Executive Summary
Driving Systems Change Forward

Leveraging Multisite, Cross-Sector Initiatives to Change Systems, Advance Racial Equity, and Shift Power

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Over the past few years, a slate of multisite, cross-sector initiatives has emerged in an attempt to address root causes of inequities by changing the systems that shape community conditions and individual well-being. However, the sharing of successes and challenges across initiatives has not kept pace with the advances made. This report addresses that gap by aggregating the knowledge that practitioners have gained on initiative design and implementation, particularly as it relates to the complex work of changing systems, advancing racial equity, and shifting power. It builds on a 2015 paper funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, and titled "Pathways for Systems Change: The Design of Multisite, Cross-Sector Initiatives" (Siegel, Winey, and Kornetsky 2015). The paper outlined key findings and recommendations related to designing and implementing multisite, cross-sector initiatives. This new report's goal is to reflect on recent progress and shortcomings and to provide strategies for those involved in all stages of the initiatives to evolve their efforts in ways that drive systems change forward.

We selected from multisite, cross-sector initiatives (see box 1) launched since 2015, initiatives that began in earlier years but extended into or beyond 2015, and initiatives that released research or evaluations in or after 2014. Our findings are based on 22 interviews with initiative stakeholders and two research convenings with initiative staff members, funders, intermediaries, and evaluators that took place from November 2018 to August 2019. To supplement these sources, the research team reviewed the academic literature and initiative documents, including websites, blog posts, press statements, reports, and evaluations. The initiatives we selected were government- and philanthropy-led and are as follows (listed by initiative launch year):

New Communities Program	(2002–12)
Purpose Built Communities	(2009–present)
YouthCONNECT/Ready for Work	(2010–present)
Sustainable Communities	(2010–15)
Integration Initiative	(2010–19)
Building Healthy Communities	(2010–present)
Promise Neighborhoods	(2010–present)
StriveTogether	(2010–present)
Strong Cities, Strong Communities	(2011–17)
Partners in Progress	(2014–15)
Communities of Opportunity	(2014–present)
Wellville	(2014–present)
Working Cities Challenge	(2014–present)
ReThink Health Ventures	(2016–19)
Invest Health	(2016–present)
Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge	(2017–present)

Box 1

What Is a Multisite, Cross-Sector Initiative?

For this report's purposes, a multisite, cross-sector initiative is a new, connected set of activities that were planned and implemented to achieve a goal, that span more than one site, and that involve a mix of institutions from the public, nonprofit, philanthropic, and/or private sectors The definition of a site varies, but common examples are a neighborhood, a school, a city, or a region.

Our findings highlight the complex intersections of systems, racial equity, and power that can work for or against systems change (see box 2 for definitions). The power to influence decisions is not evenly distributed; it interacts with racism, a central root cause of the most widespread, urgent, and unjust disparities in life outcomes. These interlinked concepts were frequently discussed as both motivating and structuring systems change work, as well as being used to benchmark success.

Box 2

Key Definitions

Systems are "the set of actors, activities, and settings that are directly or indirectly perceived to have influence in or be affected by a given problem situation" (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, and Yang 2007). Systems can function at multiple geographic levels (neighborhood, city, state, region, nation). Examples include the stakeholders, policies, processes, strategies, markets, and political environments that shape an issue area like health, transportation, or education.

Systems change means shifting the fundamental conditions that produce many of the entrenched problems in society to result in explicit changes to policies, practices, and resource flows; semiexplicit changes to relationships and connections, and power dynamics; and implicit changes to mental models (Kania, Kramer, and Senge 2018).

Racial equity as a process refers to

- using a race-conscious framework to identify and counter implicit and explicit bias and individual, institutional, and structural racism (Nelson and Brooks 2015);

- making antiracist decisions and taking antiracist actions against a belief in the superiority or inferiority of people according to race (Kendi 2019); and

- using tools and data to highlight and change harmful policies, programs, and practices and to measure the impact of change (Nelson and Brooks 2015).

Racial equity as a goal or desired outcome refers to

- "the systematic fair treatment of all people of color that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all" (Race Forward 2016), and

- race no longer being a predictor of opportunity or life outcomes (Nelson and Brooks 2015).

