

Mobilizing Residents for Action: The Role of Small Wins and Strategic Supports

Pennie G. Foster-Fishman · Katie Fitzgerald ·
Cherise Brandell · Branda Nowell · David Chavis ·
Laurie A. Van Egeren

Published online: 28 September 2006
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2006

Abstract *Yes we can!* is a community-building initiative funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation that aims to improve educational and economic outcomes in Battle Creek, Michigan by mobilizing low-income communities and resident leaders and building their capacity to influence the decisions and policies that impact their lives. This paper describes the strategies pursued during the first phase of this initiative to foster resident mobilization by building small wins within the neighborhood. Primarily through a neighborhood-based mini-grant program and staff supports to encourage collective action, *Yes we can!* has started to increase levels of resident mobilization within the seven economically distressed neighborhoods that initially partnered with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation on this effort. The specific programming components and how they were implemented as well as the initial successes experienced are described. Lessons learned are discussed.

Keywords Community building · Community organizing · Neighborhood mini-grant program · Capacity building · Comprehensive community change initiative · Social planning · Community readiness

“We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves.”

N. Scott Momady

Cited in Vizenor, 1978

Comprehensive community-building efforts seek to impact significant social issues by focusing on the economic, social, and physical transformation of a geographically bounded area (e.g., specific distressed neighborhoods or mid-size communities). A key tenet of many of these initiatives is that in order to build a healthy community, an active citizen base is needed. In fact, broad-scale mobilization of residents in change efforts and local civic opportunities is viewed by many funders and local programmers of community-building efforts as key to the success of these initiatives. Most, if not all community-building efforts strive to encourage resident involvement in neighborhood and community affairs with the belief that through such involvement, individuals can gain personal skills and greater self-confidence, improve their relationships with their neighbors and community institutions, increase mastery over their own lives, gain a sense of power in influencing the broader community, and ultimately gain greater access to and control over resources (e.g., Cornell Empowerment Group, 1998; Speer, Jackson, & Peterson, 2001; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Although many comprehensive community-building initiatives emphasize resident involvement and community mobilization, evaluations of such efforts have often found that eliciting the desired level of resident mobilization is difficult

P. G. Foster-Fishman (✉) · B. Nowell · L. A. Van Egeren
Department of Psychology, Michigan State University,
125 D Psychology Building, East Lansing, MI 48824
e-mail: fostifi@msu.edu

K. Fitzgerald
Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy,
420 NW 13th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73103

C. Brandell
Neighborhood Services Director, City of Battle Creek,
34 W. Jackson, Battle Creek,
MI 49017

D. Chavis
Association for the Study and Development of Community,
444 N. Frederick Avenue, Suite 315, Gaithersburg,
MD 20877, USA

to encourage and maintain (e.g., Chaskin, 2000; Gray, Duran, & Segal, 1997; Traynor, 2002).

This article tells the story of one initiative and its strategic efforts to encourage resident mobilization in seven economically distressed neighborhoods in the city of Battle Creek, Michigan. Prior to this initiative, these neighborhoods were characterized by low levels of resident involvement and resident leadership and a lack of neighborhood participatory structures such as neighborhood associations and block groups. Primarily through the design and implementation of an innovative neighborhood mini-grant program and strategic staff support, *Yes we can!* managed to foster levels of resident mobilization that had not been seen before in these neighborhoods. The purpose of this article is to describe this mini-grant program and the strategies used by staff to support and encourage residents to use these resources as a tool for resident participation and action. The evolution of this program over time and the challenges initiatives like this face when attempting to foster and sustain resident mobilization in distressed neighborhoods are described.

Building a community of possibility through resident mobilization

Yes we can! is the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's most recent strategic grantmaking initiative in the community of Battle Creek, Michigan. Insight into the process of community mobilization within this effort requires understanding the broader funding and community context within which the initiative was created. First, *Yes we can!* is intentionally designed to address racial and class inequities that exist within Battle Creek. Second, its approach represents a significant departure from previous grantmaking efforts in the Battle Creek community. Each of these conditions and their implications for how *Yes we can!* was designed, including *Yes we can!*'s theoretical approach to community mobilization, are described below.

A community with educational and economic inequities

In 1999, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation engaged in a strategic planning process in its home town—the city of Battle Creek, Michigan. As part of this effort, the Foundation and key community partners reviewed over 90 indicators of community health, broadly defined. Out of this analysis, a disturbing link between geographic areas characterized by concentrated poverty, racial separation and isolation, and low levels of academic achievement among children—particularly children of color—emerged. Simply put, within this city, ethnic minorities were overrepresented when considering poor educational and economic outcomes.

For example, 25% of African American residents and 31% of Latinos do not have high school degrees, as opposed

to 15% of white residents (2000 Census data). Twenty-six percent of African American residents and 19% of Latino residents live in poverty; only 11% of white residents have incomes that fall below the poverty line. These disparities become even more evident when examining some of the poorest neighborhoods within the city limits. Some of these neighborhoods overlay census tracts in which 30% to 43% of people are living at or below the poverty line and approximately three-quarters of the children attending the neighborhood elementary school qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs.

