

# STORIED COMMUNITIES, COMMUNITY STORIES

AN ISSUE BRIEF

**thirdspace**  
ACTION LAB



MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE KRESGE FOUNDATION  
DESIGN WORK BY [DERIKAH SCOTT](#)



# THE PURPOSE + GOAL OF THE PROJECT

## ABOUT THE COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITY ALLIANCE

The [Community Opportunity Alliance](#) is a national nonprofit that builds the community development field. We are committed to creating conditions where residents can shape the destiny of their neighborhoods, securing their long-term stability, health, and prosperity. Local community development organizations work in underserved communities to develop affordable housing and commercial space, support small business development, and provide social services. The Alliance strengthens the field by shaping and accelerating research, supporting the capacity of individual organizations, advocating with federal policymakers, and channeling resources. The Alliance brings together nearly 6,000 community-based development organizations, 37 state and regional community development associations, and partners across the country who are striving a sweeping goal — until all thrive.

## ABOUT THIRDSPEACE

[ThirdSpace Action Lab](#) (ThirdSpace) was created to disrupt the vicious cycle of disinvestment + displacement that negatively impacts the vitality of communities of color with low incomes. ThirdSpace is a grassroots solutions studio dedicated to prototyping creative, place-based solutions to complex socio-economic problems. The organization works as institutional + community organizers, turning multidisciplinary research into evidence-based strategies and activating “third places” to co-create more liberated spaces for people of color.

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## ABOUT STORIED COMMUNITIES, COMMUNITY STORIES

The Community Opportunity Alliance commissioned ThirdSpace, with generous support from The Kresge Foundation, to lead a research project to understand the role that resident voices have played historically, play today, and could play in the future in + with community-based development organizations (CBDOs). As the Community Opportunity Alliance describes them, CBDOs are “private, nonprofit, community-based organizations that 1) develop housing, commercial, industrial or community facilities, or 2) support business development” whose “work generally involves projects + programs aimed at improving the lives of lower-income people or the communities they live in.”

These organizations are doing important work in communities across the country, but they don't always have access to learning products that can support their efforts. This Issue Brief attempts to be one small part of efforts to address that challenge. The research is part of the Community Opportunity Alliance's + the Urban Institute's broader [Grounding Values in Research](#) initiative, a three-year research study (2021 – 2023) on the financial health, programs, production, and services of community-based development organizations (CBDOs) throughout the United States. Grounding Values intends to help the community development sector secure, maintain, and expand resources; test key assumptions about how CBDOs are meeting community needs; help the sector prepare for social + economic changes; and support diverse leadership emerging in the sector.

Within that charge, why do resident voices matter? For too long, community stakeholders, particularly stakeholders of color, have faced structural barriers to shaping the futures of the places where they live + work. That's not to say that CBDOs don't engage residents or build up community power. Many (but certainly not all) are committed to making sure that residents are at the very core of what they do. When properly resourced + supported, CBDOs and other community-based organizations can play critical roles in advancing people + communities across this country that have

been systematically denied opportunity, health, safety, and beauty, even by those intending to help.

Residents can (and do) play key roles in that effort. They can be champions for securing, maintaining, and expanding resources in their communities. They have the lived day-to-day knowledge of what CBDOs are accomplishing + where they could better address community needs. They can lead the charge in preparing for social + economic change; many of them are already experts in navigating that change. And they can support diverse, emerging leadership because they often are that leadership themselves.

The findings in the following pages are a testament to the all-too-often undervalued wisdom + sustained passion that residents bring to community development. We are incredibly grateful to all the interviewees + artists in this project that contributed to our understanding of where community development has been, where it is today, and where it could be heading next. Although this research alone cannot tangibly change the lives of interviewees, the Community Opportunity Alliance + ThirdSpace believe that it can be used to support advocacy for the resources + power-builhe Community Opportunity Alliance necessary to provoke systems change + build better futures for everyone.

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Arab Community Center for  
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bcWORKSHOP

Center for Transforming  
Communities

RichmondLAND



**HOW WE  
APPROACHED  
THE WORK**

As the name implies, Grounding Values analyses are intentionally grounded in a set of core values. When it comes to resident voice, the Community Opportunity Alliance + ThirdSpace were interested in documenting resident experience, priorities, and ideas. Equally importantly, we wanted to make sure that the information we found was accessible + relevant to both residents + CBDO practitioners – and that they could see themselves in the findings. A fuller description of how we approached the research in a way that supports these values can be found in our [Data + Methodological Brief](#).

We began by identifying four geographic targets in different regions of the United States, with varying structures + sizes of local community development ecosystems; different regional racial + economic compositions, and with an attention to at least some representation of rural service delivery. From there, we established relationships with a lead CBDO in each of the four communities. We sought partners that represented a diversity of size (financial + staffing), population served, and primary sources of funding but also had a common set of characteristics – active participation in their local community development ecosystems and a demonstrated understanding of the role of resident voices in community development.

We sought to engage a diversity of residents by age, race, and gender. Sadly, residents in low-income communities, particularly residents of color, are often subjected to extractive research practices. Equitable research + evaluation is a process, not just a set of narrow final results, but we did employ a number of tactics to attempt to demonstrate authenticity of our values. All CBDOs, resident interviewees, and research partners were compensated. Language translation services were offered to residents. Scheduling was flexible + at the discretion of residents to ensure interviews did not impede upon their day-to-day needs + responsibilities.

We also felt it was important to hear from residents with varying degrees of proximity to, understanding of, and direct benefit from the community development sector. We used level of engagement with our CBDO partners as a proxy for this diversity and engaged literary artists as co-researchers working with residents less connected to CBDOs. We define “literary artist” as a creative whose work is based in written or spoken word including, songs, poetry, literature (fiction and nonfiction), prose, screen + stageplays, hip-hop, design, and other forms self-defined by the artist.

Why literary artists? To start, the communities where we were conducting research are all storied places – full of history, heritage, and culture that is not always readily understood or appreciated. Who better to understand + tell that story than literary artists? Literary arts practices also have relatively low barriers to access, which means that residents could participate in creative research processes beyond standard interviewing that could produce richer findings. Importantly, all the CBDOs with whom we partnered had existing, demonstrated connections to local artists + culturebearers and helped us identify potential literary artist partners who lived + worked in their respective service areas.

# WHO WE WORKED WITH

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Within each community, CBDOs were key partners. Their connections to residents, artists, and culturebearers + their commitment to making community development work accessible for residents helped immensely in the process of identifying participants + partners.

