

## Partners in Progress Case Study: East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation

**A**n April morning in Oakland, California, is reliably sunny. In a conference room in the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation's (EBALDC) newly redeveloped office building, representatives from eight organizations gather for a full-day retreat of the nascent San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative. EBALDC's two-story office building anchors the southern end of that corridor. The San Pablo Hotel, a 144-unit single-room occupancy residence for seniors, sits on the next block. It is just one of the twenty-one affordable multi-family residential buildings EBALDC has developed over its 40 year history. Many of the properties it owns and manages are historic structures in what were disinvested neighborhoods at the time that the developments were built.

### The Neighborhood

The San Pablo Hotel stands in stark contrast to most of the real estate along the 1.5 mile West Oakland segment of San Pablo Avenue – a major north-south thoroughfare that extends north through six San Francisco Bay Area communities. This West Oakland stretch of the road is defined by an overpass carrying Interstate 580 to the north and another carrying Interstate 980 to the south. To the North of the 580 lies the economically prosperous city of Emeryville and, downtown Oakland, which is on the cusp of a wave of gentrification, sits on the South side of the 980. EBALDC has focused on the stretch of road sandwiched between those two freeway overpasses – the San Pablo Corridor – because it is the severely distressed spine of West Oakland's McClymonds and Hoover neighborhoods.

EBALDC has been active at both ends of that corridor. Its most recent project was another former hotel, the California Hotel, at the northern most end of the corridor adjacent to the I-580 overpass. EBALDC's purchase and redevelopment of the California Hotel provides an example of a project that includes an innovative cross-sector partnership that presaged its PIP-funded activities.

The California Hotel is an architectural landmark. Its history traces the neighborhood's trajectory. It was once "a beacon for African-American travelers who experienced discrimination elsewhere" according to the *Contra Costa Times*. In its heyday James Brown, Ray Charles, Billie Holiday, Sly Stone, Aretha Franklin and Big Mama Thornton performed there. In the 1970s, however, after the blighting effects of the elevated 580 freeway construction just yards from the hotel, the building fell into disrepair. It became subsidized housing in the 1980s before finally being foreclosed and placed under court-ordered trusteeship. At that point the building housed very-low income and formerly homeless residents, many with chronic physical and mental illnesses. The prospect of homelessness and displacement led residents

to organize and institutions to mobilize to save the building and its tenants.

EBALDC raised \$43 million in financing to completely rehabilitate the building, creating 137 units of mostly studio apartments, thirty-four of which are set-aside for people with special needs. To operate successfully, EBALDC recognized the need for supportive services. Before proceeding with the project, EBALDC partnered with Alameda County Behavioral Health Services (ACBHS) and LifeLong Medical Care, a community-based Federally Qualified Health Center with sites throughout the East Bay, to provide on-site support services to residents. Through innovative financing, EBALDC and its partners fashioned a mechanism to supplement the resources that ACBHS and LifeLong Medical Care had to provide services on site. EBALDC also worked with a food justice organization, People's Grocery, to support a community garden that it had started on the site.

EBALDC also realized a change in strategy was necessary. Like many other community developers, EBALDC reflected on decades successfully developing affordable homes for 4,000 low-income people and, despite their expanding portfolio of resident services and other programs to improve the quality of life in distressed East Bay neighborhoods, these communities remained centers of concentrated poverty. The persistence of neighborhood poverty demanded more comprehensive strategies.

### **The Social Determinants of Health Framework**

As EBALDC was considering the need for change, the media ran stories linking the geographic concentration of chronic health problems to economic inequality, social conditions and other larger social forces. This “social determinants of health” framework is evident in “Shortened Lives”: a remarkable five-part series of in-depth reports published in 2010 in the *Oakland Tribune* based on Alameda County Public Health Department research. The first installment compared two middle-aged Alameda county residents: one living on a tree-lined street in ZIP code 94597, where life expectancy is 87.4 years – well above the 78.4 average for California men – and the other living in West Oakland’s 94603 ZIP code. Life expectancy in West Oakland plunges to 71.2 years. The county’s data corroborates a significant body of research showing that where you grow-up and live has an overwhelming effect on your health and life expectancy. The poverty, crime, lack of services, and other characteristics of chronically distressed low-income neighborhoods like West Oakland’s 94603, contribute to a range of chronic health problems and shortened lives.