Educational outcomes are also particularly poor in these neighborhoods. In some areas, up to 42% of adults do not have high school diplomas, and in some of the local elementary schools, up to 80% of the children are not meeting state standards. Further, housing stock is poor—as much as 14% of the housing stands vacant in some of these neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of African Americans reside within these poorer neighborhoods (26% of the residents within the seven poorest neighborhoods are African American, as opposed to 18% across the whole city). In many ways, the conditions William Julius Wilson (1996) attributed to the rise of concentrated poverty within inner-city neighborhoods—employment opportunities moving into the suburbs, the decline of manufacturing jobs, and increases in low-wage service jobs—provide an apt description of Battle Creek, Michigan. New jobs are moving to the areas outside of the city limits, while residents of color—particularly African Americans—remain within the city boundaries.

Why resident mobilization?

A new approach to strategic grantmaking has been adopted by the Battle Creek Programming office at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This approach (called *Yes we can!*) is designed to focus on addressing long-standing racial and economic disparities in the community, particularly in the educational achievement of low-income children and children of color in the urban center of the city. A central belief and assumption of *Yes we can!* is that *adult and youth residents can be effective agents for change by influencing the policies and practices of community-based organizations and institutions through their full participation in public life*. While the Foundation has always emphasized “helping individuals to help themselves,” this belief was reflected in a new approach to grantmaking for the Battle Creek programming area.

Specifically, it required an emphasis on a “bottom-up” philosophy of grantmaking to ensure that grassroots leadership would be at the heart of the strategic focus for this effort. Prior to *Yes we can!*, the Foundation's history of working with the community of Battle Creek was more in line with a “top-down” approach to community change. This historical approach did not focus explicitly on building the leadership

of marginalized communities or on helping those communities to mobilize and build their power and organizational infrastructure to be agents of change in the community and/or region. Rather, it tended to make grants to large institutions or intermediaries who had little to no established capacity for engaging low-income communities. Overall, *Yes we can!* was grounded in the beliefs that: (a) in order to address the problems of low-income communities and communities of color, those communities *must* be represented in the local leadership, and (b) power, agency, and a strong infrastructure for mobilization, organizing, and leadership development must be built and sustained within those communities.

As such, improving educational achievement and economic self-sufficiency for vulnerable communities are the ultimate outcomes for *Yes we can!*. The question of *how* to mobilize the entire community, particularly unengaged adult and youth leaders from low-income neighborhoods, is really the essence of *Yes we can!*. Community mobilization, therefore, was targeted as the initial focus of the first phase of the effort. To achieve this end, the Foundation's overall framework of change for *Yes we can!* emphasized building a base of powerful, self-determined residents through leadership development and resident organizing and advocacy. This paper describes how the Foundation planned for and launched two initial strategic supports to promote resident mobilization in the form of resident organizing, action, and advocacy in seven economically distressed neighborhoods in Battle Creek.

Designing the initiative

Community-building initiatives like *Yes we can!* are in some ways a hybrid form of purposive community change. They are perhaps most often considered a venue for locality development in that they typically aim to engage a diverse group of residents in goal identification and social change (Rothman, 1974). They also often include elements of social action as they frequently work to organize disadvantaged groups to increase their access to power. Like other community-building initiatives in America, *Yes we can!* included all of these elements. What is less discussed and recognized in the literature on community building is the important role that social planning processes play in designing and guiding these initiatives. In most community-building initiatives, including *Yes we can!*, practitioners and funders take the lead in defining the essential problem to target (i.e., reduce educational and economic disparities), selecting the core strategies (i.e., resident leadership development) to be used, and sometimes even designing initial programs. A variety of processes are then used to encourage and motivate broader community and resident buy-in and ownership of the problems and solutions that have been selected (Arcidiacono, Sommantico, & Procentese, 2001). We highlight in this paper the social plan-

ning processes that were part of *Yes we can!* and the strategies that emerged from those efforts.

Determining core strategies

One barrier frequently encountered in resident mobilization efforts is the lack of capacity within the targeted neighborhoods to support resident involvement (i.e., few resident leaders and neighborhood associations and low levels of social capital) (e.g., Gray et al., 1997; Traynor, 2002). This may explain why many community-building efforts design strategies and provide technical assistance to build local capacity for change (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatish, & Vidal, 2001). In this initiative, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation knew from its conversations with local neighborhood development practitioners and other funders of community-building initiatives around the country that capacity issues would need to be addressed within Battle Creek as well.

However, conversations with local resident leaders and practitioners hired to consult on this effort suggested that neighborhoods targeted by *Yes we can!* also needed to become more ready for action. Residents are ready for action when they believe that change is possible, recognize their part in creating change, and believe that programs support their dreams and visions (Foster-Fishman, Cantillon, Pierce, & Van Egeren, *In Press*). Thus, in selecting and designing the core strategies to fund, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation sought programmatic efforts that would provide *tools for residents to build their capacity to engage in change* (e.g., by developing resident leadership, sense of community, access to resources) and *incentives to motivate residents to become part of the change effort* while simultaneously fostering resident engagement in collective action.

