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The Community Facilitator Pilot Project at the North Street Neighborhood

Mid-Year Report for HOPE NC
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INTRODUCTION

In September 2023, [HOPE NC](#) contracted Partners for Impact to provide a developmental evaluation of the pilot Community Facilitator program in the [North Street Neighborhood](#). In a developmental evaluation, the evaluator works with staff to continuously collect, consider, and use information to shape and improve a project as it unfolds, rather than waiting until its completion to measure its success and make changes.¹ HOPE NC hired Collin Flake as the Community Facilitator at North Street Neighborhood in December 2023.

Background information on HOPE NC and the North Street Neighborhood are provided in a baseline evaluation report completed in March 2024. This mid-year report provides a summary of data collected from North Street residents who did not participate in the first round of interviews. While the group interviewed included a variety of people, this report largely focuses on the Community Facilitator's interactions with neighborhood residents without disabilities or children with disabilities.

EVALUATING THE COMMUNITY FACILITATOR PILOT PROGRAM

From May through August 2024, Partners for Impact interviewed an additional ten residents who had not participated in earlier conversations for the first report. The current group included parents of children with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD), people who do not have children with disabilities, homeowners, renters, and people with and without disabilities. Some had been residents since the Neighborhood was formed; others have moved into the community more recently. In addition, the evaluator interviewed the Community

¹[FSG: The Case for Developmental Evaluation](#)

Facilitator about their learnings since starting their role, and reviewed notes they made on the program logic model in May. That data is woven into this report as well. This report frames the findings according to three areas of focus identified in the job description for the Community Facilitator: supporting adults; fostering inclusion; and community-building programming.

SUPPORTING ADULTS

In HOPE NC's job description, the Community Facilitator supports people with disabilities and promotes inclusion in the community. In the North Street Neighborhood, accomplishing these goals includes considerable interaction with other residents of the community who do not have disabilities. The Community Facilitator acts as a bridge and facilitator among all of the residents to create more opportunities for neighbor-to-neighbor interaction and assistance.

Residents in this round of interviews agreed that supporting people with disabilities in the community was the most important role for the Community Facilitator. The residents with disabilities have a higher level of need for regular and ongoing support. Some, particularly those without family in the neighborhood or nearby, are at risk for isolation and do not have strong networks of support. Many of the individuals interviewed recognize the limitations of the Community Facilitator role in filling all of the gaps for these neighbors, but all agreed that the position is a positive addition for North Street. Recognizing the benefit of having a paid person keeping an eye out for holes in the support for neighbors with disabilities, one interviewee said, "Some of our neighbors have support systems, but not everyone. Collin's ability to help people without that access is really helpful." Another recognized that the Community Facilitator, as a paid position, can do some things that others can not do as easily, e.g. help address mental and physical health concerns, and build healthy relationship skills.

In developing their role, the Community Facilitator has been intentional in creating sustainable systems and not fostering an overreliance on one position to support all the needs of residents in the community. One strategy has focused on communicating opportunities for people to engage with their neighbors. This includes identifying needs and making timely and specific requests for assistance. Sometimes these requests are put out to the community in general; other times the facilitator asks or facilitates requests to specific individuals who have expressed willingness to help. When the facilitator recognizes that an individual needs help to implement a project, coordinate an event, or manage a situation, they are able to make connections with someone who can assist. For example, if a neighbor indicates they are available to troubleshoot technology issues, the facilitator helps residents with disabilities reach out directly to that person when they need assistance. This facilitation is valuable for both parties - the person needing assistance who may not be comfortable asking for help and the person wanting to be engaged with neighbors but not knowing where the needs are. One person interviewed described the advantage of this, "It's helpful for the Community Facilitator role to be focused on the friends with I/DD and facilitating relationships with others in the community. He's making it easier for others to help and respond to requests." Another commented, "It's good that Collin

has an eagle-eye view of the entire neighborhood,” and can identify and clearly communicate opportunities to help neighbors. Several interviewees remarked that members of the community want to help, but do not know where they can be most useful. One said, “Many of our neighbors in North Street are wanting to help where it’s needed. What are some of the most overlooked things that people need? How do we find out what they need?” The Community Facilitator role connects willing helpers to specific needs.

When the North Street Neighborhood initially came together, individuals did not see themselves as “volunteering” to help people with I/DD - they were neighbors helping neighbors. While acknowledging the value and importance of the new Community Facilitator role, particularly as the needs of residents have changed over time, some interviewees expressed concern that having a paid support person will decrease willingness of neighbors to help each other. The Community Facilitator has not seen evidence that their work is discouraging any individual action but is instead shifting some of the weight off of the people who have been giving a high level of support to their neighbors over many years.

