

Advancing Equity through Access to Quality, Affordable Housing

Bridge Rockford Alliance
Rockford, Illinois



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The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities is a national organization dedicated to achieving our vision of a healthy and equitable society. The Alliance works for systemic change by harnessing the collective power of its network of hundreds of nonprofit human-serving organizations across North America as they translate knowledge into best practices that improve their communities. Working with and through its member network on leadership, innovation, and advocacy, the Alliance strives to achieve high impact by reducing the number of people living in poverty, increasing the number of people with opportunities to live healthy lives, and increasing the number of people with access to educational and employment success. Go to alliance1.org for more information.

The Kresge Foundation is a \$3.6 billion private, national foundation that works to expand opportunities in America's cities through grant-making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development in Detroit. In 2015, the Board of Trustees approved 370 grants totaling \$125.2 million, and nine social investment commitments totaling \$20.3 million. For more information, visit kresge.org

Bridge Rockford Alliance is a subsidiary of Rockford Housing Authority, which partners with the community and responsible residents to transform houses into homes while guiding families to self-sufficiency.

Introduction

Through a series of organizational profiles, we will explore engagement practices being applied by organizations across the spectrum of human services that translate to meaningful results in health and well-being, equity, and safety and security for families and communities. The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities defines engagement practices as the approaches, methodologies, and strategies employed by professionals and organizations that empower people to access and experience their inherent strengths and gifts, in order to fully participate and contribute to society.

“We believe all people should have access to healthy, quality housing options in neighborhoods of choice,” says Ron Clewer, CEO of the Rockford Housing Authority (RHA) in Rockford, Illinois and Director of the Bridge Rockford Alliance. With this belief at the core of all decision-making, Clewer has reformed the Rockford Housing Authority, founded the Bridge Rockford Alliance, and given each the capacity to respond to adversity and resistance. “Housing should serve as an opportunity to a better quality of life—school, stability, behavioral health, physical health, education, training—to help you serve your basic, ongoing, changing needs,” he explains.

However, according to Clewer, this is not the way public housing has been viewed historically. Instead, public housing has been slated for “leftover” spots in cities because the land is cheap and no one is interested in building there. As a result, residents are trapped and don’t have the option to move due to limited resources and opportunities to secure other housing.

Organizational Structure & Orientation

When Clewer took over the reins at Rockford Housing Authority in 2012, the organization was mired in a hostile culture and had just gone through a strategic process that took a very top-down approach. Clewer’s first move was to re-open the strategic planning process to create more opportunities for engagement with all stakeholder groups. Clewer felt this was an important first step as leader because he believes that engagement of all parties is the path to success and lays a strong foundation for the organization’s success. Each stakeholder group was given an opportunity to provide feedback and then asked, “If you don’t believe

in this plan, tell us. Then tell us what you do not believe in.” This approach included community members, partners that deliver services, residents, staff members, board of directors, and organizational leadership. In the end, everyone agreed on the content of a new plan that included input from all.

**“Housing should serve as an opportunity to a better quality of life”
—Rockford Housing Authority CEO,
Ron Clewer**

Using this approach, Clewer helped orient stakeholders towards providing input and taking action on behalf of the housing authority’s strategic priorities. Because people were asked to participate and given the opportunity to provide feedback, they developed a sense

of ownership and investment in the goals laid out by the process. Once they were vested, the housing authority created a work plan with performance indicators. This provided each group with a clear outline of their responsibilities and how results would be measured.

The commitment to the vision and future plan for RHA among all stakeholders established strength that had not been experienced in the agency previously. When, in the past, various departments within the organization did not work together, under the new approach the performance indicators required that departments work together. By intentionally building the metrics this way, each department was also required to build its capacity for collaboration because success was dependent on them working together. At the same time, the organization had to empower staff members and stakeholder groups to think universally within the agency as opposed to within their department. They developed indicators that intertwined the work of separate departments. This actually resulted in a great growth opportunity for RHA and allowed the organization to create greater impact in

the Rockford community as a united front. “We are focused on our effectiveness in delivering coordinated service, client outcomes, and achieving results all while remembering we serve people—living, breathing, feeling people; not numbers or problems,” says Clewer.



