

## YOUNG TALENT

What is it that engages and disengages young workers in the community development field? This set of interviews is revealing in its focus on principles of practice.

# New Voices *in* Community Development

by Rick Cohen

**W**HEN DISCUSSING THE NEED TO recruit and retain talent in the nonprofit sector, nonprofit professionals often talk about the young people trying to break into various fields. But evidence that these professionals really hear what young people are saying is scant. This is particularly the case in nonprofit fields that are dominated by older, top-level staff.

In the world of nonprofit community-based development, there has long been talk of an impending wave of turnover at the executive director level. But little such turnover has happened. In fact, when the *Nonprofit Quarterly* contacted state associations of nonprofit community development corporations (CDCs) to discuss the role of young people in the community development sector, a few people scratched their heads and wondered where they might be located. “I honestly don’t know of that many young people in the field here, you’ve made me stop and think,” one association director from the Southeast noted. “We are a graying field,” said the head of a Mid-Atlantic region state CDC association.

Do the roughly three thousand CDCs operating in urban and rural areas of the United States

connect to the young people working for community-based nonprofits? Do they have something to offer the junior staff who work under the seemingly never-leaving executive directors, the multitudes of AmeriCorps members who anticipate getting tangibly involved in grassroots community development, the students at nonprofit management and urban and regional planning programs?

*NPQ* sought out young people in community development to discuss two basic categories of concern: what might they want from a career in community development, and how should the community development industry change, if at all, to accommodate and welcome a new generation of people into the field. We received extended commentary from a dozen young people from community development groups or associations in: Georgia, Texas; Michigan, Ohio; Virginia; and Washington, D.C.

## Finding Their Way into Community Development

A couple of years after the collapse of the National Congress for Community Economic Development (NCCED)—the longtime national trade association for the sector—a new organization arose, an association of state CDC groups called the National Alliance of Community Economic

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Development Associations (NACEDA). Still new, and looking for traction in the sector, NACEDA has emphasized, in response to its three dozen state association members, policy advocacy in a difficult public policy environment. One of the NCCED programs that was lost in the wake of its collapse—which NACEDA has not yet been able to resurrect and may at the moment have no plans to do so—is NCCED’s “human capital development initiative,” geared toward creating a pipeline for the recruitment and retention of young people in CDCs.

The motivation for young people to join the community development sector during its rapid growth in the 1960s and ’70s was, frequently, the issue of civil rights. In fact, many CDCs were products of the civil rights movement—New Community Corporation in Newark, New Jersey; Watts Labor Community Action Committee in Los Angeles; and others—and the graybeards at the helm of many CDCs are civil rights activists. Even the significant work of CDCs on building and rehabbing affordable housing and opposing the displacement caused by urban renewal (or “urban removal”) reflects a civil rights narrative and frame.

If CDCs are going to speak to the needs and interests of the new generation now trying to break into the sector, they will have to understand that the impetus of many young people in community development is more about building and strengthening community than shaking the institutional pillars of social inequality. Or perhaps, as Tawny Powell, the youth development coordinator of Resources for Residents and Communities (RRC), in Atlanta, Georgia, sees it, community building is basically tantamount to social justice:

I’m really passionate about social justice and bringing people together to realize commonalities they hold of which they may not have been aware. I love connecting people to each other, as well. I think it makes for healthier individuals and ultimately a healthier society. . . . I think connecting and reconnecting individuals to each other is incredibly important and

something that most individuals really do seem to enjoy once they get more involved. . . . Building a sense of community creates a kind of reciprocity between community members, where everyone feels a greater need to look out for one another and to hold one another accountable; in my opinion this is really important for any real and long-lasting progress to take place in communities. So, in essence, I love and care about people and their well-being, and I think people’s well-being can be improved exponentially by really feeling that they’re part of a community. At the same time, the community’s well-being will improve as a whole, and eventually society’s well-being, too.

Working in the community development sector is about being part of a community, as Virginia Supportive Housing’s Allison Bogdanovic put it: “Community development allows me to collaborate with others to improve the communities where we live. It is more than a job; it is a set of values emphasizing opportunity and choice for every neighbor and community member.” Erika Hill, who is currently studying at Rutgers after community development work in New York City and Atlanta, sees part of the attraction of community development work as a matter of self-actualization:

Despite the economic climate and the less-than-exciting [earning] potential . . . I am personally committed to making a social impact. I see the bigger picture and feel like it is my duty to “pay it forward,” because I have been afforded opportunities, experiences, and upbringing that many have not. Furthermore, I see the potential that the field has if more individuals like me are able to work effectively with veteran individuals to develop innovative solutions to the issues plaguing our low-income communities and communities of color.

