



Building Community Data Capacity

Principles for a Strategic Approach

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Data is a transformative tool. With relevant data, people can set priorities, advocate for what is important to them, and hold others accountable for promised changes. Across the country, more than 30 local partners in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) help their communities use data to shape strategies and investments so that all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive. Each organization connects communities with the data they need and the help they need to use it. Partners have deep knowledge of their communities and trusted relationships with local groups across sectors, allowing them to produce analyses informed by and relevant to local priorities. The NNIP network includes local member organizations, the Urban Institute, and alumni, who work to promote the principled use of data for equitable outcomes. NNIP shares insights to accelerate innovation, works to strengthen and expand community data services in places across the country, and exchanges ideas and lessons with national groups to spread promising practices.

From the beginning, NNIP partners focused on building community data capacity: helping people access and use data to understand and improve outcomes where they live. (box 1; Hendey et al. 2020). Recognizing that not everyone has access to data or the help to use it, the network is committed to building the capacity of marginalized groups to use data to advocate for themselves and their communities (Hendey et al. 2025).

BOX 1

Defining Community Data Capacity

NNIPs definition of what it means for a community to have the capacity to use data comes from the framework presented in *Investing in Data Capacity for Community Change* (Hendey et al. 2020). This framework was inspired by the San Antonio NNIP partner Community Information Now and builds on decades of documentation of approaches from local NNIP partners to build community data capacity. The framework identifies (1) resources that enable community members to use data, such as access to data and access to help with data, and (2) a set of skills and practices held individually, organizationally, and collectively. Collective data capacity elements, such as data sharing and collective planning around data capacity, are generally less well-developed than individual or organizational capacities (Hendey et al. 2020).

Given tight resources and the federal government's disinvestment in data and statistics, it is more important than ever to ensure that local strategies to build community data capacity are designed to yield the greatest benefits. As such, NNIP seeks to systematically explore the many approaches that have been undertaken by partners in the network and to understand their impact. This brief is intended to assist current and prospective NNIP partners, as well as national and local funders, nonprofit organizations, and local governments in strategically building the capacity of communities to access, understand, and use data to improve community conditions.

We begin by recognizing that there are many organizations actively building the capacity of different sectors and drawing on lessons learned from the capacity-building field. We then highlight lessons from past and current NNIP work in this area and set a future agenda to continue to document practices and support a holistic approach to building the data capacity of communities.

Guidance on Capacity Building from the Philanthropic and Nonprofit Sectors

NNIP serves a wide range of audiences and specifically focuses on building data capacity. Here, we look to other experienced networks in philanthropy and the nonprofit sector for broader lessons and advice on capacity building that can inform NNIP's efforts.

In a study of giving from 2011 to 2015, the Council on Foundations found an increased investment in capacity building was a longer-term strategy that built the infrastructure of nonprofits, although the proportion of funding going toward capacity building was still relatively small. Based on case studies from several different foundations, a report from Community Wealth Partners suggests five elements essential to supporting successful capacity-building efforts:¹

- Commit for the long term—recognize that change takes time.
- Cocreate solutions with stakeholders—design based on two-way conversations about nonprofits' needs.
- Focus on strengthening the ecosystem by identifying common needs and a range of approaches.
- Support both technical and adaptive capacities.
- Ground capacity building in equity.

These recommendations acknowledge that the traditional approach to building nonprofit capacity has too often been delivered in a top-down, paternalistic way that can diminish participants and perpetuate inequities.

Chandler and Scott Kennedy (2015), in “A Network Approach to Capacity Building” from the National Council of Nonprofits, acknowledge that there is no single definition of capacity building and stress that is not a one-time activity to improve short-term effectiveness. Rather, capacity building is a continuous improvement strategy aimed toward sustainable change. They note that the traditional approach to capacity building has focused primarily on enhancing the skills of nonprofit employees through individual training sessions and educational opportunities. Based on their experience with capacity building among nonprofit organizations and their desire for greater impact, they promote a strategy focused more on networks of organizations to achieve greater change on a larger scale. They conclude that:

- building capacity through networks fosters a strong infrastructure of relationships,
- participating in a network has a positive impact on individual organizational capacity; and
- by working together in networks, organizations increase impact related to the issue of shared concern.

Chandler and Scott Kennedy explain that “networks are especially effective for capacity building because they catalyze innovation, improve communications, reduce duplication of past mistakes, and spread good ideas faster and more efficiently than may typically occur in other capacity building approaches.”

Communities Require a Portfolio of Support

NNIP partners contribute to strengthening their local communities' data capacity in two main ways. First, partner organizations directly provide data, analysis, and tools on a range of issues. They offer consulting, produce reports or data, respond to specific questions on data or information gaps, or serve as a data or evaluation partner and perform the data-related tasks for an organization or coalition that may have limited staff, resources, or expertise. Partners provide these types of assistance to nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, local governments, research organizations, and neighborhood associations.

