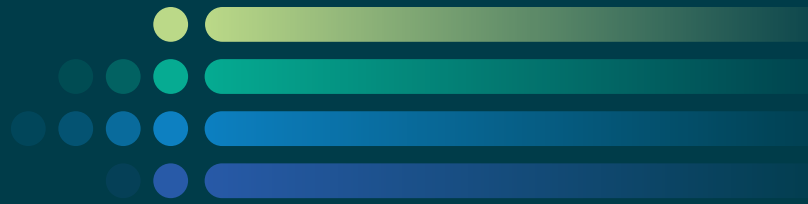




INCUBATOR

# Community Engagement

# Introduction



Data Across Sectors for Health (DASH) is a national initiative that elevates models, principles, and practices that support data ecosystems to achieve health equity. It is co-led by the [Illinois Public Health Institute](#) and the [Michigan Public Health Institute](#) and funded by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#).

For ten years, DASH has supported data sharing initiatives around the country that inform policy changes and address systemic barriers to health. This support comes through funding, networking opportunities with peers and mentors, technical assistance, and, launching in late 2025, the DASH Knowledge Base, a publicly accessible online database of resources related to the field of multisector data sharing. To date, DASH has directly funded over 200 projects nationwide and provided technical assistance and resources to many others.

In 2023–2025, DASH committed to exploring what “centering equity” can mean in grantmaking and DASH-funded projects. To advance grantmaking equity, the Incubator was intentionally designed as a funding and support *collaboration*. In this grant collaboration, organizations communicated their needs and wishes for how and when funds and other support could be used. The program sought to continue and deepen work past DASH awardees who had established multi-sector or multi-focus local collaborations.

To advance program equity, the eight participating organizations and their community-member partners co-designed the work they planned to collaborate on while DASH staff, peers, and mentors provided structure and support. The award included compensation for community members as well as the awardee organizations. Guided by feedback during the co-design process, connections were made to leading mentor organizations to provide subject matter expertise.

The Incubator was broadly structured along three major themes: engaging community, strengthening data governance, and addressing policy. This brief explores the first of those themes by offering a glimpse into the methods and considerations for authentically engaging community utilized by three Incubator awardees: Holly City Development Corporation (HCDC) in Millville, NJ; DataHaven in New Haven, CT; and Iowa Community HUB in Des Moines, IA.

**Holly City Development Corporation (HCDC)** is a community-based organization with a mission to inspire and empower neighborhood change in the Center City neighborhood of Millville in New Jersey.

**DataHaven** ensures communities throughout Connecticut have access to data and the skills to use that data by engaging hundreds of residents and organizations in decisions around data collection and reporting.

**Iowa Community HUB** is a nonprofit community care hub working with network partners to prevent and manage chronic disease across Iowa by connecting individuals of all ages, abilities, incomes, and experiences to community health programs and support.

## What is a data ecosystem?

A data ecosystem is made up of the what, the who, and the how that shape information sharing within the landscape. A community's data ecosystem includes the relationships that shape how information is gathered and used, and the lenses, structures, and processes that may facilitate or complicate information sharing.

Equitable community data ecosystems are those that have shifted their program and leadership processes in ways that the people most impacted by racism and health inequities have a deciding role in how data are collected, shared, and used.

## What does it mean to engage community?

Community members know best where services, products, and processes fulfill their needs and hopes and where those things fall short. Yet they are rarely asked for their participation and, when they are, they are rarely compensated meaningfully for their efforts. The Incubator sought to provide space and support for established multisector organizations wishing to engage community members as co-designers of the programs meant to benefit them.

Sometimes community members who have first-hand knowledge of the challenges an organization or coalition is seeking to address are referred to as “people with lived experience.” Following is a helpful definition of this term, provided by Incubator awardee-organization Iowa HUB, which in turn sourced it from the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2023:

People with lived experience are those directly affected by social, health, public health, or other issues and by the strategies that aim to address those issues. This gives them insights that can inform and improve systems, research, policies, practices, and programs. When we say *lived experience*, we mean knowledge based on someone's perspective, personal identities, and history, beyond their professional or educational experience.<sup>1</sup>

Some community members and organizations prefer other terms to suit this definition, such as “community expert,” “community consultant,” or, simply, “community member” or “consultant.” We explore this terminology from multiple angles in our 2024 blog post, [“Including People with Lived Experience \(PWLE\)—Thoughtfully.”](#)

## Compensating community members

The Incubator initiative provided guardrails while encouraging awardees to develop the program in a way that would work best for them. One of those guardrails was that a set portion of the award was earmarked specifically for payment to community members engaged in program input.

