

Supporting Emerging Leaders for Community Development



A Study & Action Plan

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► EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Can you make a career out of community development?
- How do you get from one job to another?
- In a field with so many small organizations, how do you find growth opportunities beyond one organization?
- How do you prepare yourself for advancement?
- What are the training programs? Are there enough of them?
- Why is it so hard to find top managers or new executive directors, yet up-and-coming people complain they can't get promoted?

This paper stems from questions like these raised in discussions of the Community Opportunity Alliance/ Urban Institute survey of the community development field, published in 2023.

Researchers documented 271,000 employees in 6,225 organizations. Nonetheless, newcomers and community development professionals in the middle of their careers, especially people from communities of color, cannot detect a clear pathway to a long career in the field that will offer them advancement and growth. Observers and funders of the field ask "Where is the bench of upcoming leadership?"

What's wrong with the system that these issues persist? Is there simply not enough training available? Or is something else missing?

Research for this paper began with examining the training programs available on the hypothesis that those dilemmas must be due to inadequacies in these programs. A review of the literature on training and capacity building, examination of over 50 training programs, and conversations with more than three dozen experts in training in the field revealed a

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surprisingly strong and adequate training infrastructure, albeit with some shortcomings and gaps. The array of programs could be improved but it became apparent that the critical weakness is inadequate career development practices and support for employees

in the field to plan a career, navigate a pathway, and make the connection between job demands and advancement opportunities on the one hand and training offerings on the other. Indeed, some crucial information on the field was even missing.

The investigation pinpointed three missing elements:

- 1 Basic information on categories of jobs in the field on which individuals could base their career planning and organizations could design their career development programs
- 2 Adequate career development programs in frontline community development organizations and in the local, state, and national organizations that support them
- 3 Certain specific training and professional development offerings in an otherwise robust and dynamic set of offerings

Significantly, the research also identified an unrecognized asset in the field that could be used to address the missing elements, namely, a cadre of hundreds of skilled trainers and dozens of managers of training and professional development programs in local and national organizations. Unfortunately, they are working in isolation from one another, often duplicating efforts or struggling to address issues that have already been worked out elsewhere. Fortunately, many of those interviewed expressed an interest in becoming an active network for improving the system and potentially being a catalyst for major improvement in the career development framework and programs in the field.

Since the practices of career development are minimal within the community development field at the moment, this paper describes successful practices and programs from other fields and how those might be applied within our field.

The paper presents, in strategic order, eight specific recommendations for immediate action to address the three missing elements and to capture and build on the potential for a training and career development network among local, state, and national training platforms. For

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each recommendation, immediate action is identified for one or more of the several levels of the field: individuals, frontline community development organizations, state and local member organizations, national organizations and intermediaries, and funders, with researchers incorporated into the various levels. It also sketches some longer-term actions to which those immediate steps lead.

► Recommendations:

- 1 Establish and maintain a national network of training professionals within the field.
- 2 Profile jobs and employment opportunities in the field nationwide.
- 3 Design and disseminate an onboarding program to ground newcomers in the field.
- 4 Create and disseminate a career planning training module for the field.
- 5 Boost training and career guidance for mid-level professionals.
- 6 Expand in-person comprehensive leadership programs for executive directors.
- 7 Sustain and fund the dynamic training and professional development system.
- 8 Elevate career development practices throughout the field.