Second, NNIP partners build others' capacity to use data. They offer programs to train individuals to use specific data products or to use data for specific tasks, like demonstrating the need for a particular service or program in a grant proposal. They also teach community groups how to interpret and ask questions about the data. These activities to build or facilitate data capacity can be focused on individuals, such as the staff members responsible for data within an organization or residents within a neighborhood; organizations, such as a team of board members, executive leadership, and staff; cohorts of organizations focusing on topical issues such as housing data or health data; or collective efforts across organizations, such as facilitating data sharing or peer learning.

These two strategies—providing direct answers and developing others' skills to do so—are not mutually exclusive. NNIP partners' projects often integrate both. For example, one NNIP partner produced data tables for a community coalition to directly expand the group's ability to access the data. NNIP partners often will supplement data profiles or analytic reports with facilitated learning sessions for coalition members to help them understand the strengths and limitations of specific measures and data sources. This can boost people's confidence in interpreting data and help them ask nuanced questions about the origins and quality of any data they receive.

The particular needs for data and for help using data vary among places, depending on cultural and institutional contexts, and within places, depending on the interests of different groups. This suggests that improving community data capacity requires a range of resources and tools, both to provide data and analysis directly and to build others' capacity to use data. Lessons from the field of nonprofit capacity building suggest that there is an opportunity to increase impact by gaining a greater understanding of which combination of tools is most effective in a given situation. Extending a well-known proverb, there are times when it's most appropriate to provide a fish, and other times when a fishing lesson is needed. Most often, there is a need for both.

There is no single best approach to building community data capacity; the appropriate strategy depends on the local data ecosystem, resources, priorities, investment, and trusted relationships in a specific location. Improving community data capacity—by increasing an individual's technical know-how, building an organizational culture of curiosity, establishing collective learning communities, or focusing on the many other necessary skills and practices—requires a package of support. Across a community, building data capacity—whether through training, coaching, peer learning, or another format—requires intentional design to increase the number of people who are comfortable with finding and understanding data and to extend the depth and application of their knowledge.

NNIP partners have shared their strategies on building data capacity across the network, often borrowing ideas from each other and incorporating lessons learned from various organizations. Partners have taken on activities that build individual and organizational capacity, such as hosting public “help desks,” developing data-maturity assessment tools, and running data-training programs or in-depth coaching initiatives designed to assist nonprofit organizations with data strategy and applying data to achieve their missions. Some coaching initiatives focused on performance measurement and evaluation, like the Measure4Change initiative program in Washington, DC, and the IDEAS program in Charlotte, North Carolina. Others focused on the organizational data strategy, such as the Data Strategic Planning program in Hartford, Connecticut. Still other models blend individual and organization or group support by helping residents and nonprofit staff collectively interpret data using models such as data chats and data walks.

NNIP partners have also focused on establishing or strengthening the collective elements of data capacity, such as supporting ongoing communities of practice, hosting annual in-person “data day” events, or organizing periodic sessions for institutions that provide and use data and data tools to share lessons and promising practices.

Lessons from NNIP Experience

Over three decades of helping communities use data to improve community conditions and address inequities in places across the US, local NNIP partners and Urban researchers have learned a lot about elements of community data capacity and how to foster its development. Urban researchers have synthesized some of these lessons based on the experiences of NNIP partners:

- [*Guide for Community Training on Data and Technology*](#) offers suggestions on steps to assess community needs, plan a successful training, and strengthen the environment for integrating data and technology into practice (Pettit and Woluchem 2017).
- [*NNIP's Resource Guide to Data Governance and Security*](#) focuses on accessing, storing, and managing data responsibly throughout the data life cycle (Hendey et al. 2018).
- [*Guide to Civic Tech and Data Ecosystem Mapping*](#) shares the value of mapping, key questions to ask when getting started, data collection methods, and how to analyze ecosystem maps to strengthen community relationships (Arena and Li 2018).
- [*Guide to Data Chats: Convening Community Conversations about Data*](#) offers steps and considerations for hosting small community conversations about data designed to draw out residents’ perspectives and interpretations (Cohen et al. 2022).
- [*Integrating Arts and Data to Reimagine Community Knowledge*](#) describes using artistic practices to shape and inform research design, community engagement, and interpretation (Treskon 2026).

Another Urban initiative, Elevate Data for Equity, was inspired by NNIP. It encourages philanthropic organizations to invest in data capacity and analysts to cultivate equitable data practices.

The initiative produced two research briefs and a project page that present examples of capacity-building efforts from the field, including from NNIP partners. The initiative underscores the importance of engaging community partners and identifies other national groups working on data capacity. It also presents tools for equitable data practice and individual, organizational, and collective learning.²

More recently, NNIP has begun to document the wide variety of methods that partners use to build data capacity and to encourage partners to strategically select approaches that will have the most impact on longer-term outcomes. In 2025, the network hosted internal conversations to surface current practices and principles and engaged with external groups, including the United Way Worldwide and its local affiliates, to identify shared goals and exchange examples. Three early lessons about building community data capacity have emerged to date. They dovetail with the lessons noted above about capacity building in nonprofits in general.

