



Center for the
Study of
Social Policy
Ideas into Action



Best Start Communities and Capacity Building in Action

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About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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Introduction

You may think you know this work happening in church rec rooms and community centers, park offices, and schools; you may see the folding chairs, the long white tables pushed together, the carafes of coffee and paper plates heaped with food, and think *community work*, and you would not be entirely wrong: the Best Start Communities, established by First 5 LA, do not attempt to reinvent the wheel. But there is something new happening here, in these everyday spaces: a way of working that combines flexibility and sensitivity to context and process with a strong allegiance to results.

Part of First 5 LA's larger mission to improve outcomes for children ages 0-5, the Best Start Communities (BSC) is a place-based initiative designed to support and strengthen local communities where young children live. The structure of the BSC is thus: residents from 14 designated neighborhoods in Los Angeles gather monthly in large community partnership meetings to plan and provide support for families; smaller leadership groups gather often to plan and make decisions regarding ongoing activities; and other committees (e.g., outreach and engagement workgroups) meet regularly to help devise and implement community-led strategies. Throughout, the work is supported by a Capacity Builder, a coach and guide who helps residents develop the skill and knowledge they need to help children ages 0-5 thrive.

This paper attempts to capture what is noteworthy about this work by focusing on four of the Best Start Communities at a key transitional moment: as they prepare to end their relationships with the Capacity Builders who helped support them through critical years of development, and engage with new regional and local partners in their work.

Through site profiles and direct quotations from both community members and Capacity Builders, this report seeks to illustrate both the work of place-based advocacy for young children, and the *work behind the work*, the ways in which Capacity Builders assist, support, and empower neighborhood residents towards forming high-functioning decision-making groups prepared to improve conditions for young children in their neighborhoods.

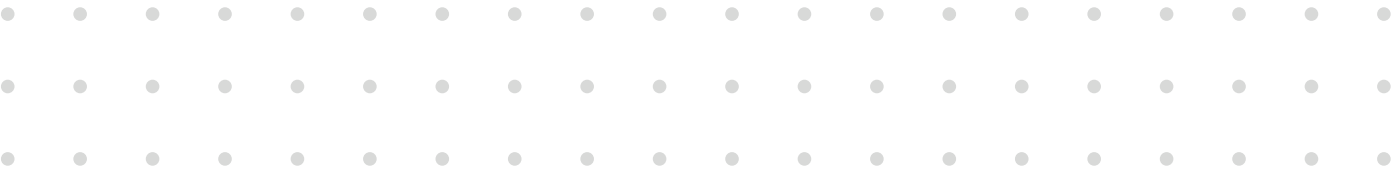
It should be noted that no attempt has been made to present an exhaustive survey or evaluation of this project. Rather, the hope is that through stories, quotes, and summaries, the spirit of this work will be communicated. Specifically, the report seeks to illustrate how the key pillars of this work—communication, leadership, collaboration, and data-driven decisions—are manifested in four particular communities: West Athens, East LA, Wilmington, and Compton/East Compton, and how these key pillars are cultivated.

The first two profiles, East LA and West Athens, illustrate the work of the community partnership and leadership group, respectively. The second two profiles delve into more specificity: we see how this style of capacity building helps a group navigate conflict in Wilmington, and watch, in Compton/East Compton, how a close-knit community approaches an emotional budget decision. Though each profile stands alone, the hope is that together they show a more complete picture of the work.

Before taking a closer look at these individual community partnerships, the paper gives a brief history of the Best Start Community Partnerships and First 5 LA's work. It then summarizes the theoretical frameworks that have structured the community and Capacity Builders' work.

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History and Context

In 2010, First 5 LA, a unit of county government supported by the state tax on tobacco, began an ambitious place-driven initiative in 14 under-served communities. Called Best Start Communities (BSC), these neighborhoods of approximately 100,000 people each, have been pursuing place-based, community-led strategies for improving outcomes for young children.

The 14 Best Start Communities range from Palmdale in the Antelope Valley, a rural desert community nearly two hours by car from downtown LA, to the more central urban neighborhoods of Watts-Willowbrook and Compton-East Compton, historically African-American neighborhoods that have been transitioning to a more Latino population over the years, to the communities of East LA, rich in immigrants, and the southern towns of Wilmington and Long Beach. The capacity building team, called the Partnership Support Team, provides capacity-building support to 13 of the 14 communities. Metro is the 14th community, which is adjacent to downtown Los Angeles and was established as a pilot Best Start initiative two years prior to County-wide implementation. Therefore, it has been separately supported by First 5 LA through a lead organization, Para Los Niños.

Though structure may vary from community to community, the core operating principles remain the same, with a large Community Partnership meeting once a month, attended by approximately 60-80 people, and a smaller advisory group or Leadership Meeting twice a month, attended by the 10-15 (usually elected) community leaders who steer the efforts of the larger Community Partnership. Sub-committees, often a mix of permanent and ad hoc, devoted to bylaws, outreach and engagement, or other topics, may also meet. The purpose of all these meetings is twofold: to develop the leadership skills of a core group of residents through a 'learning by doing'¹ methodology that helps them acquire confidence in designing budgets, organizing agendas, facilitating

discussions, and other skills; and in turn, using these skills to help organize community advocacy on behalf of families and children ages 0-5.

In the beginning, the Best Start Communities were launched with a clear purpose in mind but not an organizing framework. Recognizing the need for a core, overall approach, First 5 LA contracted with the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to help equip communities with the skills they need to assess, track, and improve results. Three years into their contract, CSSP and First 5 LA decided to anchor their approach in the protective factors of the [Strengthening Families framework](#).

To support communities, CSSP engaged approximately 10 Capacity Builders. These community organizers, non-profit veterans, educators, and consultants were given the role of supporting communities as neighborhood residents and local partners began to discuss their priorities and goals, both for the communities and for the individual members' continuing development as leaders.

The purpose of all these meetings is twofold: to develop the leadership skills of a core group of residents through a 'learning by doing' methodology that helps them acquire confidence in designing budgets, organizing agendas, facilitating discussions, and other skills; and in turn, using these skills to help organize community advocacy on behalf of families and children ages 0-5

Initially, in addition to the Capacity Builders, First 5 LA organized a full, multi-person support team for each Partnership, complete with an evaluator and facilitator. However, the degree to which these small teams cohered varied from community to community,

¹ 'Learning by doing,' here, is meant to indicate a general approach, rather than the formalized method 'Learn by Doing' employed four to five years ago in the Best Start Communities.

and as contracts began to expire, First 5 LA began to focus on Capacity Builders as key to the community's support. If you ask a Capacity Builder about his or her job, one phrase will come up again and again: we wear many hats. Although leadership development is their primary focus, the current support team often requires Capacity Builders to act as facilitator, conflict mediator, communicator, logistics, troubleshooter, evaluator. They serve as a guide, and act as a bridge between the community and the funder. In the last three years, these Capacity Builders have become more multi-faceted and more team-oriented in response to their increased workload. In monthly meetings, as well as more informal gatherings and phone calls, the Capacity Builders, along with a management support team, pool ideas as a group and engage in peer-to-peer learning, just as residents are doing in their leadership meetings.

In the past several years, in addition to aiding with the generation of a priority list of strategies for change, Capacity Builders have helped communities develop the skills necessary to achieve these changes. Workshops and trainings were offered in note-taking, data-collection, conflict management, and other topics, and individual coaching was provided. Initially, most Capacity Builders helped facilitate meetings of the Partnerships, and lead organization efforts, but as the skills and confidence of local leaders has increased, and as First 5 LA removed some consultants from these community meetings, the Capacity Builders have moved into supporting roles, reduced their own visible leadership and facilitation efforts, and concentrated increasingly on ensuring that Partnerships have the internal structure and skills to sustain themselves.

