



# Transforming Government, Transforming Communities

*Strengthening the Federal Workforce  
to Help Communities Implement  
Place-Based Initiatives*

**By Thaddeus Ferber**

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# Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through the Innovations in American Government Award given by the Ash Center for Democratic Government and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. The award recognized the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative's achievements in implementing an interagency, place-based approach to help neighborhoods in distress transform themselves into neighborhoods of opportunity. This award made possible the working relationship between the associated federal agencies and programs, the sponsorship of a Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center fellow—Adam LaRose— and technical support from the Forum for Youth Investment. We are particularly thankful to Adam LaRose, who participated in all of the interviews and produced the first draft of this report.

We are deeply appreciative of the time and effort so many federal staff and partners devoted to the process of sharing their insights and experiences for this report. Their active participation and thoughtful responses serves as a testament to the energy, passion and expertise that drive the federal place-based work.

We are also grateful to our colleagues at foundations, think tanks, nonprofits, research firms and other organizations whose body of work on place-based efforts significantly informed the creation and content of this report.

Lastly, we would like to recognize the federal advisory team for its support, guidance, editing and feedback on this report. We are thankful in particular for Matthew Hennessy, who provided a substantive rewrite of an earlier draft of this report, Julie Ewart, who assisted in the dissemination, Daniel Vallone, who assisted in the synthesis, and Jane Hodgdon, Ursula Wright and Victoria Brown for their consistent leadership and support, without which this report would not have been possible.

The Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life. [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org)

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Summary of Findings	6
Introduction	8
Place-Based Initiatives Included in this Report	10
Methodology	14
Frontline Federal Staff Competencies	16
Providing Innovative Leadership	16
Working Within the Federal Structure	17
Working with Communities	19
Communication and Interpersonal Skills	21
Other Skills	22
Strategies to Support the Federal Place-Based Workforce	24
Training and Professional Development	24
Federal Staffing	29
Supervision and Management	30
Conditions that Support Place-Based Work	34
Appropriate Adequate Resources to Federal Agencies	
Implementing Place-Based Initiatives	34
Align Federal Processes, Regulations and Grant Solicitations	36
Demonstrate Leadership’s Clear Prioritization of Place-Based Approaches and Active Involvement	38
Conclusion	40
References and Bibliography	41

# Executive Summary

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*“Federal place-based initiatives like Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) are not new programs — they’re a new way. SC2 has helped to break down stovepipes between federal agencies and strengthen cities around the country.”*

Mitch Landrieu, Mayor of New Orleans, March 3, 2016

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Through a series of signature “place-based initiatives,” the Obama Administration has made a historic effort to support communities in a comprehensive fashion, helping to empower communities to address their needs holistically. Place-based initiatives concentrate funding, flexibility, technical assistance and other support to help selected sites forge integrated approaches to community transformation that cut across individual programs, departments and sectors.

The effectiveness of these place-based initiatives depends not just on how well the policies were designed, but also on the abilities of the federal staff who interface with the participating sites on a day-to-day basis, such as grant managers, community liaisons, desk officers, program officers and team leads.

The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) developed this report to shine a light on the critical yet often poorly understood roles frontline federal staff play in helping communities implement place-based initiatives. The first section of this report captures specific competencies respondents identified as crucial for federal staff engaged in place-based work. The second section suggests ways that these competencies can be developed and supported. The third section highlights broader conditions, often beyond the direct control of the frontline place-based workforce, that allow place-based initiatives to flourish. The findings and recommendations in this report are based primarily on key informant interviews (individually and in small groups) with more than 90 federal career staff and technical assistance providers who interface with participating sites on a day-to-day basis,

with their supervisors, and with the senior officials who lead their offices and agencies. Respondents also included community grantees and designees, representing these place-based initiatives: Building Neighborhood Capacity Program; Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program; Choice Neighborhoods; Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) Health Centers; Partnership for Sustainable Communities; Promise Neighborhoods; Promise Zones; and Strong Cities, Strong Communities.

These interviews were augmented by a literature review and feedback from federal officials on earlier drafts of this report.

The list of place-based initiatives we interviewed is not exhaustive of all that exist, but includes a range of different types of current federal place-based initiatives. While these initiatives vary in design, topic and geographic scope, they all focus on a set of issues at the community level and recognize the interconnectedness of these challenges. Furthermore, they share a similar approach for achieving success by aligning all relevant community partners around shared goals and outcomes, seeking a solution that is bigger than any one agency or organization would be able to achieve working alone.

At the same time, it is important to note that each one of these place-based programs is unique. Accordingly, while each finding in this report reflects information we gathered through representatives from multiple place-based initiatives, each finding does not necessarily apply to all of the federal place-based initiatives.

Several respondents were quick to note that the competencies listed in this report describe not

just exemplary federal place-based staff, but exemplary federal staff, period. As place-based work seeks to transform how the government does business, these competencies could influence programs beyond those typically considered “place-based.”

With the goal in mind of transforming how the federal government relates to communities, this report is being released at a critical moment. With limited time left in the Obama Administration, promising strategies should be shared across government more broadly and embedded in ways that will transcend the current presidential administration.

Our hope is that by identifying the specific competencies that federal frontline staff employ in working with communities, outlining strategies for supporting the development of these competencies and highlighting the conditions that help place-based initiatives thrive, this report can advance the adoption of place-based approaches. Looking more broadly

beyond the current place-based initiatives, the competencies, supports and conditions discussed in this report may well help this Administration and future administrations achieve the lofty goal of influencing how the entire federal government does business and becomes a more effective partner to communities across the country.



# Summary of Findings

## Frontline Federal Staff Competencies Needed to Help Communities Implement Place-Based Initiatives

### Providing Innovative Leadership

- **Ability to envision and implement creative solutions**  
*"You need someone who is entrepreneurial; someone that can take something that is on a piece of paper, and can say, 'How can I create a plan for this in real-life?'"*
- **Ability to envision a federal role greater than compliance**  
*"In some ways, it is better to have more of a thought partner than a compliance partner, to help us solve issues that we had or they had, rather than just taking a heavy-handed compliance approach."*
- **Ability to envision solutions that cross department and agency lines**  
*"We need folks who naturally think about integrated approaches."*

### Working Within the Federal Structure

- **Ability to reach out to colleagues in other agencies and identify relevant resources across agencies**  
*"Federal staff should be aware of what is out there already and they should provide value in demystifying the federal resources that are available to communities."*
- **Ability to discern when and how to provide flexibility while ensuring grant and regulatory compliance**  
*"How you balance the fiduciary responsibility of the money, to what are you trying to do, what you actually do, and what the community wants to do is critical."*
- **Ability to encourage federal colleagues to go above and beyond to help place-based communities**  
*"You need to manage up very well. You need to make sure your bosses feel that you are not unduly exposing them, but are doing something good and that something good would come out of this extra step or approach you are advocating for."*

### Working with Communities

- **Ability to understand the local community perspective**  
*"You must be able to understand and comprehend what a community is going through."*
- **Ability to figure out how things get done in a community**  
*"Having political savvy in both big 'p' Politics and little 'p' politics is a big deal – meaning not only knowing the context of what is going on politically, but also how things get done at a community level."*
- **Ability to engage and demonstrate respect for community members**  
*"Oftentimes with these types of grants, we think we know what is best for the community and that we can save the community. But now we have learned that you have to embrace the community. We identify local and indigenous people to engage and be a part of this – this is a part of success in place-based work."*
- **Ability to ask probing questions to identify a community's underlying needs**  
*"Sometimes at the local level, we don't know what we are asking, or sometimes we don't know what the actual problem is. This is a skill that the staff or the liaison needs to have: to help us articulate the right question."*

### Communication and Interpersonal Skills

- **Ability to communicate with different audiences and stakeholders, including federal colleagues, local leadership and community residents**  
*"Place-based staff need to know how to communicate in various settings, and with various actors and stakeholders."*
- **Ability to convene and facilitate group discussions**  
*"Skills around facilitation are critical. A lot of this work happens with a lot of stakeholders, and employees need to be able to organize, resolve conflicts and get this work done."*

### Other Skills

- **Ability to navigate between a broad understanding of a wide range of related issues and a deeper expertise in the primary topic(s) of the specific place-based effort**  
*"We can't all be experts on everything, but it would help to have some knowledge on the programs and issues."*
- **Ability to understand and use data to keep people focused on results**  
*"The results/outcomes-based accountability framework is significant; this entails a relentless pursuit of measures and outcomes."*

# Summary of Findings

## Strategies to Support the Federal Place-Based Workforce

### Training and Professional Development

- Create trainings, toolkits, case studies and role-playing exercises

*"I think it would be useful to start wrapping training around case studies in a way that says, 'Here are the resources coming out of these three agencies and here are the challenges coming out of these communities.'"*

- Conduct joint site visits, bringing together a cross section of federal and local stakeholders

*"One of the things that would have been very helpful is to have the program officer visit the site to have a chance to more deeply understand what we were facing and dealing with on a day-to-day basis."*

- Create mechanisms for convening and exchange among federal staff implementing place-based initiatives

*"As we got going, everyone was talking about the problems they were dealing with in communities, about where to go and where to get information."*

- Create an online forum where place-based grantees, designees and federal staff can stay connected

*"This should be like a 'Facebook-lite' online forum where folks could access other communities to build upon each other's experiences."*

- Share information with federal staff on funding opportunities in other departments and agencies

*"You cannot collaborate and support if the staff do not know what is available, how agency staff are thinking about it, and how it would work across programs and communities."*

- Offer federal place-based staff opportunities to work in other federal departments and to rotate between jobs in the field and in D.C.