Certainly, a foundational tenant of community practice, particularly in social planning, is that a successful intervention is informed by and responsive to the context within which it is being implemented (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003). With the above goals in mind, the Foundation conducted a comprehensive needs assessment in the seven initial neighborhoods to identify resident concerns and desires and existing neighborhood capacities. The Foundation felt that given the current low levels of resident mobilization in these neighborhoods, it was essential to ensure that the strategies designed to foster resident action would address residents' needs and concerns, provide them with the incentives they needed to become more engaged, and provide the supports to foster needed capacities.

In the winter and early spring of 2002, 140 adults and 90 youth residents from the seven neighborhoods initially targeted by *Yes we can!* participated in focus group discussions called "capacity conversations" where they were asked to give input on residents' interest in partnering with the Foundation on economic and educational issues, describe

current neighborhood strengths and capacities as well as current issues and problems, identify dreams for the future, and provide recommendations on how to mobilize residents in their neighborhoods for action. Overall, residents indicated that a key component would be to provide vehicles for immediate change in the neighborhoods if the Foundation was to be successful in engaging people in the more arduous, longer-term efforts to improve education and create economic assets.

Specifically, residents noted that issues of economic and educational improvement, while critical, were not necessarily the most pressing, day-to-day issues residents encountered. They also noted that these issues were perhaps too large and complex to tackle at first. They suggested that if the Foundation were to support residents in attending to some of the more immediate issues like installing lights on streets or creating safe, clean parks for neighborhood children, then resident interest in larger issues such as improving local schools might increase. According to residents, by creating small-scale improvements and quick wins that would energize the neighborhood and community, the Foundation might be able to help residents overcome the feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness that plagued some neighborhood areas.

In many ways, this suggestion reflects the perspective of Karl Weick when he suggested that social scientists rethink how they define social problems in a manner that allows them to actually do something about them (Weick, 1984). According to Weick, “When the magnitude of problems is scaled upward in the interest of mobilizing action, the quality of thought and action declines, because processes such as frustration, arousal, and helplessness are activated” (p. 40). Given that, Weick recommended that social problems be redefined as smaller, “less arousing” problems so that individuals can identify manageable efforts that will lead to visible success. With this input in hand, the Foundation designed two integrated strategies that would systematically foster and support resident mobilization: (a) a neighborhood mini-grants program and (b) staff support through a Neighborhood Connectors program.

Neighborhood mini-grant program

Neighborhood mini-grant programs have become an increasingly popular strategy used by foundations and other funders to foster collective action and resident mobilization, primarily in poor or distressed neighborhoods. In general, they involve providing small grants (typically under \$5,000, sometimes only \$250) to groups of residents or neighborhood-based organizations to address local neighborhood issues. These programs vary considerably in their purpose and structure, particularly around how

prescriptive they are regarding who can be the recipient of funds and what projects qualify for funding. For example, some mini-grant programs only fund residents engaged in neighborhood improvement efforts; others fund only local neighborhood-based organizations; and still others allow both types of grantees to apply for funds.

Similarly, some mini-grant programs fund any project that local residents identify to improve neighborhood life while other programs are more prescriptive, only funding projects that target specific initiative goals such as increasing parent involvement in schools or promoting positive youth development. Overall, however, most mini-grant programs share the goal of promoting bottom-up community building by investing resources in people and neighborhood-based organizations to creatively address the problems that concern them (Neighborhood Small Grants Network website, 2005). Thus, the mini-grant strategy fit well with the Foundation’s goal to use a bottom-up approach to grantmaking to achieve its goals in the first phase of *Yes we can!*

A neighborhood mini-grant program was also an excellent strategy for providing residents with the support and resources needed to achieve small-scale, quickly attainable improvements. The Foundation hoped that through the production of these “small wins,” mini-grant projects would have the additional impact of demonstrating to residents themselves and the broader community that resident-led change was possible within neighborhoods. Because individuals are more likely to engage in activities in which they are likely to be successful (Bandura, 1982), small-win efforts have the potential to impact communities because they are likely to generate resident interest and tap into existing resident abilities while creating visible, incremental changes in neighborhoods. Overall, the Foundation hoped that through participation in mini-grant projects in their neighborhoods, residents would become more ready and able to pursue larger collective action pursuits, eventually targeting the initiative goals of educational and economic disparities.

The *Yes we can!* mini-grant program was initially designed to fund primarily resident-driven activity. However, over time, more local organizations in partnership with residents applied for and received mini-grant funds. The *Yes we can!* program was also initially designed to be relatively non-prescriptive. The Foundation believed that in order to engage inactive residents in collective action efforts, resources and supports should be available to facilitate nearly any activity residents proposed to improve neighborhood conditions. For this reason, the *Yes we can!* mini-grant project was initially designed to support almost any resident-initiated effort with the primary belief that such flexibility would encourage the small wins needed to leverage larger change efforts in the future. Over time, the mini-grants program became more strategically linked to the educational and economic goals of this initiative.