DASH suggested awardees offer community members compensation at a rate similar to what they would expect to pay a professional consultancy, up to \$250 per hour. Part of that rate could be in the form of materials and services, such as laptops, professional development opportunities, and home goods. Awardees were asked to engage in dialogue with their community members about the compensation to determine what would be fair and feasible for all involved.

Compensating community members can be logistically challenging because compensation over a certain threshold can compromise a person's eligibility for health, services, and support benefits. Paying taxes and other bureaucratic factors can be confusing for people new to 1099s. Cash and gift cards are tough to track, but checks do not work for people without established home addresses or bank accounts.

Consultant-level compensation for community members was a big change in mindset, not only for staff and partners, but for the community members themselves. In all three of the case studies featured in this brief, organization staff worked hard to communicate transparently about the goals, challenges, and possibilities for both community members and the organizations.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. “What is Lived Experience?” by Grace Guerrero Ramirez, Kate Bradley, Lauren Amos, Dana Jean-Baptiste, Ryan Ruggiero, Yvonne Marki, Jeremiah Donier, Helena Girouard, Danny Murillo, Laura Erickson, and Amanda Benton. Washington, District of Columbia: 2022.

# Holly City Development Corporation (HCDC): Chat and Chews



Holly City Development Corporation (HCDC) is a community-based organization in Millville, New Jersey with a mission to inspire and empower neighborhood change. Their impact areas are community building and resident engagement; real estate development and redevelopment; housing construction, rehabilitation, and financing; and economic development. Their many partner agencies provide resources and services that HCDC constituents often need.

## Context and Goals

In 2019, HCDC identified key projects and programs through its just-completed Center City Neighborhood Plan report. COVID put a stop to action on the plan, but the pandemic also made clear to HCDC staff how disparately different constituent communities experience adverse events. In 2023, HCDC returned to the Neighborhood Plan data and aimed to build upon it with the Incubator.

HCDC's Incubator goal was to engage residents in the planning and analysis of organizational goals and program effectiveness. They landed on the idea of Chat and Chews, facilitated conversations with residents around a shared meal. There, they hoped to gather input about community needs and preferences as well as introduce two new, compensated "community champion" roles.

## Chat and Chews

HCDC provided Chat and Chew flyers at their own and community partners' gathering spaces (food pantry, library, and a local school) and posted notices on social media. Chat and Chews were scheduled on three consecutive Thursdays at different times of day to allow access for as many people as possible. All participants were given "healthy home" gift baskets with cleaning supplies, informational graphics, flyers for financial education and enrichment classes, resources for reduced pharmacy costs,

and grocery store cards. Childcare and transportation were offered for anyone needing them.

Meetings took place in the newly renovated public library, an HCDC partner. After a good meal and some icebreakers, staff led a facilitated conversation that explored the open-ended question "What is a healthy home?" Residents could—and did—go in many directions with this prompt, connecting a healthy home to the physical environment, family relationships, nutrition, financial stability, safety, and more. In the end, each of the three Chat and Chew groups came to the same conclusion: a healthy home is not one place; a healthy home is a healthy community.

HCDC scheduled a follow-up meeting to take place within a couple weeks of the third Chat and Chew. Of the 34 people who participated in the original meetings, 16 registered for the follow-up and eight people attended. The agenda for the follow-up meeting included offering resources related to concerns expressed at the earlier meetings, providing opportunities for community members to get to know each other, and detailing the new paid community-champion role.

The meeting series helped residents voice their concerns, get answers, and understand HCDC more fully as a bridge to information. For example, residents asked how city funding gets dispersed and who decides; why some sidewalks get fixed and not others; and why their neighborhoods felt "forgotten." HCDC was able to provide



information about local governance practices, such as commissioners' meetings, and services offered by HCDC community partners, like bill payment support.

A crucial outcome was that attendees representing a variety of demographics and needs had the chance to meet and learn about their neighbors face-to-face. This allowed them to better understand each other's priorities, hopes, and struggles. They were also able to connect on shared experiences and support one another. For example, attendees with past experiences of homelessness connected and followed up with those currently facing homelessness.