*"It would be interesting to have folks who are interested in various aspects of place-based work to have rotations with each other, so they could become better acclimated with the place-based work in other departments."*

### Federal Staffing

- Seek candidates who have diverse experience both inside and outside of federal government and in various federal agencies

*"It is important to have well-rounded experience, so you are predisposed to and seek collaboration and compromise. This is the only way these approaches to policy happen."*

- Recruit candidates throughout the span of their careers

### Supervision and Management

- Change job descriptions and performance measures to support place-based staff's efforts

*"At the end of the day, place-based activities need to be the full-time jobs of frontline staff; they can't be something staffers do on top of their day jobs."*

## Conditions that Support Place-Based Work

### Appropriate Adequate Resources to Federal Agencies Implementing Place-Based Initiatives

- Give managers the authority and funding to recruit, reassign and select staff with place-based skillsets
- Dedicate more federal staff and federal resources to work with communities implementing place-based initiatives
- Allocate funding for training and site visits

### Align Federal Processes, Regulations and Grant Solicitations

- Create a streamlined mechanism for responding to communities' questions about allowable uses of their existing federal funds
- Provide place-based grantees/designees greater flexibility in using and blending their existing federal funding
- Explicitly allow a community to use an existing governance structure to manage new place-based initiatives
- Provide place-based designees competitive preference in funding competitions

### Demonstrate Leadership's Clear Prioritization of Place-Based Approaches and Active Involvement

- Strengthen interagency structures

# Introduction

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*“We know that this could work. The question is: Can the federal government really disrupt this old, top-down, outdated approach and replace it with a model of customizing what the federal government does?”*

Shaun Donovan, Office of Management and Budget Director, January 13, 2016

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Through a series of signature “place-based initiatives,” the Obama Administration has made a historic effort to support communities in a comprehensive fashion, helping to empower communities to address their needs holistically. These initiatives provide funding, flexibility, technical assistance and other support to help selected sites forge integrated approaches to community transformation that cut across individual programs, departments and sectors.

The effectiveness of these place-based initiatives depends not just on how well the policies were designed, but also on the abilities of the federal staff who interface with the participating sites on a day-to-day basis.

To shine a light on this critical yet often poorly understood federal role, the Forum for Youth Investment developed this report to help identify the specific competencies federal frontline staff need to succeed, the ways that these competencies can be developed and supported, and the broader conditions that allow place-based initiatives to flourish.

## **Background on Place-Based Initiatives**

Place-based initiatives “focus on the whole set of issues a community faces and tackles those issues in tandem, taking advantage of the synergy achieved by addressing multiple issues at once. Communities that face underperforming schools, rundown housing, neighborhood violence, and poor health know that these are interconnected challenges and that they perpetuate each other. The place-based framework helps the federal government respond to such challenges with interconnected solutions.” (Impact in Place, U.S. Department of Education, 2012)

Communities have long sought to implement comprehensive approaches to community transformation. (The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy, 2015) Examples abound of philanthropic organizations, local governments, nonprofits and other partners on the ground that have supported integrated community development initiatives. Indeed, much of the momentum behind place-based approaches at the federal level is inspired and aligned with prior and concurrent work from non-federal partners engaged in these efforts.

Place-based initiatives begin at the community level and are defined by a specified geography. Communities may initiate place-based work prior to federal involvement, or the place-based initiative might begin with applying to a federal place-based initiative and receiving a grant, designation and/or technical assistance from the federal government. Communities use federal place-based initiatives to coalesce partners around common goals, obtain further resources and increase technical support. Additionally, communities may seek other federal grants and resources that are not designed specifically for place-based initiatives to complement their place-based work.

Once a community is part of a federal place-based initiative, federal staff coordinate closely with the grantee or designee. By participating as active partners in place-based initiatives, federal staff provide guidance to help navigate and align available federal resources. (It should be noted that in cases where the community does not have a federal place-based initiative, federal staff might still provide similar guidance regarding federal resources and technical assistance.) For federal place-based initiatives, the roles





of federal staff depend on the initiative and the needs of the community. “Place-based” does not imply that the initiatives all look the same. Rather, these initiatives vary in important ways, particularly by the type of federal assistance and resources provided. For example, some federal place-based initiatives, such as Choice Neighborhoods, provide a grant to the community, while others, like Promise Zones, are designations that give communities preference for applications for specific federal grants and technical assistance competitions. Beyond the initial federal place-based initiatives, communities might also seek to layer in other federal place-based initiatives and other federal resources throughout the period of the federal place-based work.

In addition to the type of resources and assistance offered, federal place-based initiatives vary by other factors such as applicant eligibility, timeframe of the initiative, geographic scope and the agency or agencies overseeing the work. To different extents, many federal administrations had advanced some form of place-based initiatives prior to 2008. Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities, HOPE VI, Weed and Seed, and similar programs existed in the 1990s and earlier. Yet the level of focus and rigor applied to place-based initiatives by the Obama Administration is unprecedented.

Under President Obama, the White House and the Office of Management and Budget have encouraged a place-based approach to increase the impact of federal investments. In 2010, the White House launched the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (NRI) as a place-based strategy “designed to catalyze and empower local action while busting silos, prioritizing public-private partnerships, and making existing programs more effective and efficient.” (White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, 2011) NRI engages the White House Domestic Policy Council, White House Office of Urban Affairs, and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Education (ED), Justice (DOJ), Health and Human Services (HHS) and Treasury in support of local solutions to revitalize and transform neighborhoods.

# Place-Based Initiatives Included in This Report

The list of place-based initiatives we interviewed is not exhaustive of all that exist (for example the Full-Service Community Schools Program, My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge, and the Performance Partnership Pilots were also mentioned by interviewees), but it does include a range of different types of current federal place-based initiatives. While these initiatives vary in design, topic and geographic scope, they all focus on a set of issues at the community level and recognize the interconnectedness of these challenges.

## **Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program (BCJI)**

BCJI, launched in 2012, is a program based out of the Department of Justice that aims to reduce crime and improve community safety as part of a comprehensive strategy to advance neighborhood revitalization goals through site-based grants. Competitive grants are provided to a fiscal agent that works with a consortium of partners to employ data-driven, cross-sector approaches within target neighborhoods that have hot spots of violent and serious crime.

## **Choice Neighborhoods (CN)**

CN is a program housed in HUD that enables communities to revitalize struggling neighborhoods with distressed public housing or HUD-assisted housing. Local leaders, residents and stakeholders – such as public housing authorities, cities, schools, police, business owners, nonprofits and private developers – create a plan that revitalizes distressed HUD housing and addresses the challenges in the surrounding neighborhood. Through these grants, distressed housing is being replaced with vibrant mixed-income communities, leveraging investments to develop new retail and businesses, turning around failing schools, strengthening early education, preventing crime, improving transportation, ensuring basic neighborhood assets and increasing access to jobs.

## **Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) Health Centers**

Health centers have for more than five decades provided comprehensive high-quality preventive and primary health care to America's most medically underserved urban and rural communities. Health centers serve patients regardless of their ability to pay, making them the essential primary care provider for nearly 23 million people in need.

## **Promise Neighborhoods (PN)**

The vision of the U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods program is that all children and youth growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to great schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and a career. Intended to significantly improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children and youth in our most distressed communities, PN provides planning and implementation grants as well as technical assistance to nonprofits, institutions of higher education and Indian tribes.

## **Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP)**

Another key program of the White House's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, BNCP launched in August 2012. BNCP is a collaboration between ED, HHS, HUD and DOJ to target low-capacity neighborhoods in cities and provides capacity-building support to develop and implement results-driven revitalization plans. Federal departments provide technical assistance and resources to 12 neighborhoods in four cities.

### **Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC)**

PSC is an interagency partnership carried out by HUD, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Transportation (DOT). PSC provided grants to support metropolitan and multijurisdictional planning efforts that integrate investments in housing, land use, economic and workforce development, transportation and infrastructure. The agencies incorporate livability principles into federal funding programs, policies and future legislative proposals, including increasing transportation choices; promoting energy-efficient affordable housing; strengthening economic competitiveness; increasing the value of communities and neighborhoods; leveraging federal resources; and supporting existing communities.

### **Strong Cities Strong Communities (SC2)**

SC2 is a program overseen by HUD and the White House Domestic Policy Council. SC2 deployed federal community solutions team leads to 14 pilot cities to coordinate a federal, inter-agency team that supports each city's vision. SC2 expanded the model to reach additional cities through the National Resource Network (NRN), which provided on the ground and remote technical assistance, peer-to-peer networking and resources. The SC2 model also received complementary capacity from fellows funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers. Additionally, SC2 led the Economic Visioning Challenge to award funding to three cities to create prize competitions for local economic development plans.

### **Promise Zones (PZ)**

PZ is a program carried out by HUD and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that gives designated high-poverty communities a competitive priority to help them access certain federal discretionary grants, and provides in-depth technical assistance, including a federal liaison "embedded" within the local community. In so doing, PZ provides federal capacity to local leaders in order to accelerate revitalization in distressed communities. Through PZ, the federal government partners with local leaders to increase economic activity, improve educational opportunities, leverage private investment, reduce violent crime, enhance public health and address other priorities identified by the community.

## The Critical Role Frontline Federal Staff Play in Helping Place-Based Initiatives Succeed

Reflecting on the place-based work done during the Clinton Administration, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros recently noted:

One innovation we championed at HUD – and one that Andrew Cuomo improved upon during his tenure as Secretary – was to flip the Department’s organizational chart upside down in order to place the appropriate value on our staff who represented us in places. A Pepsi executive once explained to me that the key person in Pepsi-Cola’s organizational chart is the driver who unloads the truck and puts the product on the shelf in the store, because he is the one who must advantageously position the product for sale. He is the one who places the Pepsi sign where people can see it and in a way that points to the product. ... This anecdote became a metaphor for what we were trying to do. (*Place-Based Initiatives in the Context of Public Policy and Markets: Moving to Higher Ground*, The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy, 2015)

The Obama Administration embraced a similar philosophy, devoting significant high-level attention to understanding and supporting federal frontline staff implementing place-based initiatives.

It is important to note that implementing place-based initiatives is not easy. These initiatives are challenging for communities to apply for and implement, and they are challenging for the federal staff charged with running them. The work on both sides represents a significant departure from many of the roles, structures and processes that have been developed and refined in the past. Instead of managing a single grant provided to various communities, many federal staff assigned to place-based programs

are expected to manage a set of communities through various funding streams and resources. As the responsibilities of federal programs evolve, so do the roles of the involved federal staff.

