



Black Feminist-Centered Community Organizing as a Framework for Developing Inclusive Mixed-Income Communities: Nicetown CDC's Village Network and Outreach Initiatives in Philadelphia¹

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Sustaining inclusive mixed-income communities requires fostering both community development and community organizing. We define community development as the mobilization of resources towards improving community assets, while we define community organizing as the mobilization of resources towards achieving social change, often through political participation. Unfortunately, communities often feel tension between the two approaches, and organizations tend to focus on one strategy to the detriment of the other. We believe both approaches must be implemented concurrently to foster inclusive mixed-income communities, particularly in cities that are finally experiencing growth after decades of decline and disinvestment. For disinvested communities that are majority-Black,² we advocate for a community organizing approach centered in Black feminist politics, which includes acknowledging, valuing, and cultivating leadership by Black women. We believe that the values articulated by Black feminist politics, such as validating and empowering the knowledge and traditions of local communities, allows for sustained community organization for social change while also providing opportunities for developing the physical and social capital of communities. Black feminist-centered community organizing can help to mitigate the tension between community organizing and community development strategies.

This essay examines the case of the [Nicetown Community Development Corporation](#) (NTCDC) and members of the organization's Village Network in Philadelphia. Black residents

¹ This essay appears in Mark L. Joseph and Amy T. Khare, eds., *What Works to Promote Inclusive, Equitable Mixed-Income Communities*, please visit the [volume website](#) for access to more essays.

² Editors' Note: We have recommended that essay authors use the term "African American" when referring specifically to descendants of enslaved people in the United States and the more inclusive term "Black" when referring broadly to members of the African diaspora, including African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and Africans. In this way, we seek to acknowledge the unique history and experience of descendants of enslaved people in the United States and also the diversity of backgrounds within the larger Black community. After considerable deliberation, we have also recommended the capitalization of Black and White. Though both are labels for socially-constructed racial categories, we join organizations like Race Forward and the Center for the Study of Social Policy in recognizing Black as a culture to be respected with capitalization and White and Whiteness as a social privilege to be called out. All references in this essay to Black/African-American, White, or Asian populations refer to non-Hispanic/Latinx individuals unless otherwise noted.

who had long been active in Nicetown formed the CDC in 1999 to foster inclusive urban planning and planning education in the area as the city's economy was on the upswing. Much of the organization's programmatic success stems from intentionally focusing on the role of Black women—a population that has long provided leadership in the community despite being marginalized by most community development practitioners. The case of NTCDC and its Village Network members experience illustrates two themes:

- *Focusing simultaneously on community development (i.e., improving the built environment) and community organizing (i.e., increasing local residents' consciousness, agency, and leadership around community needs) contributes to a more inclusive mixed-income community.* Using a framework developed by Shane R. Brady and Mary Katherine O'Connor in 2014, we analyze the strategies and tools that NTCDC and Village Network members used to build community, plan, mobilize, and translate positive outcomes into future organizing on behalf of an equitable, inclusive mixed-income community, and we compare them to the more widely used but narrowly focused asset-based community economic development (ABCD) model;³ and
- *Black feminist political organizing offers an effective framework for inclusive community development* because it values the contributions made by woman-led households and community networks—resources that greatly influence society and culture but are often ignored by other community development approaches—and builds on these strengths and lived experiences to mobilize residents.⁴ We apply concepts from Black feminist politics to contextualize NTCDC's mission and approach, not to exclude other racial and gender groups but to apply a framework that directly addresses and elevates one of the most vulnerable demographics in urban communities.

Together, these themes suggest ways in which community development efforts can become more effective in producing inclusive mixed-income communities. First, this essay will provide background and context on the differences between community organizing and development while establishing how Black feminist politics mediate between the two strategies. Next, we will discuss the case of Philadelphia and the origins and mission of the Nicetown CDC. Finally, we will provide illustrative examples of how NTCDC and its Village Network members stick to a core set of strategies to foster inclusive communities in the changing city.

³ Shane R. Brady and Mary Katherine O'Connor, "Understanding How Community Organizing Leads to Social Change: The Beginning Development of Formal Practice Theory," *Journal of Community Practice* 22, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2014): 210–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2014.901263>.

⁴ Fayola Jacobs, "Black Feminism and Radical Planning: New Directions for Disaster Planning Research," *Planning Theory* 18, no. 1 (February 2019): 24–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095218763221>.

Movement Context: Community Organizing, Development, and Black Feminist Politics

Historically, as cities' tax bases and populations declined with the onset of urban deindustrialization, community development organizations often felt forced to choose between politically oriented community organizing (delivered through community-based organizations, or CBOs)⁵ and asset-based community economic development (delivered through community development corporations, or CDCs).⁶ Black feminist politics, meanwhile, emerged with a focus on the specific needs and contributions of Black women and children. In order to understand why these approaches work well together to create inclusive, equitable mixed-income communities, it helps to know how each strategy for social change evolved.