### Community Champions

HCDC introduced the two new community champion paid positions at the follow-up meeting. HCDC had hoped that, through the process of discussion and networking, attendees would naturally self-select for the role, and this worked: two people who were already active in their community stepped up with interest in the paid community champion role. An unexpected bonus was that all remaining attendees asked that the Chat and Chews continue monthly as an unpaid advisory group.

HCDC's careful planning and deep listening resulted in a high level of interest and engagement. Residents felt seen as people possessing insight and power. The self-selected champions were inspired by the community focus of the meetings and felt ready to advocate for the concerns of the entire community.

The successful initial meetings resulted in sustained momentum. Chat and Chews are currently held monthly at the library (with simpler food and fewer "extras" than the first meetings). In these gatherings, the community champions, who chose food insecurity as their first area of focus, lead conversations on relevant topics based on prepared questions that encourage open discussion. Attendees act as a (voluntary) advisory group where they bring concerns and drive the conversation. HCDC is present to co-facilitate where needed.

Champions meet regularly with HCDC staff outside of the Chat and Chews for help with preparation. HCDC takes special care to consistently serve as a resource only, always following the champions' lead.

### Compensation and Sustainability

Decisions around compensation moved slowly at first, as paid community roles were a new element for HCDC and their constituents alike and required time and effort to accustom everyone and to set up administrative processes. After learning about various options for compensation, both champions opted to receive payment in the form of various types of gift cards that could stabilize food access, household needs, and wellbeing.

While Chat and Chews consisted of only a small core group in earlier months, they now average 20 to 25 people. Promotion continues through a mailing list, flyers, and social media, though attendance seems to be generated mostly through word of mouth. The Chat and Chews have organically grown to authentically represent each corner of the city. People appreciate and look forward to the meetups, and their awareness of and appreciation for each other has grown in turn.

These regular, attendee-led meetings have given community members the knowledge and confidence to do something about their concerns and complaints. Some Chat and Chew attendees have begun attending commissioners' meetings and even meet commissioners one on one to seek answers. In turn, some city commissioners have attended the Chat and Chews.

HCDC and the Chat and Chew group are looking forward to continuing the work after Incubator funding and support program ends. Community members and champions alike are thinking of projects they would like to launch, and they speak regularly with neighbors, co-workers, and other residents to bring them in. A small amount of additional funding has been secured to support the Chat and Chew structure, though it will not be possible to compensate the community champion roles without additional funding.



# DataHaven: Community Data Explorers



DataHaven is an organization based in New Haven, CT, with a mission to ensure communities have access to the data that represents and affects them and the skills to engage with that data. DataHaven works with about 300 local, state, and national partners to develop reports, tools, and technical assistance programs that aim to make information more useful to local communities. The information, collected and published, is regularly used by thousands of people and organizations. Their various initiatives engage people in discussions around the collection, storage, and sharing of their data.

## Context and Goals

DataHaven works with a broad range of partners statewide, from individuals seeking access to basic needs to hospital and university directors. DataHaven aimed to employ the Incubator as a vehicle to deepen and broaden their data capture such that more experiences could be represented. For example, DataHaven's 2023 Hartford Community Wellbeing Index and their 2024 Greater Hartford LGBTQIA+ report reflected the LGBTQIA+ community and the chronic illness/disability community separately, but neither could shed light on the experiences of people at the intersection of these communities.

DataHaven sought to develop two paid community-member roles. These "community data explorers" would be people with lived experience of the LGBTQIA+ and disabled/chronically ill communities. They would examine how data is collected and used in their communities, learn from each other and their community members, and, ideally, influence local policy.

## Community Data Explorers

To connect with the focus communities, DataHaven posted physical flyers at transit stops, the public library, and other public areas in Hartford and New Haven, and posted digitally on Instagram.

Response was lower than expected, so staff sought feedback and ideas from the other Incubator awardees, partners, and staff; reviewed their flyer to ensure multi-generational appeal; and expanded their reach by asking their network to spread the word.

Ultimately, 13 people applied and were interviewed. DataHaven used a weighted decision matrix to assess each applicant, considering complementary interests and experiences as well since the pair would be working together closely. DataHaven selected two candidates interested in issues related to homelessness and housing, disability access, criminal legal reform, and jobs for the disabled or chronically ill LGBTQIA+ community.