This task has taken on increased urgency: in July 2018, First 5 LA began changing its role with the Community Partnerships, no longer serving as a centralized support organization and instead shifting to funding regional non-profit organizations that will provide continued support to the partnerships via local networks. As part of this shift, the Capacity Builders' role with their Best Start Communities will be concluded.

This shift is happening for several reasons. While community members and Capacity Builders have been grateful for the influx of resources provided by First 5, and admire First 5 LA's sincere commitment to young children and families, collaborating with a large bureaucratic institution has sometimes been challenging. Additionally, First 5 LA is increasingly focus on system change and advocacy. To that end, they are developing programming around environmental advocacy and the development of green spaces, as well as participating in more coordinated services and supports in the Best Start communities. In order to focus on these key strategy areas, First 5 LA has announced that it will rely on the Regional Support Grantees to contract the support work of partnerships out to local organizations and contractors. This shift to engaging a larger, more cohesive network of contracted organizations with policy and community organizing experience will also catalyze BSCs growth in these key strategy areas.

“Local providers can be more responsive to local needs.”

—Araceli Simeon, Capacity Builder

This transition offers opportunities as well as challenges. Communities will be able to pursue some of their own priorities; José Montañó, one of the capacity builders, says, “this will provide a lot more flexibility for communities to do the work that they want to be doing.” Araceli Simeon, another Capacity Builder, adds, “Local providers can be more responsive to local needs.” Yet at the same time, as Capacity Builders prepare to step back, they hope to see that the Best Start Communities can function on their own, and even reach out to their neighbors and neighboring organizations to advocate for change.

Theory and Framework

In this section, we will look at the theories and frameworks that have guided capacity building in the Best Start Communities, outlining our theories about what we should see if the work is going well, and how we will know if community groups are ready to engage as full partners once the capacity builders withdraw. Do we see evidence of this readiness, and if so, can we say which elements were key for achieving this readiness?

RESULTS-FOCUSED COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

From the beginning, the Building Stronger Families (BSF) framework has guided the Capacity Builders' work. Developed by First 5 LA, the BSF framework builds on CSSP's Strengthening Families/protective factors, which crystalizes decades of child well-being research into encouraging the development of five key protective factors clustered around *families* and *communities*.²

Building Stronger Families expands upon this approach, and proposes that families are strong when parents are *knowledgeable, resilient, and nurturing*; when families belong to active social networks; and when they have access to concrete support services. To *support* families, communities should have a common vision of what support means; offer coordinated services that meet families' needs; and provide social networks and safe spaces for play and interaction.³

The Results-Focused Community Partnership (RFCP) learning tool,⁴ developed by CSSP in 2013, outlines six key skills to successfully implementing the BSF framework. It provides the framework for the Capacity Builders' work and suggests which skills and strengths are especially necessary for equal partnership.

These points are defined at length in the RFCP, but for the sake of this paper include: *Keepers of the Vision; Inclusive Governance; Effective Collaboration; Data-Driven Decision-Making; Resources and Sustainability; and Building Neighborhood Capacities*.

Each of these areas of capacity comes with a 1-5 scale, with each numeric score clearly defined. Usually, a 1 indicates that a few capacity members understand or use this idea, and a 5 shows that a comprehensive plan to increase capacity has been designed and successfully implemented, with demonstrable results. At various moments, community partnership members were encouraged to self-assess their Partnership using these categories.⁵ The averages of these scores were then calculated, and these scores and group discussions were used to create Partnership Action Plans, which detailed steps to address shortcomings revealed by the evaluation.

By giving everyone the same set of expectations and explicitly setting aside time for reflection with clear parameters, the RFCP tool allowed community members to stay focused. However, as Audrey Jordan, one of the leaders of the partnership support team, and others acknowledge, the initial Community Action Plan assessment and development were also quite onerous for communities, with multiple sub scores due for each of the six capacities. Residents, capacity builders, First 5 LA, and others, became overly fixated on the numerical scores. There was a temptation to compare communities, often without sufficient context, which led to a select few often being upheld as model and a sense that others were 'behind.'

Acknowledging these lessons learned, the team prepared for the 2018 transition with a streamlined,

² For more information about the Strengthening Families/Protective Factors framework, please see: https://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/2014/The-Strengthening-Families-Approach-and-Protective-Factors-Framework_Branching-Out-and-Reaching-Deeper.pdf

³ For more information, see 'Best Start Building Stronger Families Framework,' available as a PDF at <https://www.first5la.org/files/BestStartFrameworkRetreatPowerpoint.pdf>

⁴ Place to attach RFCP – LD Here? TK

⁵ These times of reflection fit in with a larger pattern of dedicated time for self-reflection, usually during an annual retreat or specially scheduled meeting.

non-evaluative tool, the *Capacity building GPS*.^{6,7} By excising the numbered scales and making the tool more user-friendly, the executive team hoped to shift away from an overly rigorous focus on evaluation and assessment. Rather, emphasis would rest on knowing where you are, and how you might reach your goal of supporting kids 0-5 is reached; hence the metaphor of a GPS.

The GPS is divided into four categories: Communications; Leadership & Governance; Collaboration & Networking; and Data-Driven Decision-Making and Accountability. For each category, four or five bullet points define ‘ideal capacity’ in this category; additional columns invite communities to detail their actual capacity and the support needed for development. Therefore, though the GPS is similar to the RFCP tool, it is more open-ended and accessible.

At the December 2017 Capacity Builders’ retreat, Kara Coleman (a Capacity Builder and a manager for the Partnership Support Team) presented the GPS to the capacity builders not as a protocol, but as key questions one *might* want to ask one’s community, in a further attempt to make the GPS a flexible and adaptable tool. In small groups, the capacity builders then worked together to translate the GPS’s questions from a tool intended for Capacity Builders to a tool intended for residents. For instance, the question *What is the capacity of the partnership to communicate basic stats about its membership?* became *Do we collect data about our membership?* and *Do we have the ability to communicate this data to others?* By collaborating with the people who would eventually be using the GPS tool, the management team was able to take advantage of the Capacity Builders’ knowledge and experience. This collaborative approach fits with the general philosophy in evidence here, which prioritizes customization and using the insights of those who are close to (or in) the community.

Beyond growth in the four categories outlined by the GPS, the key to a successful transition is that community members are clear that they need to be change agents, rather than simply recipients of leadership growth. Audrey says, “[We want them to] understand that we need to see, and they need to see, their power activated in the larger community.”

“[We want them to] understand that we need to see, and they need to see, their power activated in the larger community.”
—Audrey Jordan, Senior Consultant and Lead Coach to the Partnership Support Team

Evidence of this understanding might come in several forms, including: using resources from First 5 LA as well as those within the community; fostering a sense of collectivism as leaders begin to organize regionally; and showing up to meetings and events in the community (such as school board meetings) to use their newly acquired or refined skills.

The goal of Capacity Builders, Audrey continues, is to guide these partnerships to “identifying the right things that they collectively agree need to improve, and help them engage on these issues. At the same time, [Capacity Builders] need to ensure that individual residents do not stay focused on themselves as the single beneficiaries of these skills.” In other words, leadership development is essential if work is to be sustained and led by community members; however, this focus on personal development cannot be the stopping point. Change in the community must also be pursued.

