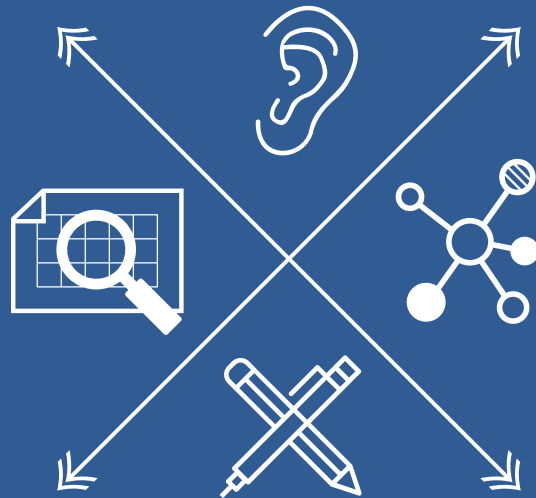


VIRGINIA COMMUNITY VOICE

BLUEPRINT



*A Four Stage Process Toward
Thriving Communities*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We are enormously grateful for the insight and guidance we received from our Steering Committee and Community Advocates. RVA Thrives would not be possible without the sustained engagement of neighbors who participated in interviews, completed surveys, attended focus groups, and provided feedback on the Blueprint language and design. Needless to say, the interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication, unless stated otherwise, represent the views of the authors.

None of this work would have been possible if not for the support and vision of Thriving Cities Group, who incubated RVA Thrives and launched Virginia Community Voice. We are grateful to Thriving Cities Group board and staff.

Finally, the Blueprint would not be possible without the very capable efforts of our colleagues at Virginia Community Voice not least Lea Whitehurst-Gibson, Elaine Williams, Nelson Reveley, Rodney Gaines, and Deborah Keys, along with the creative design of Alex Fulton.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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Patrice Shelton
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FORWARD

Dear Reader,

Over the last decade, while organizing thousands of people across Central Virginia, I have often leaned on the wisdom of those who have come before me, organizers such as Ella Baker and Saul Alinsky. RVA Thrives and Community Voice Blueprint builds on the work of those at Direct Action Research and Training Center who have harnessed the power of organized people for positive community change over many generations. I am grateful for the training and support I have received from other organizers, and excited to now share community organizing tools with neighbors on Richmond's Southside.

RVA Thrives was birthed on the Southside of Richmond in January 2017 because community members there were tired of broken promises. Though the Southside has deep history, community resilience and strong neighborhoods, the area has been divested and neglected for many years. Southside neighbors were ready for a change and RVA Thrives offered a method that put neighbors at the center. Using our Community Voice process we have been able to bring new resources to the Southside and equip neighbors with the tools they need to effectively organize themselves and realize their vision for their community.

When we started organizing along the Jefferson Davis Corridor (JDC) people were surprised that we wanted to listen to them! Neighbors were blown away when they learned we were there not only to listen to their concerns but to work alongside them to design solutions and leverage resources to implement their ideas. Surprise and skepticism are common responses when neighbors in divested communities hear of plans for revitalization and change. Historically, solutions to problems stemming from racial and economic injustice are designed for marginalized communities (not with them), by people who haven't experienced life there. Neighbors have told us that's why those solutions often fail.

This is a problem not only in Richmond, but in marginalized communities across Virginia and the U.S. Just like their more affluent peers, neighbors in low-income communities want to have a say in how downtown areas are redeveloped, or economic partnerships are leveraged. Yet they are rarely asked or are unable to access the tables where decisions are made. We wrote the Community Voice Blueprint as a guide for how to equip neighbors in marginalized communities to organize themselves and take ownership of the issues and solutions. We also wrote the Blueprint to encourage institutions to engage marginalized communities more effectively.

In my experience as an organizer, I have seen organizing efforts disregarded because institutions that have the power to make changes are not equipped to effectively respond to demands from neighbors and constituents. As we wrote the Blueprint, we became aware that there is not an organization in Virginia dedicated to both amplifying community voice, and preparing institutions to listen and respond effectively.

That is why we are also launching a new nonprofit, called Virginia Community Voice. Through Virginia Community Voice, we envision a Commonwealth where decision making is equitable. We will continue the work of RVA Thrives, and will offer trainings and coaching to institutions that want to engage marginalized communities more effectively. We believe by working with neighbors and institutions, we can build neighbors' trust and collective efficacy, change narratives, enact equitable policies and practices, and ultimately close gaps in outcomes for people of color and other marginalized groups.

We are deeply grateful for every community member along the JDC that has stayed with us throughout this process and believes that together, we will build a thriving Southside and more equitable Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lea Whitehurst-Gibson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L".

LEA WHITEHURST-GIBSON

Executive Director, Virginia Community Voice

INTRODUCTION

Six months before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia about their future. This is an excerpt from his speech, titled “What is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

I want to ask you a question, and that is: What is your life’s blueprint?

Whenever a building is constructed, you usually have an architect who draws a blueprint, and that blueprint serves as the pattern, as the guide, and a building is not well erected without a good, solid blueprint.

Now each of you is in the process of building the structure of your lives, and the question is whether you have a proper, a solid and a sound blueprint.

I want to suggest some of the things that should begin your life’s blueprint. Number one in your life’s blueprint, should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebodiness. Don’t allow anybody to make you feel that you’re nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance.¹

Dr. King goes on to instruct students to be the best they can be, no matter what they choose to do in life. To pursue their work, “as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it.”

Midway through the writing and design of the Community Voice Blueprint, our Community Voice team was in Memphis, TN to visit the National Civil Rights Museum. The museum is architecturally joined with the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was shot and killed six months after giving this speech to young students in Philadelphia.

We came across King’s Blueprint speech shortly after our visit to Memphis, at a time when we were debating whether “blueprint” was the appropriate metaphor for this project. The serendipity of our visit to Memphis and reading the Blueprint speech confirmed our choice.

The word “blueprint” describes what Community Voice intends to be—a guide for engaging and equipping neighbors in marginalized communities. It is a roadmap, so to speak, how to make equitable decisions at a neighborhood, institution, and community level.

“Blueprint” also links us to one of the most powerful figures in the fight for human dignity and civil rights in America. Dr. King’s words, and life, embolden us as we pursue racial, economic, and social justice in Richmond, Virginia, a community that is revitalizing, but overshadowed by its history and role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Civil War, and massive resistance to school integration.

We cannot change the blueprint used to erect our city. However, we can dismantle the structures which have divided and oppressed. We can lift barriers that deny many of our neighbors access to the fundamental endowments of thriving. We can rebuild, this time, putting people who were historically marginalized at the helm.

People who are the closest to the issues have incredible vision for how to make their community sustainable, beautiful, and healthy. People of color and other marginalized groups along Richmond’s Jefferson Davis Corridor and throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia have long sought a platform to share their vision and the resources to make the vision reality. They envision a community in which all people are thriving. Where policies and practices affirm their dignity and self-worth.

As you’ll read in the Blueprint, the Community Voice process equips neighbors to work with allies and key decision-makers in pursuit of this common good. Virginia Community Voice also prepares institutions to engage and respond more effectively to neighbors’ vision. Our goals are to build trust among neighbors, change institutional decision-making practices, increase the flow of resources toward equitable, community-rooted solutions, and ultimately, move the needle on community-level outcomes.

We have faith that you, your neighbors, and your local institutions, can do the same.

As Dr. King’s words have illuminated our path, we hope that the Community Voice Blueprint will guide and embolden you on your path to equitable decision making in your community.

— REBEKAH HOLBROOK KENDRICK, *Writer, Community Voice Blueprint*

[1] beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2017/10/the-50th-anniversary-of-martin-luther-king-jrs-what-is-your-lifes-blueprint.html

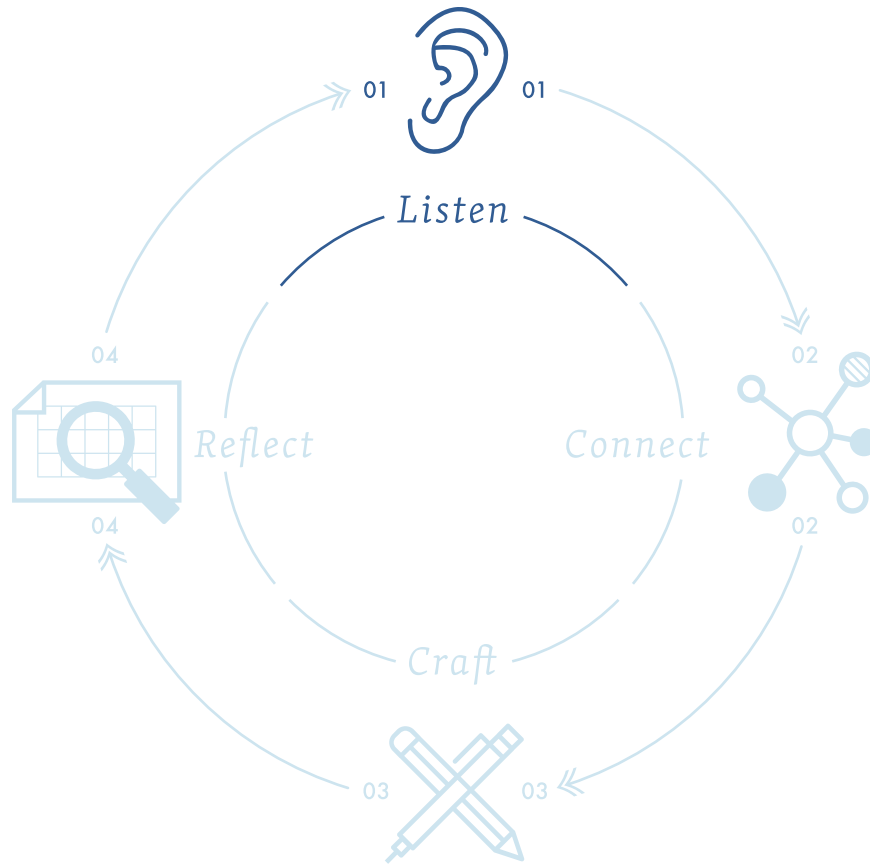
COMMUNITY VOICE
LISTEN

Identify Community Strengths & Challenges



Virginia Community Voice equips neighbors in marginalized communities to realize *their* vision for *their* neighborhood, and prepares institutions to respond effectively.