A program designed to Foster Small Wins

The *Yes we can!* mini-grant program was launched in June 2002. This program was designed to achieve three specific goals: (a) help residents achieve quick, tangible results from their efforts; (b) create opportunities for neighborhood residents to build the relationships with each other needed to work together for change; and (c) demonstrate that the Foundation took seriously its commitment to work with neighborhood residents by quickly providing resources for action. Ultimately it was hoped that the mini-grant-funded projects would help build hope and trust, foster relationships, unearth new leaders, and create the groundwork needed for larger collective action efforts to occur. During its first fiscal year, \$25,000 were allocated for mini-grant projects in each of the seven initial neighborhoods. Equal dollar amounts were committed to each neighborhood with the hope that this would communicate the message that all neighborhoods were equal partners with the Foundation in this effort. It was also believed that it would reduce the likelihood that residents sitting on the review committee for these grants would be charged with favoring one neighborhood area over another.

Individual residents or groups of residents could apply for mini-grants of up to \$2,500 to support projects that would have an immediate positive and long-lasting effect on the neighborhoods in which they lived. Initially, qualifying projects had to meet only very general requirements. As long as projects: (a) had neighborhood supporters; (b) involved neighbors working together to change things for the better; and (c) targeted one of the three funding areas—helping neighbors learn and grow, improving neighborhood physical conditions, or fostering community building—they were approved.

The “non-negotiables” of projects were few; mini-grants could not be used for existing programs or services and could not be used for personal gain. Given that there were many people with limited English reading abilities in the neighborhoods and that the Foundation hoped to solicit as much interest in this program as possible, the mini-grant application was made as simple as possible, consisting of a basic two-page form. Applicants were only asked to briefly (a) describe the project and why they thought it was a good idea; (b) describe the results they expected from the project; and (c) estimate the numbers of individuals who would participate and identify other organizations involved. A brief budget was also requested.

Similar to other neighborhood programs around the country, the *Yes we can!* mini-grant program, including the application, types of qualifying projects, grant amounts, and selection policies, was developed by a steering committee of residents from each of the seven targeted neighborhoods. Initially, two committees were created, one of adult

resident leaders (two per neighborhood) and one of youth residents. Eventually, due to the challenges of generating youth projects, keeping youth interested in the grantmaking committee, and building youth capacity to fully participate in this effort, the two committees were merged. To ensure that the committee maintained the spirit and direction of the program intended by the Foundation, the staff member hired to support this program joined the strategic advisory group that the Foundation had created to provide consultation and advice to the initiative.

To keep the system as user-friendly and responsive to resident needs as possible, the Mini-Grant Committee used a rolling admissions process and met twice each month, generally reviewing between four and 10 proposals per session. In keeping with the capacity-building spirit of the program, the committee approached applications by suggesting changes that would help projects meet the funding criteria rather than simply approving or denying applications. The greatest period of activity for this mini-grant program was during its first six months. During that period, the program received 146 applications and funded 78 projects.

Residents developed a range of neighborhood projects within each of the granting areas: (a) community-building grants, which included block parties, open houses, ice cream socials, carnivals, and youth outings; (b) neighborhood improvement projects, which included lighting projects, landscaping of public spaces, park cleanups, and improvement or removal of dangerous buildings; and (c) learning grants, which included computer classes, language classes, self-esteem workshops, and tutoring programs. According to residents who were interviewed six months¹ after the start of this program and observations of neighborhood activity, the mini-grant program appeared to be achieving what it initially set out to do.

First, residents reported that these projects led to many immediate, tangible neighborhood improvements, including park clean-ups, home repairs and the installation of street lights. Residents also suggested that these improvements seemed to be inspiring the desire for even more change in the neighborhoods. As one resident described:

We had the first part and once that started, it just took off. . . The whole idea of partnering took off with the neighbors. The ideas of neighbors having the stamina, taking responsibility with a little help, and then you

¹ As part of the evaluation of this initiative, the evaluation team conducted in-depth interviews with 28 leaders from the seven participating neighborhoods to document the story of change that was unfolding in the neighborhoods. Informants were asked to describe the changes that were occurring and to explain how and why these changes came about. The findings presented here were all strongly and solely attributed to the mini-grant program.

get the idea that yeah, we can create change. It's kind of made people realize instead of just accepting this is how it is, we're only one person, one neighborhood—it's made people realize we can get together and change it.

Second, residents also noted that these initial efforts seemed to foster the connections across neighbors that used to be missing:

A lot of these folks were staying in their houses. . . they weren't communicating. Now we have people helping one another out when they're sick. They're sharing their leaf work; they're seeing about the elderly; they're baking one another pies and cakes. I know everybody in that whole area now personally. . . because we've bonded.

Third, residents reported that the mini-grant program communicated to their neighbors that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation was truly committed to working with and supporting neighborhood residents:

People feel better, more positive, because there's more hope for the neighborhood. We've been made promises before so there wasn't faith in any particular program. Now we apply for a grant and we got that grant! There are more projects that we're going to start next year. We're more confident that resources will be available to us now.

Overall, it appeared that the mini-grant program was achieving what it initially set out to do: provide residents with the tools and incentives to engage in collective action that would generate small wins.