Having developed deep roots and relationships in these neighborhoods over many decades, EBALDC was primed for the social determinants of health framework. The organization embraced this comprehensive neighborhood health perspective and, in the process, transformed its approach to community development. The phrase “social determinants of health” appears in EBALDC’s successful 2011 grant proposal to nurture an age-friendly community along San Pablo Avenue. The evolution was completed with the organization’s strategic plan for 2013-2016: *Health Begins in the Neighborhoods Where We Live, Learn,*

**Work and Play.** The document makes it explicit:

*... We have woven years of experience, programs and projects into a comprehensive “Healthy Neighborhoods” approach, organized around the interconnected social, environmental and economic factors that determine the length and quality of an individual’s life. We are shifting our focus from individual properties and programs to comprehensive solutions that improve the health and wealth of neighborhoods...*

### **Building the Collaborative**

In November, 2013, EBALDC was awarded a grant from the Partners in Progress (PIP) initiative, a national program funded by the Citi Foundation and managed by LIIF. These grants were made to organizations that LIIF and the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco described as community development “quarterbacks” in their book of essays, *Investing in What Works for America’s Communities*. The PIP grant provided the wherewithal to pull EBALDC’s new strategic vision from the printed page and to embark on the time-consuming process of building the cross-sector, cross-silo collaborative in the San Pablo Avenue Corridor.

During the months preceding this April retreat, EBALDC’s executive director, Joshua Simon, and chief operating officer, Charise Fong, worked to build interest in the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative. They met individually with various organizations and agencies serving the neighborhood to explore their interest in developing a collaborative neighborhood improvement strategy. A few of these meetings were with established partners, like LifeLong Medical Care. But many were casual organizational acquaintances. Among the organizations which made preliminary commitments to the effort and attended the retreat were:

- LifeLong Medical Care;
- Saint Mary’s Center, a faith-based organization that serves homeless seniors and runs a preschool at its building on San Pablo;
- People’s Grocery, a spirited organization working to improve equity and access in the food system, including operating a community garden on the California Hotel property and programming for its residents;
- Alameda County Public Health Department, which conducted the health disparities research reported by the *Oakland Tribune*;
- East Bay Housing Organization, which conducts grassroots campaigns to expand the supply of affordable housing;
- City of Oakland’s planning department, which had recently prepared the West Oakland Specific Plan outlining the city’s vision for redeveloping vacant land in the neighborhood; and
- The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, which has been a national convener and thought leader on how community development and health fields can work together.

In subsequent months two residents of the neighborhood and another community

based organization, Healthy Communities, joined the collaborative. Each partner shared the primary statistical data sources they use to inform their work. Through this process, Life-long Medical Care introduced EBALDC to Sutter Health, a nonprofit healthcare network that operates the nearby Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, which serves many residents of West Oakland. “We are really impressed with the work and the methods EBALDC is using,” according to Mindy Landmark, Sutter’s regional lead for community benefits. “They are thoughtful, open to learn and to feedback.” In December Sutter joined on as a partner and sent a \$25,000 check, its “initial community benefits contribution.” Additionally it offered support to access Sutter’s data and evaluation resources.

The Partners in Progress (PIP) grant also enabled EBALDC to add a critical new role for its healthy neighborhoods approach. EBALDC hired Romi Hall as its Healthy Neighborhoods Manager to coordinate its San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative work. As the participants filtered into the April retreat, they found the conference room lined with “heat maps” displaying the education, crime, business investment, transportation, and other indicators of community well-being in West Oakland compared with the city as a whole. Handwritten signs under each map highlighted one or more of the disparities: 15 percent unemployment in West Oakland compared to 7 percent; five times more likely to be locked up as a youth for overwhelmingly nonviolent offenses, etc. EBALDC created the maps for two reasons: It wanted to provide a compelling illustration of the social determinants of health framework, and, from the outset, it wanted to nurture a culture that values data as a programmatic driver. Seeing all of the data together in one room painted a more complete view of the neighborhood stressors and assets.