Therefore, it is essential that the federal personnel who serve as the primary points of contact for communities implementing federal place-based initiatives – such as grant managers, community liaisons, desk officers, program officers, team leads and support teams – have the competencies and support they need to do their jobs well.

This report is designed to provide insights into what competencies frontline federal staff need to succeed, and ways managers, supervisors and senior leadership can help.



# Methodology

To identify the specific competencies federal staff need to help communities implement a place-based initiative successfully, and to develop recommendations for ways to ensure that federal staff in these roles have or develop these competencies, the Forum employed the following methodologies in developing this report.

**Literature review:** Literature review performed on federal place-based programs and on “collective impact” initiatives.

**Key informant interviews:** The Forum conducted more than 90 semi-structured interviews from May 2015 to August 2015. Key informants included: federal career staff that interface with participating sites on a day-to-day basis, their supervisors, community grantees and designees, technical assistance providers and the senior officials who lead the place-based offices. The interviewees were not randomly selected, nor were the set of place-based initiatives we included in this report. Potential interviewees were identified by agency leads from each place-based initiative and were further narrowed based on the individuals’ responsiveness to the interview requests, which were made via email.<sup>1</sup>

**Group conversations:** On July 10, 2015, the Forum conducted four group conversations with communities that were implementing one

or more place-based initiatives. These group conversations were conducted at the 2015 Promise Neighborhoods National Network Conference, and included participants from most of the place-based initiatives mentioned in this report. Preliminary findings about the needed competencies and approaches to training were presented, followed by facilitated group conversations to gather input, additions and further recommendations.

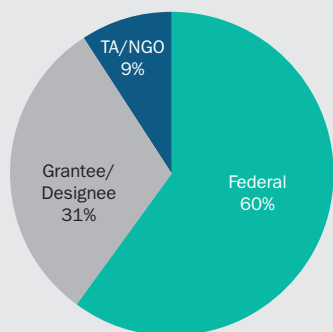
**Federal forums and feedback:** In August we shared the preliminary findings of this report with federal agency staff through in-person and online sessions, and circulated a draft of this document for comment.

Using these methods, we studied the following list of place-based initiatives (which is not intended to include all federal place-based initiatives underway):

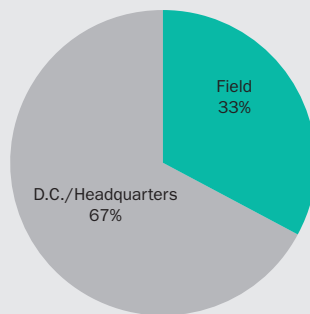
- Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP)
- Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program (BCJI)
- Choice Neighborhoods (CN)
- HRSA Health Centers
- Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC)
- Promise Neighborhoods (PN)
- Promise Zones (PZ)

<sup>1</sup> The majority HUD agency representation is due to the large number of place-based initiatives that are based at HUD.

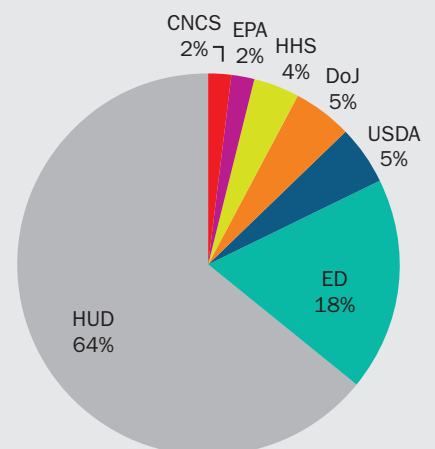
## Interview and Group Conversation Participants



Participant Sector Breakdown



Federal Staff Participation Location Breakdown



Participant Agency Representation

- Strong Cities Strong Communities (SC2) While most interviews included a similar set of questions, the questions were not always identical. Instead, the questions evolved to dig deeper into areas of interest that emerged from earlier interviews. The interview notes were extensive, but were not formally transcribed. The authors did not use a formal rubric for identifying the themes presented in this report, and it is possible that other people who listened to the same interviews could have drawn out different themes.

In part to address these limitations, earlier drafts of this report were shared with a subset of the interviewees. They provided feedback that the findings in this report aligned well with the perspectives they shared in their interviews. The few areas they suggested did not were edited accordingly.

### “Place-Based Initiatives” are not all the same

As we developed this report, we worked to find common competencies and recommendations identified by respondents from multiple place-based programs. At the same time, it is important to note that each one of these place-based programs is unique and vary on important characteristics such as:

- Funding: planning grants, implementation grants, competitive preference points for

- future grants, or no direct funding;
- Types and levels of technical assistance;
- Eligibility criteria;
- Timeframe of the initiative;
- Scope of geographic focus: neighborhood, city, or regional; and
- Agency or agencies that oversee the initiatives.

As the Bridgespan Group found, “simple homogeneity is not one of their distinguishing characteristics. On multiple dimensions these initiatives are going about their work by very different routes.” (*Next Generation Community Revitalization: A Work in Progress*, The Bridgespan Group, 2011)

These distinctions were noted by respondents in our report as well. As one put it, “All programs are not alike in how they must be administered and managed. Those with funding are very different from those without funding. ... There is a huge difference between place-based work that is primarily about convening and connecting, and place-based work ... which involves tens of millions of dollars leveraging hundreds of millions.”

Accordingly, while each finding in this report reflects information we gathered from *multiple* place-based programs, each finding does not necessarily apply to *all* of the federal place-based programs.

## Terminology in this Report

*Grantee*: a local entity that was awarded a grant from a federal place-based initiative.

*Designee*: a local entity that was selected as a participant in a federal place-based initiative that does not directly provide grants.

*Grantee/designee*: When we include direct quotes from local respondents, we often identify them as a “grantee/designee” so as to better conceal their identities.

*Federal field staff*: a federal staffer whose primary office is in or near the site of the place-based initiative.

*Federal D.C. staff*: a federal staffer whose primary office is in Washington, D.C.

# Frontline Federal Staff Competencies

Our research identified a number of competencies that were viewed as highly relevant to multiple federal place-based initiatives. They are grouped in five categories:

1. Providing innovative leadership
2. Working within the federal structure
3. Working with communities
4. Communication and interpersonal skills
5. Other skills

## Providing Innovative Leadership

When asked what it takes for federal staff to do place-based jobs well, one of the most common responses from participants was that it takes a certain type of “mindset.” Indeed, as the final report for the Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative in Fresno, California, noted, “one of the initiative’s goals has been to be a new approach and not a new program.” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013)

Our respondents identified a few different facets of the types of innovative approaches and mindsets that are essential for federal staff who help communities implement place-based initiatives.

## Ability to envision and implement creative solutions

*“You need someone who is entrepreneurial; someone that can take something that is on a piece of paper, and can say, ‘How can I create a plan for this in real-life?’”*

-Federal field staff

Federal staff members who help communities implement place-based initiatives are often trailblazers. They frequently do things that have never been done before. As a federal political appointee noted, “Staff have to have an orientation and willingness to be creative and innovative with an approach to problem-solving for many of the places.” As the place-based mindset is rooted in thinking differently about common problems, federal staff leading these initiatives must be agile and resourceful in their problem solving.

Creative problem solving was also noted in the SC2 evaluation, which cited the value of an “entrepreneurial and adaptable approach to the engagement.” (Abt Associates in partnership with Mt. Auburn Associates, 2014) Often, this approach is supported by “a curiosity and a desire for learning and excellence,” as described in Building Neighborhood Capacity Program report conducted by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

## Ability to envision a federal role greater than compliance

*“In some ways, it is better to have more of a thought partner than a compliance partner, to help us solve issues that we had or they had, rather than just taking a heavy-handed compliance approach.”*

-Grantee/Designee

Federal staff in these roles must not just see their jobs as ensuring that grantees/designees comply with federal regulations, but also commit to helping a community succeed. Their roles must go beyond implementation of one specific federal program and should instead focus on helping a community work together on a comprehensive strategy.

“One of the game changers is having someone at the federal level whose mindset is one of success, and not just compliance,” said a federal field staff person. “If you can get even one person who can put the pieces together and coordinate that and has some sort of clout at the regional or federal level, you can move mountains. If you don’t have that, the mountains won’t move.”

This sentiment was echoed by many other respondents, including another federal field staffer, who said, “In our department we have a dynamic of success being measured in terms of compliance. What we were pushing for in a place-based initiative is more aspirational: What do you want to see in the end, and how can we get it done? Having that point of view, that is what this is going to take.” Not surprisingly, grantees/designees also championed the



value of establishing relationships with federal partners that prioritize more than just compliance.

Several respondents noted the importance of clearly articulating the proper roles and responsibilities between the community and its federal partners. One respondent explained that the community is ultimately responsible for its own success, while the federal partners are responsible for doing what they can to help. Determining the specifics of these roles probably depends on the context of the partnership, but several respondents offered suggestions for clarifying the roles of responsibilities of the parties. For example, several noted the importance of federal officials not taking on tasks that are squarely in the domain of local government.

### **Ability to envision solutions that cross department and agency lines**

*“We need folks who naturally think about integrated approaches.”*

-Political appointee

Interviewees reported and reflected on the types of problems they experienced trying to connect the dots between agencies, programs and regulations. In place-based work, there is a strong need for federal staff members who excel at assembling the puzzle pieces. To be effective, federal staff must understand how organizations, agencies and issues are related and be able to identify and illuminate those connections.

One political appointee elaborated that, “If you just want to focus on housing, but not also transportation and other areas, that is not as helpful to us, since we are asking them to break that mold and solve problems collectively.”

### **Working Within the Federal Structure**

One of the essential roles for federal officials working with a place-based initiative is to help communities navigate the multitude of federal agencies, offices, programs, grants and services. Federal respondents with whom we spoke reported that the majority of their program oversight time is spent determining if a grantee is allowed to make certain adjustments in how to use its existing federal grants. In many place-based initiatives, federal staff must help a community access relevant federal resources, often extending beyond those available from the federal staff’s own office, department or even agency. Further, federal staff often help communities align the resources, both federal and non-federal, that a community already has.