Power is traditionally accumulated and wielded through expertise; access to information; charisma, networks, reputation, and legitimacy; and resources and money (French and Raven 1959). Those with power set the rules and control access to resources, information, social networks, and decisionmaking, all of which in turn can be used to influence outcomes (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy 2018).

Changing Systems

Each initiative in this study strove to change deeply ingrained, systemic problems that challenge our society. Systemic problems stem from expressions of power that have long historical roots. They show up in many facets of our environments, including government, culture, economic landscapes, and the physical environment. Systemic problems are held in place by overlapping systems, which have complex relationships and interactions with one another and are constantly evolving. Because of this complexity, systemic problems have no simple solution; instead, they require a "systems change" approach that acknowledges the many actors, processes, programs, and policies that affect an issue and how they are connected and rooted in the preservation of the current power structure.

Our research revealed the following about how a systems change approach is shaping contemporary multisite, cross-sector initiatives and influencing results:

- The work around systems change is emergent. Initiatives are achieving components of systems change but not necessarily pursuing it comprehensively or intentionally.

- While operating at different geographic levels and scales, initiatives are pursuing systems change in ways consistent with FSG's Water of Systems Change framework of explicit, semiexplicit, and implicit levels of systems change, even if they are not explicitly referencing or following the framework.

- Working across sectors is a central component of developing shared goals across traditionally siloed actors, building relationships, and holding all relevant stakeholders accountable for change.

- Multisite design can foster learning and leverage power across sites to change systems at a larger scale.

- Initiatives are driving systems change by building on past initiatives and coordinating across current ones.

- Long-term commitments are warranted for achieving and sustaining systems change.

Respondents identified examples of when initiatives had yielded promising results across the six conditions of systems change. Explicit changes in *policy* included successful campaigns to alter state policies on preschool funding (StriveTogether) and school discipline (Building Healthy Communities), as well as federal changes in funding policies (Strong Cities, Strong Communities). *Practice* changes included centering racial equity within new city- and county-level processes (Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge, or SPARCC; Communities of Opportunity, Integration Initiative). Shifts in *resource flows* included changes to how federal funds were distributed locally (Building Healthy Communities) and land transfers and funding allocations for new collaborations (Invest Health). Semiexplicit shifts in *power dynamics* were realized via community organizing (Building Healthy Communities), local government and civic leader participation in site activities (SPARCC), and community governance over resources (Communities of Opportunity). *Relationships and connections* have been strengthened through new investment relationships (Working Cities Challenge), peer learning (SPARCC), and local stakeholder meetings (Integration Initiative). Finally, *mental model shifts* included changes in individual and organizational mindsets to center racial equity in understanding and solving health problems (ReThink Health Ventures) and in reducing school suspensions to increase graduation rates and improve health (Building Healthy Communities).

Advancing Racial Equity

The current generation of initiatives are clearer than past generations were about the importance of racial equity as both a core element of the systems change process and a crucial goal to be achieved. Participants pointed to structural racism—defined here as racial bias among interlocking institutions and across society, causing "cumulative and compounding effects

of an array of societal factors…that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color" (Apollon et al. 2014)—as a root cause of racial inequities and a key driver of the systemic problems that initiatives target. Overlapping, historical systems of disinvestment and denial of opportunity hold racial inequity in place in communities across the country, leading to racial inequities in individual and community health and well-being. Achieving systems change means undoing underlying racist ideas and practices to change results. Pursuing this requires centering racial equity as an initiative goal, embracing it as a process, and tracking progress in both implementation and outcomes.

Notable progress has been made on incorporating racial equity into multisite, cross-sector initiatives, but current practice leaves room for improvement, both in elevating racial equity as a stated initiative goal and practicing it as individuals, organizations, sites, initiatives, and systems.

- For most initiatives, racism is explicitly identified—at an initiative's start or over time—as the root cause of the systemic problems they are trying to overcome, making racial equity a key goal of systems change.

