



Strong Families, Strong Communities: A Report on the Family Circle Project

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background, Goals, and Timeline	1
Methodology	2
Findings	5
Family	5
Community	9
Implications and Recommendations	14
Participant Recommendations	14
Process Proposals.....	15
Appendix A: Focus Group Details and Composition	16
Appendix B. The Process: How to conduct a Family Circle	17

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Introduction

Background, Goals, and Timeline

The Center for Social Policy (CSP) has a long-term involvement with the Dudley neighborhood. The Family Circle Project grew out of the Casey Foundation's Neighborhood Transformation and Family Development Initiative (Making Connections). In 1999, when the Casey Foundation began considering an investment in the Dudley neighborhood, CSP was invited to join the Local Learning Partners (LLP) group. In this capacity, CSP's role was to assist Making Connections in engaging community residents in the project.

As members of the LLP, CSP developed the *Inclusion of Family Perspectives: Family Involvement in Dudley Street Neighborhood Community Planning Initiative* report in January 2001. This participatory action research project included training two community members as research assistants. The team of CSP staff and community research assistants then conducted focus groups with residents and interviews with local leaders. During the project, CSP worked with the Neighborhood Based Team's (NBT) Family Outreach Sub-Committee (FOC), which was a resident driven planning group, to develop resident outreach strategies.

During Fall 2001, NBT and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) merged and the NBT and its subcommittees become committees of DSNI. In April 2002, CSP began to work with the FOC, a subcommittee of the Urban Village Work Group (the former NBT) of DSNI. CSP worked with the FOC to create a work plan for the committee, building upon several of the *Inclusion of Family Perspectives* report's outreach recommendations. CSP presented models of various outreach efforts. The committee decided to modify one of the presented models, the Story Circle (outreach model used by *Making Connection- Denver*¹) which is a process where community residents come together with a trained facilitator to share experiences and stories related to thematic questions about life in the community. The committee decided to design a participatory action community-led research project, the Family Circle Project, based on the Story Circle Model. CSP worked closely with the FOC in the design and implementation of this project, providing training and technical assistance around resident involvement.

The Family Circle Project is designed to reach out to residents in various areas of the neighborhood as well as representing a variety of ethnic groups with the purpose of:

- Creating a space for residents to get together and talk with one another.
- Giving the residents of the Dudley community an opportunity to learn more about the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's (DSNI) Urban Village Work Group (UVWG) and get involved.
- Gaining an understanding from the perspective of residents as to what makes their families and community strong and what is needed to make families and community stronger.
- Gathering information from residents regarding key areas of concern that will assist in the development of the community's agenda to strengthen families.

In May and June 2002, CSP designed the family circle session protocols and the facilitation training protocol using a participatory process with the FOC. The first circle was conducted at Project Hope in July 2002 under FOC leadership. The second circle was conducted with a

¹ Making Connection-Denver is an Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connection site. The Story Circle Project in Denver is still being used in the community.

group of youth in November. From August through October 2002, the FOC shifted focus from implementation of the Family Circle Project to design of the Parents and Teens Talking Together Project (PT3). The PT3 format was based on the family circles, and was centered on engaging parents and youth together around some of the same goals.² In conjunction with the FOC, CSP conducted three facilitator trainings between September 2002 and March 2003. Through all of these sessions, approximately ten adult and youth facilitators were trained.

During the implementation of the project, the FOC has struggled with maintaining resident involvement. This decreased capacity was further complicated by the uncertainty around the Casey Foundation's continued investment in the community which became clear early in 2003. To alleviate the effects of reduced resident involvement through the FOC, CSP took on more of a leadership role in the implementation in 2003. This entailed a greater role for CSP staff, and less reliance on the community-level process as previously managed by the FOC. As the FOC is not currently active, this report was prepared by CSP staff. It is our hope that FOC members will provide substantive commentary in the future, leading to production of a revised version.

The remainder of this introductory session describes the project methodology, including detail on some of the complexities involved in resident-driven research. Findings are then presented, focusing first on family issues and strengths, and next on community issues and strengths. Finally, the report offers recommendations, both on necessary changes in the community, as well as for continuing the Family Circle Project. Two appendices are also provided, one detailing the family circle logistics and participant demographics, and another that offers tools for continuing the project.³

Methodology

The project was designed to gather information from a wide variety of community residents via nine focus groups. Ultimately, six of these groups were conducted, all in English. A detailed list describing each of the groups is included as Appendix A. Of the six groups, one was composed of senior citizens, two focused on youth, including one group with Latino youth, and the remaining three were conducted with adult residents. In total, we spoke with 37 individuals, including 14 youth; 30 females and 7 males.

Focus groups were facilitated by community residents trained by CSP, in conjunction with the FOC. As detailed in Appendix A, groups were held at various community agencies. After being

² The FOC collaborated with two local youth as well as several supporting agencies to design and implement the PT3 project. PT3 was born out of an idea of two local youth to bring parents and teenagers together to start communicating better, to develop a better understanding of one another, to develop better relationships, to help solve problems between parents and teens, and to have fun together. CSP worked with the planning group in the development of the PT3 session protocol, using a similar participatory process as used in the design of the Family Circle Project. CSP also designed and conducted a training for the parent and youth facilitators in conjunction with the FOC.

The groups were set up as two-meeting sessions in which groups of teens and their parents separately participate in videotaped group discussions that are then shared with each other. During the first meeting, the youth group discussion is facilitated by two youth and the simultaneous parent group discussion is facilitated by two parents. During the second, group session, youth watch the parents' videotaped discussion while parents watch the videotape of the youth discussion. Following that, teens and parents come together to talk about what they saw and what they can do together.

³ The second appendix will be provided in the final, community-reviewed version of this document.

introduced to the Family Circle Project, focus group participants discussed the following questions:

1. What makes a family strong?
2. What makes a community strong?
3. What is needed to make families stronger?
4. What is needed to make the community stronger?

These discussions were followed by a group reflection on the characteristics of strong families and communities, and the relationship between families and community. Finally, participants received a call to action, asking them to take concrete steps toward strengthening families and their community.

The FOC took the lead on conducting the first two groups, including facilitation and note-taking. With participants' permission, the remaining four group conversations were recorded. CSP staff took notes at each of these four groups (which were facilitated by community residents), and completed transcriptions using the tapes. Transcriptions and notes were entered into QSR NVivo qualitative analysis software. CSP staff then coded the data to identify analytical domains, interpreting common themes and variations of perceptions among groups.

