

Community Centered Leadership

National
Principles and
Local Practice

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In collaboration with



About 904WARD

904WARD began in 2015 with a small group of friends who came together to talk openly, challenge each other, support each other, and take action together to build a more inclusive Jacksonville.

We are a diverse group made up of people committed to creating a community of inclusion for all. We take pride in mobilizing thousands of volunteers every year to create racial healing and equity.

An inclusive community begins with understanding each other better.



Mission: 904WARD creates racial healing and equity through deep conversations and learning, trusting relationships, and collective action.

Vision: An end to racism in Jacksonville and beyond so all people thrive.

Community Centered Leadership

National Principles and Local Practice

Executive Summary

Strong community leadership that expands opportunity and participation is essential to building resilient, engaged, and prosperous communities. On every level, community-centered leadership can strengthen local outcomes by reducing unnecessary barriers, expanding access to resources, and encouraging broader participation in decision-making. This policy brief:

1. Defines community centered leadership
2. Explores its core components (accessibility, economic opportunity, and civic engagement)
3. Highlights demonstration of these principles on a local level.
- 4.

Community leadership illustrates how locally driven solutions can strengthen existing collaboration and create meaningful change.

Defining Community Centered Leadership

Unlike traditional top-down leadership models, which relies on positional authority and hierarchy, community centered leadership brings community members, not based on held position or authority, together with other stakeholders to get to the real root of problems and share ownership in implementing solutions. In doing so, it prioritizes collaboration, transparency, and shared responsibility for outcomes. Community centered leadership recognizes that regulatory, communication, and practice barriers can limit participation and encourages institutions and communities to work together collaboratively to reduce them. It clears pathways for residents to move from observers to active participants in shaping local decisions. Ultimately it emphasizes accessibility, economic opportunity, and civic engagement.

You can recognize community centered leadership by these four key defining characteristics:

- Identifies and reduces barriers that limit access and participation
- Expands access to resources and opportunities
- Respects local knowledge and lived experience
- Creates pathways for community members to lead and influence decisions
- Focuses on accessibility, economic opportunity, and civic engagement



Leadership and Increasing Accessibility

Accessibility is more than physical design. It means creating clear, efficient processes to ensure residents are aware of available resources, that those resources work, and that all people can reasonably access them. In short, this means that people know what's available, can get to it, and can actually use it to meet their needs.

National Context: Given that so many systems are built around digital connection, digital access is critical to ensure that residents can participate in education, workforce development, and civic and economic opportunities. In addition, supporting leaders in being able to implement a data driven results-based approach to solving challenges can increase alignment, trust, and impact.

Often, solutions are implemented without a full understanding of the issues that created the challenge that needs to be solved. This not only wastes valuable dollars, in the trial and error of solutions, but it also wastes people's time and energy.

Leaders can break this cycle by beginning any process by being clear on results they are trying to achieve. The second step of this process is to include partners whose contributions are needed to get to that result. The group then utilizes data to unearth the root causes that drive those challenges. This is another reason that community centered leadership is so valuable. "Data" in this sense is not just looking at numbers but understanding the real stories and experiences of people and communities where complex challenges persist. Finally, leaders can use this increased understanding to then develop informed strategies that target those root causes and clear the path to participation. This data driven, results-based approach, can be used to increase civic engagement, clear pathways to employment, increase opportunities, eliminate unnecessary barriers, address policy and practice limitations and drive collective impact.

Local Accessibility in Action (in Florida)

- Many counties and cities maintain disability or accessibility councils that include residents with disabilities and advocates to improve access to city programs and services, such as accessible pedestrian signals and emergency preparedness.
- Public engagement in city planning and service delivery (e.g., participatory meetings about city budgets and transportation) reflects community efforts to increase direct engagement with policymakers at the local level.

Economic Opportunity

Economic opportunity is critical to strengthening communities and ensuring that residents have clear paths to financial security and wealth building. The ultimate goal- from accessibility to civic involvement- is to reduce barriers that prevent the opportunity for mobility, wellness, and belonging. When discussing economic opportunities, the key question is not simply do individuals have stable incomes, but also do the opportunities for long-term mobility, wealth building, and independence exist? This means ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to “move up” from where they are (mobility); that they are well enough, both mentally and physically, to utilize their resources and that they have a strong sense of purpose and belonging.