## The Quarterback Role

The process of assembling its team of partner organizations and planning the retreat surfaced some of the organizational challenges inherent to serving as a community development quarterback. Charise Fong, EBALDC’s COO, reflected on the delicate inter-organizational dynamics:

*One of the things we initially struggled with was to define what the quarterback role actually consists of. There are lots of roles in exercising leadership. Some partners told us, “We are glad you want to take this on.” But it is a tricky dynamic in leading and facilitating a collaborative, which is one of the reasons we brought on a consultant as a neutral facilitator. We are still the convening organization. So we have been very aware about stepping carefully around those roles. We hold the backbone role now, but other groups may play that role in the future. What matters to us is that the work gets done and the outcomes are being achieved.*

An influential series of articles published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review on “collective impact” describes a “backbone” organization as one of the five conditions for successful cross-sector partnerships. The backbone supplies much of the management,

facilitation, coordination and data collection and analysis required to adequately support these partnerships. The articles depict the backbone as the back office or infrastructure collaborators needed to operate smoothly, share data and coordinate activities. Fong recognized how different EBALDC's role was at this formative mobilization stage. The kind of leadership competencies EBALDC was drawing upon to assemble partners and forge a shared agenda at the beginning of the project may not be the ones the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative will need in the future.

In its capacity as the quarterback EBALDC sensed the delicate inter-organizational dynamics at play among a group of such diverse organizations and institutions that have never before tried to achieve the envisioned level of integration: The neutrality essential to effective facilitation of retreat and other partnership meetings potentially conflicted with EBALDC's organizational self-interests as a participating partner. So, at the recommendation of a colleague at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, EBALDC hired Marian Urquilla as a consultant and facilitator. Urquilla directed a family support collaborative in Washington, DC for 12 years and had most recently finished a four year stint as director of program strategies for Living Cities, helping to oversee its Integration Initiative, which supported an early cohort of cross-sector community development collaboratives. Thus, in addition to her skilled group facilitation at the April retreat and subsequent meetings and retreats, Urquilla had the experiential wisdom necessary to guide the retreat participants through the process and address any content ambiguities that accompany early collaborative meetings. She also served as a coach as EBALDC navigated the unfamiliar terrain of serving as quarterback to a broad and aligned collaborative.

### **Use of Retreats To Build Alignment**

The retreat involved both a focus on the human alchemy of building and strengthening personal relationships among organizational staff unfamiliar with each other and also a focus on a structured process of building agreements about how to work collectively and how to construct a shared and holistic strategy out of the chaotic conditions depicted in the heat maps arrayed around them. The participants agreed to constitute themselves as the steering committee with the expectation that other organizations would be identified in the future and gradually added to the collaboration. They agreed to meet monthly. And they grappled with an issue that was not on the formal agenda: How to engage residents in the planning? They observed that West Oakland residents had grown cynical about a succession of ambitious initiatives that later achieved little if anything. This history, the legacy of racism and disinvestment in the neighborhood and the increasing threat of gentrification and displacement made it imperative that residents be partners in the development of the collaborative's action plan. It was less clear how to achieve this. Who could speak for the neighborhood? How would they prevent resident participation from disintegrating into factional disagreements? Was it fair for those seated around the table to be paid for their participation while residents were unlikely to be?

They agreed to add four residents to the steering committee; two now and two more over time. They formed an ad hoc committee to propose a process for identifying, recruiting, orienting and supporting resident members of the steering committee. Acting on that committee's advice, at a subsequent meeting they agreed to pay residents \$17 an hour, the living wage rate for Alameda County, for their preparation and participation in meetings and to cover any related child care and transportation expenses they might incur. By September, when the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative held its second all-day retreat, two residents had been selected and were in attendance.

During the second half of the April retreat Tejal Shah, another member of EBALDC's staff, led an exercise exploring the social determinants of health framework. Participants settled on four key determinants: affordable housing, public safety, economic development and health and wellness. These struck the participants as the most salient issues for the neighborhood based on a review of neighborhood data and initial input from longtime residents during a senior summit meeting in 2013. During subsequent meetings and the September retreat the collaborative fleshed out a theory of change. They called it the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative Health Resiliency Model. Their embrace of "resiliency" reflects the partners' growing sense of the larger economic and political forces continuously buffeting the neighborhood and the health and wellbeing of its residents. Successful community development builds a neighborhood's internal capacity to cope with on-going change and adversity.