Community Organizing. Community organizing is a practice for changing society in ways that improve outcomes for previously marginalized members.⁷ It is a strategic approach for building and exerting political power in contexts where certain groups are systemically excluded from political representation. Community organizing lays the groundwork for sustaining core values over time, by fostering and creating a community consciousness, literally “building community.”⁸

Community organizing's origins lie in urban industrialization, when community-based organizations such as Settlement Houses and social workers provided charitable works, goods, and services to impoverished neighbors.⁹ These organizations also acted as middlepersons and advocates for impoverished people, helping to create the first set of social welfare policies during the New Deal.¹⁰ Settlement Houses often worked with White, immigrant communities; as Black communities grew they also received aid, although less of it.¹¹ Community organizing during the early Progressive Era created the foundations for what came to be called poor people's politics. Impoverished groups had not had political representation in the form of policy directly

⁵ Paul Bunyan, “Partnership, the Big Society and Community Organizing: Between Romanticizing, Problematizing and Politicizing Community.” *Community Development Journal* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 119–33. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bss014>; James DeFilippis, Robert Fisher, and Eric Shragge. “What’s Left in the Community? Oppositional Politics in Contemporary Practice.” *Community Development Journal* 44, no. 1 (July 30, 2007): 38–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsm010>.

⁶ Bunyan, “Partnership, the Big Society and Community Organizing”; DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge, “What’s Left in the Community?”

⁷ Brady and O’Connor, “Understanding How Community Organizing Leads to Social Change.”

⁸ Adrienne C. Goss, “Toward a Village Consciousness: Organizing in the African American Cultural Tradition,” *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 8 (November 1, 2015): 797–816, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934715608110>; Saul David Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

⁹ Terry Mizrahi, “The Status of Community Organizing in 2001: Community Practice Context, Complexities, Contradictions, and Contributions,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 11, no. 2 (March 2001): 176–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973150101100204>.

¹⁰ Alice O’Connor, “Origins: Poverty and Social Science in The Era of Progressive Reform,” in *Poverty Knowledge, Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 25–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s5p3.5>.

¹¹ Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

benefitting their interests, and community organizing created a suite of social welfare policies that directly addressed the needs of some while exacerbating the needs of others.¹²

Community Development. Community development evolved out of community organizing in the mid-20th century, in response to declining urban populations and lagging private investment that made government intervention necessary. The New Deal and other social welfare policies were explicitly designed to mitigate urban unrest from high job and housing losses, particularly as experienced by men in the unstable labor market.¹³ These policies are best categorized as people- and place-based community development, with the overwhelming focus on developing individuals and places through workforce training, guaranteed mortgages for homeownership, and large-scale public works projects to stabilize employment and income while also producing new residential and commercial spaces within cities.¹⁴

Unfortunately, these federal policies had segregated programming for Whites and Blacks that was administered by state and local bureaucrats, whose prejudices often created differential benefits for Blacks and Whites. The individualistic emphasis on job training and mortgage assistance was helpful in lifting the White middle class out of the Great Depression but did little for the increasingly Black urban denizens during the economic restructuring of the postwar era. Many community development strategies have continued to prioritize middle-class norms of homeownership, nuclear family household composition, and post-secondary school completion, even if these methods don't benefit Black communities in the ways they benefit White ones.¹⁵

Black Feminist Politics and Planning. Growing post-industrial cities favored policies that privileged the individual over the community, capital over labor, and agglomeration over redistribution. This neoliberal turn in social welfare policy translated into a direct attack on the livelihoods of the most disenfranchised and vulnerable,¹⁶ including and especially single Black women with children. For them, the dismantling of the safety net of welfare, public housing, public education, subsidized health care, and other entitlements warranted a political response that met their particular needs. Black feminist politics sought to fill that gap in several ways.

¹² Michael B. Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty: Fully Updated and Revised* (Cary, United States: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/upenn-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1389039>.

¹³ Sheila D. Collins and Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg, *When Government Helped: Learning from the Successes and Failures of the New Deal* (Oxford, United States: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/upenn-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1538401>.

¹⁴ Don Parson, *Making a Better World: Public Housing, the Red Scare, and the Direction of Modern Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Meghan Kuebler and Jacob S. Rugh, "New Evidence on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Homeownership in the United States from 2001 to 2010," *Social Science Research* 42, no. 5 (September 1, 2013): 1357–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.06.004>; Donald R. Haurin and Stuart S. Rosenthal, "The Influence of Household Formation on Homeownership Rates Across Time and Race," *Real Estate Economics* 35, no. 4 (2007): 411–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6229.2007.00196.x>; S. Michael Gaddis, "Discrimination in the Credential Society: An Audit Study of Race and College Selectivity in the Labor Market," *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (2015): 1451–79.

¹⁶ Zenzele Isoke, *Urban Black Women and the Politics of Resistance*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013).

First, Black feminist organizing is committed to creating and sustaining “oppositional knowledges”—i.e., using knowledge of places as a tool for resistance and resilience in the post-industrial city.¹⁷ Oppositional knowledge leverages spatialized networks of knowledge banks to aggregate and synthesize information across a specified geographic area. In what Carol Stack refers to as “survival strategies,” the limited resources of spatially adjacent households are pooled to increase each individual’s chance of survival.¹⁸ Oppositional knowledge of households, resources, and strategies across a geographic area can empower and validate the decision-making autonomy of vulnerable individuals as well as promote great social mobility. An organization that collects and takes seriously the community’s oppositional knowledge (as opposed to the top-down practices often deployed by traditional community development organizations) is more likely to build community and cultivate trust.

Second, Black feminist politics addresses a core set of priorities that have long been central to the Black feminist tradition:¹⁹ high-quality and affordable or free education, fair and safe labor opportunities (and the ability to get to them), clean and safe neighborhoods with high-quality services, and affordable and safe housing. All of these priorities fall within the purview of urban and regional planning,²⁰ and thus require a political response. Creating and implementing a plan to achieve these political priorities, using community trust and oppositional knowledge, is a key part of Black feminist organizing’s approach to mobilizing communities for social change.²¹ By sticking with the core political values of home, education, health, and social mobility, residents can mobilize *independently* of publicly convened, top-down planning meetings to advocate for their own interests from the bottom up.