⁶ Even before the GPS, the partnership support team’s approach to evaluation had gradually evolved: they sought to design assessments that could be seamlessly integrated into ongoing Best Start Communities’ action plan development and implementation; the evaluation process was simplified; and new ways of monitoring progress, including the Barometer Check and the quarterly action plan reviews, were incorporated.

⁷ [LINK TO GPS TOOL OR ADD AS APPENDIX](#)

Snapshots of Community Capacities in Action

East LA: Introduction to the Best Start Community Meetings; Preparing for the Transition

DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

At the heart of each BSC is the Community Partnership Meeting, a monthly meeting open to all residents and local stakeholders. It is the portal to involvement with the BSC, though even a resident with no interest in deepening his or her involvement will find plenty of interest. In interviews, many Capacity Builders mention their desire to make meetings *useful* and *fun* for residents. As José Montaña, the Capacity Builder for East LA, comments, “At our meetings, we want to make sure there’s a lot of resources for parents, trainings that might be useful, information that really matters to them.”

In December 2017, at the East LA End of Year Celebration, there is plenty to appeal, including arts and crafts, a Mexican ballet folklorico performance from a neighboring community group, food, translators, and childcare. In fact, at every BSC meeting, from ad hoc convenings of bylaw committees through giant community gatherings, food, transportation and childcare are constants; First 5 LA smartly chose to invest in providing comprehensive logistical support that proved critical for successful, sustainable resident engagement. For instance, in East LA, some undocumented residents fear leaving the house; nearly all parents are overworked and face spiraling housing and transportation costs. Simply holding a meeting, without addressing the logistical obstacles to attendance, would limit participation. Furthermore, given that various regulations prevent First 5 LA from providing financial stipends, the logistical support—the food, transportation, and childcare—provide a form compensation to residents who give so generously of their time and sweat equity.

Though East LA is 97% Latino and three-quarters monolingual Spanish-speakers, two translators are in attendance. Yet while the meetings are deliberately structured so that an English-speaker could participate, José feels his fluency in Spanish is key to his success in this community. As he explains, “The language issue is important, because there’s not a lot of folks [who work in the field] who bring to bear the kind of capacity building experience I have, and can also speak Spanish. It creates familiarity and creates trust.”

“At our meetings, we want to make sure there’s a lot of resources for parents, trainings that might be useful, information that really matters to them.”

—José Montaña, Capacity Builder, East LA

As José’s comment indicates, another key value of this kind of capacity building is cultural immersion. Hence the translators, the culturally appropriate food, and even, at the East LA community meeting, a quiet moment of reflection after a song. It’s not explicitly a prayer, but it does acknowledge the strong role that spirituality plays in many members’ lives. After the song and the silence, people share in small groups their wishes for children in the New Year.

Then Enedina Meza, who recalls that the first time she led a meeting she was shaking, reads the agenda in a ringing voice. A volunteer then reads the vision statement. Under the ‘Communication’ rubric of the GPS, a question asks residents whether they have a clear vision for their community. By reading the vision statement at the start of each meeting, the East LA BSC brings new members up to speed, reminds old members of their values, and renews its commitment to its own particular vision. Then a volunteer reads the partnership agreements, which include:

Speak up in any language

Step up / Step back

Put cell phones in silent mode

Another member of the leadership group talks about the importance of these rules, asking residents to reflect on whether they need to take up more or less space in meetings, and articulating the ways in which cell phones detract from the focus they want to cultivate. All three of these rules, it should be noted, are geared towards creating a more inclusive, welcoming gathering.

A casual interloper to this holiday celebration might be lulled by the crafts and food into thinking this was primarily a ‘fluff’ meeting, aimed mostly at enjoyment. And yet when the budget is announced, everyone becomes quiet. María León, another neighborhood leader, explains that last year, they did not use all their available funds. This year, they’re hoping to spend all that they’ve been allotted to further advance their goals. María then breaks down the budget by category, explaining when it’s not intuitive why one item would fall into ‘hardware’ or ‘communication.’

Then residents break for 10 minutes to discuss at their tables what they’ve heard. They’re encouraged to focus on two key questions: *What do you like about the budget?* and *What would you change to the communication and training categories, and why?* After a period of discussion, the larger groups reconvene, and a leader from each table shares their answers.

This exchange—modeled after the Parent Café⁸ process that utilizes small group exchange and open-ended questions as a vehicle for sharing wisdom—is not only a way to promote ownership and involvement in the BSC, but a method for incorporating qualitative data into decision-making. The leadership group, when voting on the budget, will see in its notes which initiatives were most popular, and can use this information to guide their decisions. This is a form of reflective analysis, in which the whole community

reflects on its goals and methods. José shared that East LA is focused on accountability and data: “We want to keep the organization and budget decisions accountable to the community, and really understand how to use data.”

Transparency, communication, and accountability came up repeatedly in the budget discussions; in an earlier conversation, José noted that in Mexico, where many of the East LA residents are from, accountability is not always a strong value for leaders. As if to demonstrate their commitment to a related value, transparency, María tells the assembled group how people will be chosen to interview potential new partners during First 5 LA’s transition. She explains that some people are not eligible because they have not attended meetings for the requisite year; José adds details about when the trainings for the interviews will occur. A representative from First 5 LA reaffirms how much the group wants the community to participate in this decision, while recognizing the time commitment involved.

Thus, nearly seven months before the intended transition, changes are being actively discussed in front of the whole community. A vehicle for including resident voices is implemented with full transparency and communication, and a First 5 LA representative is present to underscore the foundations’ commitment to listening. This not only helps residents *own the process*, but helps everyone learn how to engage with institutions in ‘real-time,’ as they transition and change.

MEETING NEW PARTNERS: COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Five months later, at the May Advisory Committee meeting, the transition has become even more concrete. With the help of a First 5 LA-developed Onboarding Guide, the leadership group holds several conversations about logistics, support, and expectations for the new partnership. The Onboarding Guide has 12 guiding questions, which range from *How do you want the first meeting with the RN/LN [new regional and local partners] to happen?* to *What are the three things you want the regional and local network organizations to know about your*

⁸ The Parent Café model was developed by Be Strong Families; for more information, please see www.beststrongfamilies.net/

partnership? These questions help partnerships think concretely about what knowledge the new RNs and LNs need to understand their group, and to plan for the future.

In East LA, by the time representatives from the new RN and LN attend the leadership meeting, the leadership group has answered each on-boarding question individually, and the answers have been tallied and collected in an easy-to-read grid format. As the RN representative asks the group for their biggest priorities, and José writes the responses on butcher paper taped to the wall, the residents make use of the grid, both to keep the discussion on-track and to see how their fellow community members have responded.

The care and time spent conveying the communities' needs points to an observation made by another Capacity Builder, Krishaunda Hampton, who works in West Athens and Watts/Willowbrook. She comments, “[Organizations and foundations] need to be honest with themselves. Do they want community involvement in their decisions? If so, they need to take the time to have it. You can’t rush questions; you need space for the conversations to occur. It’s important to ask open-ended questions, not just leave 15 minutes at the end. People need time to absorb what’s happening, and then form an opinion.”

By asking questions that range from concrete to open-ended, and by giving residents time to answer individually, and then discuss as a group two weeks later, First 5 LA and the new regional partners are clearing space for real engagement. (Though it is important to note that by May 2018, many Capacity Builders and residents felt that First 5 LA could be doing even more to share information about the transition. Some expressed concern that information dispersal is uneven, or that the process has been rushed.)

