in their engagement. Again and again, they mentioned receiv-

ing something in return for the time and energy they dedicated to their neighborhood: a sense of belonging and safety, a network of support.

Returning to the literature on engaging community members in planning, housing and community development, I found parallels between the CLI and the model of co-production, as planning scholars Jovanna Rosen and Gary Painter recently defined it. They advocate intentional efforts to share resources with residents and give them access to the tools and skill they need to contribute to decision making.¹³¹ The CLI's technical skills and resident capacity building workshops—coupled with access to NeighborWorks' seed funding—suggest the impactful initiative follows the co-production model. But the interviews, focus groups and responses from resident attendees suggest a necessary addition to the co-production model: an intentional network of resident support.

Beyond skill building exercises and financial support, residents mentioned again and again their need for staff and fellow community members alike who lift up their work and ensure they are not alone in their efforts. The CLI's impact lies not only in the training and resources it has provided, but also in the network of deeply community-based leaders it has built. For 25 years, the CLI has connected resident leaders to the support of those in their own developments and across the NeighborWorks network. As Corey explained, "It was a chance to interact with not only people from my own neighborhood, but individuals from across the country, who all seemed to be on the same page about serving the communities they're in." Reflecting on the lasting influence of the CLI, he added, "I will always be changed because of that trip."¹³²

West Baltimore residents worked alongside local artist Loring Cornish to implement a series of murals honoring the neighborhood's victims of police brutality (Source: NeighborWorks America).



viii. endnotes

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