Neither new data explorer had much experience with DataHaven prior to their hiring, so the first task after they signed their agreement was to learn what DataHaven does. Once they had a handle on that, they worked with staff to develop a list of potential projects using existing data, their interests, and the time available, then ranked their interest in each idea. Through consensus, a project emerged of interest to both data explorers: Combining community health initiatives in the focus communities with art through community placemaking. [Community placemaking](#) is a collaborative process of reimagining public spaces, such as parks and plazas, and "[third places](#)"—informal gathering



places such as coffeeshops, rec centers, bars, and donut shops.

With the help of a specialist in their network, DataHaven provided training on key informant qualitative interviews and on outreach methods for reaching community interviewees. The community explorers aimed to capture qualitative and quantitative data related to public and “third place” art and its impacts on community building. Results will be short, written pieces in a zine format, website or other suitable format for the subject.

The data explorers meet one to two times a month with their DataHaven liaison. Meetings are hybrid in format since one of the data explorers lives in New Haven (where DataHaven is located) and the other outside of Hartford.

### **Compensation and Sustainability**

DataHaven has on occasion provided small awards in the past for community participation, but compensation commensurate with a professional consultant’s rate was new to them. The organization received some pushback from partner organizations who were uncomfortable with the compensation plan. Some staff experienced initial confusion but quickly understood and appreciated the rate as validating the importance of lived experience as expertise.

DataHaven chose to pay in installments rather than by hours for ease of accounting. Both community data

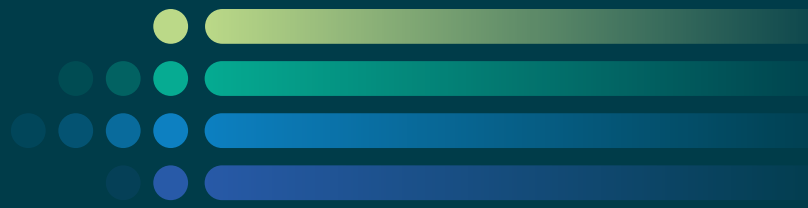
explorers chose the independent contractor model. The group first considered peer-to-peer payment options for their greater accessibility regardless of access to a formal banking institution. However, due to platform restrictions, this was not a viable option, and ultimately, direct deposit into a bank account was chosen.

DataHaven is planning to continue the community data explorer program to explore the needs of other underrepresented or intersectional communities, though without compensation. To increase recruitment reach, staff plan to post in public libraries in additional towns, offer applicants the opportunity to complete the application over the phone, and circle back to those community members who reached out the first time but who were a better fit for future intersections such as challenges faced by veterans and racial equity.

DataHaven hopes to keep in touch with the current community data explorers after their term ends and hopes that the skill-building and networking that has defined their roles will ripple out into the community and continue to make a positive impact.

The organization has also launched a Youth Advisory Council modeled in part on the data explorer program. Youth participants will receive a stipend or modest fee to develop their data and research skills while providing advice on DataHaven publications.

# Iowa Community HUB: Community Advisory Groups



The Iowa Community HUB is a nonprofit community care hub (CCH) with a mission to help initiate, expand, and sustain community health programs and services that address essential health needs and create lasting community impact for all communities.

The HUB helps people find programs and services in their communities through its HUB Navigators, its Community Resource Finder and partner service locators, and its program library. HUB Navigators, trained as Community Health Workers, contact referred individuals to link them with programs and services, and they provide follow-up to support enrollment and retention. Individuals can make a referral on the HUB website, for themselves, a friend, or a patient/client. A HUB Navigator will reach out to the referred person within 48 hours to connect them to a suitable program or service.

The Community Resource Finder is an online database of services searchable by zip code and keywords. Other partners, such as United Way 211, Iowa Compass (disability), and Lifelong Links (for elders 60+), help broaden the resource environment that HUB Navigators have access to when making connections. The online program library contains browsable information about Iowa programs that improve health, safety, and quality of life. The HUB also supports organizations through trainings and program management tools and facilitates connections between clinicians and social-care services.

## Context and Goals

In 2019, the HUB's backbone organization, CHPcommunity, convened a cross-sector HUB Advisory Group tasked with learning about needs and strengths in communities. This group, composed of about 85 representatives from an array of health care sectors, community-based organizations, and state and national organizations, has been essential in

the creation and ongoing operation of the HUB. The HUB strives to intentionally center lived experience in everything they do.