National Context: Long-standing challenges such as limited access to capital, housing, and workforce opportunities have contributed to persistent gaps in wealth accumulation. Community centered leadership prioritizes targeted interventions, like homeownership, workforce development, and support for local entrepreneurship. It's moving beyond a program approach where supports disappear with dollars and grant cycles, but alleviating these challenges through a continuous cycle of learning and improving. This includes working collaboratively to identify solutions that have an impact on the challenge you are trying to solve, testing and refining those solutions (sometimes repeatedly), collecting and analyzing data to tell what works, and scaling it using a placed based approach to other communities across the country.

Local Demonstrations of Advancing Economic Opportunity (in Florida)

- Local philanthropic organizations and impact funds focused on intentionally supporting nonprofit and grassroots organizations working in neighborhoods where challenges persist are essential to expanding resources.
- Developing collaborative strategies with major agencies such as United Way and LISC are directing millions toward increasing homeownership in communities where it is limited, a tangible effort to target wealth building and support economic growth.
- Organizations that focus on holistic neighborhood revitalization strategies, covering education, housing, economic development, and workforce training, aim to strengthen community capacity and opportunity.

Civic Engagement

Traditionally, civic engagement has focused on participation in democratic life (voting, community organizing, and shared governance). For long term community health, civic engagement extends *beyond the ballot* and seeks to encourage ongoing participation without limiting engagement solely to election cycles. It means that all individuals are engaged in policy/politics outside of election cycles.

National Context:

The current reality is that we have access now to so much information, that misinformation is an ongoing barrier to civic engagement. Misinformation erodes trust and can decrease both understanding of what is currently happening and what can be done at an individual level to impact it. Community centered leadership is built on an understanding that any pathway to civic participation has to include strategies on *education, registration* and *participation*. In tandem, these key strategies support civic participation in three keyways. 1) Ensuring people understand the real issues and challenges by weeding out misinformation. 2) Increases readiness to participate civically on an ongoing basis by proactively ensuring that all people follow the required processes to participate. 3) Identifies clear strategies to maximize the number of people who are actively participating in the democratic process and increases their ability to act individually and collectively. As with all strategies, place matters in how strategies are executed, who is executing them, and what support is needed. This process will never be successful using a cookie cutter approach. Understanding local issues, realities and contexts is critical to being able to develop tailored strategies that take those realities into consideration.

Local Civic Engagement in Action: (In Florida)

Community-centered leadership is most effective when residents, not institutions alone, shape the civic agenda. Leaders and advocacy organizations that intentionally cultivate civic participation expand community agency by elevating voices from every neighborhood, district, and municipality. Meaningful civic engagement must begin well before election season. Grassroots organizations have a long-standing history of playing a critical role in that process.

- By educating community members on local issues, the voter registration processes, and maintaining a consistent presence at city council meetings, town halls, and school board meetings, grassroots organizations fill critical gaps.
- Local advocacy centers those directly affected by policy decisions.

- Sustainable funding and investment in grassroots organizations is essential to building and maintaining a healthy, community-driven civic ecosystem. Cross-sector partnerships among government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and business strengthen capacity and avoid duplication of efforts.

It is critical to note that despite great progress, barriers persist. Factors such as historical housing patterns, redistricting, and regulatory changes have limited the impact of advocacy efforts. Recent policy shifts at the state and federal level continue to influence how residents participate in civic life. Addressing these issues requires intentional policy design and practice refinement, community investment, and responsible leadership development.

Recommendations for Strengthening Community Centered Leadership

- Invest in Local Leadership Development
- Developing and implementing curriculums, programs, and opportunities built on the principles of community centered leadership equips leaders with tools to expand their leadership and impact.
- Foster Collaborative Policy Design
 - Involve community voices in policy creation through advisory councils and participatory budgeting.
- Enhance Civic Education and Participation
 - Create accessible civic education programs in partnership with schools, colleges, and community organizations.
- Support Economic Mobility Initiatives
 - Invest in workforce development, entrepreneurship, and housing programs that increase economic stability and mobility

Conclusion

Community centered leadership is foundational to thriving democratic societies. By emphasizing accessibility, economic opportunity, and civic engagement, and by intentionally centering local voices in leadership and decision-making, communities can foster lasting progress. Local efforts, from grassroots organizations to public-private collaborations, demonstrate how national principles can be effectively implemented at the local community level.

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