Switching into nonprofit community development from the for-profit sector, MeiLee Langley, of the Texas Association of Community

Development Corporations, shares Bogdanovic's and Hill's very personal takes:

I eventually decided that I did not want to have years of my life spent simply settling for a job that paid well; I wanted to make a difference. I wanted a position that I could look back on in five years and see the contributions that I had made. I began doing a lot of research into the nonprofit sector to decide the direction in which I wanted to go. Community development caught my eye because of all that it does to benefit a city, from affordable housing to supporting local businesses and truly advancing low-to-moderate-income communities. . . . It was extremely daunting to switch career paths so suddenly, but I can honestly say it was one of the best decisions I have made.

### Staying in Community Development

While turnover at the top level of CDCs has been quite low, most observers in the field report a tremendous churning of staff below the executive director and deputy director levels. Given the personal passion that seems so characteristic of the motivation to enter community development, what might keep these young people on a community development career path?

RRC's Powell is aware of the burden of paying for the cost of student loans: "As far as compensation and benefits—something comparable to the private sector would be nice, especially since I (and I know a lot of my peers are in the same position) have a significant amount of student loan debt from both undergrad and graduate school." Brian Robb (from Lansing, Michigan) agrees, calling for a "fast tracking of student loan forgiveness." Strategies for dealing with the often crushing level of student debt have been a concern of the American Humanics National Workforce Coalition. Federal legislation enhancing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, which incentivizes young people to work in public service fields in return for a reduction of debt, might be an important step toward making jobs in community development more sustainable over the long run.

On the other hand, although no one wants to work for poverty wages, money doesn't seem to be a key motivation for staying in the field. What will keep some of these young people in community development is the prospect of advancement, a difficult proposition when the oldsters aren't vacating the top slots. Hill's description of a desirable position is one with "opportunity for growth and [that] promotes creativity. I am an individual who thrives in environments where I can take initiative and will lead something from start to finish." Can the old-timers give up responsibility and take a risk by trusting their young staff to take on real responsibilities? Currently working for a state community development corporation association, Langley sees herself eventually becoming an executive director of a CDC. But there are only a few thousand CDCs in the nation (mostly concentrated in the urban Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the older cities of the Rust Belt), and many continue to be led by people who have spent decades at the helm.

Dreams of advancement notwithstanding, nearly all of the respondents mentioned the importance of a "work-life balance," including increased vacation, shorter hours, and even a reduced workweek. The scenario of CDC directors working around the clock organizing City Hall and state capitol lobbying strategies while putting together financing packages for multi-subsidized affordable housing projects may soon become a signature community development behavior of the past.

### Obstacles in the Field

Starry-eyed idealists? Even with relatively few years of experience under their belts, young community development staffers know that liking your work and loving your community doesn't necessarily mean that a given job is sustainable. It is very hard to want to stay in a job when your supervisors devalue your input because you're young, because they were there from the days of the anti-poverty program and the civil rights movement, they've seen it all, and they know what will work—or so they think. With several years under her belt at Charis Community Housing, in Atlanta, Christy Norwood noted:

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I just wish those at the top would realize that while they once were on the ground—or if they've only gotten [to the top] through their studies—that things and times change and they shouldn't assume they know it all. I think they make a big mistake by not taking the time to consult and listen to those of us who are [now] on the ground.”

Lansing, Michigan's Robb agreed, with a bit more edginess:

The community development coalitions that are built are sometimes very exclusive, and decisions are too often made to advance the interests of the few while touting the flag of the many. . . . It's very hard to be critical of such issues without being taken for a wet blanket or misconstrued as a hindrance to business as usual. . . . People are averse to critique. I think we need to become more accustomed to critique and analysis of outcomes in an effort to become better individuals and stronger organizations.

Certainly, there is an aspect of these concerns that reflects the unwillingness of the existing leadership of CDCs to be open to the energies and ideas of young people. Robb contends that “in the smaller organizations I see the VISTA factory pumping highly educated, motivated, and talented individuals through nonprofits only to [have them] file papers instead of build local capacity as [was] intended. In government I see baby boomers reluctant to concede their influence.” But both Robb and Norwood are talking about more than CDCs' hiring and promotion policies. The ability of the community development industry to accommodate and nurture the young people in the sector depends in part on the structure and functions of CDCs themselves. The future of young people in the sector isn't just about salaries, vacations, and work-life balance. It concerns what CDCs do and how they reflect the values of the young people they want or need to attract.