While “alignment” might sound straightforward, in a federal context it is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks. To prevent misuse of taxpayer dollars, all levels of government must carefully and precisely define what a grantee can and cannot do with specific funding. While this helps prevent egregious misuses of funds, an unfortunate side effect is that such rules can be complex and confusing, often thwarting community innovation.

For example, imagine that a community conducts a data-driven analysis of its needs and available resources. As a result of the analysis, the community seeks to shift its funding to tackle its highest priority needs. However, either real or perceived restrictions around acceptable funding shifts may prevent this community from pursuing its innovative ideas.

Helping sites access available federal resources, and helping them shift and align their resources appropriately, requires a number of related competencies outlined below.

### **Ability to reach out to colleagues in other agencies and identify relevant federal resources**

*"Federal staff should be aware of what is out there already and they should provide value in demystifying the federal resources that are available to communities."*

-Federal employee

To effectively coordinate across federal programs, offices and agencies, the ability to know how and when to reach out is crucially important. It is impossible for any one person to understand all the resources available throughout the federal government, much less the detailed application requirements and regulations for implementation.

To be successful in this role, one needs the ability to develop and maintain a personal network of colleagues in other departments and agencies, the capacity to have strong professional relationships with them, and the talent to solicit their assistance as needed.

Interview respondents reported that much of the work with communities requires a working understanding of the wide range of federal funding and other opportunities that could help a community achieve its goals. The wider the breadth of knowledge of federal programs that a federal employee has, the greater the likelihood that the employee will be able to connect the community to the precise resources or support that it needs.

### **Ability to discern when and how to provide flexibility while ensuring grant and regulatory compliance**

*"How you balance the fiduciary responsibility of the money, to what are you trying to do, what you actually do, and what the community wants to do is critical."*

-Federal employee

Several respondents noted that the goal of helping provide flexibility to sites must

complement the need to maintain the integrity of the federal government. Federal staff members who take on these roles need to have respect for the regulations and oversight, but be aware of and open to opportunities to provide flexibility whenever possible. In practice, sometimes it comes down to a judgment call that is backed by some guiding regulation.

Providing flexibility often requires an ability to track down and understand nuanced regulations. A federal field staff person noted that you need "research skills, and you can't be afraid to dig into regulations and government white papers." A federal D.C. staff person noted this as well, suggesting that federal staff need to have a "good grasp on the regulations that they are dealing with ... both the letter and the spirit of the rule. I think you need someone who has this kind of knowledge to achieve the proper results."

Managing place-based initiatives that include one or more significant federal funding components brings with it an additional set of needed competencies. As one respondent put it, "grant managers responsible for programs that risk taxpayer money still must have all the other skills discussed, but they also require specialized skills ... for managing and monitoring huge sums of federal dollars with all the attendant pressures of timelines, monitoring, ... audits and reports."

### **Ability to encourage federal colleagues to go above and beyond to help place-based communities**

*"You need to manage up very well. You need to make sure your bosses feel that you are not unduly exposing them, but are doing something good and that something good would come out of this extra step or approach you are advocating for."*

-Political appointee

To advocate for a community, federal place-based staff often must convince colleagues

in a different agency or department to take on additional work in the best interest of a grantee/designee. For example, instead of giving a simple “no” regarding a question about allowable use of funds, federal staff can take extra steps to think through alternative ways the community could achieve its goals in ways that comply with federal regulations. Being able to convince colleagues to take on such additional assignments is perhaps one of the biggest challenges and most important competencies.

Federal staff who are the primary points of contact for a community are often not senior officials, so they face the additional hurdle of encouraging people higher in the organizational chart to take on or support additional work. Federal place-based staff must be able to articulate to their colleagues the value added by this additional work and how it aligns with the goals of the initiative.

## Working with Communities

To be effective, federal place-based staff have to understand, respect and be proficient at working within the local community context. Place-based initiatives are centered on a true partnership between the federal government, local and state government, community partners and the community members. Everything that federal staff members do must reinforce this core principle of partnership, not prescription.

This is particularly critical because in many cases a local community might not have previously had a positive, constructive relationship with the federal government. As is often the case with power dynamics, community members sometimes feel that the federal government affords too little respect for the views and opinions of members of the local community. The dynamic is further complicated by issues of race, class and culture, which oftentimes go back generations.

To work effectively within communities requires a number of related competencies outlined below.



### Ability to understand the local community perspective

*"You must be able to understand and comprehend what a community is going through."*

-Federal employee

To be truly responsive to community needs, federal place-based staff must first educate themselves by engaging with and listening to a variety of community representatives. As one federal official put it, "It is often tough to find a person who has experiences in many different regions, with different cultures (faith, political, race, culture). Being able to understand the complexities of communities is essential to success."

Prior experience working in a variety of communities and/or with diverse populations is beneficial. A grantee/designee noted, "I think someone is needed who has a background in tough communities, in the challenged neighborhoods; a person who has an understanding of the realities of the stresses and rigors that folks in distressed communities go through on a daily basis."

### Ability to figure out how things get done in a community

*"Having political savvy in both big 'p' Politics and little 'p' politics is a big deal – meaning not only knowing the context of what is going on politically, but also how things get done at a community level."*

-Federal field staff

As the saying goes, "All politics is local." It can take some time to understand who the movers and shakers are, the best ways to approach people, and landmines to avoid. Federal staff must be sensitive to local politics as well as the formal and informal structures and networks that drive the work. This often requires building trusting relationships with key local partners who can assist in moving an initiative toward desired outcomes.

Other reports have described similar recommendations. For example, the Abt Associates evaluation of SC2 suggested that an understanding of the local issues is critical to aligning interests within communities. The evaluation noted that knowledge of the community and sensitivity to the local context supported SC2 team members' abilities to create meaningful coalitions and drive collaboration. (Abt Associates in partnership with Mt. Auburn Associates, 2014)

### Ability to engage and demonstrate respect for community members

*"Oftentimes with these types of grants, we think we know what is best for the community and that we can save the community. But now we have learned that you have to embrace the community. We identify local and indigenous people to engage and be a part of this – this is a part of success in place-based work."*

-Federal grantee/designee

Federal staff must understand how to interact with communities in ways that convey a deep and unyielding respect for the community and what it is working to achieve. This is because target communities have often been victim to disinvestment (sparking distrust of government) and trauma, such as violence, crime, poverty, poor education and lack of resources. In such communities, one poorly phrased remark by a federal official could unwittingly unleash deep distrust among community members, putting an entire place-based endeavor at risk.

In *Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Building Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods* (Weinstein, 2014), the authors describe how to shift a traditional community-building approach toward a model that takes into account the influence of trauma as challenge to community building: "Residents are tired of empty promises that don't result in tangible changes or that exist for only a short time so they don't participate in community

building activities. ... The community has faced years of disinvestment and a scarcity of resources from outside sources so residents don't believe that their participation will result in community change or long term funding." Accordingly, "Engaging community residents and other stakeholders in identifying and prioritizing needed changes and devising and implementing strategies to achieve these changes has long been a cornerstone of place-based work."

As a review of best practices in place-based initiatives developed for the Best Start program found, "Respect is about being able to listen and learn, and convey a commitment to honest exchange. It is about the humility with which an outsider approaches a community with a genuine desire to learn." (Harder & Company and Juarez Associates, 2011)

### **Ability to ask probing questions to identify a community's underlying needs**

*"Sometimes at the local level, we don't know what we are asking, or sometimes we don't know what the actual problem is. This is a skill that the staff or the liaison needs to have: to help us articulate the right question."*

-Federal grantee/designee

When responding to inquiries from communities, federal place-based staff should ask probing questions to ensure they understand the nature of the issue before providing a response. In interviews, respondents discussed strategies to push past "no" and find a way to say "yes" by clarifying what the community was trying to accomplish. Similarly, grantees/designees highlighted the role of the federal staff in helping to identify the underlying problem and then find a solution.

One federal employee explained, "People come to the table saying, 'I need this,' but oftentimes they are looking for something they are not articulating. Program officers must take the time to really understand what a person is looking for,

rather than just giving them a quick 'yes' or 'no.' " This type of supportive and comprehensive engagement with local stakeholders is already occurring in some areas of the federal government. The evaluation of SC2 identified a shift based on the SC2 experience. One former SC2 employee explained that she no longer gives an automatic "no" when asked by city officials about funding flexibility. "Instead, she begins a dialogue with the city officials to understand more broadly what they are trying to achieve with the proposed activities," explains the evaluation. From this extra information, she then provides advice on how the city can proceed with its goals while remaining in the bounds of permissible actions. (Abt Associates in partnership with Mt. Auburn Associates, 2014)

### **Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

#### **Ability to communicate with different audiences and stakeholders, including federal colleagues, local leadership and community residents**

*"Place-based staff need to know how to communicate in various settings, and with various actors and stakeholders."*

-Federal grantee/designee

Federal staff who serve as the primary points of contact for communities spend most of their days talking to people in person and on the phone. To be effective, they need to communicate in ways that people understand, respect and ideally enjoy. As one federal staff member put it, "To be prepared to do this level of work ... you [need to] specialize in people. Everything we do, it deals with how you relate to people. You build houses, schools, communities – it's all people. Even with how you get your job done, it is various people, from various backgrounds, from different parts of the country, all with different challenges."

A study by FSG phrased the same idea as being a "charismatic and influential communicator."

One local leader described a colleague as “extraordinarily articulate and passionate about her work and ... she is a true leader in the field.” (FSG, 2012) A federal official noted that beyond having charisma and influence, federal staff should also “be able to work with stakeholders one-on-one and should be able to inspire trust.” An ability to translate between federal officials and local residents builds understanding and trust. As one federal employee said, “We have to get away from ‘government speak.’” Federal government and communities each have their own unique jargon. The federal staff who are the primary points of contact for communities often have to become multi-lingual. One federal staffer suggested that “[we should make] sure that our resources are accessible and usable for our communities. Learning how to translate the federal governmental jargon into digestible terms will aid in support and lift of communities.” At the same time, federal staff familiar with the communities they work with can help ensure that local initiatives and resources are framed in a way that is clear to a wider set of partners.