All interviewees spoke highly of the work the facilitator has done so far, including one comment that, “He is making it more of a community rather than a neighborhood.” Others said they have felt the level of engagement among neighbors increasing. One resident recognized that the Community Facilitator’s relationships present opportunities to learn more about authentically supporting residents with I/DD, “The role of the Community Facilitator could be helping people figure out how to ask questions. Sometimes it’s not just the request, it’s something deeper - a neighbor may just want to hang out. What language is needed to get below the surface to find out how people are really doing, to find out what is going on in people’s lives?”

FOSTERING INCLUSION

People recognize that for the Community Facilitator program to work, it needs buy-in from all residents of the neighborhood. While the focus of the Community Facilitator’s position is on supporting people with disabilities, fostering their inclusion in a community requires a sense of belonging among all or most of the residents. As one interviewee explained, North Street Neighborhood’s unique history as “a group of close friends dreaming of a way to live in close proximity, creating a neighborhood inclusive of people with disabilities and people without disabilities,” set a strong foundation for this sense of inclusion.

[Reality Ministries](#), a local faith-based nonprofit creating inclusive and supportive spaces for people with and without developmental disabilities, was critical to the development of North Street Neighborhood, even though the organization did not own any of the properties at the outset and did not offer programming specific to the neighborhood. The original group of residents had relationships largely through their interaction at Reality Ministries, and the ethic and values of the organization carried through to this intentional community. One interviewee with a long history in the neighborhood explained, “Reality Ministries is not a program for

people with disabilities; it is all about forming relationships across divides imposed by society. When we did that, something magical happened.” Individuals and families chose to live together to provide and receive support from each other. The neighborhood was formed for “mutual benefit rather than on the patriarchal, patronizing framework of the standard charity model.”

In the past decade, some of the residents have changed but this principle of mutual support over charity has remained strong. Another interviewee who moved to North Street more recently said,

In this community, there’s a healthy relationship around disability as an identity point. Rather than community as a ‘spectacle’ - you see there are no signs about who lives here and why - it’s a concept that we all just live around each other. It may be unspoken that everyone knows why neighbors are living here but it’s not what is emphasized. It’s not what relationships are based on. We were told early on, ‘Don’t talk to anyone differently; this is not the time to dumb things down.’ The neighborhood is about getting away from the commonality being the qualifying factor to be in this housing. That’s what makes us unique.

This feeling of mutual benefit echoed through multiple interviews, as well as its direct contribution to the support available to and inclusion of people with disabilities in the neighborhood. Residents without disabilities shared how they help their neighbors, and spoke extensively of what they have gained since becoming part of the community. Several said they see the benefits to themselves as outweighing what they give. One remarked, “The bar for yourself keeps getting higher and higher in what you want to contribute, the good you want to do. When the bar for doing good is very low-hanging fruit, it’s easy to do good - it’s easy to find something to help out with.” Another said that they do not view helping other residents as “volunteering” but just being neighbors, “The more involved we are in the neighborhood, the less we feel like we’re going out of our way to do things - we’re just doing things together or with our neighbors.” One resident shared, “This is an environment where people are open to asking for help. Living here has taught me a lot about asking for help, too - we all need help.”

Addressing Exclusion

A common theme emerging from this set of interviews concerns social structures and marginalization, not just of people with disabilities. One interviewee described the neighborhood, saying, “Everyone feels like family to each other - and with that comes ‘family drama.’” Multiple dichotomies exist at North Street, not only between people with disabilities and people without disabilities, but also based on length of time in the neighborhood, owners versus renters, association with Reality Ministries, as well as between neighbors who enjoy community activities and those who are not comfortable socializing in groups. Several interviewees commented that new residents often struggle to connect without a mechanism to welcome and orient them to the neighborhood. Several remarks were made about new people not always feeling welcome in some of the circles in the community and that hopes for inclusion are not always fulfilled. One person shared, “The neighborhood can set up an expectation of

more engagement for new residents; some find that the reality is that it is only people who are living in proximity.”

The Community Facilitator has taken steps to address concerns about new residents by creating a Welcome Packet. This project has been on the community’s to-do list for years with no one having time to make it a priority. In addition, the facilitator has been regularly checking in with new residents and facilitating their connections with others in the neighborhood. Providing a more structured welcome for people moving to North Street helps build their connection to the community. It also may help set realistic expectations and provide guidance to support their experience in this new setting. The facilitator recognizes the efforts and energy that longtime residents are putting into the community, ensuring that they feel needed and appreciated. This can contribute to their sense of belonging and strengthen their connection and commitment to the community.