Context for Data Collection

The project was designed to develop community leaders and engage residents, as well as to collect information from focus group participants. While involved residents were initially excited about formation of the FOC and design of the circles, implementation has required a more focused level of effort. Residents have many responsibilities beyond community participation; earlier phases of the project that involved attending meetings and participating in brainstorming sessions were more successful in maintaining resident engagement. However, when the FOC moved to an implementation phase, the work of conducting outreach and coordinating groups was less engaging and required more of an ongoing commitment; many of the residents did not have enough time available to actually conduct this work.

While the FOC functioned as a subcommittee of DSNi's UVWG, the implementation took place during a time in which the UVWG was in the process of preparing a report for the Casey Foundation to demonstrate their readiness to move onto the next phase of the Making Connections initiative. DSNi staff capacity to fully implement the Family Circle Project diminished tremendously during this period. The Family Circle Project's implementation required additional staff resources, that DSNi hoped to fund through continued support of the Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative. Without this funding, it was difficult to implement the project. Facing the many known barriers to resident participation (as documented in CSP's earlier report, as well as in the Gaston Institute's Making Connections process documentation reports), the FOC and the Family Circle Project struggled to maintain resident involvement and overall momentum. Therefore, recruitment for focus groups was particularly challenging.

In early 2003, acknowledging the FOC's limited capacity, CSP staff took on a more direct and active role in group coordination, a task not initially envisioned as part of CSP involvement in the project. As researchers, we were, however, forced to rely upon community agencies with limited resources for the outreach to potential group participants. As we do not work directly with community residents, CSP was dependent upon these agencies and community groups to fulfill the convening function. In other cases, CSP was more successful by working directly with community residents; however our capacity to conduct recruitment is extremely limited as we are not a direct service provider. Even in assuming this leadership role, CSP staff and FOC members were aware that the data collection process would be somewhat less extensive than

originally envisioned given the community constraints. The goal was to gather data quickly, so as to provide concrete results that would enable the FOC to move forward in the leadership of this work. It is our hope that release of this report will spur that process.

When CSP took on more of a leadership role in project implementation, we continued to use this community partner strategy. Rather than attempt to work closely with the FOC to recruit participants and facilitate groups, CSP began to work directly with community agencies and groups. In an effort to ensure successful completion of the groups, CSP personnel made direct connections with staff at these community agencies. With CSP coordination assistance and prodding, these agencies scheduled groups and conducted recruitment. Four groups were held during this period. The planned non-English speaking groups were further complicated by the additional need for facilitation and reliable translation. In the end several groups were cancelled due to lack of participants.

Implications for the Findings

In the interest of providing timely and useful information, we have proceeded with analysis and reporting of the data collected thus far. There was a great deal of consistency across all groups despite the smaller than envisioned number of focus group sessions conducted. Adult and youth residents shared many similar concerns about their families and communities, as well as ideas for strengthening both. Therefore, we have confidence in the reliability of the findings reported in the next section.

Because all of the groups were conducted in English (though one circle focused on Latino youth), we issue a note of caution about the fact that the findings do not fully represent the broad range of concerns of this multi-ethnic community's numerous ethnic minority members. Future research should focus on reaching out to these populations, conducting groups with non-English speaking Spanish language and Cape Verdean adults and youth, as well as other non-English speaking populations. In addition, most participants were female; so again, we issue a note of caution that the findings may not fully reflect community issues that are particular to male residents. In the future, it would be useful to hold at least one group with just male residents.

Findings

The focus groups contents were extremely rich. Participants shared intimate stories about their personal histories, daily lives, and families. They brainstormed together, and as a group proposed strategies for improving families and communities. Community building was accomplished through these groups. Two of the groups even continued to come together to engage in follow-up activities. The primary goals of the project, including bringing residents together and engaging them in the project were met.

The remainder of this report focuses on the project goals of information gathering. After presenting a few overarching themes, this section offers resident perspectives on family strengths and concerns, and then goes on to provide community member perceptions of community strengths and concerns.

There was consensus across all groups and participants that Dudley neighborhood families demonstrate enormous strength and capacity to survive. They continue to have hope in the face of huge challenges in the socioeconomic environment.

The environment itself is rife with problems and growing worse. Families are living on the brink, just one paycheck or one safety risk away from ruin. Residents come together to share support and resources as strategies for surviving in these tough times.

However, these strategies can only go so far. While, residents are committed to strengthening families and community, they have little time to do more than make ends meet. Although community members take responsibility for changes they can make within their neighborhood, they lack the power to change the larger environment and require the support of local government in order to do so.

Family

Focus group participants spoke eloquently of the strength of the Dudley area's families. One stated:

“Love, support, faith, and desire to do your best to stay together through it all [make families strong]. It is not always easy to have those simple things and sometimes things aren't what they should be in families. Everyone is always quick to talk about what is so wrong with the families in this community, but I think most families in this community are filled with good, loving, hard working people trying to do the best they can.”

This section presents participants' thoughts about families, their survival mechanisms, environmental changes and concerns, parenting roles and issues, and kinship as a strategy for family strengthening.

Survival

Families in the Dudley neighborhood are survivors. They demonstrate incredible resilience in the face of many struggles and challenges. In the words of one participant,

“I think poor families have to be so much stronger than families that don't have to worry about how they're going to survive.”

Even strong families have a difficult time making it in the current socioeconomic environment. While many participants spoke of the importance of good parenting to strong families, they also

reported having to hold several jobs in order to make ends meet, thus having less time for family relationships and leadership. As one participant emphasized:

“I think what would make families stronger is if they could afford to have the basic things you need ... food, a roof over your head, clothes on your back. Families struggle just to do that.”

Families must focus on survival first. See the community section for further discussion of these socioeconomic struggles and their impact on Dudley families and the area as a whole.

“Times have Changed”

Many participants talked about things being harder now, both economically and socially. As one senior resident stated, there just isn’t enough to go around:

“These days you sure don’t want to be poor. I was poor raising my kids but we were able to survive because your family and friends all helped out. Now can’t nobody really help anyone else, because you just don’t have it to help with.”

