

# Models *for* Local Infrastructure

by Thomas E. Backer, PhD, Human Interaction Research Institute and Ira Barbell, PhD, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Every community has some infrastructure that supports nonprofit capacity building, and most are also connected with national infrastructure organizations that support their work.

Isolation doesn't serve nonprofits well—they need to know what's happening in their environments, learn from the mistakes and successes of others, and share in the effort to grow stronger in serving the community. Nonprofits also need to be able to access local resources for capacity building; and the providers of these resources need ways to reach out to nonprofits and funders, as well as to each other. Every community has some infrastructure that supports nonprofit capacity building, and most are also connected with national infrastructure organizations that support their work. But communities vary widely in how—and how well—this local infrastructure is coordinated.

While not every community has every type of capacity builder, the elements of a local infrastructure for nonprofit capacity building include the following:

- **Management Support Organizations** (MSOs) (urban ones like CompassPoint in San Francisco or Third Sector New England in Boston; or rural ones like the North Dakota Resource Center)
- **Consultants** (including both individuals and consulting firms)
- **Funders** (financial supporters of capacity building, including foundations, government agencies, public programs like United Way, and to a lesser extent corporations or individual donors)
- **Information Centers** (such as Foundation Center libraries)
- **Nonprofit Infrastructure Organizations** (such as state or regional nonprofit associations and grantmaker associations)

- **Nonprofit Management Higher Education Programs** (including those based in university nonprofit management centers)

- **Technology Resources** (organizations or consultants focused specifically on the technology needs of nonprofits)

- **Volunteer Centers** (groups that connect volunteers to nonprofits needing their services)

- **Financial Capacity Building Organizations** (such as loan funds)

- **Field-Specific Intermediaries** (such as community development corporations)

A more detailed breakout of these elements of local infrastructure is on the Web site of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management ([www.allianceonline.org](http://www.allianceonline.org)) in the section, "Our Universe," and in a forthcoming research report about innovations in nonprofit capacity building (Backer, Bleeg & Groves, in press).

The infrastructure also includes nonprofit organization leaders who are willing and able to share information, advice, and skills with their peers. This informal element of the helping environment for nonprofits has always existed, but increasingly it is receiving more formal support through "peer networks" and related efforts.

The nonprofit capacity-building field is new enough so that these elements, as well as the "connective material" or infrastructure tying them together, are still being defined. Any community with a number of individuals and organizations providing capacity-building services is likely to have at least one network connecting some of them, and often there is more than one.

For instance, in Los Angeles, the oldest and

[Rochester  
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Partnership's]  
capacity-building  
events and  
consultations  
have helped area  
nonprofits acquire  
both specific  
evaluation skills and  
a better conceptual  
understanding  
of how the  
participatory process  
and logic model  
can help them.

best-established Management Support Organization is the Southern California Center for Nonprofit Management, through which many consultants and other players keep in touch. But there also are capacity-building providers that cluster around particular subject areas (e.g., poverty and social justice providers work with the Liberty Hill Foundation, a local funder in that area; and health-related providers opt for one of several major health conversion foundations doing grantmaking in this region) (Backer & Oshima, 2003). Somewhat similar situations exist in other communities, with one of the best-organized ones being the San Francisco Bay area (where communication, generally in the nonprofit sector, is far above the national average).

### Models for Coordinating Local Infrastructure

As capacity building has grown in the last 15 years into a more formally organized element of the nonprofit sector (Backer, 2001), it has become apparent that networks for capacity building in many communities are not yet well-developed. The linkages between different elements has generally been weak, leading to a loss of potential synergy—badly needed, as always, in a resource-scarce environment. Following are some models for developing and operating a better-coordinated local infrastructure.