North Street Neighborhood’s lack of formal organization serves as a point of pride among some residents, particularly those who have been present since its founding. Others would like to see more structure to better support residents with disabilities and the neighbors choosing to live in community with them. They suggest that more formal structures would address some of the constraints that slow the pace of change and hinder solutions to known issues. In the absence of formal organizational structures, natural hierarchies emerge as individuals assume leadership roles, take on responsibilities, and organize group efforts. These structures can set up group dynamics that afford some people power while others feel excluded. With no formal mechanisms in place to assign roles, manage conflict, or address power issues, “in” groups with influence and “out” groups on the margins emerge. These issues are not unique to the North Street Neighborhood and are experienced in many settings where groups of people are connected for a common purpose or mission.

The facilitator recognizes that this role does not have power to change these structures. Facilitators can use their position to bring attention to how these dynamics play out for individuals in the neighborhood, especially those in the minority because of race, ethnicity, religion, etc. They can shine light on issues of class, race, religion, ability, etc., and help people identify patterns or activities that are not promoting inclusion of all residents. For example, neighbors who are easiest to spend time with receive more attention and people who are more challenging to be in community with get less contact. The Community Facilitator can check-in with the less sociable neighbors and encourage other neighbors to connect more intentionally.

As a long-time member of the North Street Neighborhood, the Community Facilitator has built the trust needed to help neighbors navigate their relationships; their social capital is used to guide people in recognizing how their own behaviors affect others. In addition, the facilitator can offer some “truth-telling” to people with more ability and resources to address needs in the neighborhood who may not be aware of the importance of issues to other residents. One resident interviewed said, “I hope that the Community Facilitator can bear witness to the holes

and gaps, and show where some policies and practices in the neighborhood are not working, where community members should be doing something but are not.”

COMMUNITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

In order to strengthen the network for people with disabilities at North Street Neighborhood, the Community Facilitator is building and supporting the community around the residents. This includes organizing consistent community education opportunities with a mix of content. As much as possible, North Street residents are leading the trainings and discussions, drawing on the existing skills and talent in the neighborhood. Some programming is provided by outside agencies with specialized information and resources. While the intention is to reach the entire North Street community, most participants to date have been people with disabilities and their families. The Community Facilitator continues to explore scheduling that will draw a broader audience, and approaches that will encourage people without disabilities to learn more about some of the systems and challenges that their neighbors with disabilities are navigating.

From the beginning, the facilitator has made an effort to connect with everyone living in the neighborhood, learning about their needs, interests, and talents that they are interested in sharing. They are helping individuals to connect, support each other, and interact appropriately, particularly for new residents who may have less experience in relationships with people with I/DD. The facilitator is sharing information more frequently about opportunities for people to engage with each other, one-on-one or in group activities. By providing planning support for activities that historically have been put together at the last minute, they are making attendance easier for neighbors. People interviewed shared that the facilitator’s efforts have helped them know about and plan for upcoming events, as well as needs in the neighborhood. One person remarked, “It’s good to have someone paid to do community communication.”

One person interviewed remarked that the Community Facilitator could “go even further by prompting neighbors [without I/DD] to engage or host events with specific asks and invitations.” Another recognized that there’s “a lot of the work to be done to better utilize abilities,” and that developing a Resource Bank for all different kinds of skills and abilities would be helpful in the Neighborhood. Steps to develop this resource have started with a survey to all residents about their “gifts and needs.”

The Community Facilitator has also been creating and facilitating activities to appeal to a wider audience in the neighborhood. Finding times for events or regularly scheduled activities that work for people in the neighborhood who work full-time presents challenges. Many people interviewed shared that they wanted to participate in more activities but daytime events were difficult. Some also related that they are in a season of life with other priorities that keep them from doing more in North Street. Several interviewees mentioned the regularly-scheduled weekly walk to various destinations that the facilitator has initiated. One described its benefits

as “good for combatting the physical risks associated with sedentary lifestyles and also the mental health risks associated with isolation.”

In addition to providing a social activity for neighborhood residents, this organized activity has facilitated an opportunity for volunteers from outside of the neighborhood to interact with residents. Recruited by a parent of a North Street resident, a group of retired and semi-retired adults from a nearby apartment building has joined these weekly walks. The interaction has provided benefits to all of the participants as they get to know each other and form new friendships. While the facilitator has tried to forge similar connections with other living communities, the existing relationship between the neighborhood parent and the apartment residents made this possible.