In addition to these socioeconomic concerns, youth today have to mature at younger ages than their parents. They face difficult and sophisticated challenges in terms of peer pressure, lack of parental presence, drugs, violence, gangs, and sex. In this context, they feel that their ability to make sound decisions is disrespected. As one youth stated:

“[I wish] our families understood that things are different now. I think our parents and family don’t really understand how hard it is to be a teenager now. They treat us like we are babies, and I understand that we are still children, but we have to make tough decisions all of the time and we make good ones most of the time. It’s like they don’t get that.”

In today’s economy, some youth even take on provider responsibilities. One participant shared that when her mother was sick and could not work, her father worked two jobs and she took a part-time position in order to help the family survive. She was able to cover the costs of her school supplies and other needs. In one of the youth focus groups, participants listed their concerns about the most important issues facing youth today. The top family issues included:

- Absent fathers;
- Sexuality;
- Teen pregnancy;
- Relationships with friends and family; and
- Trust.

While many of these issues are similar to those that were faced by their parents, they have become more complex and pervasive in the current environment.

Parenting

Much of the conversations about family focused on parents’ roles. Obviously, these relationships are pivotal. One participant described her relationship with her mother:

“I know what makes my family strong. ... My mother. She is our source of strength. My father died when I was 13, and my mother has held my family together in spite of our loss. She made sure that we had what we needed, and always gives so much love... I can talk to her about anything and she is always there for me when I need her. Being a parent must be the hardest job there is. You have to sacrifice so much of yourself as you help to shape the lives of little people. My mother always says her job was to get me started on the right track, and be there for me when I strayed away so that she can help me find my way back on the right track.”

Despite their awareness of the importance of strong parents, focus group participants reported feeling the loss of their rights as parents and a sense of disempowerment. Several spoke of society as having taken away their rights to raise their children the way they think best. This parental disempowerment leads to a lack of respect on behalf of children, thus further decreasing parent's capacities. As one said:

"I can't [discipline] my kid because they'll call DSS."

While some parents fear being firm with their children in this environment, others feel their behavior is irrelevant; no matter what they do, they will be viewed as bad parents. One stated:

"Society already thinks if you are Black or Spanish or something that you can't take care of your kids. It's like they are watching to see you mess up so they can tell you that you ain't a good parent. Every parent makes mistakes but if you are poor or black or anything else society thinks is bad, then you need your kids taken away."

On the other hand, senior participants also spoke of children who "have been raising themselves." According to these community members, many children are "wild" because their parents aren't around. They are "raising themselves" while their parents work multiple jobs or are just not home at critical times. This situation is particularly difficult in single-parent families. As one participant stated:

"Nowadays women have to be mother and father. ... Kids need time and attention in order to learn right and wrong and be able to be good adults. If your momma is always out working and don't really have time to give you, then these kids are raising themselves."

Youth are also concerned about absent fathers. They feel that fathers need to spend more time with their children. In their view, being a father should not be optional for parents.

Whatever the family configuration, open communication is key to successful parenting. As one youth participant stated:

"The most important thing is to be able to talk to each other. I think it's also important to be able to listen to each other."

When communication breaks down, problems ensue. One youth spoke of difficulty talking with her caretaker:

"Now that I am a teenager it is so much harder for adults to talk and listen to me. I am not as bad as some of the other teenagers around here, but the adults are always thinking that I am going to do something to ruin my life. So instead of listening to me they just want to talk and tell me what to do."

Several youth participants shared similar stories of being misunderstood and misjudged by adults. Adults seem to expect the worst of teens. As one stated, parents are particularly fearful around teen pregnancy:

"Once someone in your family gets pregnant or one of your friends, then everyone starts to look at you like you might be next. I don't really date too much because I know I have plans for my future and I don't want a baby right now. My family just doesn't always believe me when I say that. It's like they always expect the worse. I probably work so hard because I want to prove them wrong."

“Sticking Together”

Given the economic challenges facing community residents, participants talked about the importance of extended family in providing ongoing family support. These relationships provide both essential nurturing and care-taking functions such as childcare while working parents are at their second, evening, job; as well as material support in the form of shared resources to help families get through until the next paycheck.

Strong family units extend beyond the nuclear family. One participant spoke fondly of his broad family connections:

“I was raised by my grandmother and I have a big family. We all did so much together. ... We all got together every week. If anyone needed anything in the family everyone tried to help. When you have family that you can count on that is so important. As we all know every family has its problems, but as a family you can work through those problems most of the time. That’s really what makes a family strong.”

These relationships can be particularly complex in immigrant families. A youth participant shared that she was currently living with her aunt because her mother was on an extended visit to Puerto Rico in order to take care of her grandmother.

Other participants shared stories of community kinship. A single parent who has no local family supports has bonded with an older neighbor who has become a surrogate mother to her. As she stated:

“She has really made me feel like a part of her family. It is hard being a single mother, but to have a woman down the street that I can just go and talk to has really helped me a lot.”

The neighbor also participated in a focus group, and spoke of the benefits she receives from the relationship, comparing it to extended family:

“[T] is like a daughter to me. I only have a son, and she is like the daughter I never had. She will just come by to have some tea and get a break. Her daughter is a handful, and I love having her around. I remember what it was like having to raise a small child without a father. I lived in my parents home so I always had them there to help me. That is how I made it through. And I love being able to give that to [her]. She is such a beautiful woman and is just getting started. I am retired and don’t have much to do, so it is great to have a younger person around to talk to. Her daughter calls me ‘Auntie’, just like we use to do when we were growing up.”

In the senior group, participants spoke of sharing meals, and even shopping together in order to make ends meet:

“We ladies in the senior home really work together to take care of each other. A few of my friends that live here, we go grocery shopping together and take turns cooking meals and we all eat together. It’s a good way to save money, and spend time with each other.”

Some participants actually had a difficult time defining family and speaking about it separately from community. In their lives, the two are inextricably intertwined.

Community

Participants are invested in improving their community. As one stated:

“We came to the meeting because we care about where we live. We need to show each other that we care.”

Another said:

“A community is only as strong as the people in it.”

This section presents participants' thoughts about community, their concerns about the socioeconomic environment, community divides, and safety, as well as their hopes for the future.

Socioeconomic Concerns

Residents expressed many concerns for the neighborhood and one another. Socioeconomic issues represent the overarching problem in the community. As stated in the family section, families have to work multiple jobs in order to survive. Community residents do not have access to jobs that pay a living wage. As one participant stated, society has accepted poverty:

“It's like it's okay for a person to work two to three jobs to pay their rent. The city doesn't care. I guess what would help make the community and families stronger is if families didn't have to work so many jobs to take care of their families. Because kids are hurt the most when their family doesn't have time to spend with them.”