The Community Voice Blueprint describes our four-stage process of community engagement. The first stage is listening.



Listen
BLUEPRINT



Listen Goals

Listen to people's stories, particularly those who feel their voices are not heard.

Test your assumptions of what you think you know about the community.

Be open to diverse sources of knowledge from lived experience to academic research.

Represent fairly neighbors' strengths, challenges, interests & hopes for the future.

INTRODUCTION

What would it take to thrive?

Virginia Community Voice asks neighbors what it would look like and take for their community to thrive. Very simply, we think of thriving as reaching one's full potential. A thriving community is one in which all people who live there are reaching their fullest potential.

Thriving looks and feels different depending on the person or community. The Community Voice process focuses on neighborhoods that are by common metrics, not thriving, but we don't come in with a pre-set agenda or ready-made solution. Instead, we look to the people who live there to tell us *their* vision for *their* neighborhood. We listen to understand community strengths and challenges, and neighbors' interests and hopes for the future.

In the context of the Community Voice process, community refers to geographically defined areas, and groups of people that share a common history or interest, a sense of collective identity, and shared values and norms.

To get to a robust understanding of community thriving, Community Voice brings together qualitative data such as lived experience and historical context, as well as disaggregated data from sources such as the census. This is our "Data Sweet Spot" and when informed by these diverse sources of knowledge we believe people can make more equitable decisions.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

DEFINED

Lived experience is knowledge about the world gained through direct personal involvement with everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.²

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

We value lived experience over other forms of knowledge in the Community Voice process, because it is the form of knowledge which has historically been valued the least. Community Voice elevates lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge and amplifies the voices of people who are typically not heard by decision-makers. We take seriously the saying, "Nothing about us, without us." By collecting, analyzing, and sharing the perspectives of neighbors in marginalized communities, we attempt to re-balance the scales. We gather lived experiences of people through in-person conversations called one-to-ones as well as through recorded interviews, community surveys and meetings with neighbors.

What to look for in this section:

One-to-ones // Interviews // Surveys

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for example interview questions.](#)

[Click here for an example of a community survey.](#)

One-to-Ones

A one-to-one is a community organizing tool used to build relationships with people in the community where you are organizing. One-to-ones are in-person meetings with neighbors at their home, or in another place in the community where they feel comfortable meeting. During a one-to-one, organizers seek to build relationships, identify neighbors' motivations and interests, find common

ground, understand community strengths and problems, and determine how that person could act as a leader in the Community Voice process.

Interviews

An in-person interview may follow a community survey, to ensure the community survey data are telling an accurate story of what people think and feel. These formal interviews are recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Surveys

The Community Voice survey process allows us to quantify lived experience and give those experiences context. Community surveying is about more than collecting data; its purpose is to engage people and identify what the community needs and wants. That's why we replace standard survey protocol with what is called a "snowball sample," in which the survey is given to anyone interested in taking it. In the Community Voice process, we co-design the survey with neighborhood leaders and hire and train local residents to conduct the survey. We strongly recommend hiring people who live in the community to conduct the survey. In our experience, it is very difficult for people who do not live in the community to get a good response to the surveys because they do not have the necessary personal connections and trust.

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

One-to-Ones

In December 2016, RVA Thrives community organizer and collaboration coordinator began the community listening process along the Jefferson Davis Corridor (JDC). Over the next four months, they conducted 50 one-to-ones with neighbors, as well as city and nonprofit professionals who focus on the southside of Richmond. Through these conversations they discovered historical events to research, as well

[Read more about the role of the Community Organizer, Collaboration Coordinator, & Community Advocates. →→](#)

as concerns, hopes and interests to be explored through the community survey. Through one-to-one's, community organizers also identified neighborhood leaders to join the RVA Thrives Steering Committee, which was formed in April 2017. The Steering Committee acts as a decision-making body for RVA Thrives. [Read more about the role of the Steering Committee.](#)

Interviews

By August of 2017, RVA Thrives had collected 700 surveys from residents living along the corridor. To give survey responses context, Community Advocates held follow-up, in-person interviews to dig into responses from the survey. For example, interviews revealed that, "I don't feel safe in my neighborhood" meant two different things: violence and fear around guns and teenagers, and; concern that the traffic in the neighborhood was so fast residents didn't want their kids to play outside. These nuances did not appear in the quantitative survey data, but emerged from open-ended questions asked during interviews.

Surveys

Through the listening process, RVA Thrives identified common themes emerging from conversations with neighborhood leaders. To quantify and more deeply understand these themes, RVA Thrives worked with the Steering Committee to design a community survey. Next, nine Community Advocates who were identified through one-to-one conversations, were hired to administer the survey to neighbors. Advocates conducted the survey from June through August of 2017 in paper and on computer tablets.

Tip

Train neighbors (Community Advocates) hired to conduct surveys and interviews, and provide ongoing observation and support.

Suggested Training Topics

TRUST BUILDING
COMMUNITY HISTORY
COMMUNICATION SKILLS
SURVEY PROTOCOL
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

People who had more connections got more surveys. Training would have been helpful on how to build trust and build relationships. Even though I'm a person of color does not mean that I can get into the community and they will be receptive. There is broken trust.

ELAINE WILLIAMS
RVA Thrives Director

Community Advocates were encouraged to reach a quota each week during the survey administration. They used a variety of creative methods to collect surveys such as attending public events such as National Night Out, First Fridays Art Walk, and festivals at Sacred Heart Center. One Advocate rode the bus and asked fellow passengers to complete the survey, while another asked fellow basketball players to take the survey in between games. At least one advocate took surveys to all the neighborhood civic association meetings. To encourage participation RVA Thrives held a raffle for Walmart and Amazon gift cards for anyone older than 18 who took the survey.

[1] oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100109997

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

DEFINED

Historical context includes information about the past that sheds light on and may change our understanding of issues in the present.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

We recommend researching at least the last 50 years of history and politics on the neighborhoods where you are organizing. From funders to nonprofit partners to community organizers, everyone should get to know the history of a place during the Listen stage. If you're unsure where to start with your research, talk to neighbors! Initial one-to-one conversations are the ideal time to ask long-time residents about how the city or community has changed, and what historical events, common practices, and policy decisions they believe drove those changes.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

It can be challenging to find written history of a neighborhood, particularly if that neighborhood has been divested of power and marginalized. Getting a complete view of the history of a neighborhood might take some digging.

We recommend starting with the following sources:

Local, State, and University Libraries

Ask to speak with an archivist who is familiar with the

[Learn how we create a more complete picture of a community by finding the Data Sweet Spot. →](#)

community and ask about any special projects featuring the community or your neighborhood.

Local Walking Tours / Oral History Projects

Some communities have created neighborhood walking tours or oral history projects that describe important historical events and people in a particular place. These can be a great opportunity to learn and to identify a local expert who could direct you to additional historical resources.

Policies and practices from decades ago still affect our communities and our neighbors today. Understanding the past helps us make sense of the present.



Mrs. McQueen, gives an interview to members of RVA Thrives in her Richmond home.

Newspapers

If you really want to go deep, you can look at old newspapers on microfiche, to read about a particular point in time in your community.

Creative Placemaking

Many communities have public art installations, monuments, and murals that help tell the story of a place. Visit those, and if possible, talk to the people involved in creating them.

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

Community organizers were in a one-to-one conversation with long-time southside resident Mrs. McQueen. She shared how southside once was mostly white but over the period of two decades (from the 1960s to the 1980s) almost the entire area flipped, to mostly black residents. She recounted the “blockbusting” in the 1970s when realtors went door to door telling white neighbors that their property values were dropping dramatically due to the increase in Black residents. Whites were strongly encouraged to sell immediately and move out. Mrs. McQueen distinctly remembers this as one of the first black residents in an otherwise white neighborhood. When she shared this story with community organizers, it shed light on census data which showed the rapid demographic changes along the Jefferson Davis Corridor between the 1960s-1980s. In 1960 the neighborhoods along the corridor were 2% black. By 1980 they were 71% black.

Combining lived experience with historical context and census data provided a more complete picture of demographic changes in the City of Richmond during the 1960s–1980s and shed light on why the southside is predominately black today.

DISAGGREGATED DATA

DEFINED

Disaggregated data are broken down into smaller parts, often by characteristics such as census tract, age, race, ethnicity, or household income.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Disaggregated data are important for putting individual circumstances into a larger context. In the Community Voice process, we use quantitative data collected through a community survey process and we supplement with disaggregated data from the census and other publicly available sources.

AGGREGATE DATA

Aggregated data is summarized or “rolled up.” This can make it easier to get the big picture, but can mask important differences between subgroups. When presented in aggregate, as is common in newspaper articles or public reports, quantitative data can obscure variations and trends within a specific group. For example, in 2017 among all residents in

the City of Richmond the poverty rate was 24%. However, for children under the age of 17 living in the City of Richmond, the poverty rate was 35.2%. Without looking at the data by age, we miss an important difference that can have an impact on solutions to poverty.

Data can be used to tell a story about a place and the people who live there that does not match the ways the community wants to represent itself. In the Community Voice process we disaggregate data down to the census tract or district level and analyze data by subgroups (age, race, income). We also compare disaggregated data on the census tract to the data collected from neighbors through our community survey process. This provides insights to the experiences of people at the neighborhood level—a data set which is typically not available publicly.