Leveraging larger change

Although the mini-grant program had been designed to foster small wins and it seemed that such wins had emerged, the expectation was that these wins would initiate additional and perhaps even larger resident organizing and advocacy efforts within neighborhoods. In fact, while the initial mini-grants launched a considerable amount of neighborhood activity and generated many immediate "wins" for neighborhood residents, one year after the initiation of this program there was less evidence that these initial wins had a lasting impact on helping residents engage in larger collective action and mobilization efforts. In other words, the mini-grant program as initially conceived appeared to be an effective strategy for bringing together large numbers of residents for a specific event such as a neighborhood clean-up project. However, while these initial events created significant energy and hope within the residents in these neighborhoods and resulted in many visible accomplishments for the residents to celebrate,

few of these efforts appeared to lead to larger-scale mobilization efforts.

Through conversations with residents engaged in the mini-grant program and the staff hired to support this effort, the Foundation and its consultants identified three reasons why the mini-grant program was not generating the developmental growth in collective action desired: (a) the residents themselves lacked the capacity to take these initial small wins to the next level of collective action; (b) *Yes we can!* Connectors (the staff hired to support this program) were not providing the targeted follow-up and support needed to help residents build upon these initial wins; and (c) the mini-grant program was not being strategically used by residents to support events that would kick off further collective action.

For these reasons, the consultants (from a national intermediary organization) hired to provide technical assistance to this effort recommended that the mini-grant program be restructured to become a more strategic tool in providing systemic support to the initiative's goals, including fostering resident mobilization. They recommended and initiated several changes to the mini-grant program, the mini-grant steering committee, and the roles and responsibilities of the *Yes we can!* Connectors in order to move *Yes we can!* from a program-oriented initiative to a support system for collective action by residents (Chavis, Florin, & Felix, 1992). Overall, the goal was to maintain the spirit and energy around the small wins gained by mini-grant projects while simultaneously strengthening the role of mini-grants as strategic and systemic levers for change along with other systemic supports in order to advance the broader initiative.

A more strategic mini-grant program

In many ways, the strategic changes made to the mini-grant program that are described below were part of an intentional social planning effort to more "systematically influence" resident behavior (Pusic, 1980, p. 275). Mini-grants as a systemic support can be used as behavioral incentives and rewards. Because of their connection with larger systems (e.g., the Foundation) and peers, they encourage, reinforce, and validate certain community actions and experiences. Smaller, more strategic, and more widespread mini-grants create the environment and, with other systemic supports, the infrastructure for a community of possibility where large numbers of residents are ready and able to mobilize for action.

When the mini-grant applications were ready to be reprinted approximately 12 months into the program, the *Yes we can!* staff worked with the Mini-grant Committee to amend the existing application to become more tightly focused on both the process of collective action and the goals of the initiative. To increase the alignment with the goals of the initiative, projects now needed to fit into one of three funding areas—improving educational achievement, improving

family and neighborhood economic conditions, or building neighborhood capacity. Applicants were also now expected to identify “three goals that their project aimed to achieve” and these goals were expected to fit within at least one of the above categories.

To increase the capacity of residents to think strategically about how to use mini-grant resources, a series of 24 four-page “How-To Guides” was developed that provided concrete project examples and steps for implementation and directed people to other resources, including potential partners for mini-grant projects. Wherever possible, local residents who had completed successful projects were featured as case examples in order to reinforce the message that “people just like you” have carried out successful neighborhood projects. Overall, by requiring applicants to show evidence of how their project would increase resident involvement and target initiative goals while providing them with best-practice examples of how to pursue such processes in their neighborhoods, the mini-grant program became a more strategic tool with which *Yes we can!* could build resident mobilization and capacity towards larger collective action.

Community connectors and the *Yes we can!* program office

Another vital part of developing the support system for the *Yes we can!* effort to foster resident mobilization was the creation of a team of neighborhood-based “Connectors,” which included seven neighborhood outreach workers who served as coaches, mentors, facilitators, and resource brokers/facilitators for mini-grant projects and other neighborhood organizing activities. The Connector job description was initially developed based on the results of the needs assessment, which indicated that residents desired assistance in building relationships within neighborhoods and engaging more people in neighborhood activities. Because of this request, the Connectors were initially asked to broaden and deepen trusting relationships in the neighborhood and community, connect people to resources and opportunities for leadership, and assist residents and young people in developing mini-grant or other projects in their neighborhoods.

All Connectors hired required focused training and capacity building, particularly in the area of community organizing/mobilization philosophy and practices. In addition to these Connectors, the *Yes we can!* office, when fully staffed, included a full-time Director of Special Projects to work on institutional capacity building and with the Mini-Grant Committee, a Senior Community Organization Specialist to oversee the field work of staff, and an Office Manager. Four members of a national intermediary research and capacity-building organization also provided administrative and technical support to the office.