Back in 2009, foundation grantmakers confided to us that some felt that CDCs were looking in the rearview mirror—fighting old battles and issues rather than looking toward new visions and directions of community development. In what new

directions might these young people want to see the sector move?

Robb would like to see “a greater emphasis on designing livable communities, but the community development field has been slow to respond. Perhaps this progression is limited by funding, talent availability, or organizational restraints; I really don't know.” The desperation to produce affordable housing in some localities has sometimes led to the design of less-than-livable urban environments. Young design-oriented professionals like Robb might be looking for CDCs to create neighborhoods where people *want* to live rather than *have* to live because of affordability constraints.

Norwood questions some CDCs' commitment to one of the core tenets of the community development credo:

I think we fail to actually get the community involved. I hear folks in big community development projects in Atlanta patting themselves on the back about getting community response/involvement. It frustrates me to no end. They get people with money . . . but fail to use the established systems for getting word out to neighborhoods.

Jamie Schriener-Hooper, executive director of the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan, expressed a similar concern about some CDCs' emphasis on money: “I think we're not necessarily always engaging the young people the way we should. CDCs have looked to older generations regarding who can give us money, but now few people can give money—now [we] have to look at who can give time and effort. . . . People aren't less valuable because they can't write a check.” Those same entrenched baby boomers Robb bemoaned may be typical of the community development leaders focusing on listening to the people with money and not the people in the communities. When young people who are idealistically committed to communities see leaders bypass input and involvement from community residents, it makes them feel that those leaders are not only smugly entrenched but also deaf to the communities they represent—as well as to the young people in the industry.

Monique Johnson, from Richmond, Virginia, gives a perspective that reflects a dynamic operating beyond the small neighborhood parochialism of some traditional CDCs:

We need to focus on organizational issues (initiate mergers, dissolve organizations, realign our strategic plans) and accept that federal resources are not going to return to previous levels, implement more systems to enhance efficiency, and use technology more strategically (build donor bases/marketing, manage projects, create internal efficiencies). I think that our organizations must also focus locally but think globally.

While young people want to connect to their local communities through CDCs, they also want to see their CDCs connect to the broader world and break out of an archaic parochialism.

Housing Network of Rhode Island leaders Chris Hannifan and Elizabeth Debs are listening to what young people want from the nonprofit community development sector, and have designed and implemented programs to respond:

While there isn't a lot of turnover at the top level [of CDCs], we have started a training program for the second- and third-level people. . . . We were lucky to partner with Roger Williams University to work with young people interested in the field. . . . [But] young people have a different idea of what community development should be—they're more visionary and idealistic . . . more than people who have been in the field for a long time. They have a "why not" attitude as opposed to [thinking] "we've always done it this way because the regulations require it," and so forth. . . . Younger people are thinking about what's possible, not about how things have always been done. For them, it's incredibly personal.

Housing Network of Rhode Island may be thinking in a structured way about identifying, recruiting, and promoting younger people in the community development sector, but the resources and initiative aren't yet being more broadly applied (beyond CDCs' frequent use of AmeriCorps and

VISTA workers, with the latter apparently much more likely to stay in the community development sector after completing their projects). The concerns of younger people in the field have led some young people in the sector to create an affinity group within the National Housing Conference. Young Leaders in Affordable Housing, as the group calls itself, is relatively informal, but, unsurprisingly for an effort initiated and run by young people, the group has taken advantage of social media by creating a Facebook page, and is thus generating considerable attention about where and how the sector might better accommodate younger professionals in CDCs.

Among the national intermediaries, NeighborWorks America (NW) has probably been the most active in thinking about the recruitment and retention of younger talent in the community development field. This is in part because NW supports organizations (the various Neighborhood Housing Services and other organizations that are NeighborWorks network members), while the larger intermediaries Local Initiatives Support Corporation and Enterprise Community Partners both typically focus most of their financial assistance on the CDCs' housing and economic development goals.

But overall, there is little happening at the national level to revive programs that not only bring young people into the field but also help create opportunities within CDCs for young people, as well as alter organizational cultures that might be resistant to exhibitions of "thought leadership" voiced by other than graybeards. There is a need for nonprofit community development as a sector to create both leadership openings and a cultural willingness to encourage the different ideas of young people who began their careers after the civil rights movement. If community development continues to age and calcify at the top levels, it could find itself weakened and left behind as funders and government agencies think ahead to a different, vibrant, more creative community development world.

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