Listen

DATA STORYTELLING

DEFINED

Data storytelling brings together data and story and communicates both through visually-appealing design.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Community Voice evaluates three types of information during the Listen stage—lived experience, historical context and disaggregated data. We use data analysis techniques to evaluate responses to community surveys, and compare this to disaggregated data from the census or academic research. Once all the data is analyzed, we put this into context by reviewing the history of the community, which reveals the “why” behind current conditions and perceptions. Finally, we put the data together in a way that is visually appealing, so that people can better understand the story behind all the numbers.

Tip

We recommend the support of a survey designer and data analyst when conducting community surveys. Be sure to find someone with experience in community-based surveying or participatory action research and who is comfortable balancing scientific protocol with community engagement.

Data Partners

RESEARCHERS LOCAL UNIVERSITY
DATA ANALYST AT A LOCAL CORP
VIRGINIA COMMUNITY VOICE

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here to read blog posts on survey findings.](#)

[Click here to learn about the Human Ecology Framework.](#)

[Click here for an example of how RVA Thrives organizes census data and a worksheet for organizing data on your neighborhood, city, and state.](#)

[Tips for Data Storytelling.](#)³

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

Once the survey findings were analyzed, RVA Thrives presented them to the Steering Committee and they prioritized three issue areas for action: Neighborhood Beautification, Neighborhood Safety, and Jobs Access. Next, working groups looked at community-level data, organized visually by Thriving Cities Group’s Human Ecology Framework. Baseline community-level indicators of thriving included employment rates, cost of living, air pollution, mental health. Neighbors reviewed community-level data related to each issue area, shared personal experiences and history to give context, and were equipped to tell a more complete story of the issues.



[3] Tessa McKenzie, *Impact Makers, Data Storytelling, A Cheat Sheet*, 2018. [impactmakers.com/insights/data-storytelling-cheat-sheet](https://www.impactmakers.com/insights/data-storytelling-cheat-sheet).

Listen Summary

During the listening process, we have heard from neighbors that decisions are made about their community without their input all the time. They learn about new developments and policies after the fact. Programs and interventions are created for them but not with them. That's one reason things are not getting better, in their view, because people directly impacted are not included in the decision-making process.

There is a long history of exclusive decision-making in Virginia. It is uncomfortable to acknowledge that many policies, programs, and practices which govern our everyday lives were designed behind closed doors, inequitably, to privilege whites over blacks and indigenous peoples. We do not fully recognize that history and its repercussions as the problem, and so we often solve for the wrong problem. In the social services realm, this results in a complex array of programs, collective impact efforts, and piecemeal policy changes. These may hold the line but don't significantly improve racial and economic disparities. And, systems largely stay the same.

Marginalized groups see the subtle and complex ways systems were designed to work against them—things which may be invisible to white people and people with privilege. To change systems, the people who see the problems most clearly must be at the table with institutional decision makers, co-creating solutions.

This requires effort, to get to a point where neighbors and institutions are ready to work together. In Richmond, it is evident that fighting against normative decision-making practices of institutions

is incredibly exhausting, especially for people of color who have experienced exclusion from decision-making spaces for centuries in Virginia. We frequently hear that "people who live here do not believe their voice matters."

As Virginia Community Voice Executive Director Lea Whitehurst-Gibson says, "The listening process is the hardest, but the most important part." It takes time, energy and resources to involve marginalized communities in decision-making. But in the long-run it is in the best interests of institutions to listen and understand the problem before creating solutions. This will catalyze efforts to create thriving communities.

We hope the Community Voice Blueprint will inspire institutional decision-makers to more inclusively and equitably steward resources. For community organizers, nonprofits, and corporate partners, we hope the Blueprint will help you re-frame existing "community engagement" efforts. Please reach out to us for additional support as you reflect on this model, and how it might challenge or inform your work.

In our experience, the Listening process garners the attention of other stakeholders, and the survey findings will be of interest beyond the neighborhoods where you're organizing. This leads us to the next stage of the Community Voice process—Connect—where we organize neighbors around key issues and connect them with allies and key decision-makers who can help them get what they want.

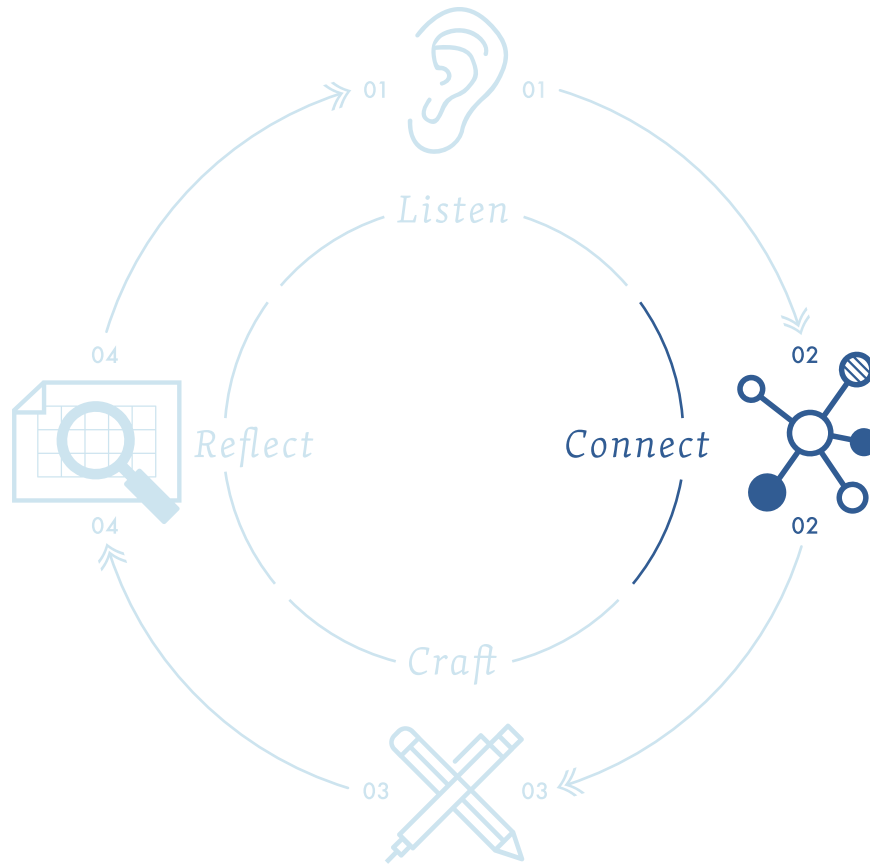
COMMUNITY VOICE
CONNECT

Organize People Around Key Issues

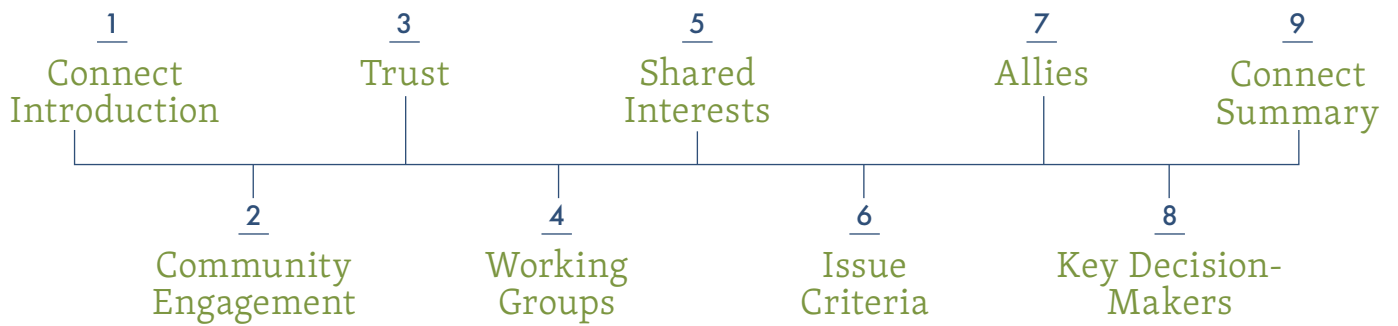


Virginia Community Voice equips neighbors in marginalized communities to realize *their* vision for *their* neighborhood, and prepares institutions to respond effectively.

The Community Voice Blueprint describes our four-stage process of community engagement. The second stage is connecting.



Connect
BLUEPRINT



Connect Goals

Develop trust with and among neighbors.

Equip neighbors to make collective decisions about the issues and solutions.

Build a strategic network of allies and identify key decision makers.

INTRODUCTION

Trust is the most important factor in successful community engagement efforts. But trust is broken, particularly between neighbors in marginalized communities and institutions that have the power to make decisions about our lives. Broken trust is a challenge, and opportunity, for those doing community engagement work.

One of the goals of the Connect stage is to develop trust among neighbors and a sense of collective efficacy, or the ability to work together toward a common goal. During this stage, community organizers become a consistent and trustworthy presence in people's lives. They organize in ways that bring neighbors on the steering committee and working groups closer together. And they equip neighbors to make collective decisions about the issues they've identified in their community.

A central tenet of our work at Virginia Community Voice is that people who are directly impacted by the issues should own the solutions. In this stage, we describe our approach to engagement, which moves neighbors from involvement (*i.e., participation in a survey*) toward ownership (*i.e., making decisions about their community*). Community engagement involves allies and key decision-makers as well—people who decide things, usually from a position of power within an organization or institution. In this stage, we describe how to identify allies and key decision-makers and build strategic networks of people who can engage with neighbors to realize their vision for their community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In nonprofit and social services work, we often hear the term “community engagement” used to describe interaction between an institution and people or groups external to that institution. Usually community engagement has a specific goal, like raising awareness among community members, getting input from the community, advocating for change, or enrolling more people into a program or service.