## **THE ARAB COMMUNITY CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SERVICES (ACCESS) + THE ARAB AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM**

**Dearborn, MI**      [accesscommunity.org](http://accesscommunity.org) | [arabamericanmuseum.org](http://arabamericanmuseum.org)

The Detroit metropolitan area is home to the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the United States, and Dearborn in particular is a large residential base for the community. ACCESS is a comprehensive provider of community development, health, and human services that works to honor its Arab American heritage through community-building and service to people of all heritages. While elements of its work extends regionally and even nationally, it also does extensive work rooted in the context of Dearborn. Since its opening in 2005, its Arab American National Museum has served as one powerful example of this approach. The museum presents exhibitions, screenings, tours, and performances throughout Michigan and in cities across the United States but also continues to document the history, experiences, and priorities of Dearborn residents. Poet + writer **Yasmine Badaoui** and songwriter **Zaina Berri** served as our artist research partners in Dearborn.

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## **THE BUILDINGCOMMUNITYWORKSHOP (BCWORKSHOP)**

**Lower Rio Grande Valley, Brownsville, TX**      [bcworkshop.org](http://bcworkshop.org)

bcWORKSHOP is the only community design nonprofit working across Texas. The organization emphasizes community engagement in all of its design work, working to understand the social, economic, and environmental issues facing a community before beginning its work and reaching out to residents not typically engaged by the design + planning sectors. It operates offices in Dallas, Brownsville, and Houston, and its projects have ranged from creating affordable housing advocacy, to producing data-driven community development research + analyses, to leading longer-term community history, organizing, and storytelling initiatives. **Ixchel Tonantzin Xochitlzihuatl**, co-founder of the socially engaged art collective, Las Imaginistas, served as our artist research partner in the Lower Rio Grande Valley + Brownsville.



## CENTER FOR TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

Memphis, TN

[ctcmidsouth.org](http://ctcmidsouth.org)

CTC is dedicated to the holistic transformation of neighborhoods and communities in and around Memphis. The nonprofit uses place-based organizing strategies + a public health framework they call “Just C.H.A.N.G.E”, where collaborative, interconnected community work groups share knowledge + resources in order to advance Community education, Health, Arts and culture, NextGen (youth + young adults), Growth (land, housing, and opportunity), and Environment. The organization works regionally + has dedicated organizing focuses in Orange Mound, North Memphis, South Memphis, and Whitehaven. **Tawanna Brown**, senior manager of knowledge + learning for the Aspen Young Leaders Fellowship, served as our artist research partner in Memphis.


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## RICHMONDLAND

Richmond, CA

[richmondland.org](http://richmondland.org)

Operating in a region facing one of the highest levels of displacement pressure in the country, RichmondLAND works to build grassroots power through community organizing, land acquisition, development, and stewardship of land + affordable housing. As a community land trust, their collective work takes land + housing out of the for-profit market so that local residents are in control of critical community assets permanently, supporting displaced residents to return + making sure existing residents can stay. Spoken-word poet, arts organizer, actor, and writer **Donte Clark**, served as our artist research partner in Richmond.



**WHAT WE  
HEARD FROM  
RESIDENT  
LEADERS**

The resident leaders interviewed included past + present volunteers, staff, members, and formal project partners. What was clear across all interviews was that, as important as CBDOs were to their communities, CBDOs could not function without residents. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two dating back to the origins of the sector. It was residents who formed the first CBDOs to organize around structural issues facing their communities, and this often still remains true in place-based community development work. We found this original organizing spirit to be alive + well amongst residents + CBDOs, and both continue to navigate barriers that were erected via formalization + hyperprofessionalization of the sector.

## HOW RESIDENTS + OTHER LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE THE ROLES CBDOs PLAY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

It's clear that resident leaders are aware that CBDOs are doing a great deal of work with + on behalf of their communities. Interestingly, many identified roles that extended far beyond what we might typically assume is visible outside the community development sector. Residents identified CBDO work falling into three general categories: Direct Services, Systems + Structural Change, and Root Cause work.

DIRECT SERVICES:	SYSTEMS CHANGE:	ROOT CAUSE:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Community Organizing</li> <li>+ Public/Community Space Development</li> <li>+ Providing safe spaces for residents</li> <li>+ Real Estate + Land Development</li> <li>+ Small Business Development (indirectly, such as through microgrant support)</li> <li>+ Urban/Community Planning + Design</li> <li>+ Workforce Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Prepping + hosting of local governing meetings</li> <li>+ Providing tools for community advocacy around community development issues</li> <li>+ Organizing around housing policy + land acquisition/ financing efforts</li> <li>+ Serving as a bridge for residents to engage in community development systems + structures</li> <li>+ Translating policy (via artists + other means)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Amplifying resident voices</li> <li>+ Creating platforms for long-term power-building</li> <li>+ Providing direct resourcing + employment opportunities</li> <li>+ Shifting narratives (such as by making community history visible)</li> </ul>



## Residents saw direct services as important but not the end of the work.

CBDOs' direct services were certainly acknowledged. The resident leaders we interviewed recognized the role of CBDOs, for instance, in supporting the protection of physical space like housing or community spaces. They pointed directly to core community development functions like real estate + land development, community planning, and workforce development (although, interestingly, there was less direct emphasis on small business development than we might have expected).

At the same time, the residents we interviewed placed even greater emphasis on how CBDOs provide entry points for residents to engage in systems change work (such as through policy reform efforts) and addressing root causes of community-related issues (such as through narrative strategy work). Resident leaders elevated priorities that are not uncommon focuses of CBDOs (including affordable housing, food access, safety, public transit) but appeared to prioritize getting to the root causes of long-standing community issues, rather than addressing them solely through direct services. The core challenges they tended to elevate were less about lack of housing or small businesses but rather the lack of community-led efforts; lack of substantive involvement of residents in community design; lack of direct resourcing of residents to develop + implement solutions to community development issues; and lack of sufficient resources going to CBDOs for them to fully focus on equitable development.