The work of the Connectors took three main forms that tended to progress in the following order: (a) activities to engage residents of their assigned neighborhoods and introduce them to the opportunities available through *Yes we can!*; (b) activities to develop collective action by resident leaders and groups (including relationship building within and among groups); and (c) activities to connect neighborhood groups with community organizations and resources for problem solving. The Connectors often began their work by introducing themselves to the neighborhoods through a series of kick-off events—large block party activities at local elementary schools where food was served, games were played, prizes were given away and plenty of opportunities were created for residents to not only interact with staff but to leave their thoughts, dreams, hopes, and mini-grant project ideas on large chart-paper stations scattered around the sites. Once initial introductions were made, Connectors moved to the next level of daily work, which was focused on building the capacity of neighborhoods to collectively mobilize for change and on developing or engaging existing grassroots groups interested in making change.

Overall, the outreach work at this time included a variety of strategies that are common to community organizing efforts (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003) to build relations with and among neighborhood leaders and other residents. For example, Connectors conducted one-on-one interviews with residents in the neighborhoods to help residents identify their self-interests, particularly those things that would spark them to action. From these interviews, Connectors were able to identify common issues of concern across residents and bring individuals with shared concerns together so that residents themselves could create or strengthen block or issue groups. Connectors also provided best practices information around approaches to issues and ideas for mini-grants or other projects, connected residents to community resources needed for problem solving, and helped provide support to other community organizations working with residents in collaborative efforts.

In addition, Connectors served as a primary resource for information and referral because residents often did not know where to turn for help with immediate personal, family, or block-level needs that acted as barriers to their engagement in larger, policy-change-level activities. In turn, community agencies often indicated that their services were underutilized. This mismatch between awareness and availability of services was identified as a key area for Connectors to target in the early days of the effort. Connectors could promote their credibility as technical resources to the neighborhoods by helping residents access existing community supports and solve immediate issues (promoting quick wins) while building relationships with residents to help them engage in more comprehensive activities.

Overall, Connectors played a critical role in supporting the implementation and success of the mini-grant program. The capacity of the Connectors to carry out this role effectively had a significant impact on how much the mini-grant program was accessed within a given neighborhood and whether or not mini-grant activities led to larger wins. For example, throughout Phase I, each Connector concentrated his/her work primarily within only one or two neighborhoods. The above suggests that staff support such as that provided by the Yes we can! Connectors fills a critical role when launching resident mobilization strategies. One leader described this niche in the following way:

“She [the Connector] supplied us with resources. If we were looking for something—‘Well, let’s call this person!.’ She had all these resources, just phenomenal, of people that I didn’t even know. You know, I’ve lived here my whole life and there were things that I didn’t even know that she was able to provide us with. Of course, she made it possible for us to apply for the grant. I didn’t know we could do that, you know.”

How do Mini-Grants Encourage Resident Mobilization?

Approximately two years after the launch of the mini-grant program, the evaluation team for the *Yes we can!* initiative interviewed residents in the targeted neighborhoods to learn, among other things, about the impact of *Yes we can!* on community mobilization and collective action. A similar story emerged across all three groups of informants: All agreed that the *Yes we can!* mini-grant program and Connector support played an important role in jump-starting resident mobilization in neighborhoods that had been previously plagued with very low levels of resident involvement and community organizing. For example, during its first two and one-half years of operation, the Mini-Grant Committee received 332 applications from residents and made 205 grants totaling over \$280,000. These projects were initiated by 212 different residents and have involved over 4,000 individuals to date. Through the support of the Connectors, these projects and other efforts have helped launch 21 new resident issue or neighborhood block groups in the targeted neighborhoods. A few of these groups have even mobilized for change at the city level.

The informants were also asked to describe how the mini-grant program and Connector support encouraged resident mobilization. Two key processes were identified: (a) the mini-grant program provided immediate visible changes in the neighborhoods that motivated residents to become involved; and (b) the program promoted resident ownership for change which, in turn, created the desire to become even more involved. Initial accomplishments from the mini-grants were described as “snowballing” into more projects as a

result of their ability to create visible wins that brought about a greater sense of confidence, interest, and sense of possibility among residents.

The processes and initial wins generated by *Yes we can!* appear to have built a sense of ownership for the neighborhood and an increased sense of collective efficacy among residents. Through the success of their own efforts or mini-grant projects, as well as their pride in designing and then implementing these projects, mostly by themselves, the message of efficacy was self-discovered (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). The fact that success was discovered by residents themselves is critical, since information that individuals discover on their own is more likely to be trusted (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993). Interviewees commented that through the mini-grant program and initial successes, residents were beginning to feel like “this neighborhood is ours” and that they could make a difference.

Lessons learned

As the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and its partners have reflected on the successes and challenges of *Yes we can!* resident mobilization efforts, several key lessons learned have been identified. We present three of the most critical lessons learned and discuss their implications for others interested in fostering community mobilization.

Key Lesson #1: Creating a community that is ready and able to mobilize is time consuming, requires ongoing attention at multiple levels, and demands a flexible, responsive approach. We found that the work of fostering high levels of sustained resident mobilization has taken much longer than anticipated and is not complete. Although the initiative has made important inroads in increasing resident participation and involvement, three years into the initiative the resident mobilization levels that have emerged are still not where they need to be to support large-scale shifts in resident power and collective action efforts in the city. In order to expand the mobilization of the community, the Foundation will need to continue to support key strategies like community organizing and the mini-grant program throughout the life of the initiative.