Community refers to residents of a geographically defined area, groups of people that share a common history or interest, a sense of collective identity, and shared values and norms. In the context of community engagement work, community also refers to people who are affected by a particular issue or who participate in, or benefit from a service. Sometimes community refers to the providers of a service, such as a nonprofit.

Though there is not a standard definition of community engagement, there is some agreement that engagement

ranges from less to more participation by community members, and that more participation yields greater impact and shared leadership. The diagram below from the International Association of Public Participation offers a helpful visual.⁴

[For a description of community engagement activities for different types of organizations, click here. →](#)

IAP2’S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM



The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public’s role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

[4] atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pce_what.html

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT + ORGANIZING

Virginia Community Voice engages the community so that people most affected by an issue can take ownership of the solution. The purpose of community engagement in this process is most similar to community organizing.

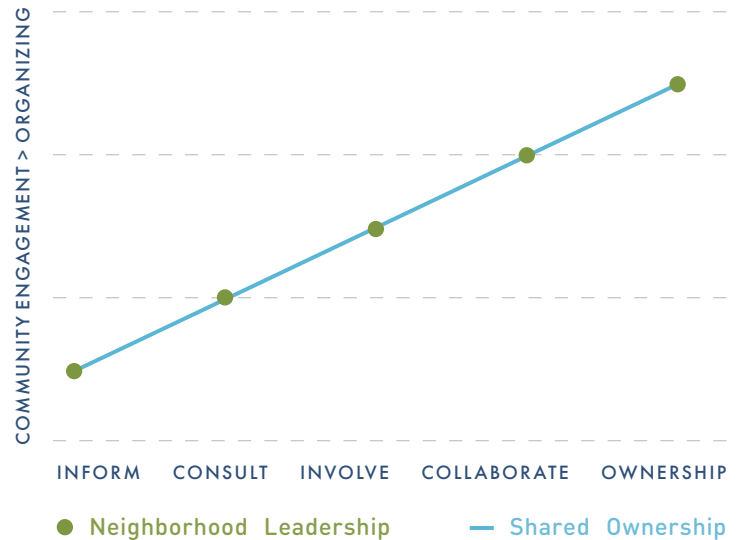
The power of community organizing is evidenced by many social and political movements—early 20th century labor movements, women’s suffrage, the Civil Rights movement, more recently the Arab Spring. Community organizing has led to major changes in thinking, values, practices, and laws in the United States. Organized movements have given citizens the opportunity to hold those with decision-making power accountable.

Throughout history, community organizing has equipped and mobilized people to stop inequitable practices, overturn unjust laws and propose new ways of addressing issues facing their communities. But it’s not enough to come up with solutions; people need the power to implement their ideas. This is how we understand ownership in the Community Voice process, as the ability to make meaningful decisions about issues affecting one’s community.

In our experience, community engagement activities that inform, consult or involve usually fall short of promoting ownership because they don’t give community members authority to make meaningful decisions. To achieve a more inclusive decision-making process and also greater outcomes, institutions with decision-making power need to assess current community engagement efforts to see

Community organizing engages marginalized people to address complex problems affecting their communities and work toward positive change.

Community Organizing Increases Neighborhood Leadership



whether they promote ownership, or whether they are designed to inform and consult.

Consider these questions about yourself or the organizations with which you are affiliated:

To what extent do our activities move people toward ownership and shared decision-making?

- > Charitable Giving
- > Volunteerism (individual, family, workplace)
- > Service-Learning
- > Community Outreach
- > Faith-Based Missions
- > Public Forums/Community Listening
- > Community-Engaged Research

Would the organizations I am involved with be willing to do community engagement if it meant sharing decision-making authority with members of that community?

Wherever you or your affiliated organizations fall on the spectrum of community engagement, we hope the Community Voice Blueprint will serve as a tool to assess and improve your approach to engagement, moving toward shared ownership between institutions and communities.

TRUST

DEFINED

Trust is the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Community Voice starts by extending trust to neighbors. We reject narratives that cast marginalized people as untrustworthy, lacking expertise, or as poor decision-makers. We value neighbors as experts on their community and trust their decision-making abilities. Trusting neighbors, and building trust among neighbors are the most important activities in the Connect stage, and frankly, the entire Community Voice process. Trust in one's neighbors is a key component of a cohesive society.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

As an organizer, how you show that you trust people, and how you build trust depends on many factors, including the context, people, and purpose. Signs that you're building trust: neighbors talk about the work in positive terms, invite their friends to meetings, encourage others to participate, and take on increasing leadership roles.

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

In Richmond, an early sign that neighbors were starting to build trust in RVA Thrives was during the community survey process, when Ms. McQueen, a 40 year resident of the Jefferson Davis Corridor (JDC), took the mic at a National Night Out event to encourage people to take the survey. She shared that she had been involved in other community surveys but didn't see anything come out of it. She told her neighbors she believes in the RVA Thrives process and is going to stick with it. Given the apprehension around research projects in many marginalized communities, this vote of confidence in RVA Thrives from a neighborhood leader was a significant early win. Similarly, in early 2018, two neighbors—Deborah Keys and Rodney Gaines—came on board as part-time Community Advocates with RVA Thrives. They had been informed of the Community Voice process and were hired on a contractual basis to conduct

community surveys. They developed enough trust in the process to become involved with RVA Thrives in leadership roles. Now they are being equipped to engage, inform, consult, and involve other neighbors. Every month, RVA Thrives equips Steering Committee members through trainings on trust, communication, debate/dialogue, conflict resolution and making collective decisions despite individual differences. The goal is for the Steering Committee to become a cohesive and trustworthy group of neighbors who can engage others in RVA Thrives.

A Community Organizer's Tips for Building Trust

- 1 Do what you say you will do.
- 2 Listen to what neighbors say and change your behavior based on their advice.
- 3 Give preference to neighbors' instincts about their community
- 4 Do not waste people's time.
- 5 Be where you say you will be when you say you will be there.
- 6 Do not overpromise.
- 7 Communicate clearly and on a regular basis.
- 8 Take a learning posture and make sure it's genuine (remember, there is always more to learn).

WORKING GROUPS

DEFINED

Working groups are usually a subset of a larger body, brought together to study and understand a specific issue and make recommendations.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

In the Community Voice process, the purpose of a working group is to craft solutions to the issues prioritized by the Steering Committee. Working groups involve people who have an experiential connection to an issue. As you'll recall from the Listen section, we value lived experience over other forms of knowledge in the Community Voice process because it has historically been valued the least. Being directly impacted by something may help a person stay engaged in collective action over time and in the face of challenges.

Formation of a working group provides an opportunity to bring more people into the Community Voice process. Working group members are recommended by the Steering Committee and Community Advocates, and before joining a group, organizers do a one-to-one with potential members.



Before forming a working group, there should be consensus from the Steering Committee that an issue warrants deeper examination. There also needs to be sufficient momentum around an issue to be able to regularly convene 10–20 people for meetings.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for a working group job description.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

In late 2017, neighbors on the RVA Thrives Steering Committee reviewed the five issues that were ranked highest in importance from the community survey:

- 1 Neighborhood Beautification
- 2 Housing Affordability
- 3 Neighborhood Safety
- 4 Jobs Access
- 5 Food scarcity

At a fall 2017 Steering Committee retreat, the group reached consensus on three issues around which to form working groups: Neighborhood Safety, Neighborhood Beautification, and Jobs Access. In early 2018, the three working groups launched. Leadership and facilitation was provided by RVA Thrives staff, and three Community Advocates were assigned to represent the Steering Committee on each working group. Working groups meet monthly for 1.5 hours to build trust, identify shared interests, and clarify complex issues until they are actionable.

SHARED INTERESTS

DEFINED

Shared interests refer to common self-interests of one or more people. Self-interest is what you desire for yourself, or your family. Shared interests are beneficial for all, or most, members of a given community, i.e., the common good.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

What shapes and sustains collective action is the ability of people to work together for a common good. Getting clear about self-interest is the first step, and seeking out others who have similar self-interests is next. That's why Community Voice starts with a survey, one-to-ones and interviews—to give neighbors the opportunity to reflect on and name their self-interests. Only then do we form working groups. The key to successfully taking collective action is the organizer's ability to tap into neighbors' shared interests. Bound by a shared purpose, neighbors will be better prepared to withstand resistance to their ideas and solutions. In the Community Voice process, organizers guide neighbors through exercises to discover the intersections of their self-interests and their neighbors' self-interest. During discussions about shared interests, the organizer points out where people have common interests, helps the group navigate conflict, and sets the tone for a dialogue, versus debate.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Download an identifying shared interests worksheet.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

As Virginia Community Voice Executive Director Lea Whitehurst-Gibson says about organizing, "we're in it for the long-haul. So, if your personal interest is not the thing we're working on today, we will get to it." A great example of this in Richmond comes from a young man named Sean, who lives with his wife and two children in the Blackwell neighborhood. Sean first got involved with RVA Thrives because he and his wife are self-proclaimed foodies who wish their neighborhood had more

We're in the learning phase with neighbors—it's clarifying but it's also connecting the issues. We want people to realize, hey, I'm not alone—the thing I am experiencing is actually connected to a real thing in the world.

LEA WHITEHURST-GIBSON
Virginia Community Voice Executive Director

restaurants and grocery stores. Sean was engaged through the community survey process and later joined the Steering Committee. The survey process revealed that other neighbors like Sean were concerned about access to healthy and fresh food. However, when the Steering Committee considered which issues were more likely to mobilize a broad number of neighbors, other issues stood out above food access. Although Sean's personal interest was not immediately selected, he has opted to stay involved with RVA Thrives. He has shared with us that affordable housing and safety are also very important to him, and he is committed to working toward the common good. He understands the issues of safety, employment, housing affordability, and food access are all interconnected.