Similarly, even as the new RNGs outline their guiding philosophy, describing a spiral of Popular Education that moves from direct experience through reflection to action, they are asking community leaders for feedback. In other words, the RNGs do not simply announce their philosophy; they take care to understand the residents’ priorities, and what they wish they had, or hope will continue.

The local network partner goes a step further, noting that “words may mean different things to different people,” and asking members to take 15 minutes to discuss in small groups how they understand terms such as “collaboration” and “support.” This is not only moving deliberately, but showing cultural and contextual sensitivity, an awareness that one’s background, and prior knowledge inflects the way words such as “collaboration” and “accountability” are understood. Even though the LNC has been working in East LA for a long time, and knows many residents, its leaders don’t assume they know how this particular group functions; they take the time to listen.

“[Organizations and foundations] need to be honest with themselves. Do they want community involvement in their decisions? If so, they need to take the time to have it. You can’t rush questions; you need space for the conversations to occur.”

—Krishaunda Hampton, Capacity Builder, West Athens and Watts/Willowbrook

In the GPS, under the Collaboration and Networking rubric, there is emphasis placed on partnering with other agencies and organizations. While official or organizational instances of this leadership may be the easiest to document, perhaps the effects of the BSCs are best seen in informal anecdotes, when residents—often women—recount helping neighbors, friends, and acquaintances confront domestic violence, or drug addiction, or simply find the parenting support they need. As Enedina Meza, an East LA Advisory Committee member, says, “It motivates me that I can share information with other parents. For instance, we’ve made a booklet that we distribute to locations where parents meet. There’s a lot of resources there, so that if the parents don’t have clothes or shelter, they can find out where to get what they need.”

Similarly, Elizabeth Quiroz says, “The leadership committee helped me so that I could connect with resources. Now I can reach out to [for instance] married women who struggle with domestic violence.

Before I became involved [with BSC], I didn't know how to help them. But in the trainings I learned how." These trainings, which often happen through the 'Parenting Academy,' include a class called 'Systems Navigator,' which helps parents learn how to access and use the social services available to them.

At the end of our talk, she adds wistfully, "I wish that there had been someone who can could connect me to resources [when I had been struggling]."

Other leaders, such as María, have been involved in community work long before Best Start came to her neighborhood. Early on, she advocated for a curriculum for child development and reading, and helped to organize, through capacity building funds, an intense three-day training, *Abriendo Puertas/ Opening Doors*, for other Building Stronger Families leaders in the community.

For María, change has also come closer to home. She recounts, "I have a granddaughter who is three years old, and I've learned how to listen, to understand when she's having a meltdown, and help her develop emotionally and socially. I read books to her, listen to her, and give her empathy. My mom told me, "Wow, Mom, you've grown a lot!" I know that we've learned how to listen to children, and now we're influencing mothers who have young children."

West Athens: Pivoting from Personal Development to Activating Change

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

December 14, 2017: the West Athens leadership meeting. On the agenda: a Learning by Doing update, to be presented by Tiffany Fantroy, who just so happens to be out of the room at the moment. Crystal Pitts, the facilitator of the meeting, laughs gently, saying she knows Tiffany is nervous, and that they'll return to this agenda item later.

When Tiffany returns from her phone call, she does indeed present her agenda item, talking about scholarship money that has become available, speaking quickly but thoroughly. Krishaunda Hampton, the Capacity Builder, interrupts to offer a supportive comment, recommending that Tiffany tells people where they can find the information she's sharing.

Crystal adds that you can't assume that everyone understands the word *scholarship* in the same way. This is a great example of peer learning: Crystal learned about building a shared vocabulary from Krishaunda, and is now sharing this knowledge with Tiffany, a newer member of the group. Everyone claps when Tiffany, visibly relieved, finishes.

This pivot from personal development to fostering change is the key shift that Best Start Communities were working towards in the first half of 2018.

This early foray into facilitation is a prime example of leadership development, one of the biggest and most noticeable benefits of most community members' involvement in their BSC. As Tiffany hesitantly presents an agenda item, and Crystal encourages her, we see the "ongoing process of developing new leaders" within the West Athens leadership group, and the way in which Crystal, an established leader, takes responsibility for growing the leadership capacities of new members.

The West Athens leadership group is fortunate to benefit from a large cadre of established community leaders. Some have been working in the community as educators, union organizers, and administrators for decades. Onamia Bryant, at eighty-three the oldest member of the West Athens Leadership group, says, "We're all professionals, who all know how to work in a group...so we don't have time to waste on petty disagreements. We don't let our own egos get into what we're working on. The bigger issue is working with our families, getting them the right information and the right resources." Clearly, this is a group that understands that personal development must lead to fostering community-wide change: one runs a non-profit, and another volunteers for the group Empowerment Congress, centering her work for the education committee around African-American parent education and advocacy.

This pivot—from personal development to fostering change—is the key shift that Best Start Communities were working towards in the first half of 2018.

To help encourage this shift, Capacity Builders introduced the GPS guide to their communities in December 2017 and January 2018. At the very end of this December leadership meeting, Krishaunda introduces the Guide with the following question: “What do you think of when you hear the word GPS?” The answers from around the room are immediate: “Direction-finding, a guide, direction. Tells you the time limit, how to avoid traffic.”

“Yes,” Krishaunda agrees, “and it also tells you where you started. With this transition that’s coming up, we need to take another look at where we are, where we are going, and what we need to get there.” While the GPS metaphor may seem simple, it embodies the approach that the Capacity Builders have honed.

For one, an abstract bundle of skills is anchored by everyday language. After all, nearly everyone has plugged a destination into a Maps app on their phone and watched as satellites determined their exact location and the route from one place to another.

Additionally, the emphasis on *starting where you are* exemplifies a commitment to building from strength. Capacity Builders and community members are encouraged to begin not by listing areas for improvement, but by noting what people already have, what work is already underway, and what capacities have already been developed.

Finally, the GPS reflects a reality of community work: the one constant is change. Since the formation of the Best Start Communities, First 5 LA has evolved and refined its approach, forcing BSCs to learn flexibility and adaptation. The decision to step back as a primary partner is only the latest in a series of decisions that has changed the role of Capacity Builders and the frameworks used by the BSC; the GPS, then, is only the latest tool that has allowed community members to engage in *real time partnership with institutions that are themselves evolving*. By acknowledging the changing role of First 5 LA, and yet reiterating that the basic goals of the BSC remain the same, Capacity Builders help residents practice flexibility and adaptation, crucial to long-term sustainability.

DECISION-MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Another key element of capacity building is reflective analysis and making a connection to results. After all, if you set out to help children ages 0-5, you need a way to decide whether or not you’re in fact helping them. A key part of this, as Krishaunda has noted, is helping community members stay focused on this goal, even as other priorities—affordable housing, good jobs, green spaces—remain pressing concerns.

An example of reflective analysis: during the West Athens leadership meeting, when a Building Stronger Families (BSF) grantee connected his work with incarcerated men to BSC’s mission statement by noting that many of these men have children 0-5, Crystal and others pushed him to demonstrate further how his project would support young families. They asked how he would create synergy between providing resources to young parents and providing resources to formerly incarcerated people; Crystal shared her experience with similar kinds of work, while others asked how targeted his programs were for parents with kids. The conversation was directed but polite, with people asking to share their feedback, and saying, “If I’m off the mark, please let me know.”

Later, Krishaunda shared how she taught Crystal and others to ask questions of grantees. In the beginning, Krishaunda recounts, they would just say, “Sounds good, that’s good.” She pushed them by asking, “What do you mean by ‘good’? What are you comparing it to?” and completed trainings on performance measures. This hits on one of the core values of this kind of capacity building: accountability. Both the Results-Focused Community Partnership and the GPS asks members to demand accountability from their partners and from themselves.