## Residents provided a rationale for focusing on systems change + root causes.

The [Racial Equity Institute's Groundwater Approach](#) lays out a framework for racially equitable systems change that we believe has clear resonance for community development. It uses the metaphor of fish dying in a lake and feeling like the situation is so urgent that we just need to help as many fish survive as we can. In social change work, this can look like direct services to help people address situations in their own lives. We might also try to "fix the lake", recognizing that if we can improve the water quality or the soil conditions, fish will fare better. In social change work, this can look like incremental systems change – trying to intervene to improve processes, policies, and procedures that dictate how a system works. When these "fish" and "lake" approaches don't seem to result in the kind of change we want, we might begin to feel like we just need more time + financial resources for our work to make a permanent, substantive difference. We should consider, though, if there might be something in the "groundwater" – some forces that might not be visible in our day-to-day work but that are nonetheless challenging its outcomes. In social change work, a "groundwater" approach may look like stepping back from the specifics of the system and the people it involves and trying to intervene in the unspoken + unacknowledged history, narratives, and norms that have set the terms of the system in the first place. If we can build a fuller + more informed collective understanding of why things happen in the system, we can much more successfully change our notions of things like timelines, measures of success, and adequate funding.

The resident leaders we interviewed had a keen interest in engaging around root causes of community challenges (i.e. pursuing “lake” and “groundwater” approaches), rather than just around specific community development outputs like the number of units built (i.e. pursuing “fish” approaches). They valued CBDO emphasis on affordability; opportunities to own or experience co-ownership of land + property; to learn about policies + give input; and to be directly involved in community planning ... but not just for the sake of doing these things. They perceived this work as important for change but were also clear that the most critical part of community change is organizing residents + working collectively with CBDOs to advance this change, especially around shifting the often negative dominant narratives about their communities to ones of rich culture, traditions, assets, strong work ethic, and ability to understand issues + develop solutions.

This was about more than just resident interest, however. Interviewees outlined three specific rationales for focusing beyond just direct service. First, in order to address issues in a more sustainable way beyond day-to-day triage, it’s important to engage those with the greatest lived experience + closest proximity to the problems, and in a community development context, that is typically residents.

Second, they noted that they already have power to address issues at a systemic or root cause level and often do so through their own activism + informal organizing. CBDOs don’t empower residents; rather, they support the process of residents rediscovering + activating their power, providing opportunities for them to use it to shape their community. Across all geographies, residents displayed appreciation for the role CBDOs play in preparing + equipping residents to advocate for themselves. They were grateful for day-to-day work helping residents fight eviction, involving residents in community design, and hosting community meetings, but their primary focus remained on the work being done to equip residents to control their own community outcomes.

Finally, they perceive a direct link between negative, dominant narratives, the services that CBDOs offer, and how much capacity CBDOs have to make those services effective + high-quality. For instance, a number of resident leaders we interviewed were able to name a direct linkage between the narrative that their communities are “high-risk” and reduced financial investment. That creates a situation where CBDOs are left to address all kinds of market failures and to do so without adequate funding + financing support. This makes it very difficult for CBDOs to remain primarily mission-focused or to provide robust services to the degree they wish to. Residents noted that it’s vital to invest time + resources into challenging + changing these narratives to move the needle on increased investment in their communities.

**There are some clear barriers to residents + CBDOs partnering on systems change + root cause work.**

That linkage to dominant narrative also suggested that residents have considerable sympathy for the position that CBDOs have been put in – to carry out a lot of different kinds of work, all urgent, all at once, and without adequate funding support. In particular, resident leaders recognize that CBDOs of + serving communities of color are often subject to the same adverse impacts of dominant narratives as residents. The risk aversion narrative stifles capital flow for residents and organizations; hyperprofessionalization causes CBDOs to experience staffing challenges and residents to experience difficulty engaging the field directly; and the trickle-down approach limits the resources made available in communities. Findings indicate that barriers + challenges experienced by residents + CBDOs in under-resourced areas are often similar + appear to be linked.

Beyond this, the people we interviewed noted two additional challenges that prevent resident leaders from actively partnering with CBDOs on systems change + root cause work. First, they noted that community development systems + infrastructure tend to be too rigid for this kind of work. In a sector with very strict monitoring, compliance, funding restrictions, timelines, and performance measures, it can be difficult for CBDOs + residents to partner on more upstream forms of change, like “groundwater” interventions around contextualizing the history of why community conditions are what they are or the narrative work that many interviewees lifted up as a key priority.

Second, they noted that the hyperprofessionalized nature of community development can preclude deep resident partnership, at least in the absence of additional time + resources. This is something that factored prominently in ThirdSpace’s separate [Anti-Racist Community Development research](#) – that the technical language, technical skill sets, and advanced degree + credential requirements for community development practitioners can significantly impede people from taking leadership roles or delving into intricate issues like policy + finance. This can be even truer for residents; while residents may bring a lot of expertise to the table, the language + expectations of academic credentials greatly curtails access in community development strategy, let alone active partnership.

**CBDOs nonetheless have some assets that leave them well-positioned to do systems change + root cause work in partnership with residents.**

Resident leaders still expressed confidence that, if these barriers can be overcome, CBDOs + residents working together could make a real difference in systems change + root cause work. They noted that CBDO staff have a detailed understanding of overcoming barriers of rigid systems + hyperprofessionalization because they experience these challenges in their day-to-day work. Interviewees felt that CBDOs are particularly good at navigating policies, which could open a door for residents to engage in systems change work around things like public

capital flow and equitable housing + land use regulations. CBDOs often serve as translators of formal community development jargon for residents, giving them the tools to apply their power + engage in the community development ecosystem, such as taking on speaking roles at council meetings, weighing in on proposed local policies, and sharing information + resources with fellow residents to increase resilience against forces like eviction + displacement.

Given the long history of community organizing in community development – particularly in the origins of the sector in the Black Power + Civil Rights Movements as an effort to push back against inequitable policies – residents felt like this kind of collaborative organizing work between residents + CBDOs could be a stronger priority in the sector. Many named that an important role of CBDOs is to remind residents of their power and provide tools + space for using their power to actively engage – especially through sustained, collective decision-making processes.

In thinking about this kind of deeper, more sustained partnership, residents also suggested that one way CBDOs help residents realize their power is by hiring them on as staff or otherwise pooling financial resources in support of resident leadership. This is not mere workforce development or a passive result of simply being located within a community; rather, when done with intentionality, residents perceived this as defying status quo practices of seeking out credentials over lived experience + affirming the notion that those closest to the problem have the solutions. Providing resources directly to residents (whether through full-time or part-time positions, participation stipends, or microgrants to support their own community development efforts) enables them to experiment + test new ways of strengthening community conditions. Such investments can stimulate a neighborhood economy, but they also ensure that CBDOs stay values-aligned + are resourcing people who are proximate to fellow residents + their needs.

