

# Collective Impact Case Study: Opportunity Chicago



Discovering better ways  
to solve social problems

## Summary

Opportunity Chicago was a Collective Impact effort composed of government agencies, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and employers that successfully helped 5,000 public housing residents prepare for and find quality jobs by connecting low-skilled, low income job seekers to workforce development resources.<sup>1</sup>

### Key Facts

**Initiative / backbone name:** Opportunity Chicago

**Year initiative formed:** 2006

**Mission:** Place 5,000 public housing residents in unsubsidized employment between 2006 and 2010

**Geography:** Chicago, IL

**Impact area(s):** Community Development, Employment / Workforce Development, Economic Development

## Problem

By the 1990s, Chicago's public housing high-rises had become infamous as one of the most dangerous places to live in the country. Residents in public housing were found to suffer from credit problems, low literacy, families with criminal histories, few work skills or employment histories, as well as physical and mental health problems.<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, Chicago recognized that disjointed interventions were not making enough progress at transforming the lives of people in public housing. The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), human service organizations, and workforce agencies could not work separately to help residents become economically self-sufficient. A collaborative framework for development and integration of resources and services was needed to meet the needs of hard to employ public housing residents.<sup>3</sup>

## Collective Impact Beginnings

In January 2006, CHA, the Partnership for New Communities (PNC), and the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (MOWD) began organizing their activities focused on improving the employment prospects of public housing residents under the umbrella of Opportunity Chicago.<sup>4</sup> This new partnership built on the foundation of workforce development services the city offered, but provided additional, flexible resources as well as a platform for integrating existing services.

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<sup>1</sup> Chicago Jobs Council: Opportunity Chicago. Accessed July, 2013. <http://cjc.net/opportunity-chicago/>

<sup>2</sup> Did Chicago's Plan for Transformation succeed? Chicago Muckrakers. Accessed August, 2013. <http://www.chicagonow.com/chicago-muckrakers/2013/03/did-chicagos-plan-for-transformation-succeed/>

<sup>3</sup>The Promise and Challenge of Transitional Jobs: Opportunity Chicago's Transitional Jobs Experience. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/TJ-Report\\_July2012.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/TJ-Report_July2012.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Note: Midway through Opportunity Chicago, the city restructured its human service system to include workforce; the services provided by MOWD became part of DFSS.

From the beginning, the partners set common goals to:<sup>5</sup>

- Place 5,000 residents into jobs;
- Offer a range of employment services;
- Work in key industry sectors;
- Focus on reaching self-sufficiency through employment;
- Streamline services;
- Engage employers in new ways;
- Address gaps in services;
- Provide a more efficient model; and
- Document the model and lessons learned.

Although their task was not small, they believed that offering a range of streamlined and targeted employment services – meeting residents where they were in regards to their workforce needs – would enable them to reach their goal.

## Structure

Opportunity Chicago was designed to be collaborative from the very beginning. In addition to the three founding organizations, the Chicago Jobs Council (CJC), a local nonprofit, was brought on to play the role of the backbone. The public agency partners and CJC worked as the coordinating center, providing decentralized executive leadership for the initiative and making sure that the innovative strategies being designed were being implemented as effectively as possible. The partners convened an independent Strategic Advisors Group (SAG), consisting over time of national and local foundations, city agencies, the CHA, higher education institutions, the Chamber of Commerce, nonprofits, and the U.S. Department of Labor. The SAG's membership evolved over time, but the role was to consistently provide expertise and knowledge of best practices, to review initiative plans and activities, to secure other resources as appropriate, and to advocate for public policy and systems change. The SAG helped guide Opportunity Chicago's strategy, and advise on course corrections, over the initiative's five years.

The public agency partners formed new working groups whenever it was determined that a targeted set of individuals needed to meet around a particular aspect of the initiative. Many of the working groups focused on ensuring effective implementation of the workforce development program models supported by Opportunity Chicago, while others cut across program strategies to help the entire initiative do their work better. These groups came and went as the initiative's needs changed, and were always linked to a specific need or action that needed to be accomplished. From the beginning to the end of the initiative,

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<sup>5</sup> A Partnership for Change: How Opportunity Chicago Helped Create New Workforce Pathways for Public Housing Residents. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OC\\_partnership\\_for\\_change\\_001.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OC_partnership_for_change_001.pdf)

the working groups that were formed were: Employer Engagement; Bridge Programs; Best Practices; Service Provision; Proposal Review Committee; Resident Engagement; and the Data Working Group.

The initiative's seed funding was a combination of money from the CHA's budget and private funding raised by PNC. As the initiative progressed, PNC and Opportunity Chicago ultimately raised more than \$27 million from a combination of public and private sources, including: local, state, and federal government agencies; corporations; foundations; Living Cities; banks; and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. A majority of the funds raised were allocated to program costs.

## Results

Opportunity Chicago set out with a specific goal – to place 5,000 residents in unsubsidized employment between 2006 and 2010. By the end of the five year effort in 2010, Opportunity Chicago had placed 5,696 public housing residents in jobs, exceeding their goal of 5,000 by 14%.<sup>6</sup>

The initiative achieved success on a number of other metrics as well:<sup>7</sup>

- More than 6,700 public housing residents participated in the initiative.
- 77% of participants worked after program exit.
- The number of participants who worked increased in every year of the program, despite the flagging economy.
- Over 50% of placements were retained for two or more years.
- Over 50% of all participants saw an increase in average earnings.

## Five Conditions of Collective Impact

### Common Agenda

As previously stated, Opportunity Chicago was established with a clear goal from the beginning. The initiative sought to help 5,000 residents prepare for and find work in five years. They did so by providing an efficient model to offer a range of employment services, focusing on reaching self-sufficiency through employment, engaging employers in new ways, and addressing and streamlining gaps in services.

