



Lessons learned: Bringing a trauma-informed perspective to the quarterback role

A Real-time Learning Brief

Findings from BRIDGE Housing Corporation's work at Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex

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Background

The Citi Foundation and the Low Income Investment Fund (LIIF) launched the Partners in Progress (PIP) initiative to support 13 organizations in their implementation of community development efforts in 10 regions across the country. All participating organizations have a single focus: to increase economic progress in low income communities. BRIDGE Housing Corporation's (BHC) grant supports BRIDGE's role as a quarterback in two community development efforts in two California communities: Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex (in San Francisco) and Jordan Downs (in Los Angeles). PIP support provides an opportunity for BRIDGE to learn from the efforts in San Francisco and Los Angeles so that this approach can be taken to scale across BRIDGE communities and used to inform similar efforts nationwide.

As part of this grant, two Learning Briefs have been developed. The first Learning Brief documents what BRIDGE and its partner organizations have learned about the quarterback role as they work to revitalize the community within and surrounding the Jordan Downs development in Watts (Los Angeles). This second Learning Brief highlights BRIDGE's use of a trauma-informed lens in their work in Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex.

Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex (Potrero) were built in 1941 and 1955, respectively, and are two of the oldest public housing developments in San Francisco. BRIDGE was selected in 2008 to lead the redevelopment effort at Potrero (called "Rebuild Potrero"; <http://www.rebuildpotrero.com>) as part of the HOPE SF program (<http://hope-sf.org/>), a partnership between the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development and the San Francisco Housing Authority to redevelop the most distressed public housing in the city. Through this project, BRIDGE seeks to rebuild 606 public housing units and create 1,000 new mixed income homes, open spaces, community facilities, and supportive services to improve the lives of residents.

Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex residents face numerous economic and social challenges. For example, residents have an annual median income of \$14,000 and violent crime at the property is five times the citywide average. The Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center¹ (2010) found that families living in urban poverty – like families living at Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex – often encounter multiple traumas over many years. The stress of chronic poverty, crime, untreated physical and mental health issues, and a lack of social and concrete supports reduces resiliency, destroys community cohesion, and leaves residents in "survival mode."

This premise was used to develop a model of Trauma Informed Community Building (TICB; Weinstein, Wolin and Rose, 2014).² TICB identifies specific community building strategies to support low-income and public housing residents who may experience cumulative trauma directly related to chronic stressors such as concentrated poverty, racism, and disenfranchisement. This model encourages individual and system changes that take into account residents' emotional needs and avoid re-traumatization triggers.

¹ Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (2010). *Understanding the Impact of Trauma and Urban Poverty on Family Systems: Risks Resilience and Interventions*. Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center. Accessed at http://www.quantumunitsed.com/materials/1431_0221_Trauma-Urban_Poverty.pdf.

² Weinstein, E., Wolin, J., & Rose, S. (2014). *Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods*. BRIDGE Housing and Health Equity Institute. Available at: <http://bridgehousing.com/PDFs/TICB.Paper5.14.pdf>

The findings in this brief were based on a review of project planning documents, meeting notes, and interviews with four staff from BRIDGE Housing Corporation and one key external partner involved with the community development work at Potrero. The roles of the interviewed staff include resident liaisons, project and program managers, and senior-level executives. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted in October 2014 by Harder+Company Community Research.

The TICB model lays out five trauma-related challenges to traditional community building strategies: (1) lack of trust and social cohesion; (2) lack of stability, reliability, and consistency; (3) disempowerment and lack of sense of community ownership; (4) inability to vision the future; and (5) breadth and depth of community needs. Each of these trauma-related challenges can be, and often are, exacerbated by the actions and/or inactions of service-providing programs or organizations. These challenges can interfere with traditional community building strategies; without the trauma-informed lens even commonplace activities in the lifecycle of a project can shake trust and impede community building. For example, staff turnover, whether due to natural transitions, staff burnout, or loss of funding can reinforce experiences of instability and trigger a trauma response in participants (Weinstein, et al., 2014). Consequently, it is important that organizations assuming a community quarterback role bring a trauma-informed perspective to the work or risk not truly engaging residents in the redevelopment process.

This brief examines how BRIDGE applied a trauma-informed perspective to a critical event in the development process: a change in roles and personnel on the ground at Potrero Hill Terrace and Annex. While changes in staffing and roles are commonplace occurrences in large-scale, long-term redevelopment projects, when understood through the lens of trauma, it is clear that transitions in staffing represent critical opportunities to either demonstrate commitment to a trauma sensitive approach or trigger trauma responses in the community. This brief begins with a description of the way organizational and project staff view BRIDGE's role at Potrero, describes a significant transition in key staff and responsibilities, and highlights lessons learned and best practices for managing transitions in a trauma-impacted community.

How does BRIDGE view its role at Potrero?

BRIDGE staff view their role in this project as a master developer that acts as the “quarterback,” “community builder,” and “strategist around the integrated people, housing, and neighborhood plan.” The role of the organization is seen as far more than taking responsibility for the physical property redevelopment. As one interviewee explained, BRIDGE is the

“master developer with the responsibility to transform the neighborhood holistically with the overall vision of creating a healthy mixed income community...[I]t’s about improving the physical environment as well as the social environment...[BRIDGE] is not actually going to do all of the implementation of every single thing that we think needs to happen, but [BRIDGE] is involved in creating the structure so that it can happen.”

