

Philadelphia Conference Explores Future of Community Development

May 20th, 2010 by Joe Kriesberg

Last week I had the opportunity to speak on a panel at a conference hosted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia on the future of Community Development. The panel was the closing plenary session for the conference entitled [Rethink. Recover. Rebuild: Reinventing Older Communities](#). It was broad conversation that gave me an opportunity to reflect upon and share some of the lessons and experiences we have had as part of the Community Development Innovation Forum here in Massachusetts. My fellow panelists were Kimberly Allen from the [Wachovia Regional Foundation](#), John Bendel of the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh who leads its community investment program, and their [Blueprint Communities program](#), and [Raphael Bostic](#) who is the Assistant Secretary at HUD responsible for Research and Policy.

The discussion touched on many themes, but the one that seemed to resonate the most was the importance of working comprehensively and across silos. This was very reminiscent of the discussion a few weeks earlier at the [launch](#) of the [Institute for Comprehensive Community Development](#). Both Kimberly and John are focusing their grantmaking on efforts to undertake comprehensive, multi-issue, multi-stakeholder placed based change efforts. At the same time, HUD is working aggressively to break down silos between federal agencies and federal programs. Asst. Secretary Bostic said that HUD is in regular meetings with officials from transportation, education, health care and other agencies looking for ways to align their strategies and work on collaborative approaches like Sustainable Communities and Choice Neighborhoods.

The panel also engaged in an interesting dialogue about how we can determine “what works” so they we focus resources on those programs. While everyone certainly agreed that we want to fund “what works” there was some disagreement about how capable we are at really knowing what works given the complex set of relationships and networks that impact outcomes. How do we make decisions given this uncertainty? How do we make sure that we use data appropriately? And how do we decide what works when different stakeholders have different goals and priorities?

Fortunately, after participating in these policy and theoretical discussions at the conference Rick Sauer, from the Philadelphia Association of CDCs took me to visit one of his member organizations, the [Hispanic Association of Contractors & Enterprises](#). HACE Executive Director Bill Salas Jr. showed us the neighborhood and the incredible work that his CDC has done implementing precisely the type of comprehensive approach that we discussed on the panel in the morning. HACE builds and manages family and senior housing, operates an innovative Main Streets program that includes an emphasis on cultural economic development and tourism, a wonderful partnership with a health care agency that serves the residents of their senior housing (HACE custom built a facility for the health care agency on the same site) and youth programming. The agency is led by a board of directors comprised largely of local, Hispanic residents working together to improve their community.

While my site visit did not answer all the questions raised at the conference, I left Philadelphia reaffirmed in my belief that resident-led, effectively managed, community based development is certainly among the things that really does “work.” Hopefully, as the federal government and other funders renew their commitment to place-based and comprehensive work they will also renew their commitment to building and supporting the local organizations that actually get the job done.