ISSUE CRITERIA

DEFINED

Issue criteria are used to make a decision about which problem to focus on for collective action. Issue criteria are like the lens through which all possible issues are viewed.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

In the Community Voice process, issue criteria are used to scope a complex problem, which at first might seem too large to do something about. Using issue criteria, organizers and neighbors narrow a problem down to something around which they can take action. The group moves forward with issues that meet the criteria. This process also helps neighbors identify the problem they are trying to solve. The role of the community organizer during this time is to notice when people are becoming entrenched in their way of seeing the issue. They work with that person one-to-one to help them see the common good. The organizer must be prepared to manage the tensions that may arise when a group is trying to reach consensus. In the Community Voice process, rather than simply voting for one issue over the other, and having the majority of the group get their way, we work toward consensus. This results in a decision that everyone actively agrees with or at least can live with. Though consensus based decision-making may take longer than other methods of decision-making, this way of operating as a group is more equitable and inclusive.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for an example of Community Voice Issue Criteria and example of how we clarify a complex issue at RVA Thrives.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

To clearly identify the problem neighbors were trying to solve, each RVA Thrives working group reviewed disaggregated data, discussed historical context, and shared lived experience. As neighbors began to craft solutions, they also looked to academic research to understand the

This is the miracle of organizing. If the organizing is done well, people can come out of their entrenched views of how things are, and step out of that, and choose the collective good in this moment.

LEA WHITEHURST-GIBSON

Virginia Community Voice Executive Director

existing solutions and what works. Scoping and narrowing the issues of jobs access, neighborhood safety, and beautification took several months of meetings. At each meeting RVA Thrives organizers took extensive notes and afterwards wrote problem statements and proposals to present to the working group at the next meeting for their feedback. In this way, at each meeting, the issues became clearer and solutions more concrete.

ALLIES

DEFINED

A person or group that provides support in an ongoing effort, activity, or struggle.⁵

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Community Voice strategically connects neighbors with allies. Allies support neighbors in realizing their vision for their community and often do so because it is mutually beneficial to them. Sometimes allies come from within the community where you are organizing. Other times they live or work outside the community, but have an interest in the community or the issue. For example, a local church might provide space for neighbors to meet. Or, a regional housing advocacy group may present to neighbors on inclusionary zoning. When organizing in divested communities, you may need to reach outside the local neighborhood to find allies with financial resources to support your work. However, there are many assets and in-kind supports within the communities where you are organizing that cannot be overlooked. We recommend doing an asset mapping exercise with neighbors to create a comprehensive list of people and groups who can join the effort.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for a worksheet to use when identifying allies and key decision-makers.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

In Richmond, there are two part-time Collaboration Coordinators, Rodney Gaines and Nelson Reveley. Rodney has been a resident of Davee Gardens for 40 years, and in 2017 became a Community Advocate with RVA Thrives during the community survey process. Since then, he has taken on progressive leadership with RVA Thrives. As an entrepreneur who has participated in workforce development programs, Rodney speaks with authority about issues of employment, business ownership, and the changes that have occurred along the corridor over the past four decades. In his role as Collaborator Coordinator, Rodney

identifies and connects with dozens of allies along the corridor including nonprofits, businesses, faith groups, and city officials. He attends nearly every civic association meeting to share what RVA Thrives is doing, and to learn about projects that RVA Thrives could ally with others on.

Nelson Reveley is a local minister, academic, and transportation activist who has worked with RVA Thrives since its inception. Though Nelson is not a member of the corridor community, he has leveraged personal and professional relationships across the City of Richmond to build an extensive network of allies for RVA Thrives. As Nelson met with allies his goal was twofold: 1) to spread the word about RVA Thrives and 2) to identify resources that could be brought to the Jefferson Davis Corridor and support neighbors' efforts.



[5] [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ally](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ally)

KEY DECISION-MAKERS

DEFINED

A person who decides things, usually from a position of power within an organization or institution.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Neighbors in marginalized communities are the primary focus of the Community Voice process. Equipping them to realize their vision is our goal. But we cannot ignore the fact that marginalized communities are marginalized because they lack power and resources. Neighbors need power and resources to realize their vision. Too often that power—to change policy, programming, or investment—rests with other people and institutions, who we call key decision-makers. Just as organizers work with neighbors to identify allies, they also do power mapping exercises to identify the people and groups with power to influence an issue. At Virginia Community Voice, we also seek to prepare institutions to engage more equitably and respond more effectively to neighbors in marginalized communities. We do this through trainings and coaching supports for institutions such as universities, corporations, local government, nonprofits, faith groups, etc. Visit vacommunityvoice.org to learn more.



FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for a worksheet to use when identifying allies and key decision-makers.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

In Richmond, RVA Thrives organizers worked with neighbors to identify key decision-makers. As solutions began

to take shape, they discussed who had the power to help implement (or derail) them. For example, we might immediately think of law enforcement as the key decision-makers on the issue of neighborhood safety. However, during the scoping process neighbors named walkability as their primary concern when it came to safety, not crime. When local youth joined the working group who wanted to advocate for bike paths that would grant them access to Richmond's new T-pot bridge, neighbors came up with an innovative solution—a program for Black and Latinx youth to create traffic calming street art at intersections along the corridor, and advocate for the extension of a bike path to the southside. To launch this program, neighbors needed approximately \$50,000. RVA Thrives identified philanthropic funders as key decision-makers who could help implement this solution and wrote grants that resulted in an investment of \$42,000 in this neighborhood project!

Connect Summary

In Richmond, neighbors tell us about businesses, banks, churches, and nonprofits that were once active and engaged institutions along the corridor, now closed or relocated to the suburbs. They describe housing redevelopment plans started 20 years ago that are still not complete. We've heard of university researchers who come to survey residents but don't return to share the findings, or pursue change. And charitable donations that enable rather than empower. Sadly, these are examples from groups who thought they were "doing good."

Neighbors have also shared that the Community Voice approach to engagement feels different.

We are not suggesting there is a wrong or right way. Community engagement takes many different forms depending on the purpose, institution, and community. But we do believe the Hippocratic Oath should be followed when engaging neighbors in marginalized communities: First, do no harm.

Virginia institutions, namely the state and local government, have historically engaged indigenous/people of color in ways that cause harm. Virginia was an initial site of European colonization, center of the slave trade, capital of the confederacy, and seat of massive resistance to school integration. Much has changed since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Yet the history of harm caused by people and groups with power reverberates in Virginia. This is evidenced by racial disparities on nearly every indicator of thriving: wealth, health, education, justice, employment, the arts, a sustainable environment.

It is no wonder that corridor neighbors view even seemingly well-intended engagement by institutions with healthy skepticism. That's why Virginia Community Voice takes such care to trust and build trust with neighbors. To listen, equip, and walk alongside neighbors in their fight to overcome the past and realize their vision for the future.

Efforts to build neighborhood leadership will fall short if people and groups with power don't also change. That's why Virginia Community Voice prepares institutions to engage marginalized communities differently than they have in the past. To help people and groups with power learn how to first, do no harm. For some of you, the Community Voice Blueprint will offer strategies you can implement right away. For others, your approach to engagement may be so deeply entrenched that you need deeper work to change. If that's the case, we invite you to reach out to Virginia Community Voice, to learn about our training and coaching supports.

As you read the Craft section about how neighbors in Richmond have collaborated with allies and key decision-makers on equitable solutions, we hope you will be inspired to **engage differently**.

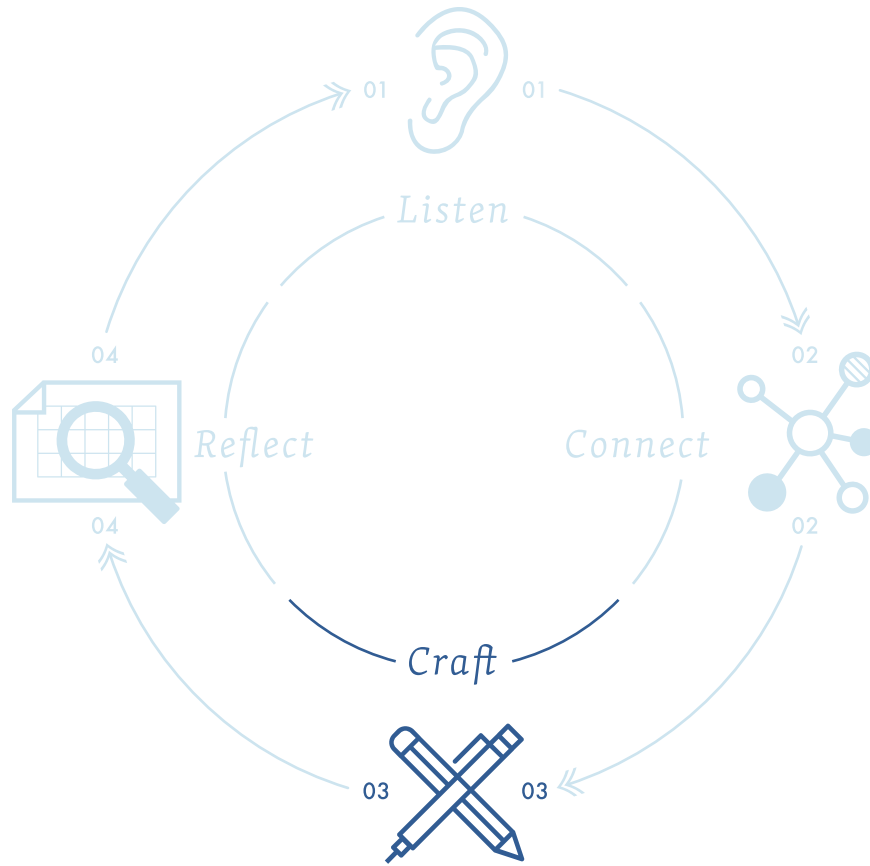
COMMUNITY VOICE
CRAFT

Collaborate on Equitable Solutions



Virginia Community Voice equips neighbors in marginalized communities to realize *their* vision for *their* neighborhood, and prepares institutions to respond effectively.