## **HOW THOSE ROLES HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME.**

Across the board, residents did not note changes in the direct services of the CBDOs with which they were familiar. The people we interviewed perceived that the CBDOs that had historically specialized in resident services continued to offer resident services; CBDOs that had a long track record of producing new affordable housing units continued to produce affordable housing. That is not to say, however, that residents thought CBDOs weren't changing – they were just changing outside of core direct service work in ways that still felt very material to interviewees – less direct CBDO involvement in political processes + policy work; either increases or decreases in CBDOs' community engagement; less visibility in community; and added or updated focus areas. For example, interviewees noted that one CBDO continues to provide community design expertise but has significantly pulled back their community engagement and thus are now less visible than they were ten years ago. Residents know that they still do the work, but they don't see it or engage in it.

## Residents pointed to a number of working assumptions about why CBDO shifts happen.

The residents we spoke with put forward three main theories for why CBDOs with which they work have shifted – longevity, funding, and leadership. While three of our four CBDO partners incorporated within the past 15 years, interviewees did suspect that an organization’s political involvement tended to decline with age, perhaps as their funding diversified; in particular, increased government funding was perceived to create potential conflicts for CBDOs. Residents noted that, as CBDOs became more established, direct, public political engagement seemed to decline, while they increased efforts to stay values-aligned by indirectly informing + influencing policy. One such example was partnering with artists external to staff, who may have more latitude to make bold political statements + offer critique.

As suggested in this example, resident leaders also perceived that funding levels play a key role in what work CBDOs do more of + what they do less. For instance, they suggested that decreases in funding might lead CBDO staff to refocus resources away from community engagement + toward activities like land acquisition, affordable housing design + construction, and implementation of routine services. Funding did not seem to have as much impact on CBDOs’ ability to offer direct services, but where community engagement declined, residents saw a consequence that fewer people were able to access CBDO services + expertise due to lack of awareness, scheduling, and/or understanding of offerings. Meanwhile, when CBDOs were able to secure increased funding + other supports, resident leaders perceived that they were able to engage residents frequently + equitably; update programming to reflect resident-named needs; provide resources for residents to implement their own neighborhood programs; and hire residents as staff members, connecting the CBDO more directly to community. While funding increases appeared to expand staffing volume + staffing proximity to residents, CBDO decreases appeared to have the opposite effect, reducing overall staff size + also leading to long-time staff departing + new staff coming in. This was perceived to lead to a loss of institutional memory + staff being spread more thinly across CBDOs’ services.

Even beyond funding-driven staffing changes, however, the resident leaders we talked to believed that who occupied CBDO seats mattered a great deal to what organizations focused on + how they approached their work. Even when focusing on relatively young CBDOs, residents perceived significant staffing changes over the past 10 years. The loss of dynamic, passionate, and mission-oriented staff could significantly reduce connectivity to community members + break down relationships that may have taken years to build. The arrival of new leadership could potentially rebuild relationships + bring creative new energy to work, or it could result in a more technocratic, production-oriented, and community-removed approach, depending on the orientation of the leader and the history + culture of the CBDO.



## HOW CBDOS EMBED EQUITABLE PRACTICES, STRATEGIES, GOVERNANCE, BUSINESS LINES, AND POLICIES INTO THEIR ORGANIZATIONS.

One of the key takeaways from ThirdSpace's separate [Anti-Racist Community Development research](#) was that equitable community development is not a single "thing" but rather an overall framework + series of decisions that impact everything a CBDO does, from bylaws to hiring + onboarding to real estate disposition to resident roles in governance.

Resident leaders offered a similar sentiment. Rather than thinking about equity practices as only affecting one area of CBDO practice or policy, they pointed to numerous concrete examples of what they perceived equitable community development looks like (or could look like, if adequately resourced). While these varied across interviews, residents consistently offered up that equitable CBDO approaches include authentically + sustainably involving residents + other stakeholders across community development processes; developing and refining programs + services to ensure they are reflective of community needs; hiring or otherwise securing financial support for residents, in order to inform processes + programs; and setting intentional guardrails against inequitable or harmful practices, including intentionality around funding sources.

**Residents saw equitable CBDO work as about both maximizing benefits + minimizing harms.**

Generally, residents suggested that CBDOS were at their strongest when they consistently considered + planned their work in two directions – increasing positive impact of equitable approaches (largely but not exclusively from the CBDO itself) and minimizing negative impact of inequitable approaches (largely but not exclusively external to the CBDO). Increasing positive impact could look like centering residents in services + processes and lifting up accurate, asset-based narratives of the community. Minimizing negative impact could look like increased organizing against harmful practices by private market + government actors + being intentional about not accepting funds from organizations that engage in activities that are damaging to the community, especially for residents of color + residents living with low incomes.

In both cases, interviewees seemed to be echoing their broader emphasis on systems change + root cause work – pushing back against notions that neighborhood challenges are a result of neighborhood-level or household-level decision-making + elevating an understanding that neighborhood challenges likely result from severe systemic issues caused by a constellation of actors + market forces that exist well outside neighborhood boundaries.

## HOW CBDOS MIGHT CONTINUE TO BE RESPONSIVE TO COMMUNITY NEEDS IN THE FUTURE.

In general, resident leaders expressed a great deal of support for CBDOs and the work that they do. Many noted that their recommendations for changes in the future are directly linked to CBDOs' capacity + fiscal challenges and were strong advocates for CBDOs receiving more funding to do things like expanding resident engagement to a broader base or being more visible in communities by attending more events.

Recommendations largely focused on the degree to which CBDOs prioritize community engagement (particularly increased focus on making sure that a larger number of residents + other stakeholders are aware of services that they offer); how CBDOs approach their work (particularly in reorienting notions of success to allow for more creativity + innovation and focusing more on authentic community engagement as a priority metric, rather than real estate-oriented metrics); and who does CBDO work (particularly increasing internal capacity + hiring and otherwise financially resourcing residents).

Resident leaders presented the last recommendation with particular nuance. They saw increased emphasis on resident hiring not just as the right thing to do but also as an opportunity to better fulfill mission – by building trust, improving communication, spreading effective practices more broadly, and reorienting CBDOs to focus more on community priorities, rather than board member or funder priorities. Such goals could also be advanced by better assessing the expertise of existing employees (both residents + non-residents) to more fully leverage the skills that practitioners have in community) and ensuring that full staffs are appropriately matched to organizational roles. Even beyond direct full-time staffing, interviewees suggested that part-time employment, temporary employment, or more limited financial support like stipends or microgrants could still have a considerable impact on resident ability to participate more fully in community development work.