When asked to describe the role that BRIDGE plays as a community builder, interviewees described BRIDGE as leading efforts not only to change and improve the physical environment, but also to prepare people to succeed in this new environment. As one staff member described:

“[BRIDGE] is there to really make changes to the physical environment, and there is a responsibility then to also be mindful of the people that live there and how this change is going to impact them and how they prepare the people that live there for this change.”

BRIDGE staff members share a strong value around the need to create meaningful connections and build trust with the community. Staff we interviewed shared a fundamental assumption that residents in public housing have been “let down” in the past by promises of change that had little or no result. Consequently, trust-building is a high priority that is central to the development process:

“There are still people that are skeptical if the redevelopment will happen at all and how it will impact them....[T]here is not a lot of trust because it has been a long time coming, and they’ve said they are going to redevelop the housing site for decades now. So until they see the first shovel going into the ground, they may like [BRIDGE] as people, but they’re still not completely trusting that [BRIDGE] are going to do what is in their best interest.”

One effort that has proven to support the development of trust was the creation of a formal Community Builder position that was filled by a Potrero resident. The Community Builder serves as a liaison between the development team and the community, and has been occupied by the same resident for the past four years, offering continuity in the community building role as the project has moved through different stages. From the beginning of Rebuild Potrero, there was recognition that fostering the development of people living at Potrero was as important as the development of the built environment.

Undergoing Transition: Using a “Trauma-Informed Lens” to Inform Process

In this section of the report, we illustrate how BRIDGE used a trauma-informed lens to plan and implement a staffing change at Potrero.

Background about role and staff changes. The Director of Community Development for Rebuild Potrero was originally hired to lead community engagement efforts and the development of a “People Plan” for the project. She was primarily responsible for community building activities with residents but also served as a key member of the housing development team, which was led by an external consultant. In 2014, BRIDGE decided to create a new in-house position to oversee the overall redevelopment strategy including the housing, neighborhood, and community development components of the Project. BRIDGE created a Director position and moved the former Director of Community Development into this role. At the same time, a new Program Director for Rebuild Potrero was hired to focus on community building activities and programs and services.

From a community perspective, the changes on the ground were twofold. First, the well-established and well-trusted Director of Community Development was moving into a new position and would no longer be as intimately engaged with community building activities as she had been. Second, a new staff person was stepping into the community building role.

Using a trauma-informed lens, BRIDGE staff carefully considered and designed a process to minimize the negative impact of these changes on the community, the relationship between BRIDGE and residents, and the redevelopment as a whole. Based on the principles of TICB, they prioritized the following values for interactions with the community:

- + **Clear communication:** Communicate early and often about upcoming changes; provide time for people to process, ask questions, and articulate concerns.
- + **Open and transparent process:** Share the rationale for why things were changing with the community.
- + **Resident engagement:** Create opportunities for meaningful engagement of community members in the hiring and transition processes.

Planning and implementing the transition: What BRIDGE did and why it matters

Staff we interviewed indicated that the plan for handling the transition at Potrero was developed with three specific stakeholder groups in mind: residents/community, internal BRIDGE staff, and external partners/service providers. Across interviewees, four key activities and/or approaches were identified as important components of the transition plan:

- + **Defined roles and responsibilities:** The previous director “*spent several weeks monitoring what [she] was doing and making lists of everything on her plate.*” The BRIDGE team also “*created a job description that they thought would encompass the role and how it would shift,*” so that there was clarity when the new Director began and flexibility to allow the position to evolve as the work continued.
- + **Engaged residents in the selection process:** Special consideration was paid to the inclusion of residents during the recruitment and selection process. The three candidate finalists met with resident leaders onsite at Potrero as part of the final interview process. The hiring team factored candidates’ comfort level and chemistry with residents and resident leaders’ impressions of candidates into their final hiring decisions.
- + **Communicated with clarity:** BRIDGE issued an open call for Program Director applications, which included advertising the position at the property. Once the Director of programs was hired, there was a clear communication strategy for letting residents know when and how roles would change. Community meetings were important venues for sharing information about the transition with residents. As one interviewee noted, “*it was not something that was announced once; BRIDGE really tried to announce it over and over and over again to reinforce it.*” The outgoing Director told residents and many stakeholders the news about the transition directly, rather than via a formal written/email announcement.

- + Phased transition in the community:** Phasing in the transition and providing time for overlap between new staff members proved to be an important factor in the success of the transition. As one interviewee described, “...*there were community meetings where [the previous Director] led one community meeting, but introduced [the new Director] as her co-leader and explicitly talked about the transition. And then, at the next meeting, the original Director bowed out and let the new Director lead it. So there was a real handing off of the baton that happened in a very conscious and explicit way.*”

While many of these approaches would be considered “good practice” for staff transition with any community, when considered with a trauma-informed lens, these practices take on heightened importance. Exhibit 1 below offers a summary of the key approaches and why they are especially important in this context.