- Initiative and site leaders provide impetus and resources to prompt local investigation of structural racism by making it an initiative goal and priority, listening to voices within sites, fostering learning across sites, building capacity within organizations, and shifting individual mental models.

- Strategies for advancing racial equity include building trust, acknowledging history, respecting local leaders, allowing time for individual and organizational journeys, tracking equity-related process and outcome metrics, facilitating training, and letting people most affected by the issue lead.

- Skeptics should be challenged to progress in their individual and organizational journeys to acknowledge racism and advance racial equity.

- Those who hold power may take on racial equity efforts in name only, without engaging in personal and organizational change; meanwhile, they may impose expectations that exact an emotional toll on people and communities of color who fight from positions of lesser power for transformational change.

On their websites, several of the 16 scanned initiatives—including Communities of Opportunity, the Integration Initiative, SPARCC, and Sustainable Communities—explicitly stated racial equity as a goal, giving sites the freedom to pursue racial equity goals and processes with the full backing of the initiative. Many initiatives evolved to include a racial equity focus. Some participants reflected that the initiative would have been stronger if equity had been centered in the initial design. Initiatives operationalized racial equity by ensuring that grantee leaders racially reflected the communities they served, holding initiative staff accountable for racial equity competencies, using equitable decisionmaking frameworks such as Race Forward's Racial Equity Impact Assessment toolkit (2009) or the SPARCC Capital Screen[1], and providing racial equity trainings for initiative leaders. A few initiatives intentionally did not focus on racial equity as an overt goal because they felt their site partners were not ready or believed it to be already ingrained in their organizations. However, many participants voiced that addressing the root causes of community challenges requires openly acknowledging how racism, structural oppression, and power influence everything from individual biases to the operations of the initiative.

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[1] Brian Prater, "A New Tool for Rethinking Community Investment: The SPARCC Capital Screen," Strong, Prosperous, and Resilient Communities Challenge, March 20, 2018, https://www.sparcchub.org/2018/03/20/a-new-tool-for-rethinking-community-investment-the-sparcc-capital-screen/.

Shifting Power

Changing systems and advancing racial equity require shifting power within initiatives. How initiatives are structured and governed reflects who holds power, what kind of power they hold, and how that power can and will be used. These structures determine who makes decisions, who gets resources, and how those with power are held accountable for their actions (or inactions). Powerful people and groups can wield their power for positive purposes and advance a more equitable power distribution. Our research participants also highlighted that power and trust are intimately linked. Where power has traditionally been used to ignore or override community members' activities or goals and to support systems of oppression or disinvestment, trust does not come easily. Funders that relinquish control over site-level goals, outcome indicators, or mandated progress demonstrate trust in the expertise and ability of sites to use resources wisely. The same can be said for powerful site-level actors (e.g., government officials) who join an initiative and use their position to elevate community voices and interests.

Our findings show that initiatives are making progress in shifting power to sites and community voices, but more changes could help.

- Powerful people and groups can advance racial equity and pursue systems change by shifting power through four channels: reputation, resources, technical capacity, and reach.

- Funders can advance racial equity by investing in organizations led by people of color and women and in communities that have faced persistent disinvestment.

- Supporting community voice and control is key to shifting power, but these processes should not allow community groups with outsize influence to drive the agenda and drown out the voices of more marginalized groups.

- Intermediaries—initiative management organizations working between funders and sites—complicate initiative dynamics. Although they are accountable to the funder, they can support community power by doing translational work between funder goals and site desires. They also can serve as a trusted coach, rather than just a technical expert, to sites.

- At the site level, cross-sector initiatives bring powerful actors from the institutions that help maintain the status quo together with people who seek to disrupt and change it, so they need management structures that shift power.

- Evaluation can work more in the interests of sites by being structured as a learning process for them around progress and direction, rather than as a review of outcomes based on funder goals.