The Community Voice Blueprint describes our four-stage process of community engagement. The third stage is crafting.



Craft
BLUEPRINT



Craft Goals

Neighbors transition from involvement to ownership.

Neighbors and allies collaboratively craft solutions.

Solutions are designed equitably and promote equity.

INTRODUCTION

Community Voice crafts solutions that are community-rooted and equitable. Equitable solutions are best designed by people who have direct experience with or are most affected by an issue. Solutions also promote equity for people of color and other marginalized groups.

When neighbors are engaged and well-organized they can identify issues and craft solutions in 6-8 months. Implementation takes much longer. Designing and launching a new program, for example, can take a year. Pursuing a policy change can take several years.

The pace of implementation is driven by access to resources and power. Marginalization occurs when groups are not involved in decision-making, and are therefore cut off from resources. Moving from ideas to action can take longer in divested neighborhoods than in affluent and well-connected neighborhoods.

Virginia Community Voice accelerates this process by bringing allies such as nonprofit partners to the table during the craft stage. We leverage in-kind resources and tap into financial resources from private and public funders.

In addition to resourcing and equipping neighbors, during the Craft stage we work with institutions and key decision-makers to help them engage differently. Through trainings and coaching, we prepare institutions to respond more effectively when neighbors approach them with their vision for their community.

EQUITABLE SOLUTIONS

Unpacking equity in the Community Voice process.

Equitable solutions reallocate resources and power to marginalized groups. This is how equity is different from equality. Equality means all people get the same resources. Equity means people get the resources they need to succeed.

We define equity as both an process and an outcome. As a process, solutions are equitably designed. As an outcome, solutions promote equity, with a specific focus on racial equity. Equity is achieved when there are no longer avoidable differences in outcomes based on one's ability or identity.

Solutions which give some people different resources than others are often seen as "unfair" in the United States. Americans have a strong attachment to the values of equality and fairness. We believe in the American Dream—that is, that every individual regardless of background, can succeed with talent and hard work.

Yet we are overly optimistic about equality. Studies have shown we actually misperceive how much progress has been made toward economic equality in this country.⁵

The reality is, America has a massive racial wealth gap. According to a recent report by Prosperity Now, that gap is growing. "Between 1983 and 2013, the wealth of the median black household declined 75 percent (from \$6,800 to \$1,700), and the median Latino household declined 50 percent (from \$4,000 to \$2,000). At the same time, wealth for the median white household increased 14 percent from \$102,000 to \$116,800."⁶

The racial wealth gap exists because of decades of unfair policies and practices that denied people of color the opportunity to accumulate wealth. Because of historical injustices, people of color and whites typically do not start out with the same economic resources or access to opportunity. Even if both groups access the same resources and opportunities throughout life, it will take much longer for people of color to achieve equality with their white peers, because they started out at a resource deficit. Until this changes, racial and economic dispari-

ties will grow. We'll keep getting the same results.

In the Community Voice process, equitable solutions are those which seek to address disparities like the racial wealth gap. Neighbors design solutions that create access to resources and opportunities for their communities.

Between 1983 and 2013, the wealth of the median black household declined 75 percent (from \$6,800 to \$1,700), and the median Latino household declined 50 percent (from \$4,000 to \$2,000). At the same time, wealth for the median white household increased 14 percent from \$102,000 to \$116,800.⁷

[6] insights.som.yale.edu/insights/how-fair-is-american-society

[7] prosperitynow.org/resources/road-zero-wealth

COMMUNITY-ROOTED SOLUTIONS

DEFINED

A solution to a problem designed by people or communities directly impacted by the problem.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

In the Community Voice process, we are intentional about creating safe spaces where neighbors can design community-rooted solutions. In our experience, when we bring even the most well-intentioned partners to the table, it creates a dynamic where neighbors speak less, and defer more, to those who they see as holding positions of power. So in the Community Voice process, people of color, youth, seniors, immigrants, and other groups who are typically excluded from decision-making are the first to name the problem and craft a solution. For example, a working group will write a proposal, then it is reviewed by the Steering Committee, and finally it is shared with allies for feedback and suggestions. When neighbors present their ideas to allies and key decision-makers, Community Voice organizers facilitate by inviting neighbors to speak first, and asking people in positions of power to listen. We also address barriers to participation in the planning process to ensure neighbor engagement. For example, we hold meetings in the evenings and provide stipends to working group members. In these ways, Virginia Community Voice strives to practice what we preach—equitable decision-making and community-rooted solutions.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for a sample proposal, crafted by neighborhood leaders and local youth.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

Safety Working Group

In the spring of 2018, several youth attended the RVA Thrives Safety working group meetings and shared their interest in advocating for a bike path along the Jefferson Davis Corridor. An initial proposal was crafted around the

safety working group’s priorities of youth engagement and walkability, and vetted by the Steering Committee. Knowing that there were very few existing youth programs along the corridor, the RVA Thrives Collaboration Coordinator reached out to allies in the nonprofit sector including Art180, BikeWalkRVA, GroundWorkRVA, Hope in the Cities, and Sacred Heart Center for ideas. Through this collaborative process, ARCA (Art, Racial Reconciliation, and Civic Advocacy) started to take shape. Neighbors further revised proposals for this program to engage Black and Latino youth and build civic advocacy skills. In August 2018, two youth focus groups were held, bringing together about 15 Black and Latino youth who gave feedback on the ARCA program.

Beautification Working Group

At a widely reported and contentious Blackwell Civic Association meeting in June 2018 local residents learned of plans to secure historic tax designation for their neighborhood. Residents responded with surprise, fear, and anger over not being informed earlier. Many people were hearing about this designation for the first time in June, though it had been underway for months. Although the process was delayed so residents had time to give input, historic tax designation for Blackwell was ultimately approved in the fall of 2018. While historic designation is not altogether negative for residents or the community, it does incentivize development, and so far that development has not reflected the needs and desires of current residents. Recently, the same developers behind the tax designation purchased a building on Hull Street, slated to become a boutique hotel, with a restaurant and spa across the street. In 2018, they also opened a donut and coffee shop on Hull Street, and a market and brewery are in the works.

In contrast, neighbors have told RVA Thrives that of all the changes coming to southside, they are most interested in amenities like restaurants, grocery stores, and jobs. As one

This is the first time that I was asked to give feedback on the structure of a program that directly impacts me—this is great.

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



We know that the traditional approach to nonprofit program delivery—when programs are delivered to community, rather than with a community—can miss the mark because they do not necessarily address the needs that community members have identified for themselves, citizens don't trust the source of the program and are unlikely to buy-in, or citizens don't feel ownership. However, when community members are engaged and can drive the discussions, decision-making and/or implementation of projects or programs impacting them, we create more effective and sustainable solutions.

SUSAN HALLETT

Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Fund

neighbor often says, "We live in a food desert. We don't really need a coffee shop or yoga studio; we need a grocery store." While many residents involved with RVA Thrives support development that will benefit their families, they are concerned they will be priced out of the area and have to move.

As these events unfolded during the summer of 2018, the RVA Thrives Beautification working group started discussing the identity of their neighborhoods, changing demographics, and the pros and cons of gentrification. Neighbors expressed deep concern about displacement. The Beautification working group decided to conduct a follow-up survey in August to better understand neighbors' perspectives on affordable housing and gentrification.

This survey was administered by a team of Community Advocates, as well as RVA Thrives staff during National Night Out and in the month following. More than 200 surveys were collected.

We discovered that neighbors want to ensure current residents can still afford to live in the area as it redevelops. They want voices of long-time residents to be heard. In response, RVA Thrives held a forum for neighbors titled "Just Gentrification" in October 2018 about programs and policies such as the historic tax credit, land banks, and land trusts, and inclusionary zoning that could help create and preserve affordable housing. Neighbors in attendance shared that they learned a lot, but still want to be equipped with tools to more actively protect their families from displacement. RVA Thrives plans to hold a second affordable housing forum for neighbors and start working on equitable development priorities to be presented to the City of Richmond and real estate developers.

[Click here to read a complete summary of the findings. →](#)

LEVERAGE RESOURCES

DEFINED

Assessing the use of existing resources, identifying the need for additional resources, or creating new resources to address identified needs.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Community Voice seeks financial and in-kind resources to implement solutions. Financial resources typically include grants and donations. In-kind resources may include goods and services such as computers, office equipment, volunteer time, etc. In the Community Voice process, we open doors for neighbors in marginalized communities to access resources from funding institutions and donors. As appropriate, we bring neighbors and funders together at the same table. When funders can speak with people who are directly impacted by an issue it can increase their understanding and connection to the issue. Being at the same table can increase neighbors' trust in institutions, and hone leadership skills. Yet in terms of ownership and power, being at the same table does not immediately make neighbors equals to funders. The situation is still imbalanced, because funders hold power, and neighbors are likely to defer to them. To rebalance power in these situations, Community Voice organizers can prepare funders before the meeting, reminding them to give preference and deference to neighbors when speaking. Organizers can invite funders to attend a community meeting where neighbors feel a stronger sense of ownership over the

space. If an institution wants to take a deeper dive, Virginia Community Voice provides training and coaching for institutions on to how to engage marginalized communities more equitably.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here for a sample budget for an equitable solution.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

Safety Working Group

Once neighbors and allies had crafted the ARCA program, RVA Thrives staff began to leverage resources for implementation. RVA Thrives wrote several grants to philanthropic funders which resulted in \$42,000 in funds for ARCA. Additionally, in-kind resources were leveraged from partner nonprofits. For example, ARCA meets in a space provided by Sacred Heart Center, and uses their bus to provide transportation for youth participants each week.