Another example of this increased accountability came earlier in the same West Athens leadership meeting, when Hector Gutierrez gave an update on the First 5 Southern LA regional meeting. Rather than passively receiving this information, the leadership members asked questions about the goals of the meeting, the role of the Capacity Builder in the regional work, and whether there would be note-takers. Others made suggestions regarding structure and agenda. Hector agreed to many of

their suggestions. Again, members were effectively advocating for their needs as they prepared to network and form alliances with other groups.

After the upcoming transition, this kind of regional work will take on a larger role. Luckily, South LA has a history of working together on the regional level, and many members have working relationships with leaders in Broadway-Manchester, Compton/East Compton, and elsewhere. However, West Athens is still adjusting to the idea that they may need to compromise on logistical details. More pressingly, many in West Athens have been wondering what will happen to community-based initiatives if First 5 LA shifts to primarily regional engagement. These answers, as of this writing, remain unclear.

COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING

The BSF grantee is not the only example of how the West Athens group has pivoted towards effecting change in their community. Crystal Pitts has her own non-profit, C.H.A.N.G.E.S, which offers education and resources to the community, specifically focusing on those returning to the community after incarceration. Crystal collaborates with First 5 LA, using their computers and spaces to create trainings and meetings. In many ways, Crystal says, her work is about connecting people to resources. She elaborates, “people who have received the message that they can advocate know that they can build something that will last, not just for us, but for the next generation.” Community members advocating on behalf of others are truly change agents.

Additionally, several members of the leadership group, concerned about community safety, serve with a group called Community Action for Peace (CAP). Using the leadership development and facilitation skills they learned with Krishaunda in the leadership group, they collaborate with parents, schools, and police. Reflecting on this work, some residents share that after their time with Best Start West Athens, they truly see the value of collaboration, especially when tackling an issue as complex and multi-determined as public safety.

All this is to say that during the winter and spring of 2018, residents increased their engagement with outside groups, not only the Empowerment Congress

and CAP, but other Best Start Communities in South LA. Krishaunda reflects that the ample resources of First 5 LA had previously disinclined residents to truly collaborate. Now, with the transition close, West Athens has focused on “spreading out” to other groups, forming relationships that will help them weather the inevitable changes in contracts. By seeking partners who already have history and vested interests in strengthening West Athens, they strengthen their own sustainability.

“People who have received the message that they can advocate know that they can build something that will last, not just for us, but for the next generation.”

—Crystal Pitts, non-profit leader and West Athens leadership team meeting facilitator

One of the most important guiding principles of the community partnership work could be glimpsed in an offhand comment by Crystal during a discussion about a planned ad campaign to recruit young African-American families. The leadership group has partnered with churches and schools, and worked with a marketing firm to design the promotional material. One member comments that she can’t see the difference between black and blue on the posters and doorknob hangers, but “it doesn’t matter so much.” Crystal says, “Of course it matters! You are someone in the community we’re trying to reach.” In other words, even when the stakes are low, people prioritize inclusion.

Another simple reminder of the value of inclusion comes from the presence of translators. Although the West Athens leadership group is primarily composed of English speakers, some new Spanish-speakers have recently joined. In December, when Febe Gonzalez arrived, everyone donned earpieces, and the translator stepped forward, enabling Febe to run the planning for the holiday party.

As both these examples suggest, those gathered around the table must own the process; that is, they must feel welcome at planning, learning, and decision-

making tables. Those involved must feel that the direction of their community groups—from something as small as the color of a door hanger, all the way through decisions as crucial as funding priorities—is indeed in their hands.

Wilmington: Navigating Conflict

Off the courtyard of a small Catholic church, Javier Hurtado is quietly wiping down chairs. Deliberately, as others chat, Javier goes from one folding chair to the next, sending a small but important message: what happens here matters.

The others are not oblivious to Javier’s careful ministrations; three hours later, the meeting nearly done, several people will call out Javier’s help as one of the ways he contributes to the group.

To perform a menial task, to make the room a cleaner, brighter place, is to invest selflessly. Others’ recognition of the act is yet another sign of the same generosity of spirit. This detail may seem unremarkable, but this group was, at one point, deeply divided, and this exchange of gift and acknowledgement is a sign of how far they have come.

ACCOUNTABILITY

When a writer sits down with the Wilmington BSC, one of the first things she learns is that this group is one of the few (perhaps the only) BSCs with a name: the Healthy Lifestyles Group. When community members first gathered, about five years ago, a consensus quickly emerged about community priorities: they wanted to shift norms around fitness, nutrition, and a healthy lifestyle.

Wilmington is 20 miles south of downtown LA; small and isolated, it struggles with employment and a persistent sense of isolation and loneliness among its mostly Latino members. By emphasizing health and increased social connections, the BSC is responding to the specifics of their community, an adaption encouraged by this kind of capacity building. As Audrey Jordan, one of the managers of the partnership support team, explains, “Communities need to figure out what works best for them, and find a balance between flexibility and fidelity.”

However, this flexibility should not be mistaken for a flexibility about *results*. Just as the West Athens leadership group asked a Building Stronger Families grantee how his project connected to helping young children, the Wilmington group is careful to articulate how increased social connections benefit families. As Audrey comments, “If you can demonstrate a link to your pillars [your and our results goals], you can go for it.”

This insistence on results—and a focus on children ages 0-5—led, in the spring of 2018, to some difficult discussions about leadership. A survey by First 5 LA revealed some important demographic shifts: seven years ago, the majority of attendees at partnership meetings were parents or grandparents of young children, but now these children have grown into grade school kids or pre-teens. (It is worth noting that First 5 LA, unlike many local and federal organizations, allows grandparents and other primary caregivers to access support services.)

Thinking about the ramifications of these findings was emotionally difficult, Lupe Gonzalez-Hernandez, the HLG’s Capacity Builder, recalls. “Some folks on the leadership group were asking, ‘Are you going to kick us out because our kids grew up?’” she recalls. As a Capacity Builder, it was her job to return the group to more fundamental questions, such as ‘Why do we collect data?’ and ‘How do we use it?’ From there, Lupe reminded the leadership group of their central mission, and asked them how they could pass on their experience to help families with young kids.

She made sure to always value what residents were sharing, affirming that it was natural and normal to feel a sense of loss, but then reminding them to focus on the collective, rather than the individual. She asked them, “What will help the group down the line?” and collected their responses in notes, so she could remind them of their answers later—another tool she learned from CSSP and her peers.

She also relied on her peers to cope with her own trepidation and conflicted emotions: with both the conversations about shifting demographics and the problems of exclusion, Lupe confides that she often felt quite emotional, and needed to talk to others—

either the managers of the Partnership Support Team, or her fellow Capacity Builders—to process her feelings. This allowed her to show up and be fully present for her community members.

COMMUNICATION

In the spring of 2018, these skills were needed again when a disagreement about the budget broke out. As Lupe recounts, even before this conversation occurred, some residents had begun to feel a tension with the representatives of community-based organizations who also belonged to the HLG. Initially, the idea behind including both residents and representatives was to create a leveled learning opportunity where everyone felt valued. However, residents, feeling left out, began meeting separately. In group meetings, these factions would then speak frequently, and the others, unseen by the speaker, would roll their eyes or make faces.