As residents leaders noted, though, all of this is contingent on adequate community development funding support, in an era when that is not typically the case – particularly in communities of color + communities of low incomes. This presents some questions that interviewees continued to grapple with. How can we address the lack of resources for CBDO areas of focus, especially when those areas are reflective of community-identified priorities, rather than current funding trends? How do we address the need for staff with lived experience with local context, if technical expertise required for the work is not present locally, which may be particularly true in rural + more remote areas?

Such questions do not come with easy answers, nor are they necessarily new in the sector. Nonetheless, they have a direct impact on how CBDOs function, and they also suggest that resident leaders have both a passion + analysis that lends itself to greater engagement, something that is perhaps fully understood or appreciated in the sector.



**WHAT WE  
HEARD IN  
ARTIST  
RESEARCH  
PARTNER  
INTERVIEWS**

ThirdSpace-led interviews resulted in substantive analysis from resident leaders who had high levels of awareness of CBDOs + engaged with them relatively frequently. At the same time, we also wanted to be sure to capture the perspectives of residents less involved with CBDO partners to ensure findings gave a fuller, more balanced picture of how CBDOs are perceived in community. To do this, local literary artists partnered with us + honed our lines of inquiry to engage residents in a conversation about their local CBDO + community in general. The artists were able to bring their own knowledge of their community and use their creativity to engage residents directly, sometimes in person, and adapt language as needed to have fruitful dialogue.

The result was a series of substantive conversations. Across these interviews, residents emphasized the importance of resident-led community development approaches, the role of artists in equitable community development approaches, and the importance of local organizations playing the role of technical expert, organizer, educator, and translator.

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## **HOW RESIDENTS AND OTHER LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE THE ROLES CBDOS PLAY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

Overall, responses were in alignment with those of resident leaders regarding CBDOs' roles as direct service providers, translators, connectors, and agents of narrative change.

Some residents who were unfamiliar with the CBDO prior to their interviews expressed interest in engagement after learning about their role + services. There was acknowledgment of the importance of things like collective land ownership, housing equity, engaging in policy processes, and increased engagement of other residents.

One resident specifically noted that "functionally, [the CBDO's] role is to create the infrastructure for community-based organizers to do place-based organizing" and that "the highest value + level of productivity a nonprofit could give any community, especially a poor, marginalized Black/ brown ... community is to be a source of refuge for the activists, organizers and freedom fighters of said communities." This sentiment was reflected in responses from most residents of all levels of engagement across geographies. CBDOs provide technical knowledge, space, and structure that community members collectively use to advance community development efforts in their neighborhood + build strong self-advocacy.

## **HOW THOSE ROLES HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME.**

Given that a number of these respondents were less familiar or had limited experience with the CBDOs, less was shared regarding how their role has changed over time. For those who did respond, they named staffing changes resulting in additional energy + new (needed) areas of focus; and an increase in community engagement in one community and a decrease in two others, primarily due to lack of funding and capacity. It was noted that in CBDOs where funding + capacity were limited, mission + values had not changed, but their ability to focus on and execute the mission + values had.

## **HOW CBDOS EMBED EQUITABLE PRACTICES, STRATEGIES, GOVERNANCE, BUSINESS LINES AND POLICIES INTO THEIR ORGANIZATIONS.**

Residents familiar with their local CBDO noted hiring local artists for programs; having residents as staff + on the board; providing support for residents to meet day-to-day needs (thus enabling them to better participate in community); and flexible paid time off for staff (particularly important for those with living with disabilities or long-term medical needs) as evidence of equitable practices.

Those less familiar named other local organizations that they do believe engage in equitable practices and suggested that CBDOs could do more to reach more community members + engage them in both their services + processes.

One person said their local CBDO does not embed equitable practices because “providing direct services doesn’t bring about equity – addressing issues at the root cause is what gets us to an equitable community.” While no one else was explicit about this, it is worth noting that most respondents were not focused on direct services when describing equitable practices or the role of CBDOs but rather being drawn to practices that they believe recognize + address root causes of community challenges. This common observation is not different from previous Community Opportunity Alliance research that named the tension between community development industry (focused on metrics + maximizing real estate production as indicators of change) and community development movement (focused on identifying + addressing root causes of inequities as indicators of change).

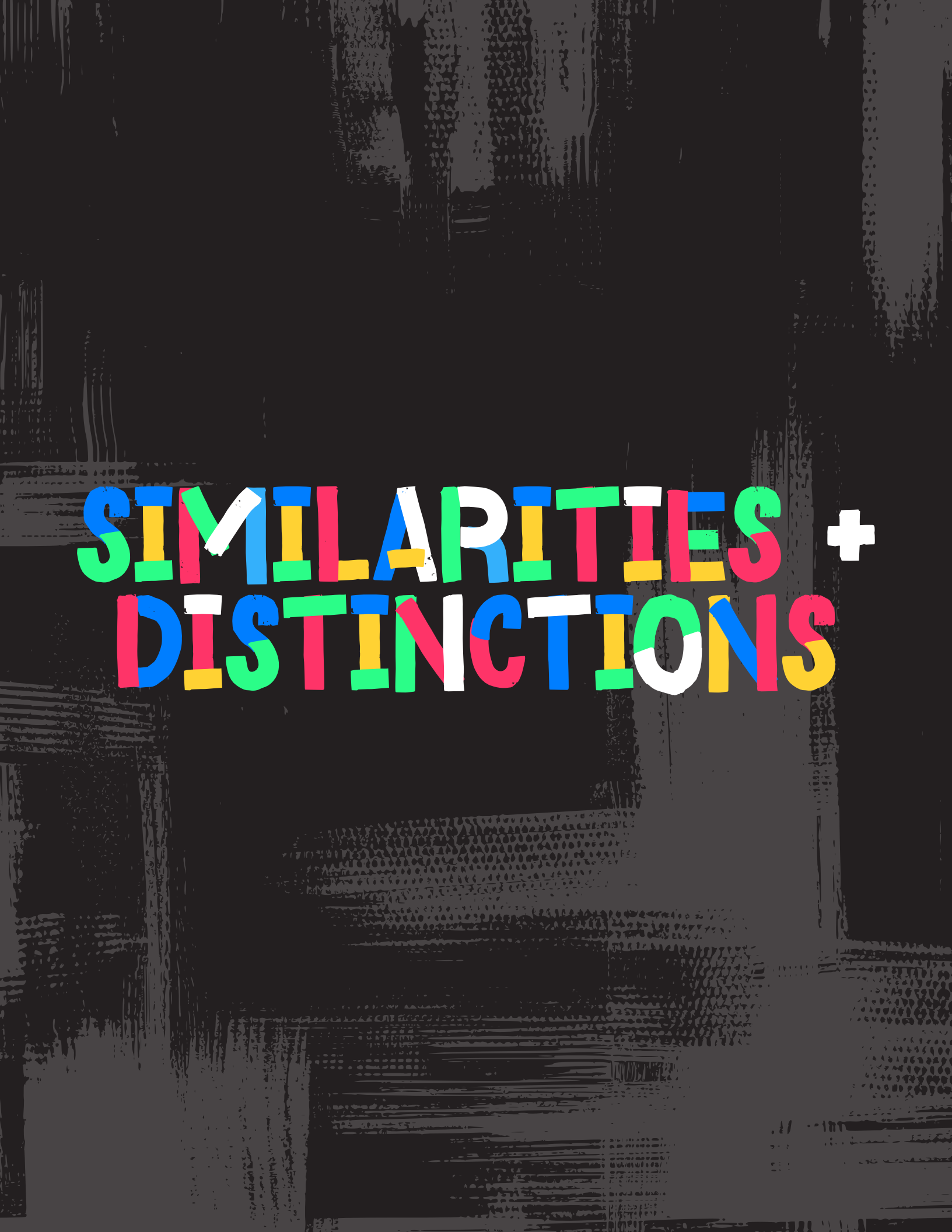
## HOW CBDOS MIGHT CONTINUE TO BE RESPONSIVE TO COMMUNITY NEEDS IN THE FUTURE.