Jobs Working Group

In 2018, neighbors involved with RVA Thrives identified the need for programs and services for job seekers living along the Jefferson Davis Corridor. RVA Thrives wrote a grant to a local corporate funder and received support to implement three jobs access events: one focus group with JDC employers, a focus group with Latino job seekers, and a job fair featuring local employers. The purpose of these events is to understand barriers to employment and retention, and identify JDC employers who are willing to work with employees around barriers such as criminal records or transportation. In-kind resources will also be leveraged to implement these events, such as meeting space at local nonprofits for focus groups and the job fair.

We believe communities thrive when residents' aspirations are understood and acted on in a way that provides quality of life for all neighbors. For communities to thrive, it will take communities and institutions coming together to share resources and create an environment of fairness and opportunity where everyone can thrive. That is why Robins Foundation supports the work of RVA Thrives and its resident partners to support the conditions needed for educational success along the Jefferson Davis Corridor.

TYONKA RIMAWI, *Robins Foundation*

IMPLEMENT

DEFINED

To put a decision or plan into effect.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

A solution may be implemented by the organization running the Community Voice process, or it may be more appropriate for allies and key decision-makers to implement solutions. Programmatic solutions like a clean-up day can be implemented by neighbors and allies. Policy solutions will be implemented by local or state government, school boards, or councils. Regardless of who implements a solution, Community Voice advocates for neighbors be at the table advising in some capacity during implementation. This increases accountability and ensures that community voice is heard throughout the process.

ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

Safety Working Group

ARCA (Art, Racial Reconciliation, and Civic Advocacy) is implemented by RVA Thrives, in partnership with two local artists and an allied nonprofit, Sacred Heart Center. RVA Thrives staff and Community Advocates recruit and interview youth participants, manage paperwork and insurance, and oversee all logistics for weekly meetings such as food and transportation. Local artists and allies lead weekly meetings. Sacred Heart Center provides space and use of their van and driver to transport youth.

Beautification Working Group

Neighborhood clean up days and housing summits are implemented by RVA Thrives staff, Steering Committee and Community Advocates. Equitable development policy experts leveraged by RVA Thrives work with neighbors on Community Benefits Agreements or an equitable development scorecard. Implementation of these solutions will be a partnership between RVA Thrives, local developers, and the City of Richmond's Office of Economic and Community Development

Jobs Access Working Group

RVA Thrives implements employment focus groups and job fairs. Allies include local workforce development programs such as Goodwill, the Financial Opportunity Center, the Office of Community Wealth Building.

SHORT TERM

ARCA is implemented by RVA Thrives, nonprofit partners, and local artists.

LONG TERM

Black and Latino youth have stronger relationships with each other, and work together to advocate for their neighborhoods.

SHORT TERM

Three clean up days and housing summits are implemented annually by RVA Thrives staff.

SHORT TERM

Community Benefits Agreements are commonly used by developers, and policies are enacted by the city that create and preserve affordable housing on Southside.

LONG TERM

RVA Thrives implements focus groups, surveys and a job fair to understand employment barriers and connect local employers and job seekers.

LONG TERM

More jobs come to the Southside and neighbors can work close to where they live.

Craft Summary

Barack Obama has written that community organizing “Begins with the premise “that (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision; and (3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders – can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.”⁸

Community Voice seeks to rebalance a system in Virginia that has accumulated power and resources in the hands of a few. We focus our efforts on changing one particular aspect of this system: how decisions affecting marginalized communities are made.

At the craft stage we do this by equipping neighbors to make decisions about the issues and their solutions. We convene allies such as churches, nonprofits, schools, and businesses to build a broad base of support for their plans. To ensure there are sufficient resources to implement these plans, Community Voice builds bridges between institutional funders and marginalized communities. Whenever possible, we work with institutions to shift power to marginalized groups. Initially this is in small ways, such as asking people in positions of power to give neighbors more space to speak in meetings. Ultimately, we hope institutions will more actively involve neighbors in decision-making, such as through participatory grantmaking or Community Benefits Agreements.

This is a challenging growth process for all involved. But the results will be more effective and just. How do we know whether this approach works? During the Reflect stage of the Community Voice process we gather information to measure impact and continuously improve our approach.

[8] lib.niu.edu/1988/ii88o84o.html

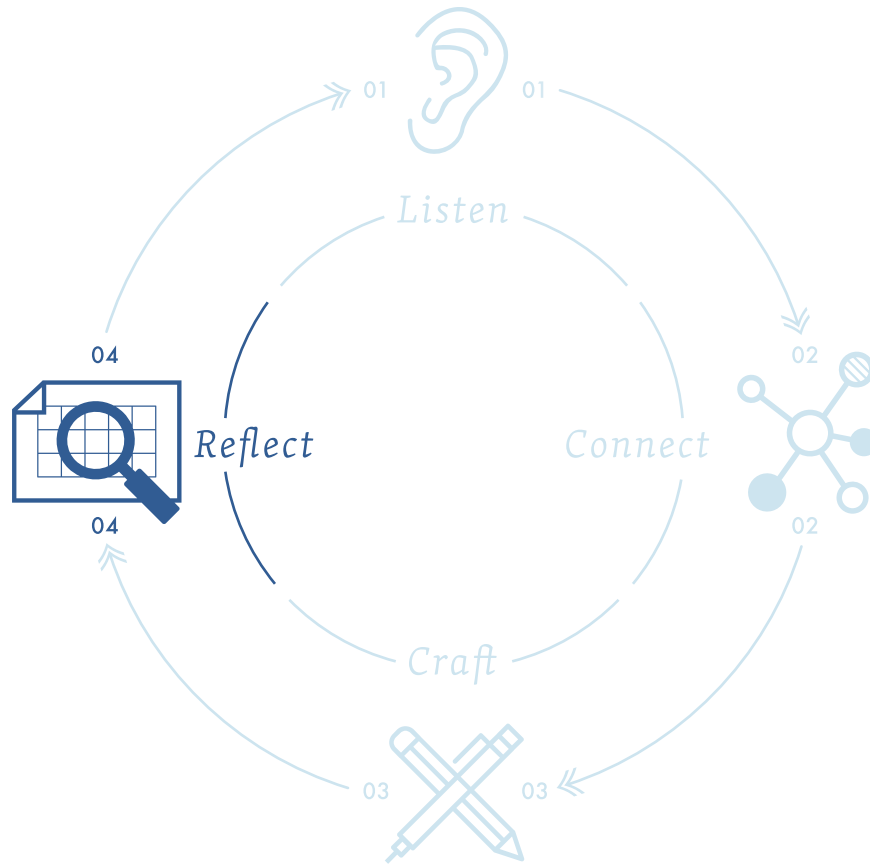
COMMUNITY VOICE
REFLECT

*Gather Feedback for Impact
and Improvement*



Virginia Community Voice equips neighbors in marginalized communities to realize *their* vision for *their* neighborhood, and prepares institutions to respond effectively.

The Community Voice Blueprint describes our four-stage process of community engagement. The fourth stage is reflecting.



Reflect
BLUEPRINT



Reflect Goals

Understand what works and what didn't work.

Use data for improvement and accountability.

Communicate the impact of community engagement.



Reflect

INTRODUCTION

It is imperative that community engagement groups understand, measure, and communicate their performance and impact. When we don't measure and communicate our impact we limit our ability to secure the resources needed to continue. Most importantly, we don't know whether neighbors are satisfied with our efforts and which engagement tactics work best.

Yet there are challenges to measuring the impact of community engagement. Limited research exists on how engagement leads to improved outcomes for marginalized communities. While there are many stories of successful organizing campaigns, there are not many studies on the links between empowered neighbors, institutional decision-making, and long-term community outcomes.

In the Community Voice model, “winning” on a particular issue is an indicator of success, but we go deeper, looking at how our process increases neighbors' capability to realize their vision for their community. Virginia Community Voice also seeks to change how institutions engage marginalized communities. We look at equitable decision-making among people and groups with power as an indicator of success. Finally, we understand success in terms of whether community-level outcomes improve.

In the Reflect stage, we describe our approach to measurement and evaluation, and provide suggestions for how community engagement groups can reflect on progress regularly, course correct, and simultaneously measure performance and impact.

THEORY OF CHANGE

DEFINED

A theory of change describes how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a given context.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

Community Voice has developed a theory that reflects our understanding of how individuals, institutions, and communities change. We aspire to change neighborhood leadership, institutional decision-making, and community-level outcomes. Below we detail how and why we expect these changes to occur as a result of participating in the Community Voice process, trainings, and coaching.

Neighbors

We expect neighbors to build trust and collective efficacy and make meaningful decisions about their community.

Institutions

We expect institutions to engage neighbors in marginalized communities more equitably and make more equitable decisions about investments, policies and programs affecting marginalized communities.

Communities

We expect community-level outcomes (e.g. safety, jobs, housing) to improve as a result of more equitable decision-making and increased neighborhood leadership.

COMMUNITY VOICE THEORY OF CHANGE

We believe a correlation exists between neighborhood leadership and more equitable decision-making by institutions; and, that equitable decision-making by institutions correlates with improved outcomes in marginalized communities. In our experience, it takes one to three years to build neighborhood leadership; three to five years to change how decisions are made; and five to ten years to see community level outcomes improve.



FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

People who are closest to the problem are best positioned to define the problem, and its solution. Work with neighbors on your Community Voice Steering Committee or working groups to come up with a theory change. If you have not created a theory of change or logic model before, check out this sample

logic model for Affordable Housing and review the logic model for RVA Thrives below.

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

[Click here to see RVA Thrives logic model.](#)

MEASURE PERFORMANCE + IMPACT

DEFINED

Performance measurement tells what a program did and how well it did it. Evaluation tells the program's effect on the people, families, or communities it is serving.

COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

To measure performance, Community Voice draws on continuous improvement science, a method of cyclical problem-solving based on making small changes over time to improve outcomes. Like our approach to engagement, continuous improvement does not extend from upper-level management, but is driven by the people who are closest to, and best understand the problems. In the Community Voice process, if the desired results are not achieved, we cycle back to the first stage, reassess the problem, and plan for other changes.

PERFORMANCE

To measure performance we gather data regularly through neighbor satisfaction surveys once per year, and feedback loops with the Steering Committee on a monthly basis. We also track individual neighbor's participation on a quarterly basis, to understand whether our activities are moving people from involvement toward ownership.

Indicators of Involvement

Neighbors take a community survey, attend a focus group, sit with an organizer for a one-to-one.

Indicators of Collaboration

Neighbors join a working group, attend a community clean-up, housing forum or job fair, or attend the annual joint steering committee and civic association meeting.

Indicators of Ownership

Neighbors join and / or take on leadership within the steering committee, become a paid community advocate, co-lead trainings and coaching on the Community Voice model for institutions

IMPACT

We measure impact at key points throughout the year to see whether our efforts are having the intended effect. To measure change in neighborhood leadership, we survey neighbors on the trustworthiness of the group, sense of collective efficacy, and perceived decision-making power. To measure institutional change, we assess decision-making practices, and reassess after an institution has participated in trainings and coaching with Virginia Community Voice. We also track "wins" such as a policy change following neighbors' advocacy efforts, resource investment in a community-rooted solution, or use of equitable development tools like a Community Benefits Agreement. Finally, we measure community-level outcomes for the geographic focus area such as an increase in affordable housing units, decrease in traffic-related injuries, or increase in local jobs filled by local residents. To measure long-term outcomes, we use publicly available data to establish a baseline, set a 5–10 year goal to work towards, and check back annually, or as data becomes available, to see if that outcome has improved.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

- > [Housing First Assessment Tool](#)
- > [100 Million Healthy Lives Adult Well-Being Assessment](#)
- > [Outcomes and Performance Indicators for Employment Training / Workforce Development program](#)
- > [A Guide to Measuring Advocacy & Policy](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

During the first two years of engaging neighbors along the Jefferson Davis Corridor (JDC), RVA Thrives' measurement

Residents are the most knowledgeable people about their community—they know what is needed most, what strategies will work and which ones won't. They also know how relationships are built in their neighborhood and how things get done. These local nuances can frequently stop a project from being successful, so it makes sense to us that community engagement efforts should start with the expressed needs of the people who live in the community. Our city is strongest when everyone's voice is heard and valued.

ANNETTE COUSINS

Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond

and evaluation efforts were focused on the listening process, and collecting and analyzing data on neighbors' vision for their community. Reflection and feedback loops were integrated into every aspect of RVA Thrives operations during this time, but a formal satisfaction survey was not completed. During the third year of engagement, as the RVA Thrives Steering Committee coalesced, and community-rooted solutions such as ARCA were implemented, RVA Thrives started to focus measurement and evaluation efforts more on the impact of the Community Voice process. RVA Thrives administered a pre/post survey to measure Steering Committee members' trust, collective efficacy and decision-making capabilities. Youth participating in ARCA took a pre/post survey measuring trust, cross-cultural understanding, and civic advocacy skills. Job seekers who attended focus groups and job fairs were asked to share feedback on whether or not it helped them find a job or employment resources. A measurement tool is being designed to assess institutional decision-making and community engagement practices. All data collected by RVA Thrives on our performance and impact helps us understand whether our process is having the intended effect, and communicate the value of community engagement to stakeholders and funders.

COMMUNITY VOICE INDICATORS

OUTPUTS

- > Number of one-to-ones, survey responses, focus groups, program participants.
 - > Number of institutions participating in Community Voice training and coaching.
-

SHORT TERM OUTCOMES

- > Percent increase in trust and collective efficacy among Steering Committee members.
 - > Number & percent of neighbors who grow from involvement to collaboration.
 - > Number of meaningful decisions neighbors make about their community, (i.e. successful implementation of community-rooted solutions).
-

MID-TERM OUTCOMES

- > Number & percent of neighbors who grow from collaboration to ownership.
 - > Number and percent of institutions that engage marginalized communities equitably.
 - > Number and percent of policy, program, and investment decisions made equitably.
 - > Number and percent of policy, program, and investment decisions made to promote equity for people of color and other marginalized groups.
-

LONG TERM OUTCOMES

- > Number & percent of issues around which neighbors have taken collective action improve.
-

ULTIMATE OUTCOME

- > Neighbors in marginalized communities are equipped to realize their vision for their neighborhood and institutions are prepared to respond effectively.

COURSE CORRECT

DEFINED

To recalculate and adjust your course along the way.



COMMUNITY VOICE APPROACH

As performance measurement data are gathered, we analyze what is going well and what we would change. This happens on a regular basis, even monthly, as neighbors share feedback during meetings with staff. On an annual basis, we look at impact data from surveys to see whether trust and collective efficacy are improving, or whether institutions are changing how they engage marginalized communities. If we do not see improvement, growth, or satisfaction, we look more closely at the data to find out why. If needed, we follow-up with neighbors and institutions through one-to-ones and focus groups, or another survey. We strive to clearly understand what is not working so we can make decisions about how to course correct.

FOR YOUR TOOLBOX

[Click here to see a sample questionnaire to help capture satisfaction data from event participants.](#)

IN ACTION @ RVA THRIVES

In October 2018, at the Just Gentrification Housing Summit,

RVA Thrives staff collected performance data from participants and the Steering Committee, and in light of what they learned, were able to course correct. In terms of what neighbors thought went well—they said the panelists were very knowledgeable, and they learned a lot about the topics on the agenda. In terms of what they would change, neighbors wanted more practical tools they could use to combat gentrification. They also wanted to hear from people who had direct experience with gentrification, rather than professionals in the housing affordability field. In response, RVA Thrives is planning a second housing summit, at which neighbors will start to de-

velop practical tools to combat gentrification, such as a Community Benefits Agreement or equitable development scorecard. The summit will also provide time and space for neighbors to share their stories with housing affordability. At every monthly Steering Committee meeting, the beautification working group meets and discusses the issues surrounding housing affordability and gentrification. RVA Thrives also has two part-time Community Advocates who are Southside neighbors. They meet with staff weekly and provide feedback on decisions. Being open to and receiving neighbor on a weekly basis allows RVA Thrives staff to course correct very quickly and make sure they are on a path to pursuing neighbors' vision for their community, and not someone else's vision.



Reflect Summary

During the Reflect stage, we seek to understand how well community organizers facilitate the Community Voice process, and whether our efforts are having the intended impact for neighbors, institutions, and communities.

Reflection is happening throughout the Community Voice process; however. To gather feedback and improve is not something we do once per year. It is integrated into all aspects of decision-making at Virginia Community Voice.

Community engagement should be highly responsive to input from neighbors. That is why we dedicate time and resources to ensure that neighbors' voices are heard. We ask for feedback on our performance, and course correct quickly. This creates a culture of accountability, increases the decision-making capacity and power of neighbors, and develops trust.

Though careful to avoid "survey fatigue," we do measure change through pre/post surveys. Quantifiable survey data can be analyzed to show whether neighborhood leadership and institutional decision-making are changing. Finally, we monitor trends in community level outcomes over time. This tells us whether greater neighborhood leadership, and more equitable decision-making is moving the needle on complex issues.

The story of successful community engagement is compelling. When neighbors build trust, take ownership of decision-making, and are able to engage with institutions to access power and resources—it's something to be celebrated.

Using the Virginia Community Voice website, social media, events, and reports, we share first-hand stories of how community engagement works, and its value to neighbors in marginalized communities. Please visit us regularly and often, as we reflect on our progress, and share our learnings.

Need help with measurement and evaluation for your
community engagement work? Contact Virginia Community
Voice at info@virginiacommunityvoice.org →

CONCLUSION

Virginia Community Voice equips neighbors in marginalized communities to realize their vision for their neighborhood and prepares institutions to respond effectively. The Community Voice Blueprint describes our four-stage process of community engagement. It's a long-term approach to community change.

Community Voice starts by awakening the collective power of people who are directly impacted by the issues and equips them with the tools to do something — whether that is to pursue policy change, redirect philanthropic investment, or launch a program designed by neighbors.

By participating in the Community Voice process, neighbors move from the fringes to involvement, and from involvement to collaboration in organized efforts to strengthen their community. Through training and coaching with Virginia Community Voice, institutions also learn how to engage marginalized communities more effectively and make equitable decisions about policies, programs, and investments.

As evidenced by our mission, we believe community voice can and should be incorporated into any program design and implementation, research, or collective impact work that targets marginalized communities. If your mission is to improve community, we encourage you to make a listening process and genuine engagement with neighbors, the first step. We hope the Community Voice Blueprint has demonstrated to you that this is possible, and has provided examples and strategies for how you can engage neighbors in your own community.

This work takes time, and is not easy. It will take decades to dismantle the unjust systems upon which this country was built. But we will prevail.

Dr. King's words once again embolden us to pursue our calling:

And finally, and finally, in your life's blueprint, must be a commitment to the eternal principles of beauty, love, and justice...However young you are, you have a responsibility to seek to make your nation a better nation in which to live. You have a responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody. And so you must be involved in the struggle of freedom and justice.¹

[1] beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2017/10/the-50th-anniversary-of-martin-luther-king-jrs-what-is-your-lifes-blueprint.html



To hear from some of the neighbors involved with
this work in Richmond, Virginia, please visit
VACOMMUNITYVOICE.ORG



To speak with Virginia Community Voice, please email us at
INFO@VACOMMUNITYVOICE.ORG.