Infusing Black feminist politics into a community organizing approach calls for centering Black women’s leadership and engagement and intentionally engaging a diverse range of perspectives on community goals within Black femme interests—including those of young, elderly, queer, disabled, immigrant, and trans women²². Elected officials also serve an important role in empowering community members by translating oppositional knowledge into policies and programs and by advocating for Black feminist interests and policies. In centering a diverse mix of Black women perspectives in community organizing efforts, particularly in mixed-income communities, we can pay more attention to what Khare, Joseph, and Chaskin refer to as the

¹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

¹⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*; Duchess. Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, 2nd ed. (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²⁰ Jacobs, “Black Feminism and Radical Planning.”

²¹ Brady and O’Connor, “Understanding How Community Organizing Leads to Social Change.”

²² “About Our Work! – Uplifting the Narratives, Leadership, and Lived Experiences of Trans People of Color,” Trans Women of Color Collective, accessed May 20, 2020. <https://www.twocc.us/about/>.

“enduring significance of race” in structuring residential experiences.²³ This diversity of Black women leaders can help to mitigate the secondary marginalization that can occur within disenfranchised communities.²⁴

Geographic Context: Philadelphia and Nicetown

Philadelphia's population reached a peak of nearly 2.1 million in 1950 before declining to a post-industrial-era low of 1.5 million in 2000. As the city redevelops a thriving and diverse economy, community development and community organizing have both evolved and mixed-income communities have become increasingly common. Growth has been uneven in the last two decades, however. Map 1 displays the changes in household income from 2008—just before the foreclosure crisis that hit Black households at twice the rate of White households in the city—to 2017.²⁵ During that decade, some census tracts' median household values in the city decreased by 32 percent while others increased by 137 percent in the same period. The red highlighted portion of NTCDC's designated service area shows both sides of this spectrum: A few tracts saw values appreciate by about 30 percent, while some saw values decrease by 30 percent. While household values varied dramatically across the service area, household income was a bit more uniform: Map 2 shows most household income across the Nicetown census tracts either decreased or remained flat between 2008 and 2017. Many areas in Philadelphia experienced these simultaneous increases in household values while incomes remained flat or unchanged, creating increasing housing burdens in a high-poverty city. This housing insecurity and vulnerability makes it difficult for organizations to sustain community mobilization and advocacy in high-need areas.

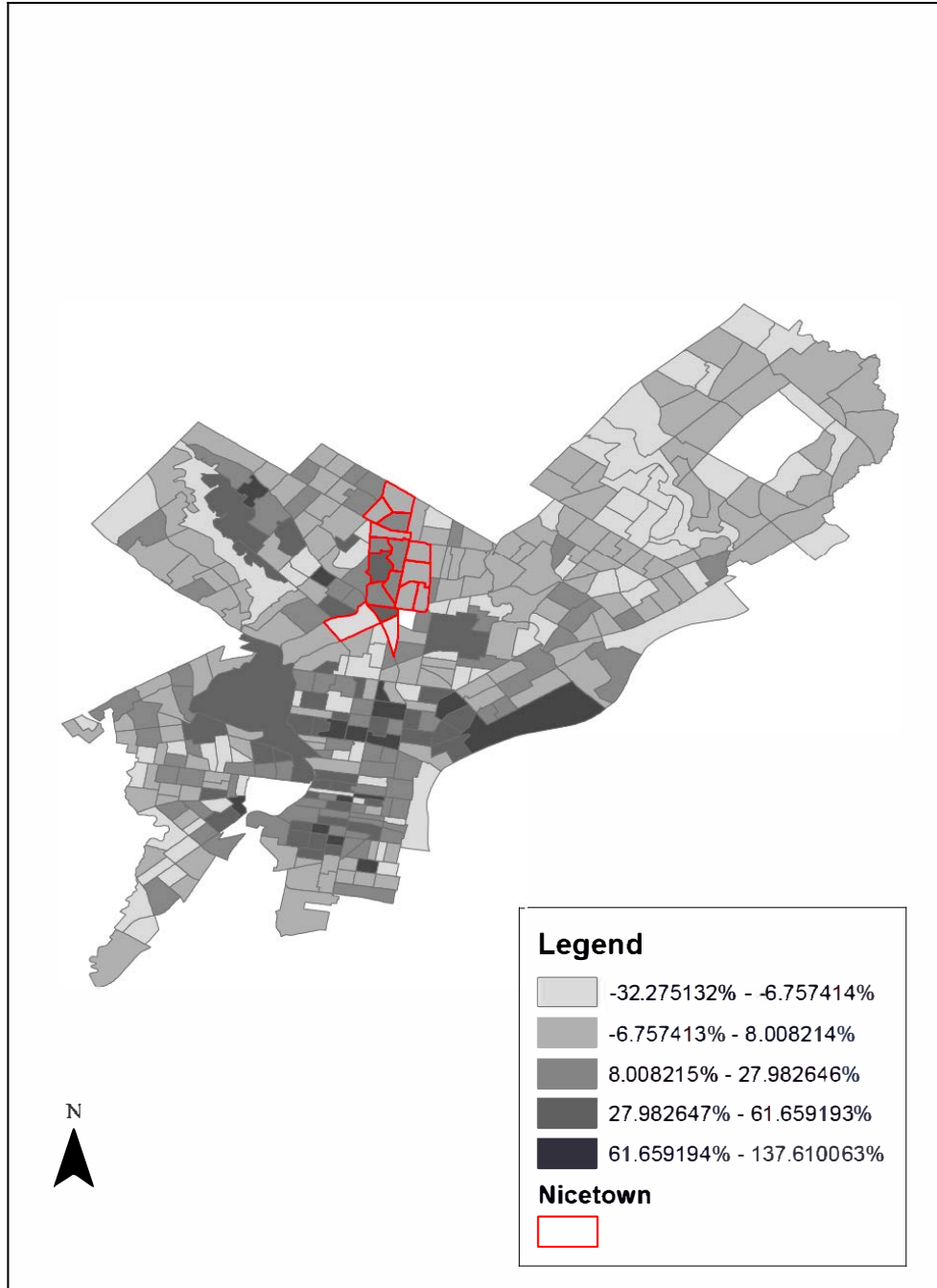
²³ Amy T. Khare, Mark L. Joseph, and Robert J. Chaskin, “The Enduring Significance of Race in Mixed-Income Developments,” *Urban Affairs Review* 51, no. 4 (July 1, 2015): 474–503, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087414537608>.