While gains have been made in increasing resident mobilization, there is data that suggest that a significant number of challenges and barriers to expanding and sustaining this level of mobilization exist within Battle Creek. One of these challenges is the need for greater numbers of skilled leaders (Foster-Fishman, Quon-Huber, & Pierce, 2004). In some neighborhood areas, it is still difficult to identify and/or engage specific leaders. Moreover, leaders described themselves as generally isolated from each other and rate themselves as relatively unskilled at supporting a community mobilization process, particularly around organizing others for change and communicating issues and concerns to

decision-makers. By emphasizing leadership development in Phase II of *Yes we can!*, it is hoped that residents will build the skills they need and develop connections to other resident leaders (Chaskin et al., 2001).

We also learned that readiness and capacity are dynamic, multi-leveled processes. For example, the defining elements of a neighborhood's readiness or capacity to mobilize for change may shift as the question "ready or able to mobilize for what" changes with each small win (Weick, 1984). For example, residents initially told us that one reason they were not yet ready to mobilize was due to the lack of bonding social capital that existed within the neighborhoods. Yet, even though *Yes we can!* efforts began to successfully build sense of community within some neighborhood areas and this in turn appeared to foster continued involvement in neighborhood events and block parties, Connectors and some resident leaders experienced significant challenges as they attempted to generate greater resident involvement in groups targeting more substantive neighborhood issues (e.g., poor school performance, crime). We believe that one reason such barriers were experienced was because the goal of generating resident interest in and commitment to organizing around an issue required a different state of readiness and capacity than was created by the mini-grants and Connectors' work. In other words, levels of sense of community may matter less when attempting to mobilize residents around highly substantive issues. This suggests that programs interested in building a community that is ready and able to mobilize must recognize the developmental nature of such efforts and scaffold programming efforts to support the shifting states of readiness and capacity as they emerge.

In a similar vein, the staffing of a support office for efforts like *Yes we can!* requires attention to how the roles and responsibilities of key staff may evolve as the demands of residents and neighborhoods change. For example, Connectors primarily took on the role of supporter and outreach worker during the first year as neighborhoods began to become familiar with the opportunities provided by *Yes we can!*. However, as residents became more knowledgeable and skilled and desired more support around organizing efforts, the demands for staff skilled in organizing increased. Strategies for anticipating shifting roles and responsibilities and staff training to meet these changing expectations are needed in efforts like *Yes we can!*.

Finally, we also learned that issues of readiness and capacity are important to consider at all levels and for all partners within an initiative like *Yes we can!*. This includes reflecting on what readiness and capacity look like among residents, neighborhoods, local organizations and institutions. For example, one arena where the state of readiness may challenge many stakeholders in an initiative like *Yes we can!* is around readiness for the issues that emerge when pursuing collective power (e.g., community organizing) and the role that conflict

plays in the shifting of power balances. A deep understanding of and comfort with power, collective action, the healthy role of conflict, and the importance and role of leadership in this process needs to be developed by all parties at their own pace.

Key Lesson #2: Community ownership for an initiative like Yes we can! requires ongoing communication and is strengthened when programming efforts are run by the community. Goals, priorities, and approaches are institutionalized and most likely to be sustained when community-based partners become the publicly recognized owners and champions. The creation of a community-owned and governed infrastructure for neighborhood organizing and leadership development is essential. At the time *Yes we can!* was launched, some key organizations involved in leadership development and community organizing were immersed in various leadership, financial, and programmatic crises. As a result, a national intermediary operated much of the local organizing work associated with Phase I. For the long-term success and sustainability of the effort, the Foundation is focused on supporting the formation and development of a locally owned and governed infrastructure for community organizing at multiple levels, including neighborhood, city-wide, and regional levels.

The community ownership of this effort has also been impeded by the difficulty the Foundation faced in communicating a "systems-change" approach/vision to residents and organizational leaders. Such a vision is complex and residents sometimes found the discussion of policy change too abstract and/or felt that the Foundation was expecting residents to impact issues that exceeded their abilities. In addition, it has been challenging to help residents understand how the work of Phase I, particularly the mini-grant effort, is linked to the ultimate goals of *Yes we can!*. We have learned that communication is essential to such efforts and needs to feel at times overdone to really succeed in helping people understand key messages. We intend to sharpen communications and expand them in Phase II.

Key Lesson #3: The role of social planning processes within the context of a comprehensive community-building initiative is complicated. Although intentional in its desire to take leadership on the design of *Yes we can!*, the Foundation also intended to use this initiative to launch a "new way of doing business" within the community. Specifically, it hoped to communicate strongly to the residents that *Yes we can!* took resident input seriously and would be responsive to the needs and concerns raised by residents. While most community-building initiatives strive to use a bottom-up grantmaking approach and pursue resident-driven strategies, funders, as the Foundation did in this effort, often design the theory of change for the initiative and make the final programming and funding decisions.