This societal complacency impacts families and the community as a whole.

Seniors lamented the current economic crisis. While they had hoped to enjoy their later years with some help from family, many find that their children are too strapped raising their own families. Rather than helping them, their adult children actually appeal to the elders for financial support. Even when resources are pooled, there isn't enough to go around.

Welfare reform and its work mandates have also affected the community. One participant referred to these rule changes as destroying families:

“It's not like you can just get welfare and raise your kids [anymore]. Now you only have a little bit of time to get welfare and then you better figure it out. Sink or swim. That is what families face nowadays. And I just see a lot of families sinking.”

Lack of affordable housing is a significant concern for many residents. As one participant stated:

“Even in this neighborhood you can't find a place to live for under \$900 a month. When you are working at low paying jobs how are you going to live somewhere that you can't afford? Like I don't know the statistics or anything about how much it costs to live here and how much the average family makes, but I know from observing it doesn't match.”

As families are forced to move by high housing costs, family and community instability increases. One participant shared his concerns about family transience:

“During these times stability is getting harder and harder to come by. ... There is an apartment building next door to me and it seems like every year new people move in and out. That must be so hard to have to keep moving around because you can't find a safe affordable place to live these days. That makes it so hard to raise a family.”

Senior participants spoke of their adult grandchildren not being able to afford their own housing, and asking to move in. However, the seniors are also precariously housed, and live in elderly housing where the rules do not permit them helping their family. As a senior stated,
“It is so hard to be old, poor, and struggling.”

In order to gain living wage jobs, individuals may need more education and training; however, participating in educational programs precludes work. For most families in the community, the opportunity costs are just too great. As one senior stated, education is the only way out:

“I tell my grandkids all the time that they better do good in school and go to college, because without college you will be poor just like the rest of us.”

Concerns about Community Divides and sense of “Community”

Immigrant families face additional educational challenges. With passage of the new legislation limiting bilingual education, school-age children will be in an even worse position. A youth participant described her fears:

“This city doesn’t really respect the different cultures. Now if you don’t become American than they will do everything to make it hard for you. I went to bilingual classes until I could learn in English. Now kids that come to the [US] have to learn English real fast, but then they will always have a hard time in their classwork. I don’t think this city is fair to you if you don’t speak English, and if you are not American.”

Other participants spoke of the already existing divisions between community members:

“The Spanish people hang together and help each other. The Black people hang together and help each other. The Cape Verdean people do that too. It’s like every kind of people just stick to their own kind of people. I have all kinds of friends because of school. That helps me to understand that there are a lot of different people around the city, and that’s good. But this city doesn’t really do too much to help the different people do better in the city.”

There is a need for integration strategies, rather than anti-immigrant legislation.

In addition to these divisions, there are splits between older and more recent residents. Participants spoke of the decrease in neighborhood involvement and community connections. As new housing is built and families move into the community, new residents are sometimes less interested in getting to know their neighbors and not invested in the area’s longevity. One despaired:

“For those of us that have been here forever, we have always taken pride in our neighborhood. Some of these new folks don’t even care. It’s like they just live here for now so it doesn’t matter. But it matters to me.”

Safety Concerns

This lack of economic opportunity has created a culture of hopelessness for many residents. This desperation leads to safety issues, including drugs and violence. As one participant stated:

“I think they turn to drugs and stuff because they are sinking and they can’t see no way out. I got a lot of family member on drugs and they just seem so hopeless. There are a lot of kids in my family caught up in the system.”

Another participant stated:

“Drugs are destroying families in this community.”

She shared that because her mother was a substance abuser, she was raised by her grandmother. Her mother died of AIDS a few years ago, and will never meet her granddaughter.

A senior spoke about the situation deteriorating. Over the course of her life, she has watched circumstances fluctuate between bad and worse. As she said:

“These streets are getting worse again. You remember when these streets were real bad in the 80s, then they got better, but now it seems like it’s getting bad like the 80s again. ... Well in my lifetime I have seen the best and worst of times around this city, and *I just feel like we are coming up on some of the worst of times again*. The community needs to learn from the past and try to stop the madness before it gets too bad to stop.”

Other seniors spoke of general safety concerns. Young people, some of whom are substance abusers and dealers, others who are gang members, and others who just appear threatening hang out on the streets, frightening some elders. Some seniors are scared to leave their homes; while others fight back to reclaim their community.

Many parents are so worried about their children’s safety that they also try to keep them at home. Parents fear “losing their children to the street.” In one of the groups, participants spoke of a three-year old girl who was recently shot on her front porch. One adult stated:

“I worry so much about their safety. You have drugs, prostitution, all this violence. You can’t hide your kids from it as much as you may want to. These guys are right up on Blue Hill Ave. dealing drugs. You don’t even want to send your kids to the store to get milk.”

Referring to these same issues, a senior stated:

“You don’t even see the kids out playing like they use to. I know I don’t let my grandkids go outside unless I can see them or someone goes out with them, and that’s not fair. Kids can’t just enjoy being kids, gotta worry about if someone is gonna do something bad to them.”

Youth are faced with gang violence and concerns about their own and their peers’ relationships to gangs. One youth participant reported being scared to hang out outside because

“there are a lot of kids who have a beef with each other. ... You might get shot or something.”

Finally, some residents are concerned about traffic. In one of the groups, participants spoke extensively about this issue. They identified speeding in the neighborhood as a major safety issue, and discussed ways to work together to make a difference.

Hopes

Despite all of these issues facing Dudley area residents, the community members we spoke with have many hopes for the future of their neighborhood, as well as ideas for improvements. They take responsibility for making these changes. As one senior states:

“I guess things can’t really change if we just keep waiting around for someone else to do it. I came up in a time when Black folks had to fight for basic things they deserved. We all have just gotten too comfortable. Or at least we are settling for less than what we deserve. Families deserve a place to live, food to eat, and clothes on their back. We old people deserve to be able to take care of ourselves too.”

Community members need to work together to fix what they can. Residents can get involved; however it also critical to work with government authorities that can make change. One participant spoke of this:

“I think it takes the people in the community to come together and say this is not what we want in our community. Hold the law enforcement accountable for ridding our streets of drugs and prostitution. Working with our young people to show them that there is a better way.”