**The Rochester Effectiveness Partnership** (REP) in Rochester, NY, is completing eight years of formally organized work in 2004 (contact Beth Bruner, Bruner Foundation, brufound@eznet.net). REP has brought together funders, evaluators (with consultation led by national evaluation expert Anita Baker), and nonprofit service organizations to design, implement, and refine evaluation practice related to philanthropic grantmaking in the Rochester area. The first step was to convene a “funders summit” and a “nonprofit summit” to identify, from the point of view of each group, what is needed to help nonprofits do evaluation more effectively. The Bruner Foundation, the major funder of this collaboration, had previously conducted a project that searched nationally for innovations in evaluation practice, and thus it served as a resource for this effort.

REP's capacity-building events and consultations have helped area nonprofits acquire both specific evaluation skills and a better conceptual understanding of how the participatory process and logic model can help them. Parallel capacity-development activities for funders have helped foundations in the region understand how they can best use evaluation results to sharpen grantmaking. REP also developed, for evaluation, a “Rochester Logic Model,” which is now incorporated into a unified grant application form and process used by many local funders and nonprofits.

**The Capacity-Building Network of Upstate New York** (contact Jane Ellen Bleeg, Network Project Director, jellen@rochester.rr.com) aims to increase the effectiveness and impact of the nonprofit sector in Western and Central New York. More than 60 funders, nonprofits and capacity builders, operating within Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County, began work in 2002 to identify regional capacity-building needs and assets. Based on findings from this and a study of 18 capacity-building organizations around the country, a network has been designed to link and serve existing nonprofits, funders and capacity builders across the region. It will complement and build upon existing assistance already available in specific communities.

Regional services will include the following: standards of excellence and an assessment tool to help nonprofits identify and prioritize their needs for capacity building; e-mail discussion groups linking those with similar interests; a Web-based consultant directory, calendar of trainings, jobs listing, and other resources; and brokering/linking across the region. In addition, action plans developed in five communities are guiding the enhancements to local capacity building, with the exchange of resources and knowledge between communities being one key feature. Special projects, such as developing assistance for rural or grass-roots groups, may also be undertaken. Foundation and corporate grants, earned income, and contributions from individuals and organizations support this program. Evaluation is built into every aspect of the network. A report on the feasibility and transition work is available.

**CONNECT: Partnership for Nonprofit Solutions** ([www.connectoc.net](http://www.connectoc.net)) supports lead-

ership development and provides capacity building and technical assistance to more than 2,000 nonprofit organizations in Orange County. CONNECT offers a variety of information resources on capacity-building assistance, including a consultant database (currently under construction) that will be available on the program's Web site, and a clearinghouse of resources and best practices.

CONNECT coordinates the Nonprofit Assistance Roundtable, a network of technical assistance providers and consultants that coordinate capacity-building services in the area. It also offers a Circuit Rider Program to help local nonprofits with their technology needs. Finally, CONNECT has a range of human resource development programs: training for nonprofit staff and boards, the Leaders Connect learning group, a coaching program through Executive Services Corps, a Young Nonprofit Professionals Network, and an AmeriCorps Program for volunteer services. CONNECT is supported through a partnership of Orangewood Children's Foundation, Children and Families Commission of Orange County, and Families & Children Together Orange County.

**Building Stronger Nonprofits: Capacity Building for Nonprofit Organizations in the San Fernando Valley** ([www.humaninteract.org](http://www.humaninteract.org)) began with a planning conference in November 2001. This regional initiative is aimed at providing resources for capacity building to nonprofits, foundations, and individual donors in the San Fernando Valley region of Los Angeles. It is coordinated by California State University Northridge's Center on Management and Organization Development, the nonprofit Human Interaction Research Institute, and the Volunteer Center of Los Angeles (all three partners are based in the San Fernando Valley).

The initiative included convening the first major conference on nonprofit capacity building in the San Fernando Valley region in April 2003, and creating the first directory (print and online) of capacity-building resources for Los Angeles County, including the Valley region. Local foundations have supported this activity. Plans are now underway for creation of the Valley Center for Community Change, a comprehensive nonprofit resource center on the Northridge campus that will serve the Valley region.