Respondents often offered recommendations about future CBDO focuses based on the specific context of their community. Similar to resident leaders, however, common cross-community themes included increased community outreach; increased assistance to residents in understanding, navigating, and engaging in the local political landscape; increased grant support for resident-led programming; and resident-engaged narrative work. One respondent shared that they “hope that [the CBDO] can take all of its research initiatives and bring community members together to help deconstruct + unpack + analyze the data and then design a system that helps to create policies, procedures, and educational structures that benefit the populations served, as well as models for others dealing with those populations.” This suggests a perception that CBDO-led participatory research-based practice could be an important practice for staying responsive to community needs.

Lastly, residents shared that CBDOS can play a role in bridging the gap between generations. Tension between older + younger generations came up across multiple interviews, often with a tinge of frustration around lack of generational alignment, in-fighting, and resulting inefficiencies. This tension was framed in a number of ways, including older residents feeling as though they had not yet had a chance to lead despite their age (perhaps due to racism) and wanting their turn; disagreement between “old school” and “new school” approaches; and older residents maintaining a hold on local power and not cultivating or supporting younger leadership. At the root of these tensions is the unspoken expectation to show up in a particular way (typically a way associated with white dominant culture) in order to experience or demonstrate success in the United States. For example, some residents stated that people of darker skin tones (even among shared ethnic or racial identities) experience more challenges + barriers to leadership, engagement, and community participation than those with a lighter complexion, causing a concentration of a specific demographic in positions of power. In addition, youth may be criticized for not speaking the language of their home country or deviating from traditional cultural norms, religion, or other traditions and be seen as becoming Westernized or embracing “whiteness”. On the other hand, in some households youth might be encouraged to embrace whiteness as a way to succeed. This exclusionary dynamic contributes to intergenerational misalignment given that younger interviewees tended to be more interested in and focused on inclusionary tactics + approaches, as well as on challenging + modernizing their culture. These divergent views can cause major challenges around community organizing and aligning around issues of importance and also can show up within community organizations.

Generational misalignment around approaches + tactics also showed up in interviews in a similarly race-explicit context. Tactics + approaches from each generation may be viewed as either be rooted in or perpetuating whiteness: older approaches may be criticized for being hierarchical, not sharing power, and not being inclusive, while modern approaches may be criticized for lacking focus and clarity, being ahistorical, and focusing on inclusion rather than residents + communities with the most need. What was clear is that there is a desire to find ways to effectively work together while respecting the different viewpoints, experiences, and opinions of all generations. There are residents within each community who recognize the role of racism in the generational challenge and are working to bring people together. Some elders expressed excitement + gratitude for the openness + innovativeness of youth, while some younger respondents displayed admiration for what the older generations have accomplished + expressed a desire to build on that legacy.





**SIMILARITIES +  
DISTINCTIONS**



## WHAT SIMILAR VIEWS DID RESIDENT LEADERS + RESIDENTS LESS ENGAGED WITH OUR CBDO PARTNERS SHARE?

### **Direct services are one part of equitable community development, but other work (particularly narrative work) should be more highly prioritized.**

Both groups held broadly similar views about what CBDOs do, what they should do, and what they could do differently in the future – perhaps to a surprising degree. Both sets of interviewees generally felt that CBDOs play a crucial role in building equitable neighborhoods. They expressed appreciation for the importance of direct service work but also named the importance of more upstream focus – particularly around policy + narrative. All residents named that the dominant narratives of their communities are predominantly negative + myopic, in that they do not reflect the cultural + historic richness of community and are a major barrier to receiving relevant + sizable resources for community development needs like housing, infrastructure, environmental justice, or food justice. Interviewees in both groups suggested that these narratives are not grounded in history or current day-to-day reality, and they do not take into account the role systemic + structural racism play, such as in stubbornly high crime rates or the presence of food + financial deserts. Many suggested that CBDOs either do or should play a major role in positioning residents to collectively create + uplift an accurate, asset-based framed narrative, ideally with additional support for residents to do so.

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### **Engagement with CBDOs is generally easy but not without challenges.**

Residents rarely, if ever, have difficulty engaging with a CBDO, and most become connected via staff who are community members that residents trust (a few interviewees specifically noted that they would not have gotten involved with their local CBDO if they had not been invited by a trusted staff member). Trust was named frequently as critical to authentic engagement between residents + CBDOs and also fragile, especially when there are changes in staff or key priority areas. Where interviewees did experience challenges to engagement, the most frequent reasons offered were a general lack of awareness about the CBDO; a specific lack of awareness of current CBDO focus + offerings (not knowing whether they were “still around” or still doing programming); a lack of interest in current CBDO work; an inability due to immediate needs + personal obligations (a “focus on surviving”); or a wariness about engaging with a CBDO due to what were perceived as constant staffing + focus changes that cause them to doubt sincerity of values + ability to affect meaningful change.