²⁴ Cathy J Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” in *Black Queer Studies*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Duke University Press, 2005), 21–51, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387220-003>.

²⁵ Svenja Gudell, “Homes in Black Neighborhoods Twice as Likely to Be Underwater as Homes in White Neighborhoods,” *Zillow Research* (blog), January 11, 2017, <https://www.zillow.com/research/negative-equity-race-q3-2016-14063/>.

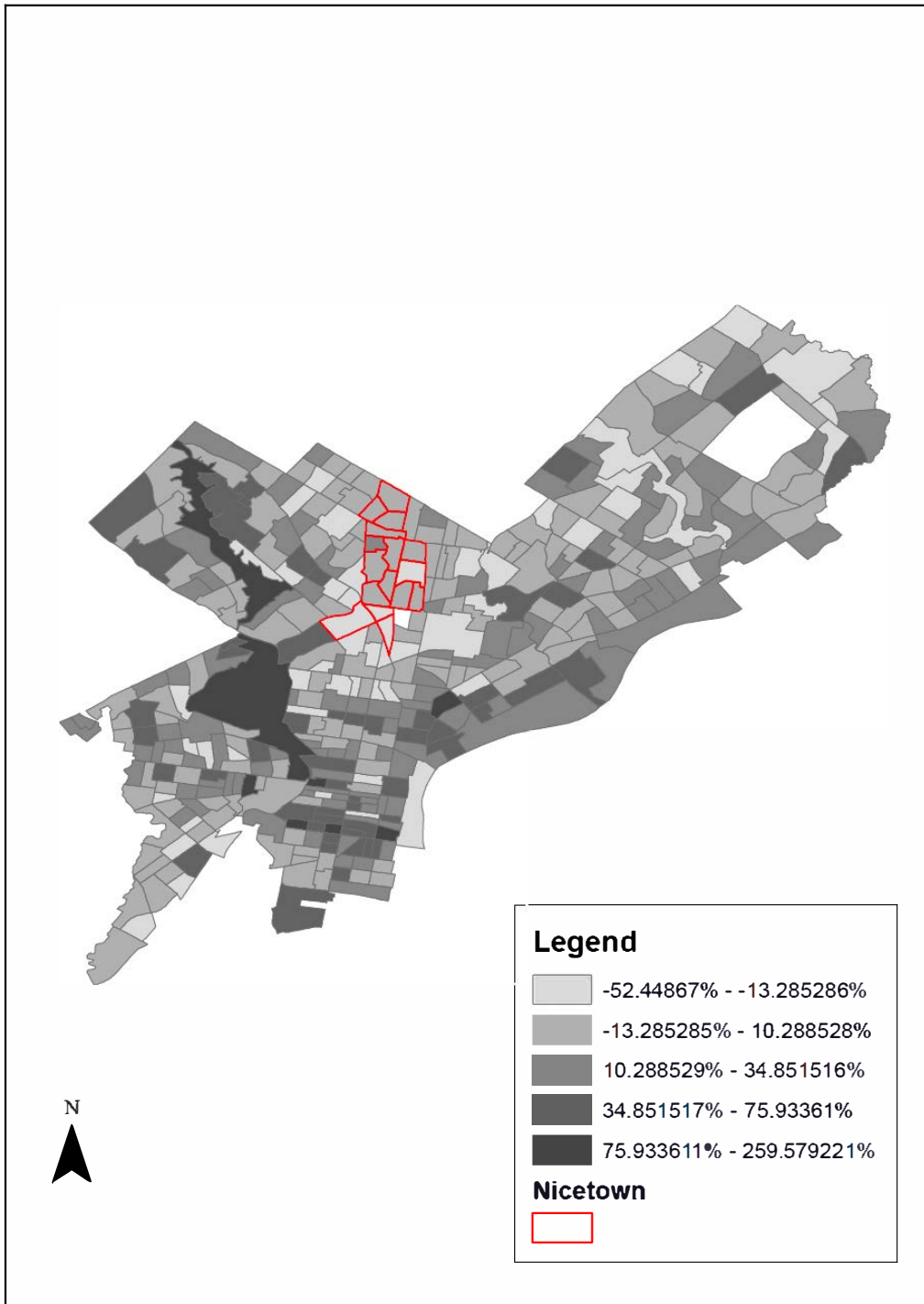
Map 1:

Changes in Median Home Value in Philadelphia from 2008 to 2017



Map 2:

Changes in Median Household Income in Philadelphia from 2008 to 2017



Post-industrial Philadelphia has a bifurcated economy powered by low-wage service and underemployed workers and high-wage, white-collar professionals. The metropolitan area is home to several universities, two teaching hospitals, and a wide range of pharmaceutical and chemical companies. City policies are concomitant with those of a growth machine, privileging the needs and development of downtown property owner and business interests, often to the detriment of social services and policies that would stabilize outlying residential areas.²⁶ The city offers a 10-year tax abatement for new construction and renovation, a reduced business privilege tax (while the regressive individual wage tax remains stable), and a number of business improvement districts that provide disproportionately strong amenities to high-rent areas in the city.

Population changes in Philadelphia have altered the practice of community organizing in different communities. In communities near the downtown and universities, membership in longstanding organizations is changing and new organizations are emerging to reflect the shifting demographics. For instance, instead of working to oppose an urban renewal project or protest the shuttering of a manufacturer, community organizations and residents in those areas are working *with* real estate developers and corporate interests to create business improvement districts and other neoliberal policy mechanisms. Sometimes, these alliances result in community organizations that are full of homeowners whose interests favor property value appreciation, regressive property tax policy, and extensive use of the carceral state and poverty criminalization to maintain these interests.²⁷ Thus, tensions between community development and community organizing strategies are appearing with increasing frequency in mixed-income areas of the city.

Nicetown, historically a working-class neighborhood in North Philadelphia, just 10 miles from center city, is seeing some unevenness in its own economic growth while still lagging behind the growth of the city overall. Once home to many factories and Eastern European immigrant households, Nicetown transitioned into a majority-Black community in the middle of the 20th century. The neighborhood has two primary schools and one high school, several parks and green spaces, a transit center for the city's regional rail system, and multiple subway stations. Excluding the newly-renovated transit center, very few of these places and spaces have seen funding committed from local, state, and federal government. The community also has strong connections to advocates of Black feminist organizing: City Council members Cindy Bass and Cherelle Parker are Black women who cover Council districts within or adjacent to Nicetown, and Kendra Brooks, a Nicetown resident and community organizer, successfully ran for a City Council At-Large seat under the Working Families Party, the first third-party candidate in over half a century. All three women advocate for policy initiatives that reflect Black feminist organizing priorities, while remaining committed to Black feminist core values.

²⁷ Robert E. Thibault, "Between Survival and Revolution: Another Community Development System Is Possible," *Antipode* 39, no. 5 (December 7, 2007): 874–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2007.00556.x>.

Nicetown CDC's Mission and Focus

The Nicetown Community Development Corporation (NTCDC)'s mission is “to dynamically improve the quality of life in Nicetown and surrounding communities by establishing sustainable community economic development.” The statement continues: “We fulfill our mission with a holistic and inclusive approach to goals and objectives that prioritize public safety; mobilization through ‘re-education’ and training; affordable housing development; commercial corridor revitalization; arts & culture, and land care.”²⁸

NTCDC focuses on homelessness prevention but takes a holistic approach to meeting individual and community needs. By addressing community development needs, such as affordable housing development and commercial corridor revitalization, *and* community organizing needs, such as mobilization through re-education, the organization straddles the divide between the need for material and political progress. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the array of information and services provided by NTCDC.

Fig 1:

EXCERPT OF NTCDC NAC QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER, JANUARY-APRIL 2019

QUARTERLY QUOTES:

"Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds! "
Bob Marley

"Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you just take it. "
Malcolm X

WE CAN HELP YOU WITH RESOURCES:

- Mortgage & Real Estate Tax Foreclosure
SAVE YOUR HOME PHILLY HOTLINE
215-334-HOME (4663)
- Basic Systems Repair
- Adaptive Modifications Program
- Rental Assistance
- Rent & Property Tax Rebates
- Settlement Assistance Grant
- Block Captains & Leaders
- HOME WEATHERIZATION & ENERGY COUNSELING
- REPORT VACANT LOTS & UNSAFE BUILDINGS
- Fallen Behind on your mortgage or real estate taxes?
APPLY FOR PROPERTY TAX RELIEF PROGRAMS
- EVICTION PREVENTION PROGRAM
- PURCHASING VACANT PROPERTIES & VACANT LOTS

The Nicetown CDC/NAC
Visit us : 4300 Germantown Ave., Phila PA
Or call us: (215) 329-1824
Hrs of Operation: Mon-Fri 9am to 5:30pm
(Closed for lunch from 1pm to 2pm)

FOLLOW US AND STAY CONNECTED!
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Working Together To Put The Nice Back In "The Town"

²⁸ “About Nicetown CDC,” accessed June 30, 2019, <http://www.nicetowncdc.org/>.

NTCDC's Core Features

Nicetown Community Development Corporation educates and mobilizes the community in several ways that make it more inclusive and equitable, some of which use community organizing tactics and some that focus on community development. The components include a Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC); a Village Network and drop sites; community surveying, needs assessment, and planning; financial autonomy; and a commitment to what we have framed as a Black feminist approach to developing leadership in the community, particularly among young residents.