Uniting, residents can gain the power necessary to make improvements. A participant called her peers to action:

“We need unity. When we are ‘as one’, nobody can do anything but back up and let us through.”

By looking beyond differences and reaching out to those from other cultures, residents can work together to improve the area as a whole. As one participant stated:

“Most of the cultures around here have a lot of the same beliefs in community and family. We just don’t understand that. I work with a lot of Spanish people and they complain about the same things we are talking about. You just have to get to know them. We have one thing in common: we are all struggling to raise our [families] and get them good educations and safe homes. So we have something in common.”

Another spoke of bridging the divide by new and long-term residents:

“You also have to be welcoming. ... It is hard moving into a new neighborhood and not knowing anyone. It is a two way street for getting to know someone.”

Participants agreed that it is critical to get involved. Some talked about maintaining awareness of what is going on in the surrounding area, or being “nosy” in order to take action to correct any problems. As one said:

“We need to help each other or we’re not going anywhere.”

Others spoke of the importance of volunteering in local community agencies.

Youth engagement can be critical in helping teens stay out of trouble. One youth participant spoke of her work at La Alianza as “keeping [her] out of trouble” and maintaining her connection with the community. She works with elders and greatly enjoys these relationships, describing them as her “abuelos.”

As a community, residents need to take responsibility for child raising. As one participant stated:

“These successful adults in the city need to take more responsibility for our kids. Especially those kids who don’t have much. Kids need to see that there is a way out from being poor, and that if they work hard they can change their lives.”

Finally, one participant summed up the group’s positive feelings about the community and its future:

“When I brought my house a few years ago. Everyone was telling me I shouldn’t buy a house in this neighborhood. Because the neighborhood had some issues. But I pretty much grew up in a neighborhood like this. ... I remember when I started looking at my house. The realtor drove me down Blue Hill Ave and it looked like your typical inner city poor neighborhood. People standing on the corner, doing God knows what. But then she drove down my street which is right

off of Blue Hill Ave., and I still saw dirty empty lots, but I also saw kids were outside playing. That was important to me. I felt like, yeah, all that is here is not perfect, but when I sit on my porch I hear laughter of children. I smell all types of food cooking in my neighbors' homes. I am meeting people from all over the world right there on my street. And those things are priceless. I cherish those things. Those are the things that helped make me the woman I am today when I was growing up. I learned so much about life and other people in the neighborhood I grew up in. And when I came here I felt like it was home.”

Implications and Recommendations

This section of the report presents two types of recommendations. First, we describe focus group participants' proposals for community improvements. Next, we offer our suggestions for carrying the project forward.

Participant Recommendations

Overall, community members feel that they need to **come together** to make change. In order to do so, they must be joined by local authorities. When residents and government unite, the strength of community sentiment combined with the power of local authorities can result in actual change. In a participant's words:

"You can talk only so much about problems, because if you have no power to change it, then it really won't change."

While the community is committed to working to increase safety by minimizing violence and substance abuse, these issues are inextricably intertwined with larger social and economical problems. Real change will only happen when we make a statewide and national commitment to **end poverty**. Times are getting harder and policymakers are becoming more complacent with the pervasiveness of social and economical inequalities, particularly in this community. Community members must continue to speak out about social and economic injustices. As one participant put it:

"If you are poor and struggling you need a way to change your circumstances. Families need money."

Community residents do have control over their relationships with one another. Participants believe that neighbors must **connect with one another**, whether they are of different ages, races, cultures, or durations of connection to the area. In the voice of a participant:

"We need to respect our neighbors."

Intergenerational relationship building is one important means for making these connections. An elder participant proposed:

"It is more than just about yelling at some girls for cursing in the street. It's about talking to them. Telling them stories about the struggles and ways to survive."

Honor family and community strength. Despite the high levels of poverty and crime in the area, community residents see a great deal of resilience among families. Residents are bonding together to raise the community's children. These kinship relationships are a large part of family strength. It is time for families, this community, and society as a whole, to recognize this strength, rather than focus on dysfunctionality. In the words of one participant:

"Everyone is always quick to talk about what is so wrong with the families in this community, but I think most families in this community are filled with good, loving, hard working people trying to do the best they can."

Overall, families are doing the best they can in a difficult environment. Many continue to maintain hope for the future and are committed to making their community a better place. But real change cannot take place until the broader environment enables families to take care of themselves rather than requiring them to focus so much energy on daily survival. Until the

social and economic problems facing this community are addressed, families will continue to struggle. The neighborhood seems to be poised for trouble unless a major policy shift is undertaken.

Process Proposals

Many community members felt enriched by the experience of participating in the Family Circle Project. The project built community on a localized level. Residents came together, shared stories and ideas, and became excited about the potential to make change. Two of the groups resulted in concrete outcomes. After one of the focus groups, residents linked with the local Neighborhood Association in order to address traffic safety concerns in their area. Another group held a neighborhood barbecue in order to maintain and expand the connections made during the focus group.

The Family Circle Project has the potential to continue this resident involvement as well as gather stories and other relevant data. In order to do so the project must have adequate resources. Outreach must be conducted by dedicated staff, who are linked to a myriad of community agencies. The most effective recruitment strategies include targeting existing community forums (e.g., Neighborhood Associations, local parent groups, churches, etc.) and neighborhoods at the block level.

The data presented in this report are powerful. They can be utilized to facilitate change. We strongly support continuation of the project. As the collection of stories and resident strategies continues to grow, so does the power of the project to facilitate change. Ongoing data collection efforts should focus on non-English speaking populations, adult males, and parent and youth together, utilizing the PT3 model. Please see our earlier report to the LLP, *Inclusion of Family Perspectives: Family Involvement in Dudley Street Neighborhood Community Planning Initiative*, for detailed recommendations on strategies for resident recruitment, retention, and development.