**Even where current community engagement strategy is adequate, it does need to become more nuanced.**

While both groups did not perceive strong barriers to engaging with a CBDO, that did not mean that people engaging were having their voice heard adequately or equitably. While notions of where power in strategy, approach, and decision-making were not uniform across interviews, several constituencies were frequently cited as having outsized influence – policymakers + funders, private market real estate developers, CBDO board members, and more affluent residents.

There was a generally strong resistance to having outsiders come in and “fix” neighborhoods; residents were confident in their ability to address problems themselves with the right support. At least some interviewees felt that interrogating “community” + “stakeholder” would be worthwhile, as these terms are sometimes used to include people far removed from the day-to-day lives of residents. For example, there may be “stakeholders” who work at or own a business in a community but they aren’t necessarily deeply rooted in the community, have insight into the day-to-day lives of residents, or have shared lived experiences. It’s important to distinguish between those who are “in” the community vs. “of” the community.

Many also suggested that CBDOs prioritize having a more nuanced approach to engagement within the community, feeling that it was important to engage as many residents as possible and to be intentional around identifying which residents are not engaged; their demographics; what barriers they face; and meeting them where they are so they can be involved (should they want). Residents valued engagement approaches that go beyond the norm such as providing child care at meetings for residents or identifying businesses or spaces where underrepresented demographics gather (for example, a local business employing a high percentage of residents) then physically going into those spaces to engage people directly, rather than expecting residents to come to them.

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**There needs to be more focus on how best to build up financial support inside the community.**

Financial resourcing was a very frequent topic of conversation for both groups. There was widespread understanding of the structural limitations on CBDOs influencing dollar flows, but residents frequently expressed interest in engaging in that larger macro environment + establishing some basic guiding principles at the neighborhood level – namely that regardless of whether funding comes from outside the community; solutions should be designed + implemented by those living in the community; and regardless of the technical expertise that CBDOs may need to secure outside the community in the short term, there should be a longer term strategy for building up that technical expertise inside the community.

## WHERE DID RESIDENTS LEADERS + RESIDENTS LESS ENGAGED WITH OUR CBDO PARTNERS DIFFER IN THEIR VIEWPOINTS?

While we did not see sizable differences between the two different groups of interviewees, some did seem worth noting:

- + Residents who were less engaged with CBDOs generally named that they were interested in what the CBDOs do but were either not aware of them, did not feel the services were for them, did not feel that they were a target audience for the CBDO, or that residents of their racial demographic had not been made aware of the available or significance of a CBDO's offerings.
- + Those who were less engaged with CBDOs were generally more skeptical that the CBDO's current level of community engagement (or its current engagement goals + approaches) were sufficient for achieving meaningful community impact.
- + Those interviewed by artists more often identified as artists themselves. They lifted up the various ways artists can + must play a role in equitable community development given their unique perspectives, processes, and ability to reach people without being harmful or extractive.
- + Residents who were less engaged with CBDOs were generally more explicit about the need to support people's daily life needs so they have the space + knowledge to make informed decisions or play more direct roles in systems change + narrative work. They were also more likely to recommend challenging or undoing existing systems, rather than changing them or adapting to them.





**WHAT COMES  
NEXT?**

So where do we go from here? To start, we at ThirdSpace hope residents + CBDO practitioners see their experiences reflected in this document. We recognize that there are no silver bullets in community development; it is a complex sector where the context, culture, and history of places matters a great deal. No single research document can shift practice across all these communities, nor capture what resident engagement would be most meaningful in individual places. We see this research as a starting point, rather than an end destination.

The residents we + our artist research partners interviewed offered a great deal of insight that can help guide a way forward, though. Informed by their perspectives, ThirdSpace offers the following recommendations – for further research and refined practice. We also believe this work benefits from additional dialogue within communities; we offer some initial discussion prompts in our *Storied Communities Conversation Guide*.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Four CBDOs, four artist research partners, and 56 resident participants – it was not an insignificant number of contributors, and we believe that they offered a great deal to the national understanding of resident voice. At the same time, we recognize that across thousands of CBDOs serving potentially millions of residents, even the nuances here may not capture the full story. The following are recommendations we would make for future community development research, either building from the experiences of this research or around topics that warrant further exploration, recognizing the limitations of our own approach + scope.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

Continue to conduct community development research using creative methodologies, including ones like [Photovoice](#) and [Forum Theatre](#) that have already been employed successfully in the sector. Our partnership with literary artists as co-researchers helped us test different methodologies for making research accessible, enjoyable, and meaningful for participants. Continuing to explore creative research approaches (and incorporating lessons from participatory action research + equitable evaluation) could open up new lines of inquiry + produce new, meaningful findings, particularly for a sector that gravitates to research grounded in financial + property metrics. Examples include substantively engaging residents and/or practitioners in research design (including what inquiries are being pursued, for what audience, and to what end); using creative processes to break down jargon barriers to understanding + applying research; and leveraging research findings for ongoing dialogue + action, rather than as isolated white papers.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

Increase explorations of CBDO resident engagement in different geographic contexts. While we considered geographic diversity in this project, and while the CBDOs we partnered with work in very different local contexts, we also recognize that no four geographies can represent the entirety of experience of the sector. In particular, we would recommend further exploration of the state of resident voice within rural + tribal communities.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

Conduct research specific to the engagement experiences of targeted sets of residents, particularly residents underrepresented in community development dialogue due to barriers of income, language, education, or housing status. This project intentionally attempted to include the voices of a cross-section of residents by age, racial identity, and degree of engagement with CBDO partners. We can also see value in more discrete research that looks specifically at the experiences of residents of particular background, particularly those who are not typically foregrounded in community development work. We were struck, for instance, by the relatively scant mentions of small business development among interviewees, and could see value in tracking the specific engagement experiences of resident merchants – people who both own small businesses + reside within a particular neighborhood. Additional suggested target groups include residents from immigrant + refugee backgrounds and unhoused residents.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFINED PRACTICE

It is ThirdSpace's belief that standardized, top-down mandates around how resident voice should or must function in CBDs simply will not work. The context of a place matters a great deal, and local residents' priorities + preferences for how they engage matter even more. That being said, we believe the interviewees in this project offered suggestions that could have widespread national applicability. Their thoughts helped shape the following recommendations for how the sector might shift resident engagement practices.