A New Approach to Public Housing

“Applying private market principles of real estate development to a public housing model is what I set out to do,” explains Clewer. “You don’t create real estate for people who don’t need it. If you do create it, you are going to create it to meet the needs of the people who live there. If you don’t have a product that is desirable, it is not going to sell.” This is traditionally done through small, focused investments over a long period of time to keep the asset modern and desirable so that it continues to produce a return. “When you have a piece of real estate like ours that is in really poor condition, you have to dig around to find the value of the property,” states Clewer. “In our case, what’s in there is of value; it is our people.” So instead of RHA focusing on short-term solutions for the physical piece of property, it focused on working with residents to improve the development and to move the organization forward on its long term strategy to improve the real estate and improve the living conditions.

¹Rockford Housing Authority Fiscal Year 2016 Annual Report

Clewer believes, “If real estate conditions do not meet the resident’s needs, then it is a poor investment.” If that is the case, “maybe the investment needs to go away and we need to provide another platform for the folks living there to find success.” Best practice supports this approach.

Challenges from the Community

RHA, under the direction of Clewer, has set out to improve existing options and build housing that is near transportation, employment opportunities, and better quality schools. The underlying goal of providing “high quality affordable housing that serves as an opportunity for greater quality of life”¹ is the foundation of everything RHA sets out to do for the residents of the 1,922 units at 11 different sites across the city of Rockford. From the very beginning, however, they have had to contend with systems that are unaccustomed to RHA’s philosophy on housing, and with a community that struggles with misconceptions about public housing residents. “There are some in the community that don’t agree. Rhetoric got really ugly here last year, we were in the midst of a firing squad,” said Clewer. In 2015, RHA broke ground on a, 49-unit housing development in a neighborhood of Rockford that has not housed public housing units in the past. This location was chosen due to the accessibility to transportation and employment options, as well as high quality schools and education opportunities. As a result of this move, existing neighbors were angry and outspoken against the new families in the neighborhood.

In addition, the Rockford City Council tried to block moves by RHA, even though, according to Clewer, “RHA was meeting all the zoning and other local planning requirements. [They reacted this way] simply because they did not truly understand who RHA serves. Regardless of what

materials we put out to tell the story of who the residents really are, it seemed an impasse existed.” In the end, RHA sued the Rockford City Council and won, allowing the development of the new housing to move forward. The federal government has also become involved, and has begun a federal fair housing investigation of whether there were civil rights violations by the city council throughout this process.

Clewer believes that one important takeaway from the experience thus far is that it helped RHA and Bridge Rockford Alliance to fulfill their basic role of advocacy as a value of their work. “None of us at the housing authority had ever stood up for our residents in that way. This is being recognized by our residents and has opened a new relationship with them.” In order to be effective in an advocacy role and advance equity, Clewer says, “You need to be willing, ready, and able to stand in the fire for the people you’re representing. If you’re not, they’re going to know it and you’re going to lose them. You won’t lose them in the sense that they are going to move away, but you will lose them in the sense that you won’t have a relationship with them and there will be animosity.”

Co-Creating with Neighbors

The turmoil and legal process created a lot of anxiety throughout the Rockford community. Despite the physical progression of the new housing facility in Rockford, the RHA is now dedicating itself to the task of rebuilding its relationship with new neighbors and the Rockford City Council. According to Clewer, the neighbors who are upset are a small and vocal group. In response to their concerns, RHA has been intentional in using video, storytelling, community meetings, media coverage, direct mail, and email in attempts to introduce RHA’s actual clients to the neighborhood and erase misconceptions. Starting by rebuilding personal connections has worked well, according to Clewer.

Additionally, to help advance a sense of community, RHA has offered to pay the fee to start a neighborhood association in the area of Rockford where the new facility is being built and where the concerned neighbors reside. “A stronger neighborhood would work together to understand what is happening within the neighborhood and have a means or a platform for communication within that neighborhood. If that means had existed in the past, maybe this turmoil wouldn’t have come about, or not in the way that it did. We must create a space for engagement,” Clewer speculates. To begin this process, RHA resident leaders who were willing to be part of the association and start the formation process were recruited. At the same time, some existing neighbors have come to know the RHA residents, and that the organization’s intentions focus on the client and building relationships. Neighboring residents of the new development have already started hosting gatherings and inviting potential residents of the new facility to get to know one another. Clewer is hopeful that the early, frontline neighbor-to-neighbor outreach that is already organically happening will lay the foundation for the neighborhood to grow and flourish in the future, “When you empower people to act in a way that they are passionate about, reasonable people are going to act in a way that truly tries to unite each other, not in a way that divides each other. This is true of people in both neighborhoods; it’s one of their commonalities.”