The HUB's Incubator goal was to deepen community input so internal workflows and collaborations with network partners reflect the real needs and perspectives of the people the HUB serves. Through a newly established Community Access and Impact Council made up of individuals with both professional expertise and lived experience, the HUB created Community Advisory Groups (CAGs) to capture and elevate diverse perspectives.

The CAGs are composed of community members who have firsthand experience being referred by their healthcare provider to the HUB, working with HUB Navigators to be screened and connected to services, and ultimately participating in a community program. These community-member CAG participants received stipends.

Feedback from a CAG is then shared with the Council, where it is translated into actionable items for the HUB to operationalize, informing decision-making and shaping best practices that can be shared with partners. To support this work, the HUB recruited two individuals with lived experience and expertise in equity, inclusion, and community engagement to co-facilitate CAG development and implementation via paid roles.

## Paid Community Members

One of the hired community members has served as the co-chair of the Community Access and Impact Council and the other is in a community liaison role. Both have





advocacy experience as well as lived experience among the focus communities. The HUB also championed a leader whose lived experience is matched by a distinguished record in nursing, education, and managing community health initiatives through nonprofit service, culminating in his service as Board Chairman for the HUB.

To start work developing the CAGs, the HUB chose an initial use case (healthy eating and active living) that would allow them to braid grant funding acquired from another source. The first step in this process was to gather experiences and ideas from the community. The HUB put together a facilitator guide and script with suggested questions for the contracted community members.

Two CAG meetings have been completed thus far and their reports generated and shared with HUB staff and Council. These CAG meeting reports are intended to create a best-practices library for partners and provide the HUB with insights to improve its own operations.

### **Compensation and Sustainability**

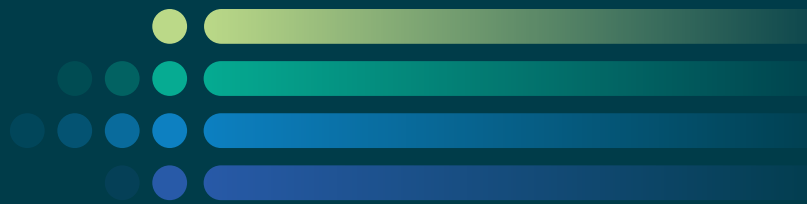
Incubator meetings helped HUB staff prepare for the compensation element of the Incubator program, which was new to them. With the first of their new hires, they spoke candidly about the role, the Incubator initiative, the value of lived experience, and also the fact that they were new to this compensation piece. After this first conversation established details and a certain comfort with the topic of pay, HUB staff were able to carry over what they'd learned to the other two new hires in a more streamlined and practiced way. Iowa HUB was able to hire a billing specialist and operations manager with money from another grant to help with the logistics of the new payments.

The two new Council hires and the new HUB Advisory Group board president chose to be paid as independent contractors rather than receiving gift cards, access to services, or other options.

The CAG participants were offered multiple payment options, such as peer-to-peer apps, ACH, and paper checks. All participants chose to receive payment by check. After each session, facilitators sent verified attendance and the finance team processed and mailed the checks to participants. The HUB's CAG efforts will continue well beyond the Incubator grant, reflecting the HUB's priority to have its processes and services shaped and informed by community members across Iowa.

Iowa HUB worked closely with their legal team to ensure HIPAA compliance and security. The community members filling the roles reviewed and signed a Community Member Agreement that stipulated pay and expectations for time commitment and activities. The Iowa HUB's legal team played a pivotal role in developing policy, amending bylaws, and facilitating the election process for the Board Chairman position.

The Council co-chair role is planned to be a recurring, sustainably funded position. The Board of Directors position with a stipend is also slated for sustainability. The paid community liaison role endured only for the duration of the Incubator grant.



## Networks: Expand or Reinforce?

The three organizations took three different approaches to outreach and selection of community members. HCDC opted to solicit voices new to them but within their network, and in the process fostered a budding community of neighbors. Their multi-step process for engaging community moved relationships from more transactional to genuine and mutually beneficial.

DataHaven chose to reach outside of their network. This method required more time and effort than initially planned because it did not access existing wells of trust, but resulted in new community connections and ideas for future use cases.

Iowa HUB worked with an existing structure that already prioritized the experiences of community members. The HUB limited their recruitment efforts to individuals who were already involved with the HUB through programming or projects, thereby reinforcing existing networks.