### **Ability to convene and facilitate group discussions**

*“Skills around facilitation are critical. A lot of this work happens with a lot of stakeholders, and employees need to be able to organize, resolve conflicts and get this work done.”*

-Federal employee

Inherent in the place-based model are the diverse coalitions that contribute to communities and ideally work in lock-step with the federal government. Interviewees noted that place-based federal staff must know how and when to bring together diverse stakeholders in ways that are appreciated and effective. As a federal field employee put it, “You must have someone who has strong interpersonal skills and that can build coalitions and is creative in their thinking. You have to be able to step back and see the forest, to know which parties to convene, at the proper times.” Moving from a diverse set of goals and activities into a plan that aligns contributions

toward a commonly desired and defined result requires significant skill and training.

The importance of convening and facilitating was identified in the final review report of the Fresno, California, SC2 pilot, noting that the Community Solutions Team (CST) of more than two dozen federal employees “was often able to assume the role of convener and/or facilitator on efforts that required multiple stakeholder participation. The CST effectively brought partners together to advance efforts associated with high speed rail station area planning, infill development, small business development and downtown revitalization, for example. In addition, the Fresno CST helped greatly strengthen the working relationship between the City of Fresno and the local Caltrans District Office regarding the environmental review for the redevelopment of the Fulton Pedestrian Mall.”

### **Other Skills**

**Ability to navigate between a broad understanding of a wide range of related issues and a deeper expertise in the primary topic(s) of the specific place-based effort**

*“We can’t all be experts on everything, but it would help to have some knowledge on the programs and issues.”*

-Federal field staff

One of the most challenging aspects of supporting a place-based initiative is that, by nature, many of the initiatives deal with a wide range of topics, from childcare to housing to transportation to health. So it comes as little surprise that a Bridgespan report on leadership and key staff involved with six place-based initiatives found that “when we asked initiative and site leaders about the challenges they were wrestling with ... knowledge gaps surfaced repeatedly.” The report explains that from a programmatic perspective, “the primary need was for help in identifying ‘what works’ or shows promise of working in critical program areas.” (The Bridgespan Group, 2011)

For this report, respondents indicated that having a broad understanding of many issues is essential. Federal staff working on place-based initiatives often bring deep content knowledge in fields relevant to their prior work, such as education, housing, economic development, workforce development and health. It is important that federal place-based staff continue to develop content knowledge, often stretching beyond their typical area of focus, in order to be fluent across all the content areas that the initiative addresses. Thus, federal place-based staff can use their understanding of a wide range of topics to bring together partners with different backgrounds and expertise.

Similarly, the Abt Associates' evaluation of SC2 found that SC2 team members' knowledge of a specific issue or topic was less important than their ability to shed light on how federal programs and initiatives operate within and around the area of interest. They noted that their ability to "work as generalists across various topic areas and with multiple city departments and federal agencies was more valuable to the initiative's success than the leads' content expertise." (Mt. Auburn Associates, 2014)

While an understanding of a wide range of topics will serve federal officials well – especially for the broadest types of place-based initiatives, such as Promise Zones and SC2 – they often also need expertise specific to the focus of the particular place-based initiative. For example, federal staff need a deep understanding of education policy to effectively administer the Promise Neighborhood initiative. Likewise, for Choice Neighborhoods, one respondent noted that "you can't be a federal partner in some of the most complicated urban real estate transactions in the country without a 'deep understanding,' experience and knowledge of real estate, federal housing programs and finance."

### **Ability to understand and use data to keep people focused on results**

*"The results/outcomes-based accountability framework is significant; this entails a relentless pursuit of measures and outcomes."*

-Federal employee

To oversee a results framework, federal place-based staff should be able to look at both qualitative and quantitative data presented in various forms (such as tables, charts and diagrams), interpret the findings and help a community determine related action steps to take. As one technical assistance provider noted, "Basic understanding of data is important – they need to have some fluency on what sources of data there are, what kind of issues one thinks about when looking at data, and what questions one needs to ask to identify and figure out various problems."

Respondents spoke of these competencies in the context of results-based accountability (RBA), which is a "data-driven, decision-making process to help communities and organizations get beyond talking about problems to taking action to solve problems." RBA achieves this by asking three performance measurement questions: "How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?" (Friedman, 2015) One federal employee praised this framework and pointed out that "this focus means that accountability is attributed to both the grantees through tracking data, but also through the program officers overseeing it."

This echoed findings in CSSP's report, Building Neighborhood Capacity Program: Findings from Flint, Fresno, Memphis, and Milwaukee, which found that an intent focus on "results driven outcomes" encouraged community leaders to utilize and find resources for data collection and reporting at the community level. By underscoring the "story behind the data" and the ability to advocate based on outcomes, community leaders were intent on establishing the means to track and report on data.

# Strategies to Support the Federal Place-Based Workforce

Identifying the specific competencies federal staff need to help communities successfully implement a place-based initiative is a critical first step. To ensure that the federal workforce can acquire and utilize these competencies requires a focused plan and clear support from managers and supervisors. Respondents offered recommendations on ways to improve training and professional development, staffing, and supervision and management in order to better support federal staff engaged in place-based work.

## Training and Professional Development

As noted above, few federal staff were recruited or hired specifically to work on a place-based program, and this may take a long while to change. (As one political appointee put it, “FTEs [Full-Time Equivalent staff] are not going to rain down out of the sky.”) As a result, federal staff readiness to effectively play these roles is mixed. In this context, federal staff training is of utmost importance. Unfortunately, few federal staff who we talked to had received any trainings tailored to their place-based roles. A federal employee noted, “ ‘place-based’ and ‘cross-collaboration’ are not mentioned even once in our department’s career and training modules.” He went on to say that “much of the training documentation is very centric to our one department, and never mentions the spectrum of programs, nor rationale for place-based work.”

Likewise, a Bridgespan report on leadership and key staff involved with six place-based initiatives uncovered “a widely felt need for help with leadership development. Initiative leaders talked about the need to develop their own skills and capabilities; to build bench strength, by deepening the capacity of others in their organizations and at their sites; and to make sure they are developing the next generation of leaders, by authentically engaging them in the initiative’s work. How such efforts could be organized, where the time and money would

come from, and what the ‘curriculum’ would be are all important questions with no obvious answers.” (The Bridgespan Group, 2011) We, too, found these to be important questions with no obvious answers. But we were able to glean a number of insights to help point in the right direction. Below we discuss various potential components of a robust training and professional development system for federal staff who are helping communities implement place-based initiatives.

While each of these training and professional development components could be developed independently by each respective place-based initiative, ideally at least a core set of these elements could be developed and offered across all departments or agencies. As one federal employee noted, “Place-based programs, as it relates to the federal staff that carry them out, have very much in common across departments, and there is a need for uniform and tailored training in this type of work and what it entails.”

## Create trainings, toolkits, case studies and role-playing exercises

*“I think it would be useful to start wrapping training around case studies in a way that says, ‘Here are the resources coming out of these three agencies and here are the challenges coming out of these communities.’”*

-Federal employee

Across the board, participants recommended trainings and toolkits as a baseline part of federal employee training, particularly in roles that inherently take a place-based approach. New federal staff members should be introduced to this policy approach to inform their service, encourage innovation and direct their day-to-day work toward a place-based mindset.

By nature, place-based initiatives are wide-ranging and dynamic. It is difficult to learn some of the most important place-based strategies and skills in a traditional classroom environment. For this reason, some respondents pointed to a



training model that focuses on case studies and role-playing exercises that help federal staff learn how to think about the types of issues that might arise, and strategies to address these issues. Respondents called for case studies that are meaningful to multiple agencies working on various place-based initiatives. A grantee pointed out that “case studies are usually about one initiative, but for this method, there need to be issues presented that covers more than just one.”

Another federal employee felt that case studies can be useful in sharing common challenges and solutions across different initiatives, saying, “Case studies are always really powerful. . . . Every place-based initiative is going to be slightly different and slightly nuanced. This will be great for staff from all initiatives to hear about this stuff.”

Other suggestions included case studies that address issues that are interagency in nature, such as bureaucratic barriers and blending and braiding federal funding, local and private funding, and other resources. Such case studies could be developed based on documentation aggregated in day-to-day operations of place-based programs as well as targeted cases created throughout the course of place-based initiatives.

The findings outlined in this report can inform the development of training for staff engaging in place-based work, such as efforts by the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) Community Solutions Team to develop cross-agency, place-based training for federal staff. Responding to the needs and opportunities expressed in interviews with federal staff, designees, grantees and community partners, agencies will be better equipped to provide federal staff training on the tools and skills needed to carry out the place-based approach.

### **Conduct joint site visits, bringing together a cross section of federal agencies and a range of local stakeholders**

*“One of the things that would have been very helpful is to have the program officer visit the site to have a chance to more deeply understand what we were facing and dealing with on a day-to-day basis.”*

-Grantee/designee

Federal staff, partners, grantees, designees and technical assistance providers all indicated that strategic site visits have been one of the most helpful activities to identify roadblocks, bust silos and catalyze interagency collaboration in ways that would have been extremely difficult to do otherwise. A federal employee reported, “You have to be able to see these positive outcomes that tear at the heartstrings of federal staff. So beyond just reading about it, you must physically go to these places. Some of these communities are doing work that is much more than what you think they are doing.”

In particular, numerous respondents pointed to the San Antonio site visit of 17 federal partners in the spring of 2013 as an important experience that accelerated their ability to help communities implement place-based programs. One of the local grantees/designees shared that “this was a game-changing visit. They saw what we were doing and they saw what we were facing. Neighborhoods wanted the federal government to realize the potential impact of ‘neighborhood investment,’ not one grant or opportunity for one aspect of revitalization. It would be productive to prioritize site visits where there are multiple funding streams and federal resources.”