A few weeks after the retreat, EBALDC began the process of engaging residents. At a community event they set up a photo booth. Residents gathered around the booth and completed surveys while EBALDC staff took pictures of them holding signs on which they had written their hopes and dreams for the community. Reflecting back on the day, Romi Hall said:

*Let me just say, it was a hit! We met a lot of people that day. Sixty-six folks completed surveys. More than 300 pictures were taken and the community members really appreciated the simple questionnaire, asking them about their hopes and dreams, and getting a free picture. I'd actually like to build out this strategy next year and host a photo booth at other community events. It was such a win!*

*Most gratifying, the surveys echoed the four priorities that emerged from the April retreat – health and wellness, safety and community, housing affordability, and jobs and income. During the next five months, working groups met to explore these four priorities. The working groups reported back to the steering committee at SPC Collaborative's second all-day retreat. At the end of the day Urquilla, the facilitator, assigned one of the priorities to each corner of the room. She asked the participants to physically move to the corner he or she believed the collaborative would be most able to impact. With the exception of three people, everyone found themselves in the health and wellness corner. The exercise provided a surprisingly clear dramatization of how partners' thinking had*

*coalesced around a shared neighborhood health framework. The partners left the retreat resolved to treat health and wellness as the leading edge of their collective work.*

*As noted in the summary of their plans, the Steering Committee has adopted core strategies for 2015-2017 that integrate the collaborative's efforts across silos. Like the partnership between EBALDC and Lifelong at the California Hotel, these strategies bring together collaborative members in innovative ways that leverage the strengths and resources of each for better outcomes. For example, research has shown that combining affordable housing plus on-site health services can help to improve the quality of life and reduce public sector health costs, particularly for populations that are in poor health and are homeless. The partners are now engaged in discovering and implementing similar strategies across their silos.*

*This outcome also demonstrates the role a quarterback organization can play when it has the time and resources to support the partnership formation process. Monthly meetings and check-ins have enabled partner organizations to build the trust, organizational commitment and momentum to implement the core strategies described in SPC's resiliency model represent proof that the quarterback approach works. Equally important EBALDC has been changed by the process. Its community development approach reflects its own transition from a primary focus on real estate to serving as the quarterback for a multidisciplinary people- and place-based agenda where progress is measured by the collaborative's ability to reduce the neighborhood stressors which result in health disparities.*

EBALDC's experience highlights some of the initial insights about the community quarterback's role and the process of building a cross-sector, cross-silo collaborative:

### ***Building commitment and trust***

For collaboratives to be effective in integrating people- and place-base strategies, they need to bring together organizations that often have little or no experience with each other. The process of building trust and commitment takes time and face-to-face engagement. This includes both initial one-on-one meetings and group retreats, in this case led by a neutral and seasoned facilitator.

### ***Quarterback vs. backbone***

The literature on collective impact describes the backbone organization as essential infrastructure for the collaborative. But the QB's role in building the collaborative highlights a qualitatively different role. A QB needs to be entrepreneurial and proactive in identifying potential partners, establishing trust, building commitment, and forging a shared agreement on the key focus for the collaborative's work. This goes well beyond the backbone's function as the infrastructure and logistics to support the collaborative's coordination, decision-making, implementation and reporting.

### ***Data used for understanding and decision-making***

Presenting data in a clear, graphic form helps prospective partners reach a common understanding of the challenges and the forces driving those challenges. EBALDC used heat maps and other infographics to foster a culture of using data to inform action.

The grantee's experience also provides promising indications that the community quarterback-driven model for the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative's cross-sector and cross-silo partnership is likely to achieve more together than each member could otherwise accomplish working independently in their traditional siloed mode:

### ***Strong evidence-based theoretical framework***

The research supporting the social determinants of health framework manifests the extent to which housing, employment and public safety issues, for example, are intertwined and impact health outcomes. For instance, one study has shown that the best predictor of whether children with asthma will need to be hospitalized is the percentage of homes that have code violations in their immediate surroundings. Similarly, there is abundant evidence that higher levels of chronic illness (particularly for children) can impact the ability of single parents to get and hold jobs. Organizations face significant obstacles trying to address problems in isolation from the complex interactions that cause them.

### ***Collaboration as a framework for discovering opportunities for synergy and leverage***

The interaction of factors across silos means that changes in activities in one silo affect outcomes in other silos. The collaborative is the setting in which partners discover opportunities for attaining improvements in outcomes through the synergistic effect of coordinated action, and by being able to better leverage existing resources.

### ***Unique resource development opportunities***

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Kresge Foundation, along with a group of other funds, have formed the BUILD Health Challenge to support cross-sector community partnerships, like the San Pablo Area Revitalization Collaborative, to improve the overall health of local residents. EBALDC applied on the Collaborative's behalf to implement the plan it developed during the PIP planning year and was selected to be one of eighteen community partnerships in the BUILD Health Challenge, providing external affirmation for the quality of the partnership and the promise of its plans.

*This case study was prepared by Carl Sussman of Sussman Associates and John Weiser of BWB Solutions.*