Initiative actors have considered and balanced power through four elements of multisite cross-sector initiatives: selecting sites and goals, managing across sites, implementing the site agenda, and evaluating the initiative. Only a small number of initiatives we examined set supporting community voice and control as a core goal necessary for redistributing power and advancing racial equity. For example, Building Healthy Communities relied on the expertise of young people when it decided to pursue the goal of reducing school suspensions. And according to one participant in the Sustainable Communities initiative, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development required a $750,000 set-aside for community organizing and voice within the Minneapolis-St. Paul regional transit planning process. In terms of implementing the site agenda, most initiatives created a group of community representatives and site stakeholders, often referred to as a "collaborative table," to govern the work within a site and engaged cross-sector actors using a "hub-and-spoke" working group model. Participants emphasized their intentional effort to ensure that their governance groups were organized horizontally to facilitate shared power. The work on managing across sites and evaluating initiatives has the most room for growth. Intermediaries and evaluators often thought they were not being used as effectively as they could be to bridge and transfer power from funders to sites.

Strategies for Stakeholders

The participants in this research covered a wide variety of initiatives and spanned multiple roles: funders, intermediaries, site leaders, and evaluators. Despite this diversity, they were clear that all stakeholders will need to evolve to change systems, advance racial equity, and shift power through multisite, cross-sector initiatives. We lay out strategies, distilled across all interviews and convenings, for steps that each stakeholder can take to advance these changes within their organizations and initiatives. Although these strategies are not easy to implement, we hope that highlighting them will enhance mutual accountability across stakeholders for how they work within their organizations and across partners to address root causes and drive systems change forward.

For Funders

- Educate foundation board members and government agency directors about the complexities of systems change and the importance of racial equity, and provide opportunities for both individual and organizational learning and reflection.

- Advance racial equity when selecting sites, defining time frames, allocating resources, and assessing capacity-building needs. This may mean working with and investing in lower-capacity sites or organizations to overcome decades of disinvestment while providing flexible funds and/or long-term grants.

- Involve site leaders in decisionmaking about the initiative design, implementation, and evaluation to validate assumptions, rebalance power, and elevate the voices and expertise of underrepresented communities of color.

- Build extra time, money, and flexibility into grants for relationship building and goal alignment because initiatives are reliant on collaborative partnerships. Initiative stakeholders often come to the table with differing expectations, so space must be created during an initiative's formative phase for open dialogue about power, racial equity, and mutual goals.

- Build relationships with community representatives or those affected to encourage individual and organizational journeys toward racial equity. Create incentives or structures that encourage funder and intermediary staff members to attend community events and working group meetings and to visit community representatives in their schools, businesses, and community spaces.

- Encourage initiative stakeholders to provide authentic feedback and criticism by ensuring that honesty will not jeopardize their reputations or lead to a loss of funding.

For Intermediaries

- Help balance power as the bridge between funders and communities by amplifying community insights, rather than just transmitting outside expertise to sites.

- Be less prescriptive with site goals, and instead support goals that align with the communities' expressed interests and have realistic expectations about progress. Encourage funders to do this too.

- Ensure that initiatives have technical assistance staff members and consultants who are equipped to provide services with a racial equity lens.

- Develop and offer tools to assist sites in integrating racial equity and power sharing into decisionmaking processes using clear structure and skilled facilitation.

For Sites

- Acknowledge and value community experience by creating asset inventories, taking time to build trust and listening to ideas, and compensating site participants for their time.

- Set aside time and space for site actors to discuss the historical and contemporary context of the initiative, to explore stakeholders' different lived experiences, and to digest how these experiences relate to racial equity.

- Create agreements and practices within collaborative tables that encourage participants to balance power, including structuring agendas and meeting formats to encourage equity among participants.

- Anticipate and structure ways to handle conflict among communities and community members, especially where power imbalances exist.

- Encourage "early action" projects within the initiative that offer the opportunity to demonstrate progress to community members on an issue they care about to show value and create buy-in for the long-term systems change efforts.

- Challenge the initiative's internal practices to encourage evaluators, funders, and intermediaries to implement and spread processes that advance racial equity and power building as a central strategy for systems change.

- Partner with other sites with common interests to drive systems change beyond the local level.

For Evaluators

- Embrace a learning approach to evaluation. Start early, consult all stakeholders on what they would like to get out of the evaluation, be as flexible as possible, and focus on ways to improve not only the initiative's outcomes but also the process by which it arrives at those outcomes.