In order to find common ground, Lupe would ask the entire group to remember the bigger picture and to take a closer look at the proposed idea. Additionally, in one-on-one meetings, she asked members to reflect on how they presented themselves in the meetings, and encouraged them to either take a step back or forward, as appropriate. By asking in a non-judgmental way for members to articulate their presence in the group, Lupe encourages them to see conflict as a two-way street, which is part of developing collaboration and conflict-resolution skills.

When, after a spirited discussion at the May 9th meeting, Javier says, “This is maybe the first time I’ve agreed with Marbella,” everyone chuckles. Someone else chimes up, “Conflict is healthy!” and there is more knowing laughter. This group—after a struggle—has learned how to healthfully disagree.

To solve these conflicts, Lupe did not only use ‘soft’ tools such as helping members to talk through their feelings; she also encouraged the group to codify its bylaws, work which proved useful at the May 9th leadership meeting, when Roberto Monroy mentioned that he may have to miss some meetings in order to work. Six months ago, such an announcement might have prompted vigorous debate over whether this merited the loss of membership or voting privileges;

now, the bylaws clearly state how many meetings a member can miss before he or she loses voting privileges, and the path for regaining them. Bylaws, which fall under the Leadership & Governance portion of the GPS, are another important way to contribute to the long-term stability of a group.

COLLABORATION AND NETWORKING

During the late winter and early spring of 2018, the Wilmington HLG decided to increase its civic engagement, planning to focus on issues that particularly impact their community: public safety (especially decreasing the number of hit-and-run and drive-by-shootings); immigration concerns and what, exactly, it means to be a Sanctuary City; the high cost of housing; the environmental health impact of the nearby oil refineries; and the strengths and challenges of the educational system.

After articulating this list of concerns, the Wilmington HLG reached out to city council members and its state representatives. Both city and state representatives agreed to attend the large Partnership meeting each month, both to occasionally present to the group and to hear community concerns. These budding relationships with political leaders are evidence of the pivot from personal and group leadership development towards using these new skills in the larger world. For several years, the Wilmington group has refined its communication, leadership, and collaboration skills; they can now use these skills to engage with their elected officials in a coordinated way that maximizes impact.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As the Wilmington BSC looks ahead to the transition, and to increased collaboration with outside organizations, one issue that surfaces is compensation. Alma Serrano and Javier Hurtado estimate they have collectively donated over 1,800 hours of volunteer work to their community. They give so generously of their time because they have a deep passion for their community; however, they also acknowledge that it would be wonderful to receive a stipend, a feeling shared by many across the different communities. “We’re here, we’re invested, but no-one pays us,” another community member comments. They feel that compensation would honor the time they’ve given.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the leadership group would be mindful of the value of compensated work. After all, Lupe has traveled the road to employee, beginning her involvement in the Best Start Communities as a member before becoming a note-taker, and then a facilitator, and then finally, in the fall of 2015, a Capacity Builder.

“When we get together as a team, they [the management team] have an agenda, but they also give us space to talk and troubleshoot among each other, so if I’m stuck on something, I’ll put it out there, and that night I’ll have a tool.”

—Lupe Gonzalez-Hernandez, Capacity Builder, Wilmington HLG

The residents and leaders with whom she works know that Lupe has grown as a leader over the years; they know that the facilitative leadership process espoused by CSSP can work. In an example of mirroring—the quality by which what happens between the residents and the Capacity Builders is mimicked, or mirrored, by what happens between the Capacity Builders and the partnership support team—Lupe comments that she has received a large amount of support from Audrey and Kara, just as she offers support to her residents. Lupe comments, “I’ve been blessed to be put in the path of Audrey and Kara, because they’re women of color, and they really believe in hiring people that reflect the demographics of the community ...they’re right next to me, saying believe in yourself.” This is exactly the kind of support the Capacity Builders strive to give to residents. Yet it is also worth noting that Audrey and Kara supported Lupe as she accessed her own skills, capabilities, and experience; similarly, this kind of capacity building is not about the Capacity Builders, but about the skills and knowledge that residents hold.

It is not only confidence-boosts that Lupe receives from the partnership team; it is the opportunity to participate in peer-to-peer learning. She comments, “When we get together as a team, they [the management team] have an agenda, but they also give us space to talk and troubleshoot among each other, so if I’m stuck on something, I’ll put it out there, and

that night I’ll have a tool. We’re able to share: what are our strengths? We all have different ways of working with a community.” Everyone agrees that over the course of several years, the Capacity Builders have moved from a group of individuals to a team, freely sharing resources and knowledge.

Reflecting on changes they’ve seen in their community, the members of the Wilmington leadership group note the new faces at Community Partnership meetings, and increased socialization. However, they acknowledge that though they’ve identified a lot of needs, implementing programs to address these needs has been difficult. Yet overall, Wilmington remains optimistic about the transition. Veronica Venancio comments, “I have a feeling that that transition will be for the better, because I think it will be more local, with more direct support. It’s going to be a good year.”

Compton—East Compton: Fostering Accountability Amid Close Networks

May 10th, in the Latino community, is Mother’s Day, and the Compton/East Compton leadership meeting that day begins in happy chaos. Young mothers hand out pink roses; atop a far table, a chocolate fountain whirls, while strawberries and marshmallows await dipping. A lunch bar steams with hot food; translators hand out headpieces and presenters fuss with the AV equipment. The air rings with warm exclamations as people greet each other.

The chairs, arranged in a large square, have been designated for various members: the leadership group on the right; the RNG and LNC representatives who are attending their very first Partnership meeting, and grant applicants on the left; note takers, a program officer, a logistic manager, and translators scattered throughout. Kara Coleman and Silvia Montez, the co-Capacity Builders, helps everyone find their seat.

Unusual in its size, due to all the invited guests, the May 10th meeting nonetheless displays many hallmark traits of this BSC community: the gathering is diverse, split between men and women, African-Americans and Latinos, younger parents and older relatives. Conversation is ebullient, and there are many hugs passed around.

There are tears, too, when El Nido, Compton/East Compton's Building Stronger Families grantee, gives its presentation. Dedicated to engaging and supporting low-income families, El Nido runs many different programs, including mentorships, direct services, and advocacy work. In Compton/East Compton, they specifically focus on teen parents, using the Building Stronger Families framework. In the meeting today, several teen mothers and their parents offer emotionally wrenching testimony, speaking both to their struggles and to the crucial support El Nido has offered; when one, her voice shaking, becomes overwhelmed, people clap and cheer, "You got it!" The young women speak of struggles with addiction and gangs, the difficulty of attending high school and maintaining relationships with incarcerated partners; they speak too of how essential the daycare, the diapers, the mentoring and the socializing that El Nido brings has been. "El Nido is like a family," one girl tearfully concludes, and many in the room wipe their eyes. "Please continue to fund this program," others urge.

The heartfelt presentation speaks to the power of El Nido, and all the good they have brought to the group; however, the straightforwardness of the plea belies the complexity of the story behind the funding, and El Nido's relationship to this BSC. To understand the web of relationships fully, one must go back to the early days of Compton/East Compton's leadership group.

COMMUNICATION AND GOVERNANCE

According to Kara, who began working with the Partnership in July 2015, the leadership group has evolved from being largely guided by a few experienced and outspoken professional stakeholders to one where there is a more balanced engagement. In order to support this transition, Kara sought to uplift the idea of respecting different leadership styles and assist members with developing group processes that encourage full participation, including a rotation of monthly meeting facilitators that allowed more residents to serve as leads. She also regularly

invited people to reflect on how they contributed to the group, and affirmed repeatedly that it was not only okay to ask questions and speak up but also part of their responsibility as community leaders. As community members grew to know Kara, and saw that she could be trusted to respect everyone regardless of background or title, they began to buy in more fully to her ideas.⁹ Newer members trusted that they could lead as themselves, rather than adopting the style of the established leaders, and as they came into their own, they became more vocal and confident about expressing their true opinions. New norms were established, not through top-down directives from Kara, but through a collective shift.