### RECOMMENDATION 4

Increase commitment, resourcing, and prioritization of resident engagement. ThirdSpace's separate [research around the history of race, place, and the community development sector](#) showed that the origin of community development was less about housing development + business development and more about residents exercising their ability to choose issues most significant to them and secure resources + government support to develop + implement their own solutions. Community development began to formalize from these kinds of resident-led experiments, backed by Black churches and picked up as a key pillar of both the Civil Rights + Black Power movements.

Over time, community development has gravitated incrementally away from organizing + policy work and incrementally toward technical expertise, with a strong emphasis on real estate development. This has arguably led to better outcomes in the physical conditions of places, but the consequence has been that, rather than residents developing + implementing solutions for challenges, others have taken over defining + professionalizing community development. The overwhelming majority of interviewees put high value on these kinds of professionalized offerings of direct services. At the same time, they were strongly in favor of

reorienting + reprioritizing systems change work + root cause work – whether they were familiar with or named this origin story of community development or not. Interviewees placed a particular importance on engaging young adults in this kind of work, which they suggested would lead to community development that better aligns with needs + aspirations of the current generation.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5**

Acknowledge that “community” is not monolithic + begin to address barriers to participation that impact some residents more than others, particularly for residents of color. ThirdSpace is actively working on a [large body of work related to Anti-Racist Community Development](#), but in the current project, we intentionally avoided assuming that residents would foreground race themselves, particularly in the absence of race-specific prompts or lines of inquiry. It was, however, something that interviewees frequently volunteered, emphasizing how racism created structural barriers to both active engagement in community life, as well as in social + economic opportunity generally.

This was particularly true for Black residents, who noted being disproportionately impacted by rises in housing costs + being displaced by non-Black residents; local businesses not welcoming Black patrons; people of darker skin tones being treated less favorably even within communities of color; and being relatively segregated from communities of other demographics due to poor public transit + infrastructure. Immigrant interviewees also noted particular structural barriers they + their communities face, including a lack of supports for people who are monolingual or speak English as a second language. Of particular note, one interviewee discussed the tension of cultural assimilation in Western society and how certain cultural + religious aspects underlying Western community development can preclude integration of other cultural traditions, which could rob the sector of different but meaningful approaches to priorities like environmental sustainability.

All of this suggests that race-neutral approaches to resident engagement are not adequately addressing the specific circumstances facing residents of color. Interviewees recommended thorough + explicit acknowledgment of racism within CBDs + community conversations, specific longer-term strategies to address racial inequities, and practical shorter-term interventions along the way – reducing the use of technical jargon; holding meetings at times + places convenient to those most marginalized; and developing specific participation supports for residents working multiple jobs and/or caring for family.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6**

Increased root cause work, especially work focused on narrative change. Interview after interview, residents were able to name how their communities are perceived + drew direct connections to how those narratives cause harm for individuals, families, CBDOs, and whole neighborhoods. In particular, they recognized that outside perceptions of the people in a neighborhood had a direct impact on perceptions of how community development resources flow (or in many cases, are withheld). There was a keen interest in focusing more on pushing back on harmful narratives + promoting more accurate ones grounded in neighborhood assets (including people), history, and culture. Where that work is occurring, residents anticipated that it is not prioritized to the degree that it should or is interpreted as neighborhood branding + marketing, rather than as an attempt to inform more equitable policy + funding.

While sustained, collaborative narrative work may be a departure for at least some CBDOs, particularly those that emphasize development work, we believe that interviewees have made a strong case for why this may deserve more attention from at least some segments of the sector.

## **RECOMMENDATION 7**

Increase prioritization, consistency, and diversity of resident participation supports. Across interviews, residents stressed the importance of additional resourcing – financial + non-financial – to support their fuller participation in community development. This did not appear to be about individual personal gain; rather, the people we interviewed raised that resident resourcing could help expand community engagement from narrow community bases to broader ones; increase additional, unique nuanced context from residents who do not currently engage; increase resident advocacy, systems change, and power-building capacity across demographic differences; improve effectiveness of CBDO direct services + increase overall participation in those services; and expand resident capacity to take on some segments of CBDO work in ways that might “lighten the load” for time-strapped staff. While the most frequent recommendation was to move from providing residents with a seat at the table to hiring residents as full-time staff, interviewees were also very sympathetic to the financial constraints that CBDOs face. They emphasized that part-time employment, temporary contract employment, microgrants, and even modest stipends could still have meaningful positive impacts for long-term resident-CBDO collaboration + stimulate additional economic activity within neighborhoods (rather than resourcing outside consultants + service providers).



## RECOMMENDATION 8

Increase collaborations between residents + CBDOs around joint policy work, including around community development funding. Interviewees demonstrated an understanding of local, regional, and sometimes state community development systems and generally expressed a strong interest in partnering with CBDOs around systems change work beyond neighborhood borders – particularly around policy. Resident priorities around specific policy reforms varied, although there was a broad general consensus that increased substantive resident engagement + partnership requires increased, predictable, and equitable community development funding.

For organizations that are already doing policy work, there may be an opportunity to bring residents into existing processes + programs. This has the potential to demonstrate a critical mass of support, bring new ideas + nuances to policy agendas, and expand skills + hours that residents might be able to lend to time-starved CBD0 practitioners. For organizations that are not actively engaged in policy work, there appears to be resident appetite to do so and the potential for an “inside-outside” play. Some interviewees suggested as much, with CBD0s being able to work inside policy ecosystems to develop consensus and push for incremental change, while residents outside of ecosystems can demand more explicit, large-scale change. Either way, it struck us that many interviewees have community development funding goals that we believe may resound with many community development practitioners’ own experiences + priorities.

We recognize that this is just a start. Understanding how residents + CBD0s collaborate today, envisioning how we want to partner in the future, building a strategy to get from here... that’s complex, time-consuming, but also certainly feasible work. ThirdSpace + the Community Opportunity Alliance are committed to continuing to support this learning, planning, and implementation work ... and we hope you’ll join us in that effort.



## **GRATITUDE TO CBDOS, ARTISTS, AND INTERVIEWEES**

This project would simply not have been possible without the rich analysis, insight, and candidness that people brought to the exploration as residents, artists, leaders, + interviewees. Allowing ThirdSpace (virtually) into these communities was a great privilege that we do not take lightly. We will forever be grateful for their contribution to this project + look forward to continuing to build community with them in the future.



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