- Develop racial equity metrics that capture changes in process (e.g., how is power being shared?) and outcomes (what shifts, disaggregated by race, are observable for the focus population?).

- Provide real-time feedback on progress and skill building for site participants to contribute their interpretations and learn from interim findings.

- Develop tools that track the quality and scale of community involvement and mobilization during the initiative.

- Collect qualitative data that illustrate community perspectives and perception shifts.

- View sites as the primary audience for evaluation, and ensure that lessons from initiative results are digestible for different stakeholder groups.

Looking Forward

Transforming the fundamental conditions that hold complex, systemic problems in place across the country is difficult work. This report highlights how many multisite, cross-sector initiatives are choosing to tackle this work against the odds by targeting systems change in ways that advance racial equity and shift power to communities. However, it also reveals opportunities for initiatives to further advance systems change.

Any inability to achieve widespread, durable shifts in equity stems partially from the complex and underacknowledged role of power within multisite, cross-sector initiatives. Initiatives have multiple layers of power imbalances—within sites, between sites and intermediaries or evaluators, and between grantees and funders—that stakeholders increasingly seek to mitigate. These stakeholders could benefit from broader support and a deeper toolbox to take on these power structures, as well as the space to learn from one another's progress and challenges.

Initiative designers can foster relationships, respect, and mutual accountability as seedbeds for trust to grow. However, unexamined distrust among disinvested communities and powerful actors can stymie initiatives. Despite the costs that distrust incurs on overall effectiveness and efficiency, initiative designers struggle with proactively investing the time or resources in formal activities and tools to develop trust[2] or adequately restructured initiatives to foster trust building. Distrust will dominate when funders set priorities while overlooking sites' and community members' interests and failing to acknowledge past initiative shortcomings (or actual harm) and systemic injustices.

Although a consensus exists that advancing racial equity should be a goal within initiatives and progress has been made to that end, operationalizing it requires deeply embedding racial equity in practice to undo structural racism. Most initiatives are struggling

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2 For example, Robert F. Hurley, "The Decision to Trust," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2006, https://hbr.org/2006/09/the-decision-to-trust; and "overview" on "Resources," Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, accessed April 20, 2020, https://trustbasedphilanthropy.org/resources-index.

with what this means for design and implementation. In some cases, training elevates the effects of individual racial bias and centers racial equity as a goal, but a set of strategies to transform internal institutional processes and target specific outcomes is only emergent. Initiatives need to ask hard questions about the role that power plays in perpetuating the systems that created racial inequities and the best ways to shift the power dynamics toward community control within and across sites. This means requiring privileged actors to take a back seat to position leaders of color as agenda-setters and decisionmakers. It also requires rethinking how sites and initiatives are evaluated and successful outcomes are defined.

Learning must be incorporated intentionally to accomplish the ambitious goals of systems change, racial equity, and power shifting. Initiatives could be nimbler and readily adaptive; those with longer investment periods have room to change significantly during their implementation. Developing and implementing a collaborative learning agenda will encourage stakeholder buy-in to gather the needed information and provide feedback on which innovations are advancing the initiative's goals. Setting structured processes at the initiative and site levels for reflection provides the space to determine whether and how to shift direc-

tions based on interim results. Finally, our evidence demonstrated the payoff of a community of practice across sites to regularly share opportunities, models, successes, and challenges.

We have evidence of growing success in achieving systems change. Changes in policies, practice, and resource flows are the most observable outcomes that can generally be linked to initiative actions. Efforts to change relationships, power, and mental models are less developed. Having more initiatives target all levels of systems change—from explicit to implicit—would be significant progress, as would clearer ideas on what to target and how to address root causes such that initiatives create durable changes.

Our research confirmed the value of using multisite, cross-sector initiatives to drive systems change forward, as well as the fast pace of innovation from initiatives across the country. Participants in interviews and convenings generously shared their current insights but will continue to refine their practice and launch initiatives with new approaches. We encourage people in the many roles in these initiatives—funders, intermediaries, site leads, and evaluators—to look for opportunities to share what they are learning along the way with the field and to exchange ideas with other initiatives.

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