Neighborhood Advisory Committee.

Neighborhood Advisory Committees (NACs) are funded by the City of Philadelphia's Division of Housing and Community Development to inform residents about city programs. NTCDC established a NAC in Nicetown to function as its comprehensive planning arm, providing ongoing education and encouraging community participation and collaboration. The NAC's outreach strategy, conducted via telephone, social media, door-to-door canvassing, service area briefings and community meetings, special events, and a quarterly newsletter, was developed "to help improve quality of life as it relates to housing, poverty, neighborhood conditions, unemployment and associated problems," NTCDC materials state. "The goal is to connect with residents, businesses, schools, and various community and faith-based organizations, and enhance our capacity to serve low-moderate income residents throughout the service area."²⁹

²⁹ "Nicetown CDC."

Fig 2:

NTCDC'S EFFORTS TO EDUCATE AND MOBILIZE THE COMMUNITY

PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION:

The NTCDC/NAC partners with the City, residents, faith and community organizations, businesses, corporations and institutions that share in our mission and enhance our capacity to provide resources to the community.

EDUCATION:

NTCDC/NAC staff educates those we serve to eliminate dependency and poverty. Energy conservation, budget counseling and money management tools educate and empower. We identify potential first time homeowners for the Nicetown CDC Homeowners Club. We also coordinate and facilitate trainings with Town Watch and 311, and workshops for parents. After school programs are designed to improve literacy and youth leadership.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:



The NTCDC/NAC organizes for voter education, clean ups, public health & safety, zoning issues, and taking care of our parks and Community Garden.

Village Network and Drop Sites. For marginalized households in Nicetown, a number of different organizations and places offer goods and services not provided by the public sector. However, navigating this network is difficult, particularly for new or elderly residents, or residents with limited mobility. To address this need, NTCDC established a Village Network that identifies individuals and locations that have agreed to help disseminate important information, which NTCDC staff hand deliver or email to them. The distribution points change in response to an ongoing assessment of neighborhood needs and use of space and place, but they include block captains, business associations, elected officials, faith- and community-based organizations, agencies, schools, hospitals, private businesses and other information exchange locations (“drop sites”). To date, the NTCDC/NAC has identified more than 130 drop sites in its service area. Networked approaches to community organizing are not new. However, this local, scaled-down approach is an improvement on the traditional network strategy because it incorporates the organization's ongoing commitment to surveying and assessing community needs.³⁰ These survey efforts are coordinated through social media, network listservs, and the Neighborhood Advisory Committee.

Community Surveying, Needs Assessment, and Planning. With funding from the Neighborhood Advisory Committee, NTCDC surveys the community frequently to learn about community needs. Housing stability, childhood health and development, and community healing and responses to gun violence have surfaced as needs most frequently articulated by the interviewees. One purpose of surveying is to draw people out of their homes and into the community. For a neighborhood where nearly one in three residents are living at or below the poverty line, and with homeowners facing disproportionately high foreclosure rates, these interpersonal interactions can have broader community benefits on health and wellness, according to Sandra Harmon, NTCDC’s data and outreach coordinator. “We see a lot of people, particularly seniors, living in silence not knowing that help is available...feeling ashamed, embarrassed, any number of things you can feel when you’re impoverished,” Harmon says.

The hard work of conducting methodologically rigorous and iterative community surveys pays high dividends as it strengthens the organization’s commitment to neighborhood diversity and inclusiveness. The surveys reach out to all residents across age, class, gender, ability, mobility, and housing tenure boundaries, literally “meeting people where they are,” as Harmon puts it, “from business owners who are needing to organize, right down to someone who is substance addicted and in need of some resources.” The organization takes a proactive approach to ensuring that marginalized interests are represented by going out to different community events and spaces, while also understanding that these surveys must be conducted at different literacy levels, in different formats, and address a range of needs.

³⁰ Robert Kleidman, “Community Organizing and Regionalism,” *City & Community* 3, no. 4 (2004): 403–21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1535-6841.2004.00096.x>.

NTCDC also uses survey results to inform planning and programming. NTCDC Executive Director Majeedah Rashid is certified by the local [Citizen's Planning Institute](#) (CPI);³¹ she is a steering committee member of two of the city's district planning groups and brings a significant amount of planning expertise and tools to NTCDC's programming. In this way, local community planning serves as an entry point to broader community and political mobilization and household and community empowerment, and is an important contributor to producing social change.³² When surveys underscored the community's concern with housing, for example, NTCDC obtained grants from local foundations and the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC) to create community plans for mixed-income, mixed-use, transit-oriented developments; worked with local designers to create renderings and hold charrettes; and ultimately managed to secure Low-Income Housing Tax Credits and over \$40 million in financing for Nicetown Court I and II. When the development and construction of the buildings encountered some community resistance to the proposed rent schedule, NTCDC responded by meeting the community where they were, holding a listening session, and increasing the number of units that could accept Housing Choice Vouchers.³³ The buildings, finished in 2016, contain 90 rental units as well as ground-level retail options, a medical office, a fitness center, and a new green space. This development certainly expands the community's resources, but the rents—\$573 per month for a one-bedroom unit, and \$937 for a four-bedroom—are far above median rental prices in the neighborhood and above the rent-burden threshold of many household incomes.