In particular, D.C.-based staff noted how difficult it is for them to do their jobs effectively without ever having visited the communities they work with. A federal staff member reported, “It is the exposure to what is happening on the ground that brings this work to life. Sometimes it is beyond the realm of comprehension for people to see what may be transpiring or not transpiring

in communities, and site visits make this work real and they aid in identifying where resources and time need to be allocated.”

Unfortunately, site visits can be hard for the federal government to fund. And orchestrating a visit with multiple federal agencies at the same time poses extra challenges. Yet, the passion with which participants spoke about these opportunities, and the degree to which they pointed toward the subsequent benefits which ensued – for both the federal staff and the distressed community – suggest that they are well worth the required time, effort and funding.

Based on these reports, federal agencies should consider allocating more attention and resources to strategic site visits in cities where there are multiple place-based and federal funding streams. When possible, these visits could include federal partners from a diverse representation of agencies and programs. They also many wish to collect more information on how to make site visits meaningful, including sample agendas.

### **Create mechanisms for convening and exchange among federal staff implementing place-based initiatives**

*“As we got going, everyone was talking about the problems they were dealing with in communities, about where to go and where to get information.”*

-Federal field employee

Federal respondents often cited opportunities to come together with their peers as relatively low-cost and of significant benefit. “It doesn’t cost the federal government any more,” said another federal staff person. “It would just need approval from superiors: I’m going to take an hour to go to this event or do this with this agency.” Said another: “The level of collaboration in this job is new. If these kinds of conferences are done more often, there are no downsides, only upsides. Even better yet these kinds of things don’t require that much money. The federal government has

facilities, et cetera.” As an additional benefit, providing opportunities for place-based federal staff to learn about each other’s work could also help smooth federal staff transitions, because more than one person will have the institutional knowledge about a particular place-based initiative and set of communities.

Respondents mentioned several mechanisms for supporting federal peer exchange. “We should have regularly scheduled interagency calls of federal partners, grantees and designees,” said one respondent. Others mentioned conferences and events as opportunities for interacting with federal colleagues engaged in place-based work. Several respondents cited the Promise Neighborhoods National Network Conferences as one example, noting that a variety of federal place-based staff and communities attend.

Inter-agency collaboration and peer-learning are discussed in several previous reports on place-based initiatives. Facilitating “peer-to-peer consultations” is one of the strategies and activities that BCJI technical assistance providers have been asked to report on and participate in. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015) Likewise, the evaluation of the SC2 pilot noted that “team members can be encouraged to use their relationships with other team members to solve and find cross-agency solutions when needs arise. ... Team members might also be asked to share examples of how they successfully collaborated with colleagues from other agencies.”

### **Create an online forum where place-based grantees, designees and federal staff can stay connected**

*“This should be like a ‘Facebook-lite’ online forum where folks could access other communities to build upon each other’s experiences.”*

-Federal grantee/designee

Across the board, interviewees indicated that they want more opportunities to interact with

place-based grantees, designees and federal staff. Participants indicated this would create room to stay connected, share successes and failures, establish promising practices and inform federal staff of place-based developments and barriers.

Several respondents noted that this online platform would have to be different from typical government websites and platforms. “The way the federal government would typically do this wouldn’t work,” said one grantee/designee. “This forum would have to be something like Facebook: a place where we could get answers quickly.” Another grantee/designee felt that “federal leadership would not use it, but the local federal staff may.”

Efforts at establishing such a platform in some regards are already underway. The Office of Personnel Management’s (OPM) Open Government Plan 2.0 of 2012 calls for the Office of the Chief Information Officer to “introduce innovative technologies to enable employees, the public and other agencies to access centralized documentation and to collaborate with one another. . . . These technologies will empower federal employees and the public to explore information that promotes the creation of rich dialogue and diverse ideas.” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2012) OPM’s Innovation Lab and Open Government Plan might be one possible resource to create this platform.

Another online tool that could serve as a model is Midas, an 18F project at the General Services Administration (GSA). 18F – a civic consulting team with an eye toward fast-paced technology solutions for federal agencies – describes Midas as “a platform that facilitates collaborative work worldwide. Individuals can create projects, propose working groups or assemble ‘tiger teams’ to act on their ideas. Anyone can also post tasks online and people with the requisite skills can respond and complete the task.” Other

such examples of online platforms in which community members can access archived calls, webinars and resources are the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs and the College Access Affinity.

### **Share information with federal staff on funding opportunities in other departments and agencies**

*“You cannot collaborate and support if the staff do not know what is available, how agency staff are thinking about it, and how it would work across programs and communities.”*

-Federal employee

The previous section of this report highlighted the ability “to identify relevant federal resources across agencies that meet a particular community need” as a competency that is particularly challenging, but beneficial for federal staff to master. One respondent explained, “We need to have federal grant managers and place-based employees involved in some way in all place-based programs, to actually know how these programs work.”

In particular, interviewees noted the importance of having a strong familiarity with a range of funding notices, often referred to as Requests for Proposals (RFPs) or Notices of Funding Availability (NOFAs), which detail the procedures for a community to apply for a set of federal resources. Yet a political appointee observed, “Even community liaisons are not required to have much background on NOFAs and how they work.” Interviewees indicated that federal place-based staff should have familiarity with RFPs/NOFAs across programs and departments in other federal agencies.

One respondent noted that federal staff had some success “cross-training each other through calls.”

“When we share info, it gives us information on what exists. There are, naturally, some programs that are more synergistic in nature than others.” Another opportunity for information sharing mentioned by several interviewees involved reaching out to federal place-based staff to serve on the review panels for federal grants and federal place-based initiative competitions in other departments. A federal field employee recalled that “we had multiple agencies review our grants because we knew that would benefit the communities down the line and it would benefit the federal staff as well. If you don’t have the circulation between headquarters, the field and other agencies, some of the innovation efforts [in place-based work] will be doomed before they start.”

**Offer place-based staff opportunities to work in other federal departments and to rotate between jobs in the field and in D.C.**

*“It would be interesting to have folks who are interested in various aspects of place-based work to have rotations with each other, so they could become better acclimated with the place-based work in other departments.”*

-Federal employee

While the strategies outlined above are likely to have a strong impact in cross-training federal staff, nothing is as powerful as actually getting to see the work from a different perspective. As a federal employee put it, “Agency folks should have rotations in other departments. Maybe the federal government needs to have opportunities for federal staff in one department to support place-based initiatives in another department in a more intensive way, like by having feds shadow a community liaison for 30 or 60 days within other departments.” Another D.C.-based federal staff person agreed that rotations would be beneficial, and grantees/designees noted the same. As one put it, “It would be so helpful to have people that have experience across more than just the one program cylinder and department.”

Respondents noted that, ideally, federal staff would not only have opportunities to work in other departments within their agency, but also to experience working both in D.C. headquarters and in the field. “Rotations into the field and out of D.C. headquarters would be fabulous,” said one D.C.-based federal staff person. “Getting experience on the ground



and in other areas would be hugely beneficial.” This recommendation was also made in the evaluation of the SC2 pilot regarding building a responsive federal workforce: “The placements would provide value to the city and build or reconnect the employee to the reality of local implementation. . . . This might be done by placing federal staff in cities they haven’t worked before (or for some time) or by focusing on a city’s list of concerns rather than the agency’s agenda.” (Abt Associates in partnership with Mt. Auburn Associates, 2014)

Fortunately, there are existing processes through which this could be implemented. As outlined by OPM, federal employees who are serving in the competitive service under a career or career-conditional appointment are eligible to be detailed or transferred to another position in the competitive service.

Yet some respondents noted that allowing a federal staff person to be detailed to another role is at the discretion of supervisors, and that supervisors often have little incentive to approve such assignments. One federal senior career staff noted that there had been some initial discussions of opportunities to set these detail assignment up as “trades,” so neither department is short-staffed when a federal employee is detailed to another role.

Also, as previously noted, one of the advantages of employing Presidential Management Fellows is that fellows participate in one or more rotations “to allow fellows to gain a broader perspective of the federal government.” These rotational opportunities can take place at an office, department or bureau at the PMF’s current agency or at a different federal agency. “By participating in rotational opportunities, PMFs can gain management experience, work in specific occupational fields, or learn about a program function from another perspective.” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012)

## Federal Staffing

### Seek candidates who have diverse experience both inside and outside of federal government and in various federal agencies

*“It is important to have well-rounded experience, so you are predisposed to and seek collaboration and compromise. This is the only way these approaches to policy happen.”*

-Federal employee

Noting the breadth of competencies needed, it comes as little surprise that most respondents believed that federal staff involved in place-based work must have a diverse background, with experience from a number of programs, disciplines, agencies, organizations or sectors. Many respondents noted the value of having worked outside the federal government. Said one, “Any experience outside of the federal government – particularly at the community level – is helpful. I think that as a skillset, federal employees would have an advantage having actually worked in a community, to be exposed to the plans going awry or even the community rejecting an idea.” Others recommended hiring candidates that “have experience in the philanthropic world as a funder.”

For example, one federal staff person who had “worked in cities and at the community level” described how this experience helped him do his current job well. He explained, “When I am on the phone and people are telling me about a local challenge, I know what they are going through. And it is helpful for me to have that background and know what they experience.” Experience working in distressed communities is particularly beneficial. As a grantee/designee pointed out, “You need to have a background working in tough communities, in the challenged neighborhoods; an understanding of the realities of working in these neighborhoods and the stresses and rigors that folks in distressed communities go through.”

While there is no perfect combination of experiences which hiring managers should look for, virtually all respondents suggested that a well-rounded background in diverse settings – in particular work at the local level in a distressed community – is essential.

### **Recruit candidates throughout the span of their careers**

When discussing ideal candidates, respondents pointed to people early in their careers, late in their careers, and everyone in between.