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# Thinking About the Future of Nonprofit Capacity Building

In March 2001, a group of capacity-building experts met in Miami to talk about the future of this field<sup>1</sup>. While much has happened in the nearly three years since, the four themes that emerged from this brainstorming meeting are each still relevant to this field:

**Theory and Definitions:** In shaping a definition of the field of capacity building, the question of “capacity for what?” is paramount. Capacity-building funding and services must be directed not only to helping nonprofits achieve their fundamental mission, but also to developing a 21st century understanding of how nonprofit organizations should function as an important vehicle for activating our democracy. We need a theory of management that is particularly suited to the nonprofit role and function.

In a tighter-resources environment, it is even more important to look clearly at what kinds of nonprofit organizational structures capacity building is helping to create. Doing so requires creating a refined, “21st century” definition of what a nonprofit organization is and how it should operate, including, but going beyond, immediate issues of survival, retrenchment, and consolidation. The resulting determinations need to be agreed upon through a consensus process, perhaps through key national organizations like the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and the National Council for Nonprofit Associations, and widely shared for use in guiding capacity-building activities in the field.

**Good Practices:** Practices in capacity building are changing rapidly. It is important to have good systems to ensure that we are measuring the effectiveness of various strategies being tried. Some of the important variables, which this group noted, that have not yet been measured are such things as cultural competency of the providers delivering capacity-building services, their knowledge of the field in which the nonprofit exists, and the depth of their own experience in management etc. There was a sense that some of the more promising strategies include integrating peer-to-peer learning and networking with other interventions, often using a learning community model that can be supported by technology. There was also a sense that advocacy should be viewed as a core competency for nonprofits.

Because resources have been available in recent years, both

locally and nationally, to support developing innovative, nontraditional approaches to capacity building, a number of new models have emerged, and these now need to be made widely available for use in the current tight times. Several efforts to do that are discussed elsewhere in this issue.

**Infrastructure:** The availability and quality of capacity building have been very different from place to place and from field to field. The development of national networks like the Alliance for Nonprofit Management and the National Council of Nonprofit Associations promises to help even out the quality to some extent—particularly if these networks produce an evaluation agenda for capacity builders—but regional differences in access are still quite marked. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations may help encourage funders in currently underserved regions to become more active in helping develop local infrastructure.

Especially for smaller, community-based nonprofits, a major obstacle to effective capacity building is access. Most cities or regions don’t even have a reasonably comprehensive print or online directory of capacity-building services available to local nonprofits, much less a well-organized community network to weave together providers, academic institutions, funders, etc.

**Research and Evaluation:** To address concerns about the highly variable quality of capacity-building services, and to improve them, both research and more intensive evaluation are needed. We should, however, never expect that these actions will produce rote, prescriptive solutions or “the perfect tool” for any situation. Capacity building must remain a work in progress, tailored responsively to the needs of each group, but informed by aggregated knowledge of past practice.

There is now a group of researchers studying nonprofit capacity building and sharing the results through both print and online sources. As encouraging as this activity is, the limits of research and evaluation also must be made clear. Both of these need to be part of the overall learning cycle for the nonprofit sector—and specifically for the capacity-building field. Findings need to be re-packaged for practitioners, without academic jargon, and methods for evaluation should be tailored to the practical needs of smaller, more community-based programs where the resources for doing evaluation and paying for it are likely to be limited.

<sup>1</sup>See endnote on page 56 for a list of participants.

**South Florida Regional Capacity-Building Initiative** ([www.donorsforumsf.org](http://www.donorsforumsf.org)) is intended to increase the region's responsiveness to the capacity-building needs of nonprofits. In 2003, the Donors Forum of South Florida convened a meeting of local foundations (with outside experts providing input) to explore ways to increase the region's responsiveness to the capacity-building needs of nonprofits. At that time, a nonprofit resource center already existed in Palm Beach and in Broward Counties, but not in Dade County.