## Time to Ramp Up, Reflect, and Revise

HCDC, DataHaven, and Iowa HUB took different approaches to the notion of authentic engagement in program development and implementation. HCDC invited a larger community to weigh in on what makes a healthy home, which created a foundation and context for the choice the community champions made as their chosen topic (food access).

DataHaven located a gap in their data and then targeted their initial outreach and networking with that demographic in mind. The two community data explorers then worked with DataHaven staff to choose their focus based on their interests. The work has a smaller locus point, situated in the hands of the Explorers and their DataHaven liaison as

opposed to in a larger group like HCDC's Chat and Chews or Iowa HUB's Community Access and Impact Council.

Iowa HUB's Community Access and Impact Council selected the topic for their first CAG based on an external grant opportunity. They conducted interviews for the community member facilitator roles and partnered with a local program to recruit CAG members, drawing from participants in a predetermined program. This approach was possible through the HUB because the grant project's protocol leveraged existing community-centered groups and built upon a history of trust with community members in that zip code.

## From Discomfort to Ease

All three awardees spent time and careful thought preparing staff, community, and partners for the compensation aspect of the Incubator.

The topic of compensating community members as consultants felt awkward and new for many involved with the initiatives—awardees, community members, and other stakeholders—even in cases where small awards or gifts had been provided for participation in the past. Awardees found if they were clear about their goals and transparent about both their uncertainties and their willingness to work toward an agreement together, the discomfort passed, and everyone involved felt appreciative of the effort.

Awardees researched compensation in a variety of formats and provided options accordingly. In one of the case studies, hired community members selected gift cards for compensation, and in the other two cases, they opted to receive 1099s as independent contractors. Awardees made sure to spell out the requirements and potential challenges community members may encounter collecting pay and filing taxes. Awardees also used Incubator funds to make goods and services, stipends, or gift cards available to



community consultants and other community members who participated in meetings and networking.

Compensation matters required some set-up time logistically, legally, and institutionally. DataHaven and Iowa HUB both accessed additional funds to help with the legal and/or administrative demands of compensation.

In general, the co-design and compensation elements were initially a heavy lift, but once the protocols—and relationships—related to these elements were worked out, organizations were enthusiastic about the model and planned to continue it in some form or another even after the grant wrapped up.

HCDC's Chat and Chews are an established part of their offerings now, although compensation at the Incubator level is not sustainable for the moment. Consultant-level compensation is also not easily reproducible for future data explorers, but DataHaven enjoyed and found value in the two-way process of discussing questions of compensation and will continue with this practice. Iowa HUB plans to continue the compensation structure for the Board Chair role and for community members participating in CAGs.

### **The Speed of Trust**

A key ingredient for this work is trust. HCDC staff understood that, even though they knew the Chat and Chew attendees, they were asking them to engage on a new level. Whether the organization had earned their communities' trust depended on the organizations fulfilling their promise of a timely and meaningful re-gathering. When they held the fourth meeting and arrived with answers to community member questions in hand, the group began to forge bonds well beyond a transactional exchange.

DataHaven sought to use the community engagement initiative as an outreach initiative as well, connecting with community members not yet known to them. Growing a community always takes more time than working within an existing community, as that trust and responsiveness must be invited, cultivated, and freely given. DataHaven experienced this in the slow build of responses to their invitation.

Iowa HUB was also working with an established Council to cultivate the compensated community member positions. That trust had been deliberately cultivated over time since the Council began. It was given that the Council couldn't be effective if people were not comfortable being honest. Among the first significant trust-building exercises was the development of the Council's charter, which the whole group created and approved together.

The awardees and their community consultants all derived great satisfaction from building these relationships and look forward to continuing their work together. It is worth noting that building and maintaining relationships is a continuous process, as different opportunities and challenges introduce different ways to work together.

### **The Grantmaking-Equity Frontier**

Incubator awardees began planning their community engagement activities six months before they moved forward with the selection of community members. Organizations need operational costs for this type of planning and implementation, not program-restricted funds. The first go-round always takes some extra time and resources, but even subsequent, more streamlined practices would have operational costs, and authentic relationship building simply takes time. Community moves at the speed of trust.

Financial sustainability and grantmaking equity will therefore continue to be a limitation for many nonprofits until a critical mass of philanthropic and governmental organizations act on the importance of funding operational costs and provide timelines long enough to allow organizations to experiment and learn.