Appendix A: Focus Group Details and Composition

Population Focus	Partner/ Convener	Date	Male	Female	Duration of Residency	Ethnicity
Adult	FOC	July-02	0	8	2mths- 33 yrs.	7 Black; 1 Latina
Youth	FOC/Youth Opportunities Boston	November-02	4	8	NA	NA
Adult	Resident	January-03	1	5	1-50 yrs.	6 Black
Senior	Resident	May-03	0	5	2-9 yrs.	4 Black; 1 White
Youth (Latino)	La Alianza Hispana	May-03	0	2	NA	2 Latina
Adult	Resident	July-03	2	2	2.5-6 yrs.	4 Black
<i>Total participants</i>			7	30		

Additional Family Circles attempted:

3 - PT3 format groups with youth and parent participants

5 – Adult, including one targeting Cape Verdean participants and one targeting Spanish-speaking participants

1 - Cape Verdean youth

Appendix B. The Process: How to conduct a Family Circle

The Family Circle Project, a participatory action community-led research project, is designed to develop resident leaders, engage residents in open dialogue, and to collect information from circle participants. In participatory action research, the research itself is framed by the people who are affected by the problem and need it solved for their own interests. The community formulates the problem, decides what information to seek, selects the data collection methods, determines how to analyze the data gathered, and what to do with the findings.

The Family Circle Project is designed to reach out to residents in various areas of the neighborhood as well as represent a variety of ethnic groups with the purpose of:

- Creating a space for residents to get together and talk with one another.
- Giving community residents an opportunity to learn more about the activities of local organizations so that they can get involved.
- Gaining an understanding from the perspective of residents as to what makes their families and community strong and what is needed to make families and community stronger.
- Gathering information from residents regarding key areas of concern that will assist in the development of the community's agenda to strengthen families.

The Family Circle project was developed for a specific organization, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, but the project format is a very useful community engagement and data collection tool for any community based project, organization, or group. It is our hope that these guidelines for continued implementation of the Family Circle project format will be useful throughout the community. The project has been and may be capable of continuing to serve as a powerful tool.

The most important participants in this project are the residents that help plan and implement this project as well as the residents that participate in the group discussions. We encourage groups/organizations to truly develop diverse resident participation in all aspects of the project. Residents may play a variety of roles by participating throughout the project:

- Planning and design;
- Resident Facilitators;
- Discussion groups;
- Understanding the information gathered; and
- Sharing the learning w/in the group/organization, the community, etc.

Maintaining resident involvement can be challenging, but in the face of these challenges it continues to be the most important component of a community engagement and learning project, such as the Family Circle Project.

This appendix provides some guidelines related to planning and implementation of the Family Circle format. The guidelines are designed to provide a framework for community groups/organizations interested in utilizing the Family Circle Project format for engaging community residents in data gathering projects.⁴

⁴ The Family Circle Project is based on a model used by the Making Connection-Denver Initiative, an Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connection site. The Story Circle is still used in this initiative. There is a Story Circle Tool Kit available on their website. (<http://www.makingconnectionsdenver.org/toolkit/459276171485348StoryCircleToolkit.qxd.pdf>)

Planning

The upfront planning of a project such as this is vital to its success. There are several things that a group/organization should consider before implementing the Family Circle Project or similar efforts. One of the powerful aspects of this project is its ability to bring people together to get to know each other as well as gain useful information about their community. We have provided some guiding question for groups to consider during the planning phase of the project. These questions will help group members make some important decisions about the scope and depth of the project. While you are planning your project, you should keep this over arching question in mind: ***Are ALL of the necessary perspectives involved in these planning discussions?***

Why do you want to bring people together?

The answer to this question may seem obvious, but your group/organization needs to be clear for yourselves as well as the people you hope to bring together.

What will be the focus of your project? What will be the topic areas for your learning?

In order to have in-depth conversations with a group, you will need to have a clear and narrow purpose. Your focus needs to be something that will be realistic and manageable. You may have more than one topic area for your overall project, but a discussion group should only discuss one topic area per session. If you have multiple topic areas that you want the group(s) to discuss you should prepare to host a session for each topic area.

What do you want to learn from the group of participants you plan to engage in your project?

Again, you will need to be specific in order to make the project as manageable as possible. You will need to develop a short list of questions you hope to have answered by the information gathered.

How will you use what you have learned? Will you share your learning beyond your group/organization? If so, how?

Research is a powerful tool for influencing social change. You will have gathered very valuable information from your community, and you will need to decide how you will use the information gathered. It can be empowering for participants to know that the issues and stories they shared will be used to inform others and help strengthen their community. Concrete ideas for using the information can be shared when recruiting group participants and again at the groups, during the introduction.

What perspectives are vital for you to gather in order to fully understand your area of focus? How will you include these various perspectives in your learning and information gathering?

You should identify what the different perspectives may be about your area of focus (e.g. cultural and ethnic groups, genders, individuals and families, geographic representation, social service agencies, government authorities, etc.). This may require some initial research about your focus area, so if you have the capacity to gather this information during the planning process it will be very helpful in ensuring that you gather information from a group that is as representative of the community's diversity as possible

Who do you need to invite to participate in your project?

Now that you have done some initial evaluating of why you want to do this, what do you want to learn, etc., you should think about other people you may need to invite to participate in the planning and implementation, and who you would like to participate in the group discussions. As you think about this, you may find that you need to share your initial thoughts about the project's focus and learning agenda with other partners (i.e. other residents, community groups or organizations, etc.). This process may lead to rethinking and revising your initial thoughts and plans in order to strengthen the project. *This can be an evolving process.* Most learning processes develop over time; while this can be frustrating it often results in a more focused and successful mission and outcome. We encourage you to be open to making adjustments as necessary.

How much can you actually take on?

Throughout this thinking process there will be a need to balance idealistic thoughts and visions for the project with the reality that your group or organization may be facing in terms of capacity constraints during this process of planning and implementation. In order to implement this project successfully a group/organization needs to continuously consider the following:

- ***What is your capacity to recruit and coordinate the project planning and implementation as well as the group discussion? Who will be responsible for overseeing each part of the project? Who will actually have the time to do the work during each part?***
- ***Do you need to partner with other groups or organizations? If so, who? In the spirit of collaboration it will be important to decide who will have lead responsibility for the project.***
- ***What will be the timeframe for your project? Be sure to allow at least twice as long as you think you'll need.***
- ***How will you make sure not to lose sight of the perspectives that may not be directly engaged in the various aspects of the project (e.g. planning, implementation, group discussions)?***
- ***Are there some alternative ways to understand the perspectives of those you may not be able to engage? For example if the planning group doesn't include people from a prevalent cultural group, can you reach out to an individual or two that group members know, even just to get their informal opinion during a phone call?***

This project is designed to be participatory, and that can present some challenges for your group/organization. During the initial implementation of this project it was challenging to keep residents and community partners involved. These challenges directly impacted our ability to recruit for the group discussions. The reality of many groups and organizations in the non-profit sector is that they are typically operating with limited resources and have to frequently shift priorities in order to adjust to this reality. Your group/organization will need to determine the available resources for implementing this project. In the Implementation section of this guide, we discuss some of the desired resources for actual execution of the project.