As a result of this initial exploration, local foundations made a commitment to support development of a resource center for the Miami/Dade area, and this new center was established in 2002. Now the three nonprofit centers work in collaboration with funders in all three areas of the South Florida region to address ongoing capacity-building needs of local nonprofits, under the leadership of the Donors Forum of South Florida. Grants from area funders support the initiative.

These five examples all represent a more sophisticated, more fully-resourced networking

among individuals and organizations involved in nonprofit capacity building than currently exists in most American communities for individuals and organizations involved in nonprofit capacity building. All are focused on a region; all have a central coordinating entity; and all are supported by multiple funders. In addition, all five are tied into other regional, as well as national, initiatives for enhancing nonprofit capacity building.

### What Other Infrastructure Types Are Emerging?

In a just-completed national research study (Backer, Blegg & Groves, in press), several new types of infrastructure for nonprofit capacity building are described. For instance, peer networks such as the Association for Nonprofit Executives (ANE) in Nashville offer ways of tying together capacity-building direct services and communication. ANE has 125 members and offers networking and meetings with a content focus. More recently, the eight-year-old group has begun interacting regularly with

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local policymakers, and holding educational retreats for its members on specific topics such as managing diversity. A part-time staff coordinator manages these activities, and handles the group's Web site and e-mail newsletter. ANE maintains a collaborative relationship with the region's principal MSO, the Tennessee Center for Nonprofit Management, with which it recently co-hosted a "nonprofit day" that drew more than 200 participants.

This study identified some new players on the nonprofit capacity-building scene, some of whom may last and some of whom will undoubtedly fall away. For instance, a number of foundations across the country now have separate divisions that offer direct services to nonprofits in their particular grantmaking area. The jury remains out about this model, as well as about various models of involvement by smaller foundations and individual donors who are increasingly interested in capacity building (Backer, in press a,b).

Corporations are also getting into the capacity-building "business" with nonprofits in their areas. For instance, Sempra Energy provides support for nonprofit capacity building in the San Diego area, and in nearby areas of Mexico as well. The corporation provides funding for nonprofit leaders to participate in training conferences, and helps shape partnership activities between American and Mexican foundations.

These and other new developments on the capacity-building scene are helping to shape our understanding of how local infrastructure can be enhanced, especially during times of challenge. More research on these emerging models, as well as a more rigorous evaluation of capacity building, also will help in creating responsive local infrastructure.

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#### Let's Talk

We'd love to hear your comments. Any ideas or arguments you'd like to share with the authors and editors? Contact us at: [feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org](mailto:feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org).

#### Endnote from box on page 54

1. Participants in the March 2001 Future of Capacity Building Think Tank: **Michael Allison**, CompassPoint; **Thomas E. Backer**, Human Interaction Research Institute; **John Bare**, John S. & James L. Knight Foundation; **Gary Burger**, John S. & James L. Knight Foundation; **Flo Green**, California Association of Nonprofits; **Mary Ann Holohean**, Eugene & Agnes Meyer Foundation; **Paul Light**, The Brookings Institution; **Ruth McCambridge**, Third Sector New England; **Sandra Mikush**, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation; **Penny McPhee**, John S. & James L. Knight Foundation; **Ricardo Millett**, W.K. Kellogg Foundation; **Gus Newport**, Urban Strategies Council; **Ann Philbin**, Third Sector New England; **Roni Posner**, Alliance for Nonprofit Management

Participants were invited as centrally-placed observers in the field, with an emphasis upon philanthropy. No outside funding was sought; all participants came self-funded and representing their own organization. The think tank was coordinated by Thomas E. Backer and Ruth McCambridge. The meeting was co-sponsored by the Human Interaction Research Institute, Third Sector New England, and the John S. & James L. Knight Foundation, which also hosted the gathering in its Miami offices.

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