Some respondents suggested recruiting people early in their careers (generally up to four years of experience). In particular, several indicated that Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs) and Presidential Management Council fellows (PMCs) might be good potential sources of federal staff for place-based initiatives. Often, fellows have a particular interest in the cross-cutting, applied nature of place-based activities, as opposed to more traditional, compliance-based roles within one agency. Additionally, because the fellows can rotate across federal departments, they are exposed to programs across the federal government.

Other respondents suggested recruiting people who are late in their careers (generally with 15 or more years of experience). They noted that

these candidates are more likely to have the knowledge and clout to help a community navigate the federal landscape. Further, respondents said these types of opportunities might reignite a passion among employees who have been in more traditional government roles, increasing their job satisfaction, performance and retention.

Others suggested recruiting the “key segment of government officials that are in the mid stages of their careers,” generally with five to 14 years of experience.

The breadth of responses indicates that federal staff at all levels of experience can be eligible and interested in this work. The variance in suggestions reflects that there is no one-size-fits-all candidate, but that place-based work benefits from multiple perspectives and diverse skillsets.

### **Supervision and Management**

For place-based program success at the federal level, supervisors and managers must wholeheartedly endorse a place-based approach. “The project can be killed in the hierarchy very easily or it can be given wings in the hierarchy very easily,” noted one federal field staff person.

### **Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs)**

PMFs are recent graduates of master’s programs who apply in a competitive process to receive a two-year appointment to a federal agency. In addition to participating in training and networking opportunities, PMFs must complete at least one four- to-six-month rotation in another office, department, or agency. Interviewees, particularly federal staff, reported that PMFs would be excellent candidates for place-based roles. Many noted that PMFs often embody many of the competencies that were identified in the first section of this report. According to one employee in the field, “PMFs are really interested in this type of work, and in my experience they have been very effective.” (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2014)

### **Presidential Management Council (PMC) Fellows**

PMC fellows are “high potential GS 13-15” federal staff who take on interagency rotations for six months in order to build a pipeline of “emerging leaders who possess a broad understanding of the varied missions across the federal government” and “cultivate a diverse rising generation of talent with broad organizational exposure.” In the Promise Neighborhoods National Network Conference, two PMC fellows recommended this as an approach to recruiting and exposing federal staff to the innovative place-based role and programs. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2014)

This sentiment is consistent with several interview responses. Senior leaders and federal staff who directly interact with communities may support a place-based approach, but if the supervisors and managers in between are not on board, it can put the entire initiative at risk.

Support from supervisors is especially important for innovative efforts like place-based initiatives because government structures, processes and culture often stack the deck against innovation. A federal staffer expressed the view that “innovation is not valued in the federal government – you either get slammed or everyone gets on board; it’s that simple.” In the most recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), of the over 392,000 federal employees surveyed from 82 agencies, only 34.8 percent felt that creativity and innovation were rewarded within their agencies. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2014)

Federal staff working on place-based initiatives reported that an integral piece to place-based success is the extent that supervisors and managers allow for this type of work. Furthermore, they shared that their level of work and commitment to place-based efforts and operations was often contingent upon that of their supervisor.

Respondents spoke to specific ways managers and supervisors can better cultivate and support place-based activities led by frontline federal staff.

### **Change job descriptions and performance measures to support federal place-based staff’s efforts**

*“At the end of the day, place-based activities need to be the full-time jobs of frontline staff; they can’t be something staffers do on top of their day jobs.”*

-Federal staff

The final evaluation report of the SC2 pilot noted that helping communities implement place-based initiatives “was sometimes difficult for

regional staff because their normal duties called for them to monitor grantees for compliance and performance.” Those who succeeded had to go “above and beyond their traditional roles in assisting cities,” often with little to no support. Some interviewees noted that while their responsibilities changed when they started working on a place-based initiative, their job descriptions did not. “The administration has created this unique space for the place-based programs, but people’s job descriptions are not on par with what they are encouraged to do in the place-based model,” said a federal political appointee. Even a grantee noticed that “these job descriptions need to be altered and updated. You cannot expect an employee to just do something extra if it isn’t a part of what they are expected to do across the board.”

Misalignment between job descriptions and job responsibilities has dire consequences for relationships among individuals, team coherence and job effectiveness. As a senior federal official observed, “Oftentimes federal staff get pushback from managers for doing things outside of their job description and performance measures, which aim to add to the effect that place-based programs are having. ... The fact that these expectations are not reflected in duties and



responsibilities is problematic.” Since managers respond to their employees’ job descriptions and performance measures, changes would position managers to better support their federal staff’s place-based efforts.

“There is no incentive right now to collaborate with other agencies,” said a federal employee based in the field. “No one is going to ask or expect you to work with another agency, and in many cases they are going to discourage you from it. And federal staff often get flack for doing it, because it seems like it is outside of their job and they aren’t evaluated on it accordingly.” Another federal employee said, “Rarely do I have the time to sit in on interagency webinars, calls and meetings or go too far outside of my job expectations. If there was an incentive to do more of these things, as a part of a performance evaluation – such as a requisite for a certain number of interagency hours, or number of touchpoints with federal partners – I would do a lot more work with the place-based approach in mind.”

Aligning federal staffs’ job descriptions to job responsibilities would benefit supervisors and managers as well. To be effective in helping communities implement place-based initiatives, federal staff need to encourage their colleagues to support the extra efforts place-based work might require, often pushing past “no” and finding a way to say “yes.” This can be very hard for junior federal staff to do unless their supervisors are supportive and willing to help them elevate conversations as needed to drive toward desired results. By including this type of engagement in supervisors’ job descriptions and performance measures, supervisors would have more incentive to lend such support.

Fortunately, some efforts are underway to adjust job descriptions and performance measures. A senior official in one agency explained, “We have begun a process a year-and-a-half ago looking at position descriptions.

... We have begun to identify a skillset of place-based skills, and this aids in adjusting our job and skill descriptions, and also updating the recruitment package so they reflect the skills we want to have going forward.”

Respondents mentioned several metrics that could be tracked:

- “I track each activity and interaction with agencies and programs – even ones outside the federal government. This way I can report that I have connection with all of them and things are happening in this place-based work.”
- “Communicating a communities’ success, updates and happenings.”
- “The full range of federal resources you brought to the table. How you accomplished that and what you brought to maximize federal impact.”





**#EveryStudentEveryDay**

# Conditions that Support Place-Based Work

Beyond the competencies that federal staff need to implement place-based strategies and the ways these competencies can be developed, there are broader conditions that aid in supporting this work. Creating these conditions is often beyond the control of frontline federal place-based staff. Rather, creating these conditions often requires the involvement of a variety of actors and coordinated decisions, such as policy changes, congressional appropriations and support from senior political leadership. Actions such as these can greatly affect the environment in which federal staff do place-based work.

This section of the report is divided into three categories:

1. Appropriate Adequate Resources to Federal Agencies Implementing Place-Based Initiatives
2. Align Federal Processes, Regulations and Grant Solicitations
3. Demonstrate Leadership's Clear Prioritization of Place-Based Approaches and Active Involvement

## Appropriate Adequate Resources to Federal Agencies Implementing Place-Based Initiatives

An evaluation of SC2 found that positive outcomes appear to have a direct relationship with the role of the federal government and the commitment it had to the area (in terms of federal staff time, number of federal staff, leadership support). They noted that the lack of funding for the program resulted in a lesser commitment from the federal government than what would have been ideal for the proper level of support in the community.

We heard similar feedback from respondents. Below are suggestions for resource allocation improvements to support federal place-based initiatives.

## Give managers the authority and funding to recruit, reassign and select staff with place-based skillsets

Federal managers overseeing place-based initiatives reported challenges in hiring and retaining qualified staff. One federal staff member embedded in a community explained that although they quickly learned what skills were necessary for this work, hiring and recruiting processes made it difficult to bring on staff who demonstrated these competencies.

When we asked federal managers which qualifications they looked for when hiring federal place-based staff, many responded that, regretfully, there had been no hiring process at all. They simply had to reassign existing federal staff to a place-based initiative, often with very little latitude to decide which staff to choose. The challenge in reassigning federal staff is that often the staff were originally hired for roles that required a different set of competencies than are needed in a place-based role. Therefore, although qualified for their original positions, they might not be equipped with the skills and knowledge to succeed in a place-based role.

Respondents felt that managers should have more freedom in recruiting and hiring directly for place-based roles, both from within the federal government and external candidate pools. As one federal respondent said, "If you can identify the people that have predispositions to work like this, the work will be much more effective."

## Dedicate more federal staff and resources to work with communities implementing place-based initiatives

Respondents indicated that place-based roles require much more attention and effort than what is expected of a typical federal program officer. As agencies increase the number of place-based grantees/designees, departments

overseeing these initiatives must keep up by expanding the resources and capacity dedicated to this work. In order to maximize the impact of federal place-based initiatives and achieve a shift in the way the federal government works in these communities, respondents called for more resources and federal staff designated for place-based activities. A federal political appointee explained, “In our department there are more and more place-based grantees and designees, but a lack of resources tends to strain our capacity to oversee them. A prerequisite for place-based efforts is that our staff need more time to do this work. In order to serve the communities like we should, I would need 20 percent more staff, with at least two to five place-based employees in each field office.”

A federal program officer put it simply: “The federal government needs more money and more staff for this type of work.”

### **Allocate funding for trainings and site visits**

Many of the trainings and site visits discussed in the previous section of this report require dedicated funding. Respondents requested funding be prioritized specifically for place-based training and site visits to place-based grantee/designee communities. Because the place-based approach marks a significant shift in how federal staff are encouraged to do their work, staff highly valued training, conferences and other ways to engage with community partners and peers working in this new space.

As one federal field staff person said, “The D.C. office has not provided a specific dollar amount to field offices to allocate for training. I reviewed this year’s budget and there are funds for training, but each time I ask they say there is no money. This greatly affects the opportunities to attend conferences and trainings related to the position of working on place-based initiatives when our department doesn’t offer training on the topic themselves.”