Bylaws, including rules dictating term-limits, also helped make room for new voices. However, as their term limits expired, and these established leaders stepped down, some remained actively involved as work group members and others took on new roles within the Partnership.

For instance: Saul Figueroa, El Nido's BSF Program Manager, is a Compton resident, parent of a 0-5 child, and one of the originally elected Leadership members for the Best Start Community. In his role as a leadership member, he played a prominent role in developing Compton/East Compton's BSF strategy of engaging and cultivating teen mothers and fathers as active community leaders. He and his team have been central figures in the daily management of the BSF program.

Since becoming a Building Stronger Families grantee, El Nido team members, and many of the supported teen parents, have become fixtures in Compton/East Compton's Best Start Community meetings and activities. For instance, three of the teen mothers and fathers engaged were elected to the Leadership group in early 2017, and play an integral role in partnership decision making, and are valued as full, dedicated partners.

Based on their success in engaging teen leaders and commitment to active partnership, El Nido's BSF work is a great source of pride within the partnership and

⁹ Along with modeling and active encouragement, Kara and Silvia provided or supported trainings on Working with Diverse Leadership Styles, Mindful Leadership, Collaboration, Conflict Resolution, and Shared Understanding. Collectively, these trainings uplifted the idea that everyone is able to offer a meaningful contribution, and helped the group establish clear norms for promoting full participation.

there is a general desire among members that it will continue. Yet leaders also understand that decisions about what that might mean, especially in light of the transition, requires not only careful thought, but also clear information about the new structure, budget parameters, program objectives, and costs.

With the end of El Nido's two year Building Stronger Families grant period approaching, questions and tension around the continuation of program activities arose. Because of El Nido's close connections to the Best Start Community, they knew of the availability of Community Identified Project Funds before these resources became public knowledge. (These funds were also significantly higher than any amount the group had previously had direct responsibility for managing.) As any proactive organization facing an end date that impacted staffing would do, they lobbied early for these funds, even before the Best Start Community had established a clear understanding of the fund's purpose or developed guidelines for its management. Hence, this May meeting's emotional presentation and distribution of a proposal for the entirety of this year's available Community Identified Project Funds, a sum that is substantially more than any other fund the group has had direct responsibility for managing.

Kara, as a Capacity Builder, is committed to neutrality; it is not her job to weigh in on what she thinks the group should or should not do. Yet in a Community Partnership as close-knit as Compton/East Compton, with so many familiar players involved with a range of organizations, she understands why the existence of clear decision-making processes and conflict-of-interest policies that help members avoid the blurring of boundaries is of particular importance. Based on the Partnership's established practices, she also does feel that any requests for funding should be considered as part of a full budget discussion.

At the presentation's conclusion, she reminds community leaders how far they have come "in being responsible financial stewards," and reminded members that although everything they are feeling and saying about the program made perfect sense, there was more yet to come from the LNC and First 5 LA, post-transition, that will help them make fully informed decisions about how to build on their work and continue to achieve

their goals. This includes the Leadership Group's recent decision to establish an ad-hoc committee to develop recommendations for how they will utilize the available Community Identified Project Funds.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The formation of an ad-hoc committee to manage CIP funds is not the only example of the big strides Compton/East Compton has made in spending money and making decisions. These gains were also on powerful display earlier in the meeting when a representative from a local agency, Children Striving Together, presented a request for funding for an Annual Day in the Park, a carnival-style fair for families in Compton, Long Beach, and Watts.

Earlier, Kara recounts, sponsorship requests were often rubber-stamped with an off-hand, "I guess we can fund it, because it sounds good." Now, however, members have reflected on how they make decisions, and understand that it's important to have their own guidelines, skills they put to astonishing and immediate use after the young woman representing CST's boss finishes her pitch. Leadership members point out that the request exceeds the allotted amount; that the paperwork needs to be filled out properly; that the CEO has not attended any recent meetings of Best Start Community. This is rich evidence that the group has internalized the value of demanding accountability from partner organizations, one of the elements under the 'data-driven decision making and progress tracking' of the GPS.

After the CST representative leaves the room, the members continue their discussion, wondering frankly about the change of location. Others point out that they should request a post-events report, and prominent placement on the flyer. Unlike in the past, members now are aware of the need to network and reach the larger community; they are sensitive to how this Family Fun Day might benefit their own group.

Children Striving Together's confusion over the limit for grants is, in some ways, understandable: First 5 LA set a limit of \$4999, but Compton/East Compton, after discussion, decided to lower the permitted amount to \$2500 in order to spread the budget over a range of

organizations. In other words, a value of the group—*supporting many neighborhood organizations*—has been translated into a financial guideline.

In light of this decision, El Nido’s bid for the entirety of the Community Identified Projects resources may be in conflict with the precedents set for managing other funds. The leadership group has committed to diversifying its support in one realm of the budget; the question is whether that commitment will apply in another realm. As of this writing, the decision is still pending, but Kara confirms that some residents have made the explicit connection between the work they’ve done codifying their budget decisions and connecting their decisions to their larger goals.

The new LNC has also been charged with providing direct support for the ad hoc committee proceedings. With input from the Capacity Builders, they proposed a process that would support Leadership Group members in first reviewing the Partnership’s overall budget and priorities, and then developing specific CIP decision-making criteria and voting procedures (which will allow for confidential voting, if the group prefers it given the emotions surrounding the fate of BSF activities), and an in-depth review of costs associated with individual BSF program components. The process steps were then vetted with Governance Work Group members that included BSF staff. Due to the conflict of interest policies in play, members also agreed that BSF participants who serve on the Leadership Group would be permitted to take part in the initial review of the Partnership finances and goals, but would recuse themselves during committee deliberations and voting.

Regardless of what Compton/East Compton decides, the conundrum is an important illustration of the GPS framework in action. Deciding whether to give the entire BSF budget to one organization requires the leadership group to use skills across all four GPS elements: they must articulate and *communicate* a strong partnership identity, and reflect on how that identity is reflected in their budget; *govern* with a clear decision-making process for the budget, *collaborate* as they resolve conflicts and disagreements; and in their *progress tracking*, monitor the accountability of El Nido.

Additionally, as Compton/East Compton was discussing the management of its CIP funds, it was also reviewing its GPS priorities. This simultaneity helped underscore for residents that funding decisions must take the community partnership’s goals into account, and it spurred leaders to adapt new CIP decision-making processes that even more clearly stated that resource management should be considered through the lens of results and goals.

“As a Capacity Builder, so much of the work is about helping community members understand their capacity for positive change.”

—Kara Coleman, a Capacity Builder and a manager for the Partnership Support Team

By investing in clear bylaws for decision making, and affirming the value of everyone’s perspective, Compton/East Compton grew from a partnership heavily influenced by a few strong voices to one with a greater balance among active leaders. In the past, decisions might have been made because someone influential suggested it, but now, even faced with an emotionally and personally vexed decision, the group remained committed to due diligence. Regardless of the ultimate decision, the May leadership meeting demonstrated vividly just how far the Compton/East Compton group has evolved.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The decision also illustrates some key elements of this particular brand of capacity building. A Capacity Builder’s neutrality aids in facilitating leadership, rather than imposing it; the budget decision would not be as meaningful if Kara or Silvia led the group towards it. Kara comments, “As a Capacity Builder, so much of the work is about helping community members understand their capacity for positive change.” Capacity Builders do not try to become leaders of the communities with which they work, or overtly ‘steer the ship.’ Rather, they aim to do their job so well that they no longer become necessary—to train themselves out of a job.