Design

The Family Circle Tool

Once your group/organization has decided the focus area and what you hope to learn, you will be able to start designing your discussion guide. This will be the tool that your facilitator(s) will use for the discussion session. The development of this tool is the first step in putting the

groups together. One of the tools that was used during the Family Circle Project is provided at the end of this appendix.

Below is a guideline for a Family Circle session. This guideline is meant to be adaptable for your group/organization's needs. The format is designed to accommodate a variety to topics, but we again remind you to limit your session to one topic area. We also recommend that a group be composed of no more than 6-12 individuals, in order to maintain a manageable discussion (see Recruitment for further discussion of this issue). It is also important to balance the need for enough questions to get the discussion going, but plenty of time to actually allow for that discussion to progress at a comfortable pace. If the structure is too rigid or overwhelming, the data gathered will not be as rich.

The Components of a Family Circle Session

Introduction

1. *Facilitator introduces her/himself to the group.*
2. *Introduce the Community Group/Organization*
3. *Introduce the Family Circle Project*
 - The purpose
 - What you hope to learn
4. *Explain how the session will be conducted*
5. *Establish Ground Rules for the Discussion-* These are rules that are established to create an environment of respect for one another. Ground Rules can be developed during the design of the circle, or with the group during the introduction component. If they are developed prior to the session, you should check in with the group to see if there are any other rules they would like to add.
6. *Group Introduction/ Ice breaker-* This will give the group the opportunity to get to know a little about each other, and establish themselves a group. The liveliest discussions happen when the group has spent some time getting to know each other having a sense of togetherness, before they can fully participate in an in-depth conversation.

Focus Questions (4-5 questions)

These questions will relate to your topic area. We encourage you to think about what questions will lend themselves to lively, in-depth conversations, where participants can share stories and experiences related to the topic area.

Reflection Question(s) (1-2 questions)

This question(s) is designed to help the group think about the experiences and stories just shared by the group in relation to the topic area or the community.

Call to Action

This part of the discussion invites the group to think about possible solutions to the issues they have identified. This is the action part of the discussion. The group is

encouraged to think of possible actions steps that they can take relating to the topic area and issues raised, as individuals and/or as a group.

Closing/Next Steps

The facilitator closes the discussion, and provides the group an opportunity to share briefly what worked well about the session, and any suggestions to improve future sessions. If in the *Call to Action* component the group decides to work together on some possible solutions, they should use this time to think about possible next steps.

Facilitation

Resident Facilitators are one of the key components of the project. During your planning and design of the project you may have already decided who will be facilitators for your sessions. If not, you may need to recruit for Resident Facilitators. Your facilitators will need to understand the project, their role, and the basics of group facilitation. Some of the key attributes of effective facilitators are people who are confident and comfortable speakers, warm and inviting, good listeners, and able to facilitate the discussion while remaining neutral.

Resident Facilitators can also participate as notetakers or recorders for the sessions. Careful notes are vital to the research component of your project. This function may be done by Resident Facilitators or group/organizations members. The notetaker/recorder should be skilled in efficient notetaking and/or transcription (as the session can be recorded and transcribed). Please see the end of this appendix for the training and orientation outline that has been used for the Family Circle Project. You may need to consult with a trained facilitator to help you design and implement your Resident Facilitation Training and Orientation session(s). Key components that should be included in your training are listed below.

Key Components

Orientation to the Group/Organization

If you are training residents that may not be familiar with your group/organization, it will be important that they understand who you are, what you do, how you do it, etc.

Orientation to the Project

You could discuss: the purpose of the project, what you hope to learn, the project timeframe, and the current status of the project.

Basics of Facilitation

This is where you share the basics about group facilitation: what is facilitation; keys to good facilitation; and help the residents figure out how they see themselves as facilitators and what this means for them.

Review your project discussion tool

You could do some role playing exercises using the tool, in order to help familiarize them with the format and the questions.

Self Assessment

The trainees identify their comfort level with facilitation (i.e. what s/he feels s/he does well as a facilitator, and what s/he feel s/he feels s/he needs to improve).

Facilitation Assignment Process

Discuss the logistics of how facilitators will be assigned to sessions, etc.

Q & A/ Wrap-Up

This is the opportunity for trainees to ask any additional questions, and for you to remind them of important project information. This is also an opportunity for you to see what worked well about the training, and what could be improved.

With training and support the Resident Facilitators will be a valuable asset to your project. During the initial Family Circle Project, Resident Facilitators helped in all aspects of the project, especially with recruitment and final project design. We recommend that the Resident Facilitators be monetarily compensated for their time and contribution to the project. The rate for their compensation should be relative to the living wage hourly rate for your community (see Resources section for further discussion of this issue).

Implementation

When your group/organization is ready to implement your project there are some important matters that you will need to address. The planning and design phases are where the thinking happens, but implementation is where you bring the planning and designing to life. The implementation phase requires some more planning in order to help make your project real. We have provided some information about the matters that need to be addressed during this phase.

Timeframe and depth of your project

During the planning and design phase you have made some decisions about the perspective(s) that need to be engaged in the project. You may have identified your target group(s) for participation in your discussion sessions, so now you need to decide how many sessions you will need to conduct in order to reach your target group(s).

Recruitment

This may be one of the harder elements of implementation. We faced many challenges related to recruitment, because this element can be time consuming and requires the use of some innovative outreach strategies in order access some of the harder to reach individuals in your target group(s). We recommend that you develop a recruitment plan, including a variety of outreach strategies, and possible partnerships with existing community groups that work with your target group(s). We have provided some recruitment recommendations and strategies that are used in a variety of outreach efforts⁵.

- Develop recruitment materials such as flyers describing the project and potential participant roles.
- Have groups scheduled so you are recruiting for specific dates.
- Think about who you want to reach.
- Think about where/how to find them.
- Try to connect with local groups that can help you access people,
- Go to places where people in your community gather (e.g. grocery stores, Laundromats, local playgrounds, places of worship, etc.). Post flyers and hang around to talk with people who may be interested.