## Align Federal Processes, Regulations and Grant Solicitations

Federal place-based staff spend a lot of time helping communities figure out ways to access and implement complementary federal programs efficiently and effectively. However, the ways most laws are crafted and the resulting federal processes, regulations and grant solicitations – such as Notices Of Funding Availability (NOFAs) and Requests for Proposals (RFPs) – often make this task exceedingly difficult.

As one grantee reported, “The NOFAs come out on different timelines, and it seems like there could be more resources and a better way to facilitate a way to bring these funding streams into these areas with better NOFA coordination. This would be helpful whether you are a federal employee or a federal grantee.” A political appointee went on to say, “We need more concerted and strategic thought and coordination around place-based work, and it starts with when the NOFAs are released.”

Below are recommendations to help agencies align processes, regulations and grant solicitations. Putting in place these policy reforms would take some of the alignment burden off the communities and the federal frontline staff tasked with helping them.

## Create a streamlined mechanism for responding to communities’ questions about allowable uses of their existing federal funds

As discussed above, place-based federal staff can spend a significant amount of time tracking down specific federal regulations to see if a community might shift the use of some of its existing federal funds to fill a community need identified through a rigorous, data-driven needs assessment. In one anecdote, a request a community made was passed along through five federal officials before finally reaching the federal staff person who knew the answer. The answer was that the community’s question was not framed correctly, and the community would need to provide additional information. That response then made its way back along the five-person chain before finally reaching the community. That process took months.

Respondents suggested putting in place a government infrastructure that can evaluate and respond to community questions about allowable uses of existing federal funds. The value of having such an infrastructure in place is significant. A study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that “with incomplete information, district officials may make only conservative and narrow interpretations of federal requirements, believing they have less flexibility than they actually do.” (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998)

This has been the case consistently over time. During the Clinton Administration, for example, the U.S. Department of Education received 617 requests for waivers under the “Ed-Flex” program. Nearly one-third of the requests were for actions that the requesters were already allowed to take without a waiver. (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) In this case, the federal government could have approved more than 200 requests for flexibility years ago if it simply had a mechanism in place to review and respond to communities’ questions about allowable uses of their existing federal funds.



### **Provide place-based grantees/designees greater flexibility in using and blending their existing federal funding**

Even if a streamlined mechanism for responding to communities' questions about allowable uses of their existing funds did solve one-third of the funding barriers that place-based communities face, another two-thirds of the barriers would remain. Removing these would require new statutory and administrative authority. Expanded flexibility of federal funding would allow communities more latitude in responding to their unique challenges and coordinating investments.

One example of a vehicle for providing such flexibility is the Performance Partnership Pilots program (P3). P3 offers up to 10 sites a year an opportunity to develop and implement their own evidence-based strategies for serving disconnected youth. The selected sites will be granted the authority to blend funding from multiple related federal discretionary grants, and to obtain waivers from federal statutory and administrative barriers as needed to implement their plans.

Another example for providing such flexibility can be found in OMB's Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (released in 2013). These requirements state that efforts should "rely more on performance than compliance requirements to ensure accountability, and allow federal agencies some additional flexibility to waive some requirements (in addition to the longstanding option to apply to OMB to waive requirements) that impede their capacity to achieve better outcomes through federal awards." (White House Office of Management and Budget, 2013)

Respondents also suggested a desire for greater flexibility in aligning performance measures across multiple funding streams. Too often, grantees are required to measure performance

in multiple ways to appease different grant requirements. OMB has signaled a path toward greater flexibility through a provision that allows non-federal entities to submit performance plans that incorporate funds from multiple federal awards and account for their combined use based on performance-oriented metrics. (White House Office of Management and Budget, 2013)

While this opportunity to blend funds is of significant value to place-based communities, one respondent indicated that, to date, their department has not received any request to blend funds under this new audit provision. The excellent technical assistance resources put together by the Department of Education (see <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/fund/guid/uniform-guidance/index.html>) could serve as a model for other agencies, and such technical assistance could be focused first at place-based grantees/designees.

### **Explicitly allow a community to use an existing governance structure to manage new place-based initiatives**

Federal place-based staff often find that the communities they work in suffer not from a dearth of place-based collaborations, but from an oversupply. Many communities sport a multitude of collaborations working on overlapping youth issues, from bullying to pregnancy to dropouts. It comes as no surprise when people find that: "I used to have to attend meetings with 17 different departments; now I have to participate in 17 different coalitions." Communities often point to federal requirements as part of the problem, believing that to obtain or implement a federal place-based initiative, they need to create a new governance structure charged specifically with overseeing that particular place-based initiative. Respondents suggested that laws and funding announcements should explicitly provide communities the option to use an existing governance structure to manage a new federal place-based initiative.

“When we designed the community governance structure that we required for our department’s place-based initiative, we used the exact same local governance structure that was already in place from other federal departments’ place-based initiatives,” said one senior agency official. “It was the same leadership board. So that means that on the agenda we talked about Promise, Choice, Byrne, etc. – it was the same people, in the same positions, talking and hearing about all of the other programs.”

“If there was a way to get various Notices of Funding Availability and Requests for Proposals to somehow incorporate existing leadership structures for various grants, which includes related agencies, local governments and appropriate bodies, this would get all the people together who can make decisions, talking and working around funding and resource availability. This would be a big start.”

### **Provide place-based designees competitive preference in funding competitions**

Some federal place-based initiatives do not provide direct grants to selected sites. Instead, they create a designation that gives them preference points or priority/special consideration for selected federal grant programs, technical assistance and other capacity building opportunities. Frontline federal staff noted that they lack the authority to decide which federal grant programs will provide the designated sites a competitive preference. Yet this decision greatly affects their ability to help the community succeed. “If we are going to be concentrating on certain communities,” said a federal field staff member, “we need to be allocating bonus points for those designations, so we can continue serving in a concerted place-based fashion.” Grantees agreed. As one put it, “Notices of Funding Availability really do set the stage for the direction of a grant. Giving bonus points to existing designees/grantees helps push that effort forward.”

On the other hand, another respondent observed that more is not always better. Competitive preference should be given only for grant

competitions that are a good fit with the designee’s mission and capacity. Government should not, therefore, “award grants [just] because there is another grant” if they don’t have the “appropriate local resources and skills.”

### **Demonstrate Leadership’s Clear Prioritization of Place-Based Approaches and Active Involvement**

Significant changes must take place in order for place-based approaches to be adopted and implemented more widely across the federal government. It is important for federal agency leadership to prioritize these changes and be actively involved in making the vision a reality.

### **Strengthen interagency structures**

A number of respondents noted the importance of having an interagency infrastructure to coordinate across federal agencies, departments and initiatives. Just as it is important for federal career staff involved in place-based initiatives to connect across agency and departmental lines, the same is true for senior administration officials, all the way up to cabinet secretaries. Such leadership is necessary in order to fully embed place-based approaches into government processes.

Fortunately, structures to facilitate this work have already been put in place. OMB created a Community Solutions Team in early 2015 to work across the Obama Administration to intensify place-based initiatives and to make sure lessons learned about using data and partnering with communities become embedded as how the federal government does business not just now but well into the future. The Community Solutions Team is partnering with the interagency Community Solutions Task Force, made up of cabinet secretaries and other top agency leaders, to strengthen the federal processes and infrastructure that undergird place-based work. In particular, the task force and team are working to promote coordination among agencies and invest in federal staff through training and cross-agency agreements that provide critical ground-level tools, skills and opportunities to carry out this approach.



# Conclusion

## **Integrating a place-based approach more permanently into the federal government’s way of doing business, not just for “place-based” federal staff, but for all federal staff that work with communities**

“If you look at place-based work, in comparison with other approaches to public policy within the federal government, you will find that federal place-based staff love doing this and they find it very rewarding,” one senior political appointee said. Indeed, we found this sentiment shared by respondents at all levels. While these jobs are difficult, they are also energizing and can even be coveted by staff in various stages of their careers who are inspired by the opportunity to work with communities in new ways – in ways that some indicated they had always wanted to work but never before had been allowed to.

These jobs also allow federal staff to cultivate skills that make them very valuable. As a federal field employee explained, “Once federal staff members become successful and well-versed in this model of working with communities, they become very marketable in other areas of the federal government, and other sectors and organizations.” While on one hand, the same employee noted, “this leads to turnover and gaps in coverage to communities,” it also creates a strategic opportunity: to bring the place-based mindsets and competencies into more areas of government.

Indeed, many respondents were quick to note that the competencies listed in this report described not just exemplary place-based staff, but exemplary staff across the federal government, period. Many proponents of federal place-based efforts have a goal far broader than successfully managing a set of unique initiatives; they seek to transform how the federal government relates to communities overall.

With such a goal in mind, this report is being released at a critical moment. With limited time left in the Obama Administration, proponents of place-based work are looking for ways to simultaneously spread the approach across government more broadly, and to embed current place-based initiatives in ways that will transcend presidential administrations. As one respondent put it, the Obama Administration is looking for ways that the place-based approach can be “integrated more permanently into the federal government’s way of doing business. ... Embracing the place-based approach would be a significant departure from the traditional, silo-based, program management mentality of many federal government staff and agencies.”

Our hope is that – by identifying the specific competencies that federal frontline staff employ in working with communities, outlining strategies for supporting the development of these competencies, and highlighting the conditions that help place-based initiatives thrive – this report can advance the place-based approach.



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The page 5 photo is courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education and highlights local action summits under the My Brother's Keeper initiative.

The page 13 photo is courtesy of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and highlights HUD and local leaders viewing a mural being restored in the Philadelphia Promise Zone of activist Herman Wrice, founder of an anti-crime initiative, on Sept. 5, 2014.

The page 19 photo is courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education and features youth discussing school discipline with ED and local leaders, highlighting the My Brother's Keeper initiative, on June 20, 2014 in Austin, Texas.

The page 33 photo is courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education and shows a student assembly highlighting the My Brother's Keeper initiative at Miami Northwestern Senior High School on Feb. 19, 2016 in Miami, Florida.

The page 39 photo is courtesy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and shows President Barack Obama leading a round table discussion with youth during his visit to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, highlighting its designation as a Promise Zone on July 15, 2015.



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