### Shared Measurement

The shared measurement system focused on measuring individual resident outcomes that tracked toward the ultimate goal. Big picture metrics such as housing and employment status were tracked for the

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<sup>6</sup> Opportunity Chicago: 2006-2010. Improving Access to Employment for Public Housing Residents in Chicago. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/OC-Evaluation\\_July2012.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/OC-Evaluation_July2012.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

residents of the housing authority, and specific metrics such as participation in training programs, type of employment, and employment retention were tracked as well. Most of the data collected was obtained through CHA's Salesforce system and Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES). Specific data decisions were decided upon by a Data Working Group, including issues of collection and dissemination.

Data was disseminated to partners in as timely a manner as possible. Data from CHA and IDES (Illinois Department of Employment Security) were used to track employment for members of the initiative and share successes and challenges with partners. Partners used the data to improve services and coordinate activities. Furthermore, Opportunity Chicago provided a venue for stakeholders to meet and review the data, identify challenges, exchange information, discuss services delivery improvements, and propose plans to address symptomatic problems.

### Mutually Reinforcing Activities

All of Opportunity Chicago's partners were committed to the success of the overall goal and worked together to achieve it. The nine working groups were created to support and reinforce each other with that idea in mind, under the overall direction and strategic focus provided by the SAG and public agency partners. These groups developed strategies, monitored their implementation, and revised the strategies as more was learned. This layered structure gave the broad effort a decentralized model, but ensured connections for shared impact and learning.

### Continuous Communication

Continuous communication occurred between the coordinating members, the SAG, and the working groups. The groups communicated in different ways; working groups used meetings to monitor progress and revise strategies, while the SAG used meetings to review and offer advice on those strategies, consider proposals, and to advocate for policy and systems change. This was all facilitated by the backbone organization, CJC.

Leaders focused on communicating key findings to city agencies responsible for the services. To further disseminate findings to the field, Opportunity Chicago released several reports to share their findings: *Opportunity Chicago 2006-2010: Improving Access to Employment for Public Housing Residents in Chicago*,<sup>8</sup> a final evaluation of the initiative, and the companion report, *The Promise and Challenge of Transitional Jobs*.<sup>9</sup> Besides the formal evaluation reports, they also released *A Partnership for Change*, a report specifically designed to share learnings with the broader community.<sup>10</sup> All of these reports can be found on the Opportunity Chicago website: <http://cjc.net/opportunity-chicago/publications/>

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<sup>8</sup> Opportunity Chicago: 2006-2010. Improving Access to Employment for Public Housing Residents in Chicago. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/OC-Evaluation\\_July2012.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/OC-Evaluation_July2012.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> The Promise and Challenge of Transitional Jobs: Opportunity Chicago's Transitional Jobs Experience. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/TJ-Report\\_July2012.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/TJ-Report_July2012.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> A Partnership for Change: How Opportunity Chicago Helped Create New Workforce Pathways for Public Housing Residents. Accessed August, 2013. [http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OC\\_partnership\\_for\\_change\\_001.pdf](http://cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/OC_partnership_for_change_001.pdf)

## Backbone Support

The Chicago Jobs Council, an existing 501c(3) that represented a variety of stakeholders, played the role of the backbone. CJC is a local coalition with a mission of ensuring access to employment and career advancement opportunities for people living in poverty. CJC's commitment to workforce development issues that affect disadvantaged jobseekers gave the initiative credibility and positioned the organization as a neutral convener of the different stakeholders. The staffing structure for the backbone was very lean; no more than two individuals were assigned to work on Opportunity Chicago at any one time.

## Lessons Learned

**Have an ambitious but actionable goal:** Opportunity Chicago began with a very specific goal – to get 5,000 residents of public housing into employment. Starting with this goal went a long way towards aligning and motivating partner organizations. As one partner explained, “having a concrete placement goal and a timeline was a motivating force for leaders and the broader set of city stakeholders.”<sup>11</sup> A discrete goal gave Opportunity Chicago the ability to start tracking data right away, and allowed partners to see if they were making progress. Having a discrete actionable goal and a time-delineated effort helped ensure accountability – after Opportunity Chicago exceeded their employment goals the success of the initiative was plainly clear.

**Use influential leaders to achieve broad buy-in:** Opportunity Chicago was a strong collaborative because it did not just bring stakeholders to the table, it brought the right stakeholders to the table. The four organizations involved from the beginning, the CHA, the PNC, the DFSS, and CJC – were already well positioned to provide complementary skills and services. The CHA and DFSS were already providing housing and support services for those residents they were assisting to find employment, the PNC was working with other funders as part of their collaborative – including the business community – and the CJC was working to advance employment opportunities with nonprofits and organizers on the ground. When these four organizations came to the table and set their mind toward integrating, other organizations were more inclined to follow. To this end, one member of Opportunity Chicago noted that “having the right group of people who built a high regard for each other, who could influence others, is a hallmark of this effort.”<sup>12</sup>

**Backbone roles often shift over time:** CJC's role as the backbone changed significantly over the initiative's five years. CJC began as primarily a facilitator, helping provide legitimacy through its past work in employment access and convening the disparate stakeholders of the initiative. However, as time went

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<sup>11</sup> FSG Interviews and Analysis

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

on, the initiative had to weather many changes – including the 2008 recession. As leaders and participants from partner organizations left to take on new roles, and new leaders and participants joined, CJC helped maintain continuity and focus. After the initiative had been active for a few years, CJC’s role had evolved to not only focus on facilitation and management, but also to help other partners clarify roles and responsibilities and to create momentum for the initiative as whole.

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