Where are things now? Early successes and challenges

Interviewees reported that the transition in roles and staff went smoothly and that the community has warmed up to new Director. She has taken the time to develop rapport and trust with residents that has introduced new residents to community building activities. Specifically, the new Director has “*reached out to Chinese and Latino support groups, and to different groups that are convened by CBOs [Community Based Organizations] on site to try to recruit more people to activities.*” She also made it a point to “*meet with residents that were previously engaged but have become disengaged*” over the years.

Exhibit 1. Transition Approaches, Activities, and Importance

| What BRIDGE did | Why it matters |
|--|--|
| Clearly defined roles and responsibilities in advance of the transition | Creating clarity allowed residents to have <i>a stable, reliable, and consistent experience</i> during the transition. It was clear “who” would be doing “what” and how residents could continue to have their needs met, regardless of which individual was linked to a specific title. |
| Engaged residents in the hiring process | Including residents on the team to hire the new Director of Rebuild Potrero provided opportunities for <i>empowerment and ownership by the community</i> . |
| Communicated with clarity | By communicating early and often about coming change, BRIDGE <i>met the community where it was at</i> , recognizing that people require time to process the message, to formulate questions, and to articulate concerns. This helped continue to <i>build trust and provided an opportunity to experience consistency</i> as the same message was delivered over time. |
| Phased transition | The phased transition between Directors allowed the community to experience <i>consistency and stability</i> . Visibly seeing the outgoing and incoming Director working together may have calmed fears about “things changing” or concerns over loss of programs and activities that have become important to the community. |

As with any transition within a team, it takes time for people to establish relationships and adapt to different work styles. The new Director has made some initial adjustments to the program to ensure it adheres to the original structure, which has “*upset a few residents, but it will be better in the long run*”. There is an additional level of complexity to this transition in this case, since the previous Director is still involved with the project in a different role and “*it’s her baby, so she feels protective if things change.*” However, a real benefit of having the previous Director still involved in the project is access to information about history and community relationships.

The strong infrastructure of trust and programs put in place by the previous director is also credited with creating a smooth transition for the community. As described by one interviewee,

“There has been enough structure in place that [the new Director] has been able to step into something...it’s not connected to any one person or any one organization....”

Another important component to the successful transition was the consistent presence in the Community Builder role, which has been occupied by the same resident for the past four years. The Community Builder is recognized by residents as the “face of the project.” Despite change at the Program Director level, no programs stopped as the transition took place and the “boots on the ground” Community Builder remained a continuous and consistent link from BRIDGE to the residents. The fact that the new Director was not a complete outsider since she was on the consultant team for 1.5 years to develop the Social Services Master Plan at Potrero, had community knowledge, and was a familiar face to some residents served as another point of continuity.

In terms of emerging challenges, there is a sense that the scope of the Director of Programs position is expected to expand and that additional staffing support is required to fulfill all the duties of the role. This is not surprising given the shift from a slower-moving planning phase into a more aggressively moving implementation phase of the development process.

Implications for quarterbacks

Developing and maintaining trust with residents are challenges faced by all quarterbacks, regardless of the community in which they work. Quarterbacks working in highly impoverished communities are very likely to encounter residents who have experienced a lifetime of trauma. The literature on trauma-informed care suggests that redevelopment efforts are more likely to succeed when the special needs created by trauma are thoughtfully considered and strategies to mitigate trauma effects are intentionally employed. In this Learning Brief, we highlighted how one event – the transition in a key staff position – was approached through a trauma-informed lens. BRIDGE’s experience at Potrero suggests that quarterbacks who are sensitive to the needs of their communities will call the best plays to advance the work.

We close this brief with a summary of some key Principles of Trauma Informed Community Building (see Exhibit 2, adapted from Weinstein, Wolin, and Rose, 2014). These principles provide a starting point for quarterbacks and can be used to guide the creation of strategies for nearly any activity in the development and community building process.

Exhibit 2. Principles of Trauma Informed Community Building

- + **Be aware of past and current trauma.** Promote activities, programs, and services that avoid re-traumatizing individuals and the community. Given that trauma affected communities face ongoing insecurities around the sustainability of programs and services, be thoughtful about the financial sustainability of new programs and services.
- + **Meet residents where they are.** Understand and accept the realities of the community conditions and set expectations accordingly. Residents in trauma affected communities cope in a variety of ways and benefit from openness to different ways of participating. Make efforts to adapt activities so that they are accessible to residents who may be experiencing mental health conditions, substance abuse, or a variety of responses to the trauma they have experienced.
- + **Empower individuals and the community.** Encourage community investment in the process and be inclusive. Let all residents know they can play a supportive role in redevelopment efforts. This helps residents feel in control of the changes that are impacting their community, family, and themselves.
- + **Be reflective.** Individuals, and the community, may have experienced a life-time of trauma. It will take sustained efforts to meaningfully impact a trauma affected community. It is also important to be aware of changes in the community and to adapt efforts commensurate with changes in conditions.

Adapted from Weinstein, Wolin, & Rose (2014)

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