This mix of social planning and social action strategies can create confusion and conflict across stakeholders and delay

decision-making as players work to decide who is strategically in place or on point to make particular decisions. It can also erode trust between funders and residents as residents who are promised a responsive, resident-driven approach begin to realize the limits of their decision-making authority. Obviously, funders often need to retain final decision-making authority, given their accountability. However, we learned that this role needs to be clearly communicated to residents and other stakeholders and the limits of resident input appropriately bounded at the beginning of the effort.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Yes we can!* has experienced some success at increasing resident mobilization within some neighborhood areas during its first phase of operation. By having access to the tools and incentives (in the form of mini-grants) and strategic supports (via Connectors) to organize for action, many residents were encouraged to pursue activities that fostered immediate small wins. The extent to which these initial successes can be leveraged to generate more extensive community mobilization and policy change and address the educational and economic disparities within Battle Creek remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank all of the members of the *Yes we can!* strategy team and the seven *Yes we can!* Connectors for their thoughtful work on this initiative. The story told here would not be possible without their efforts and insights.

References

- Arcidiacono, C., Sommantico, M., & Procentese, F. (2001). Neapolitan youth's sense of community and the problem of unemployment. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 11*, 465–473.
- Armenakis, A., Harris, S. G., & Mossholder, K. W. (1993). Creating readiness for organizational change. *Human Relations, 46*, 681–703.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1975). A Bayesian analysis of attribution processes. *Psychological Bulletin, 82*(2), 261–277.
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist, 37*(2), 122–147.
- Chaskin, R. J. (2000). *Lessons learned from the implementation of the Neighborhood and Family Initiative*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Chaskin, R., Brown, P., Venkatesh, S., & Vidal, A. (2001). *Building community capacity*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Chavis, D. M., Florin, P., & Felix, M. R. J. (1992). Nurturing grassroots initiatives for community development: The role of enabling systems. In T. Mizrahi & J. Morrison (Eds.), *Community and social administration: Advances, trends and emerging principles*. Haworth Press.
- Cornell Empowerment Group (1998). Empowerment and family support. *Networking Bulletin, 1*, 1–23.
- Coulton, C. J., Korbin, J. E., Su, M., & Chow, J. (1995). Community level factors and child maltreatment rates. *Child Development, 66*, 1262–1276.
- Coulton, C. J., & Hollister, R. (1999). Measuring comprehensive community initiative outcomes using data available in small areas. In P. Connell, A. C. Kubish, L. B. Schorr, & C. H. Weiss (Eds.), *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Theory, measurement, and analysis*. The Aspen Institute.
- Easterling, D. V., Gallagher, K. M., & Lodwick, D. G. (1998). *Promoting health at the community level*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Fawcett, S. B., Lewis, R. K., Paine Andrews, A., Francisco, V. T., Richter, K. P., Williams, E. L., & Copple, B. (1997). Evaluating community coalitions for prevention of substance abuse: The case of project freedom. *Health Education and Behavior, 24*, 812–828.
- Foster-Fishman, P., Quon-Huber, M., & Pierce, S. (2004). *Assessing the current state of resident leadership in Battle Creek*. Report to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.
- Foster-Fishman, P., Nowell, B., Deacon, Z., Nievar, A., & McCann, P. (In press). Using methods that matter: The impact of reflection, dialogue, and voice. *American Journal of Community Psychology*.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Goodman, R. M., Speers, M. A., McLeroy, K. L., Fawcett, S., Kegler, M., Parker, E., Smith, S., Sterling, I. T., & Wallerstein, N. (1998). Identifying and defining the dimensions of community capacity to provide a basis for measurement. *Health Education & Behavior, 25*(3), 258–278.
- Green, G. P., & Haines, A. (2002). *Asset building and community development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Murphy, P. W., & Cunningham, J. V. (2003). *Organizing for community controlled development: Renewing civil society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Neighborhood Small Grants Network, <http://www.nsgn.org>. September 25, 2005.
- Norton, B. L., McLeroy, K. R., Burdine, J. N., Felix, M. R. J., & Dorsey, A. M. (2002). Community capacity: Concept, theory and methods. In R. J. DiClemente, R. A. Crosby, & M. C. Kegler (Eds.), *Emerging theories in health promotion practice and research: Strategies for improving public health* (pp. 194–227). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Nowell, B., Berkowitz, S., Deacon, Z., & Foster-Fishman, P. (2004). Revealing the cues within community places: Stories of identity, history, and possibility. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Rothman, J. (1974). Three models of community organizing practices. In F. M. Cox, J. L. Erlich, J. Rothman, & J. E. Tropman (Eds.), *Strategies of community organization* (pp. 22–58). Itasca, IL: Peacock Publishers Inc.
- Smock, K. (1997). *Comprehensive community initiatives: A new generation of urban revitalization strategies*. Northwestern University.
- Speer, P. W., Jackson, C. B., & Peterson, N. (2001). The relationship between social cohesion and empowerment: Support and new implications for theory. *Health Education & Behavior, 28*, 716–732.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. *Health Education Quarterly, 21*(2), 171–186.
- Weick, K. E. (1984). Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist, 39*(1), 40–49.
- White, L. (2003). The role of systems research and operational research in community involvement: A case study of a health action zone. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 20*, 133–145.
- Wilson, W. J. (1996). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zimmerman, M. A., & Rappaport, J. (1988). Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 16*, 725–750.