⁵ For additional recruitment recommendations and strategies please refer to CSP's early research report: *Inclusion of Family Perspectives: Family Involvement in Dudley Street Neighborhood Community Planning Initiative*, January 2001.

- If you can, work through existing groups to host sessions with their members (e.g. neighborhood associations, crime watch groups, parent groups, etc.).
- Get commitments.
- Follow up to make sure people are coming.
- Recruit for twice as many people as you want because everyone who has agreed to participate will not show up.

In order to demonstrate the value of participants' participation, their time contributions should be recognized. Tokens of appreciation will be influenced by the availability of resources. Minimally, compensation should include provision of refreshments and child care during the groups. During the implementation of the Family Circle Project there were resources available to compensate participants for their time. These funds served both as an incentive and an act of gratitude for their contribution to the project.

Preparation for the Session

The days and hours before a scheduled session are critical. We have provided a general checklist of things you will need to prepare in advance of each session. We recommend that you develop a checklist for your project.

- ✓ Confirm meeting location.
- ✓ Contact committed participants to remind them of the session and to confirm their attendance (24-48 hours before the date).
- ✓ Contact Resident Facilitators to make sure they are ready for the session and have the materials they need (3-4 days before the date).
- ✓ Confirm any logistical arrangements (i.e. food, equipment, meeting supplies, childcare provider, funds to pay participants, etc.)

Follow Up after the Session

There is still more work to be done after the session has occurred. We have provided a brief check list of things you need to consider as necessary follow up activities. Again we recommend that you develop a checklist for your project.

- ✓ Debrief with Resident Facilitators.
- ✓ Prepare and review session notes.
- ✓ Develop follow up plan (if necessary) for the call to action proposal established by participants.
- ✓ Correspond with participants regarding next steps and/or to thank them for their participation.

Resources

Resident Compensation

We recommend that the Resident Facilitators be compensated for their time on the project. As mentioned before, the compensation rate should be relative to the living wage hourly rate for your community. One of the goals of this project is to foster leadership and empowerment of residents. One of the most profound ways to develop people is to show them that their contributions are valuable.

As discussed above, we also recommend offering a token of appreciation to the residents participating in the discussion groups. The token demonstrates appreciation for their valuable contribution. Some suggested tokens are: small stipends (\$15-25); gift certificates; tickets to local events; etc.

Meeting Expenses

At a minimum, we recommend that each session provide: snacks and refreshments; child care; transportation if possible; and translation services if necessary. The resources for these expenses should be included in your project budget.

Materials and Equipment

We recommend that you factor in the cost of printing and necessary equipment (i.e. tape recorders, flip charts, markers, etc.).

This guide was prepared in an effort to support the continuation of the Family Circle Project, as a localized engagement project in the Dudley community, and other communities. We have also included some of the tools that were used with the project on the following pages: the Resident Facilitation Training Outline; the Family Circle Session Format; and the Report Back Template.

Resident Facilitation Training Outline

This is an agenda outline was used at one of the Family Circle Project Resident Facilitation Trainings. We have included this as an example of agenda items to consider during your resident facilitation training.

Facilitation Training Agenda - Thursday, September 18, 2002 Facilitation Trainers: XXXXXXXX

1. Introductions
2. Overview of the project and the connection to the Family Outreach Committee @ DSN!
 - How the project began
 - How it relates the work that the FOC is doing in the community
3. Understanding Facilitation (Prepared a folder with additional materials related to facilitation for the trainees to take with them for reference)
 - What is facilitation?
 - Keys to good facilitation
 - What does facilitation mean to you?
4. Reviewing the Agenda and Questions for the PT3 Session 1
5. Review the Logistics for the Session
6. Role playing exercise
Role play as both facilitator and note taker
Feedback and coaching
7. Self Assessment exercise
What role works best for me? Self assessment exercise

Q & A

Training Evaluation

Family Circle Session Format

Family Circles Project

INTRODUCTIONS

1. Introduce the Community Group/Organization
2. Introduce the Family Circle Project

Purpose

- To create a space for residents to get together and talk with each other
 - To give the residents of the Dudley community an opportunity to learn more about the COMMUNITY GROUP/ORGANIZATION
 - To learn from residents their perspective related to (your group's focus area)
3. *Ground Rules for the Family Circle*
Suggested Groundrules: (Some groups may decide to establish ground rules during the session)
Confidentiality
Respect/everyone talks at one time.
Everyone participates

Group Introduction/ Ice breaker

Icebreakers and introduction are a good time to for participants to get more comfortable talking in a group. The planning group and the Resident Facilitators can decide on a few possible ice breakers to use.

4. This was one of the icebreakers used during the Family Circle Project:
Let's start by having everyone introduce him or herself. Please tell us you name, what street you live on and how long you have lived there. If you have any children, please tell us how many and their ages.

Icebreaker Activity

1. *Please share one unusual thing about yourself*

Focus Questions (4-5 questions)

5. *What makes a family strong?*
6. *What is needed to make families stronger?*
7. *What makes a community strong?*
8. *What is needed to make a community stronger?*

Another way to invite group storytelling is to reframe the questions.

- Can you share with the group a story about what makes your families strong and what could make them even stronger?
- Can you share with the group a story about what makes your community strong and what could make it even stronger?

Reflection Question

Let us think about families and community together as they are dependent upon each other for strength. Based on the stories and thoughts that we have heard today, what are some characteristics of a strong family, community, and the relationship between families and community?

Call to Action Question

Collective Action: What do you think needs to be done collectively in order to support these strengths and to build on them?

Individual Action: What do you think you can do in order to support these strengths and to build on them?

Closing/ Wrap Up

Report Back Form Template
Family Circles Project

Report Form

Community Partner: _____ Date: _____
Location: _____
_____ First Session _____ Follow-up Session (if so, name and date of First session _____)
Audio or Video Tape Name (please circle one): _____
Facilitator(s): _____
Reporter: _____

Total # participants _____ Female _____ Male _____

List the questions for this group:

Ice-breaker used:

Discussion Question(s):

Reflection of Discussion Question(s):

Call to Action Question(s):

Summarize the question responses:

Focus Question(s)

Reflection of Focus Question(s)

Call to Action

Summarize key issues or concerns