First, organizational data-capacity building often starts with an assessment, which also serves as a teaching tool to build data capacity. For example, Neighborhood Nexus, the NNIP partner in Atlanta, has developed a Data Maturity Framework tool to assess nonprofit needs for building data capacity and provides both local exemplars of specific skills and referrals to relevant resources.³ Although the tool helps individual organizations to assess their capacity, the process builds capacity at the collective level by surfacing the topics, tools, and services that Neighborhood Nexus could prioritize.

Second, building capacity to use data is most effective when it's developed in partnership with stakeholders. For example, the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute involved nonprofit staff in every phase of the design process for the Impact, Data, and Evaluation Academy (IDEA) program. They convened 32 nonprofit staff members, 13 content experts, and 3 funders for a participatory process to surface “the needs, interests, learning practices, and learning modality preferences” of the nonprofits (ROI Impact Consulting 2024). The process fostered collaboration among the nonprofits and built buy-in from the funders. The findings guided the development of a curriculum that meets participants at their level and focuses on the skills needed to accomplish their goals.

Third, efforts that are long-term and systemic are likely to have a greater impact than those that are time-limited or siloed. For example, the University Center for Urban and Social Research, a NNIP partner in Pittsburgh, created the Data Literacy for Data Stewards program, a workshop series designed for a cross-sector audience. Participants were largely recruited from long-time partner organizations. The discussion-oriented series focuses on building critical thinking about the use of data and technology across all the stages of the data lifecycle. The series also addresses how organizations can institutionalize the values of equity, fairness, and justice into data and technology practices and infrastructures.

An Opportunity to Advance Community Data Capacity

Taken together, the lessons from philanthropy, the nonprofit sector, the NNIP network, and many others not covered in this paper represent substantial field knowledge and offer a promising foundation

for deepening and expanding data capacity in communities across the country. We believe all communities would benefit from an intentional strategy for improving their community's ability to use data over time. The strategy should have a collective lens, looking across agencies, issue areas, and systems and addressing the needs of individuals and organizations. Although this process would need a designated facilitator, it should include all those who have a role in strengthening community data capacity, including universities, local government, funders, foundations, and residents. Together, these groups can envision what changes they'd like to see from capacity-building efforts and what outcomes would indicate success of these efforts over the short, medium and long term. Having this comprehensive vision can help people see the connections among current efforts and surface opportunities to fill gaps in building data capacity. This process can also highlight the payoff of capacity-building efforts to improve community conditions and make the case for broad and multisector investment.

NNIP partners and other local organizations across sectors can begin by examining and establishing their own role and approaches to building data capacity, whether a community-wide strategy is in place or not. To make the most of limited time and resources, they could develop a plan that identifies priority topics, intended audiences, and expected time frames to make progress toward the local vision. They should share this plan with potential partners and sponsors for feedback and to spark collaboration.

Below is an initial set of operational principles that NNIP partners and other local organizations can incorporate when implementing this plan and any data-capacity efforts:

- Engage with and develop capacity-building activities in partnership with data users and providers.
- Recognize the expertise of others and build on the knowledge they bring to the table.
- Understand the needs of the people and groups for whom you are trying to build data capacity, whether through informal means or an assessment tool.
- Recognize that methods may have different audiences and different outcomes. Be explicit about the purpose, process, and payoff of the chosen approach.
- Pay attention to who is (and who is not) benefiting from activities to build capacity.

NNIP is committed to leveraging its expertise, broad experience, and trusted position in communities to play a substantial role in building community data capacity and encouraging others to do so. Internally, NNIP is creating a learning agenda on data capacity to encourage strategic thinking and further explore the application of these recommendations. As part of the agenda, the network will facilitate exchange among partners to tease out which approaches they find useful in different situations. In addition, the network will elevate lessons on running community data help desks, nonprofit coaching programs, and community convenings that promote a culture of data use and that foster data capacity. Elevating these lessons to external audiences can help expand the ability of communities across the country to collect and use data to promote equitable outcomes.

Among an increasing amount of misinformation, rapid shifts in the ways people seek and share information, and communities struggling to understand and mitigate the harm caused by changes in federal priorities and funding, we recognize an increased urgency to build data capacity at all levels in communities. The task is now more important than ever.

Notes

- ¹ Carla Taylor and Lori Bartczak. “Five Elements for Success in Capacity Building,” *Philanthropy News Digest*, March 13, 2019, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20191016222825/http://philanthropynewsdigest.org/columns/the-sustainable-nonprofit/five-elements-for-success-in-capacity-building>.
- ² “Elevate Data for Equity,” Urban Institute, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www.urban.org/elevate-data-equity>.
- ³ “Data Maturity Framework,” Neighborhood Nexus, accessed August 27, 2026, <https://neighborhoodnexus.org/data-maturity-framework/>.

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ABOUT NNIP

The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a network of local organizations in more than 30 US cities that help local communities use data to shape strategies and investments so that all neighborhoods are places where people can thrive. Urban Institute, as the national partner in NNIP, brings policy expertise, spreads the NNIP model to new cities, provides a national platform for engagement and experimentation, and facilitates peer learning.



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