Financial Autonomy. Unlike older community-based organizations and CDCs, which had to accept government grants and contracts to provide social services in low-income communities as urban populations and tax revenues declined, the relatively new NTCDC has not relied on public or philanthropic money for its core operations, except for federal grants for weatherization and affordable homeownership programs. Instead, NTCDC finds that its leaders' ability to maintain strong personal networks in the community generates a great deal of in-kind donations. NTCDC often gets free consultations from local design companies, donated goods and services for its annual Nicetown Giveback Festival, and subsidized catering from local restaurants. This relative independence means that the organization can take on controversial political stances, but also leaves NTCDC increasingly dependent on its leadership. Other community organizations in Nicetown have also found that independence from public funding—either by choice or because city, state, and federal administrations are an unstable source of funding for social welfare—gives them more leeway to address individuals' ongoing material needs while also supporting the community's need for recreational and assembly space. For instance, the Giving of Self

³¹ The Citizens Planning Institute is a seven-week course free to all Philadelphia residents that provides instruction on core urban planning concepts. After completing the course, CPI graduates are engaged in citywide and community planning processes as stakeholders and encouraged to train other community members.

³² Brady and O'Connor, "Understanding How Community Organizing Leads to Social Change."

³³ Staff, "Community Tension Prompts Walkout at Nicetown CDC Meeting," *WHYY*, January 22, 2013, <https://whyy.org/articles/nicotown-cdc-meeting/>.

Partnership (GOSP), which serves low-income households in the adjacent West Oak Lane neighborhood, purchased a large building on the border of the Nicetown and West Oak Lane neighborhoods. It draws most of its revenue for programming from renting rooms to churches, day care providers, and party organizers.

Leadership Development. NTCDC was founded by Black men and women but is currently only employing Black women in leadership positions. Black women-led households dominate the Nicetown community, but there also is a large elderly population and growing youth population. NTCDC and other Village Network members rely heavily on the community to act as leaders of organizations; virtually all of the leaders live in or near Nicetown. Not only does this provide a level of comfort and accountability for residents and community organization leaders, it also provides the needed context to interpret surveys and needs assessments and translate them into effective programming.

NTCDC's Village Network in Action

As the examples that follow illustrate, NTCDC deploys its core components and its combination of community organizing, community development, and Black feminist political strategies to: fill funding gaps in community programs; ensure that low-income legacy residents have power and resources in a neighborhood where many community organizations are stretched to, and beyond, their limit; and empower residents to mobilize around their immediate needs.

Financial Autonomy to Support Leadership Development. Funding streams for local, state, and federal programs and initiatives are notoriously unreliable, because priorities tend to change every time a new leader assumes office. When public funding ends for programs that Nicetown residents rely on, NTCDC and its Village Network step in to fill the gap as best they can. The Nicetown branch of the free public library is a good example. Located in an unassuming building on a commercial strip at the intersection of North Broad Street and Hunting Park Avenue, it is one of the city's libraries with a mission to "advance literacy, guide learning, and inspire curiosity."³⁴ Fred Ginyard, the Director of Programming for the North Central cluster of the free public library system of Philadelphia, works with programming staff to fulfill this mission but also understands the library's broader role in the community. "We are the only free space with programming in the neighborhood," he says. "There isn't any [other] space that you're not going to get chased out of."³⁵ Sustaining an above-and-beyond mission is difficult in a community short on resources, but Nicetown library staff have received microgrants from the central branch for programs that serve community's specific needs, including a series of youth theatre camps and open-mic nights that were instrumental in building community and in building

³⁴ "About the Library," Free Library of Philadelphia. 2020. <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/about/>.

³⁵ Fred Ginyard, Interview with Fred Ginyard, In-person, June 10, 2019.

the space of the Nicetown library branch. Although funding for the open-mic night has lapsed, Nicetown Library continues to hold it with an entry fee, using audio equipment purchased with the grant.

Obtaining Resources for Nicetown Residents. NTCDC uses the Village Network and drop-site arrangement with 130 partners to connect Nicetown residents with an array of in-kind goods, services, supports, and opportunities. Reflecting priorities aligned with Black feminist politics, these resources center on those often most needed by women and families, such as food banks, childcare, training, and part-time work opportunities. For example, a parishioner at Provision of Grace World Mission Church (a Village Network member) who has connections to the national organization [YouthBuild](#) helped the church obtain programmatic funding to train local youth to rehabilitate occupied and vacant homes in the neighborhood. Residents of low-income neighborhoods often have weak ties to outside resources, but the network created and maintained by NTCDC helped make that linkage on behalf of Nicetown youth and families.

Before organizing residents, NTCDC must first overcome counter-pressures rooted in the neighborhood's history, urgent current needs, and residents' sense of disconnection from the community. These barriers reflect a core tension between community development and community organizing in mixed-income communities, notes Rhona Austin, who runs State Senator Sharif Street's Nicetown office: Communities like Nicetown were disinvested in and demobilized while other parts of the city experienced growth and revitalization. Residents are aware of how this affected the neighborhood—especially how public policy undermined the neighborhood's economic status. The long history of redlining and mortgage discrimination in Black communities, the stagnant wages and job opportunities, the declining quality and availability of affordable housing, and the ongoing threat of environmental pollution and health hazards that come with living in a neighborhood designed for industrial use all combine to create fewer household resources available to meet greater community needs. In that context, it isn't surprising that residents might resist showing up “to sit in a meeting [to] talk about a building across the street,” Austin notes. “How can you think about the community needs when you are too busy thinking about your own?”³⁶ Working residents might also be too tired to take on another project; often, meetings that are meant to mobilize and inform all community members are attended mostly by those who have free time not dedicated to work or domestic duties. “You would have the same 15 people out of a neighborhood of 500 show up,” Austin observes.