The role of the Community Facilitator requires recognizing the needs of extroverts and introverts, those who thrive in group settings and of those with anxiety in social interactions. The facilitator has organized events for people comfortable in groups while also creating opportunities for individuals who prefer one-on-one meetings. Some residents do not desire or welcome interaction with him as the Community Facilitator. The facilitator respects these personal wishes while also having an eye on the wellbeing of those most prone to isolation.

Resource issues also emerged as a theme in interviews. Group activities in close proximity to the neighborhood with no cost to residents is a short list and many are living on limited incomes. Transportation can present challenges for excursions further from North Street. A few people interviewed also spoke of the expectations around eating out with their neighbors. They shared that they sometimes feel an obligation to pay for the meals of their neighbors with limited incomes but do not have the resources to cover that expense very often. Some have tried to address that by inviting neighbors to cook and eat with them at home, rather than going to restaurants. One interviewee talked about this as an opportunity for discussion around expectations, and as a learning opportunity for both parties about boundaries.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This round of interviews, primarily with residents who do not have disabilities or family members with disabilities, provided an opportunity to examine the larger dynamics of the North Street Neighborhood. While discussions often centered around some elements that were very specific to this unique community, several lessons emerged that can be generalized for Community Facilitators in other settings.

Foster Community among All Residents

The role of the Community Facilitator centers on promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities into a community. Nurturing a sense of belonging among all residents creates a living environment that is both inclusive and a community. Without attention to the culture of the community, people may live next to each other but have no connection. **All residents must**

recognize the mutual benefit of sharing space and supporting each other. This is North Street's foundation and many people interviewed recognized that as crucial to the neighborhood's ongoing supportive and inclusive aspiration. Without explicit efforts to maintain those principles and share them with new residents, the intention can be lost and the nature of the inclusive community will change.

Uplift the Mutual Benefit of Inclusive Communities

The themes of mutual benefit and neighbors helping neighbors emerged repeatedly throughout this set of interviews. At North Street, residents without disabilities do not view providing assistance to neighbors with disabilities as volunteering; it is what friends do for each other. Individuals interviewed see themselves receiving as much as they give. The Community Facilitator can help foster this culture of mutual benefit by **acknowledging different types of support and the contributions that all residents make to the community, both in group activities and one-on-one.** Rejecting a patriarchal charity model upholds the dignity of every member of the community.

Make Specific Requests

Specific, time-limited opportunities to assist get better responses than open-ended requests.

Neighbors may be happy to help with immediate needs but can be hesitant to over-commit themselves to long-term arrangements. The Community Facilitator can assist neighbors in framing their requests to make them more likely to be fulfilled. The Community Facilitator can also encourage residents to host events or organize activities by approaching them with specific requests. This can prompt people to engage and remind them that they have talents and resources to share.

Be Mindful of Power Dynamics

In settings with no formal structure, power dynamics can emerge with positive and negative impacts. People stepping up to provide informal leadership play important roles in organizing group efforts, addressing concerns, and building community cohesion. With no formal accountability, however, hierarchies can arise that privilege some and marginalize others. A Community Facilitator can **bring attention to these power dynamics, encouraging efforts to minimize exclusion and support the whole community.**

Recommendations for Future Evaluation

While some changes in the North Street Neighborhood may be too slow or subtle to measure over a year's time, **the next phase of this evaluation can focus on the effects of specific interventions.** Interviewing new residents who received the Welcome Packet and extra attention from the Community Facilitator can provide some insight into the effectiveness of these efforts. The evaluation can consider not only their feelings of being welcomed into the neighborhood but also their willingness to engage with their neighbors as a result of the information shared. Additional outcomes to be measured may include the participation in and impact of new activities, including community education programs and weekly walks.

CONCLUSION

This mid-year report presents findings from interviews with the Community Facilitator and ten residents of North Street Neighborhood. These conversations shed more light on the experiences of people without disabilities or children with disabilities living in the community and helped clarify the role of the Community Facilitator in relation to the broader setting. This group of interviewees does not speak for all residents of the neighborhood, but their responses fill in another dimension of creating and supporting inclusive communities.

Every community, including the North Street Neighborhood, constantly changes and evolves. As people leave and others move in, a Community Facilitator can help a neighborhood shift and grow while continuing to live into its foundational values. Including this among the Community Facilitator's responsibilities can maintain continuity even as the individuals filling the position change. In addition, focusing on the themes of relationships, mutual benefit, and power can help a Community Facilitator build a stronger, more inclusive community.