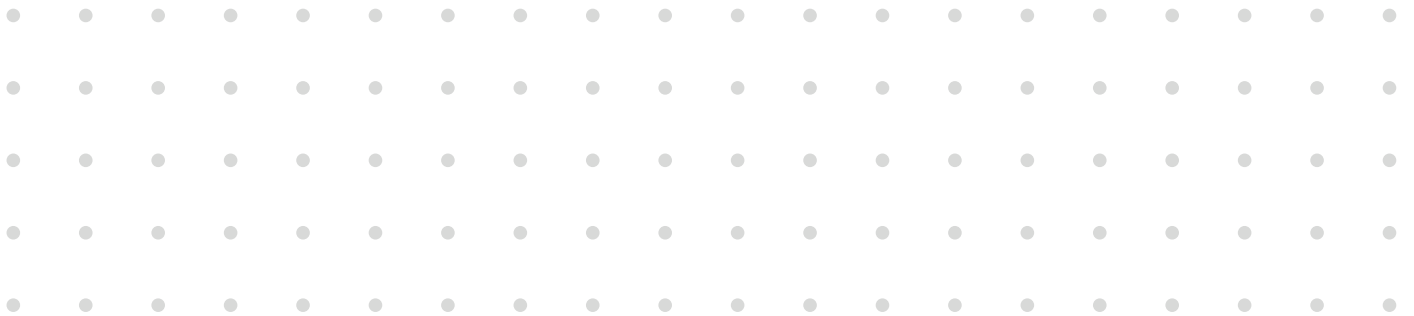
For Kara, a key part of this skill-building is *reflective analysis*. She explains, “so much of what we [Capacity Builders] do is helping [residents] learn to reflect, and building in time to support conversation driven by open-ended questions.” In the demand for efficiency, it can be tempting to hew closely to a narrow agenda, but for Kara, this misses the point. “Part of what makes this work unique is giving people a chance to pause and think critically about their own experiences and goals.

“To back up a few steps, this emphasis on reflective analysis really comes from the sincere belief that parents and residents are truly wise and capable. We want people to be guided by their experience and perspective. We partner in order to create space for that to occur.”

In the light of Kara’s sincere belief, and her co-Capacity Builder, Silvia Montez’s support, Bertha Lamas, a leadership member, has blossomed. Over the course of several years, she has grown from a quiet member who occasionally attended community meetings to one of its most vocal leaders. She attributes much of her growth to the warmth and support of Kara and Silvia, who, she says, always welcomed her to meetings, going out of their way to give her a hug and make her feel welcome.

Kara and Silvia’s warmth towards Bertha exemplifies the value of inclusion; Bertha, in turn, has used her new skills to teach others to be leaders, in an example of peer-to-peer learning. For instance, when she participates in local charity activities, such as a jacket and blanket handout for the homeless, she often brings others along. About this, she says, “My kids come with me, my sons come with me, the young kids help out, and it’s good for them to see the poverty. Perhaps it will inspire them to be leaders.”

There is one person Bertha has definitely inspired: her own daughter. A few days before our interview, Bertha’s daughter gave a speech at an LA college on behalf of an organization called Green.dot. Afterwards, she said to her mother, with surprise in her voice, “I can do this.” Bertha understood that it was not only the leadership classes in her daughter’s school, but her own example, that had inspired her daughter. “I see that I’m leaving an impact,” Bertha notes. “And that makes me feel good.” As Kara and Silvia prepare to step away from the BSC, and new partners come into place, it is affirming to see the cycle of facilitative leadership repeat, spreading ever outward.



Conclusion

As one would expect, May 2018 brought uncertainties, frustration, and excitement to residents, Capacity Builders, and program officers alike. Confusions over whether resources would diminish, questions of how the new regional and local partners would fit into established working styles, and worries about shifting budgets all consumed discussions. Capacity Builders strove to mirror back residents' fears while reminding them that this transition was planned and expected, and that the nature of community work is change.

Above all, groups struggled to understand what it would mean to function without their Capacity Builder. When, at last, one leadership group truly grasped that after June 30th their capacity builder would not be around, they hastily asked for a two-day workshop, "so you can teach us everything that you do." Others chorused, "Don't leave us!" Capacity Builders, too, carried a host of emotions as they contemplated the end of their contract: pride in the work done, some wistfulness, but readiness to move on, too. As June 30th approached, emphasis remained on celebrating the work done and progress completed, as well as anticipating the new opportunities opening up for Best Start Communities.

Yet despite the inevitable bumps during the transition, Phyllis Brunson, who served as the Project Manager for the CSSP's Partnership Support Capacity Building Team, is sure that this form of capacity building has made a difference in community members' lives. "Whatever happens with the transition," she says, "I know that hundreds of people have been exposed to this form of results-focused thinking and working together. That has to have an impact."

This paper has tried to convey a sense of what this kind of capacity building *is like*. Some of the answers are found in the frameworks, the result-based Community Partnership and the GPS, and some of the answers come from the qualities, such as *inclusion* and *reflective analysis*, called out in the stories.

In the profiles of East LA and West Athens, we have seen the work that community members do, and the

ways in which the Capacity Builders support them, in both community partnerships and leadership meetings. In Wilmington, the leadership group mended a growing rift; in Compton/East Compton, the leaders, having successfully navigated a similar rift, faced an emotionally difficult budget situation that called on conflicting loyalties. This is real life, not theory.

"I know that hundreds of people have been exposed to this form of results-focused thinking and working together. That has to have an impact."

—Phyllis Brunson, Project Manager for the CSSP's Partnership Support Capacity Building Team

These pictures are by necessity incomplete; they offer snapshots of the groups, and are not meant to be exhaustive. However, spending dozens of hours attending meetings and interviewing Capacity Builders, community members, and the partnership support team, leaves an impression about which values predominantly shape this work:

- **Inclusion:** Questions in the GPS ask members to reflect on who governs, which voices are heard in meetings, and how new members are integrated into the group; Capacity Builders reference using everyday language, building from strength, using peer-to-peer learning, and showing cultural sensitivity. In meetings, members often mention the importance of making this work accessible to all.
- **Self-reflection:** It is not accidental that in both the major conflicts narrated within this report, resolution began with asking participants to reflect on their own role. Cultivating self-reflection—not only in conflict, but in progress towards goals and connection to results—is a key aspect of teaching people to do this work. The GPS, as a whole, is a tool designed to encourage self-reflection; values such as *owning the process* and *facilitative leadership* ask leaders

to think about their own relationship to the trajectory of the group.

- **Accountability:** Hand in hand with self-reflection is accountability. Community members demand accountability from themselves and others through attendance requirements and the delegation of responsibilities; through *making connections to results*, they learn to ask the searching questions necessary to seek accountability from partners. Capacity Builders, too, keep each other accountable through bi-weekly meetings and engagement on the partnership support team.

The story of the Best Start Communities is far from over. In the coming months and years, they will engage new partners on their own terms, and continue to pivot from personal development to larger community change. The hope here is to help other practitioners, residents, new partners, and funders understand the values that have shaped the progress of these thirteen Best Start Communities, and the work behind the work.