NTCDC's response is to frame community organizing as an immediate solution to residents' own needs. The organization and its Village Network partners take pride in preemptively addressing the concerns of local households and consistently providing goods and services that promote housing stability. Many of the organizations have weekly food pick-ups; clothing drives for holidays and the beginning of school; and semi-annual days dedicated to

³⁶ Rhona Austin, Interview with Rhona Austin, In-person, June 10, 2019.

utility bill forgiveness, record expungements, or other high-cost legal and administrative functions. At the onset of the foreclosure crisis, for instance, NTCDC canvassed homeowners in areas at high risk of foreclosure, including two neighborhoods just north of Nicetown, to provide information on foreclosure diversion and assistance. Their rationale, informed by Black feminist politics, was that freeing up the emotional and mental bandwidth of heads of single-parent households would lead to more participation and engagement in community actions.

Conclusions

The field of housing and community development can learn a great deal from the experiences of organizations in communities such as Nicetown. Inclusionary mixed-income communities require an iterative, community-driven, resource-mobilizing approach to organize long-term and newly-arriving residents over time. Community organizations working in areas where mixed-income development is occurring must increase funding independence and shift away from the often-conservative philanthropic foundation and nonprofit funding complex in order to maintain accountability to and flexibility for the changing community's needs. Focusing limited organizational resources on both community development and community organizing is difficult, but the benefit is inclusionary, responsive programming for communities that have both traditional and nontraditional options for community development. Centering Black feminist political values and leadership is an effective means of mitigating between this tension emerging from opposing community organizing and development priorities. This long-term investment in community will help to build trust, enhance educational outreach and community participation, and mobilize and empower residents to contribute to social change for marginalized communities.

Implications for Action

Implications for Policy.

- Policy makers should legitimize and support the networks, foci, and spaces needed to sustain Black feminist “oppositional knowledge” and should maintain and increase funding allocated to key Black feminist political interests, such as education, care, housing, and mobility.
- Local, state, and federal policies should:
 - Include funds for surveying, community building and organization, and implementing community plans;
 - Emphasize and provide funds for grassroots programming to sustain innovative strategies, such as the Village Network; and

- Counteract the pitfalls of funding community organizations—e.g., the emphasis on short-term service funding—by specifying funding for community organizing and community development activities.
- City governments can create dedicated streams of funding for community organizations that support multiple forms of data collection, by implementing a system similar to Neighborhood Advisory Committees.

Implications for Research and Evaluation.

- Measures of success for community development should not only focus narrowly on individual mobility but also on community-wide measures of empowerment and autonomy.
- Researchers should engage in Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) to account for their own biases and produce research reflective of community needs and empowerment goals.
- In keeping with the PAR/CBPR methods, researchers can conduct research and evaluation through local organizations and schools – engaging citizens in collecting data and using data for decision making (i.e., linking planning and empowerment).
- Researchers and policy makers should accommodate longer evaluation timelines for programs and interventions in order to capture impacts and outcomes in neighborhoods with high rates of disadvantage and poverty, which make outcomes difficult to ascertain. At the same time, researchers should build local research capacity and phase out their own direct investigation in order to avoid creating “permanent laboratories,” a longstanding issue involving social science in marginalized communities that undermines trust and induces research fatigue.

Implications for Development and Investment. Investment and development strategies should be diverse enough to account for multiple economy types while also offering balanced approaches to development for renters and homeowners alike. Maintaining neighborhood affordability while attracting market-rate investment is difficult. But the Nicetown Courts model with service-providers, medical, retail, and political offices on the ground floor mixed with residential units in a transit-oriented development is a great means of attracting development while addressing housing needs. Other targets for investment include:

- Cooperatives (for both business and homeownership/renters), which foster empowerment and address material needs at the same time. Cooperatives can also create employment opportunities with greater autonomy than other traditional job-training and workforce development programs.

- Community land trusts (CLTs), which allow nonprofits and governments to issue leases on land but not to sell the property. This creates permanent affordability, by limiting the ability to profit from real estate sales.
- Using a block grant model to leverage the power of larger organizations to attract funding, and issuing microgrants for community proposals to support businesses and provide start-up capital.

Implications for Residents and Community Members.

- Residents and community members must continue to hold community organizations accountable to their service areas and to changing political, economic, and social interests and realities.
- Residents and community members need to support organizations that innovate by participating in surveys, meetings, and leadership training and opportunities.
- Based on this case study, community organizations should consider the following when building inclusive mixed-income communities:
 - Foster empowerment and engagement by legitimizing “oppositional knowledge”;
 - Create space for people to gather and legitimize their own networks;
 - Tap into local funding to support community planning efforts and ongoing surveying and needs assessment;
 - Implement a Village Network model that stretches the definition of community—consider partnering with educational and other anchor institutions as a means to create weak ties in the neighborhood; and
 - Maintain ongoing educational opportunities in nontraditional spaces (such as parks, cafes, and laundromats) to engage wider segments in the community as an initial step of community building and empowerment.

About the Volume

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Readers can view this essay, the [framing paper](#) for the volume, and all currently posted essays on NIMC's [website](#) where new pieces are being uploaded every month. Essays will be compiled and released in a final print volume, with an anticipated release in 2020.

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