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Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development

Bringing Promise to Washington, DC

The DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative

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The U.S. Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods Initiative is one of the Obama administration's major antipoverty initiatives and a core strategy of the White House's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, an interagency approach that empowers communities to end the cycle of generational poverty. The Promise Neighborhoods Initiative is intended to help communities turn neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity by creating a continuum of school readiness and academic services for children from early childhood through college. The hope is that creating a continuum of services will improve children's health, safety, family stability, and access to learning technology, and increase families' engagement in their children's learning.

The DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative (DCPNI) began in 2008, before the federal initiative was formally launched. Irasema Salcido, CEO and founder of Cesar Chávez Public Charter Schools, recognized that students were entering Chávez Middle and High Schools-Parkside with academic skills far below grade level. Inspired by the Harlem Children's Zone, Mrs. Salcido convened a steering committee to figure out how to address students' challenges comprehensively. DCPNI involved residents from across the Parkside-Kenilworth community, the two neighboring DCPS elementary schools, and local service providers.

By early 2009, DCPNI's effort had drawn attention from organizations outside Parkside-Kenilworth. It attracted the strong support of the America's Promise Alliance, which facilitates volunteer action for children and youth, as well as the Children's National Medical Center. Eventually, the initiative's efforts attracted a wide array of actors, including the Urban Institute, service providers from throughout the District, city agencies, foundations, and local politicians who participated in the planning and development effort alongside the residents and schools of Parkside-Kenilworth. In October 2010, Cesar Chávez Public Charter Schools, the applicant agency for DCPNI, received one of

During DCPNI's planning year, it engaged residents, developed comprehensive plans, brought together organizations and resources, and laid the groundwork for a sustainable initiative.

Table 1. Demographics at DCPNI-Targeted Schools

School demographics	Kenilworth ES	Neval Thomas ES	Chávez MS and HS-Parkside
Enrollment, 2005	299	342	521
Enrollment, 2010	178	236	717
% African American, 2010	98	100	89
% Hispanic, 2010	2	0	10
% receiving free and reduced-price meals, 2010	88	78	80
% special education, 2010	12	14	11
% English as a second language, 2010	0	0	3
% proficient & advanced DCCAS-reading, 2010	29	25	44
% proficient & advanced DCCAS-math, 2010	34	28	6

the U.S. Department of Education’s 21 Promise Neighborhood planning grants.

Challenges in Parkside-Kenilworth

Parkside-Kenilworth is an island of concentrated poverty cut off from the rest of the city by the Anacostia Freeway, the Anacostia River, and a decommissioned electrical plant. This isolated area, less than two miles long and less than one mile wide, is home to approximately 5,700 residents and 1,800 children under 18 and consists of seven contiguous neighborhoods (map 1). To the north are the D.C. Housing Authority’s Kenilworth Courts and Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation (the first public housing project to be sold and managed by residents during the 1980s), both of which suffer from the typical ills of dilapidated, high-crime public housing developments. Directly below these properties lies the mostly middle-class neighborhood of Eastland Gardens, which consists of small single-family homes. South of that are

two large subsidized developments: Mayfair Mansions, a 569-unit apartment rental complex, and Paradise, a 652-unit complex. Lotus Square, a new workforce housing development, is located along the freeway, and the Parkside neighborhood has newly constructed subsidized homeownership townhomes.

Residents in the DCPNI targeted area face an array of steep challenges, including crime, a lack of basic services and amenities, and deep poverty. Approximately half of all DCPNI residents live below the federal poverty level, almost three times the city average, and median household incomes in the Parkside-Kenilworth neighborhoods are about half of the city median. Nearly 90 percent of families with children in the DCPNI footprint are headed by single females, and neighborhoods in the northern census tract also have some of the highest shares of teenage births in the District—and the nation. Very few pregnant mothers of any age receive adequate prenatal care. Not surprisingly,

babies born in the DCPNI neighborhoods have some of the lowest average birth weights in the city.

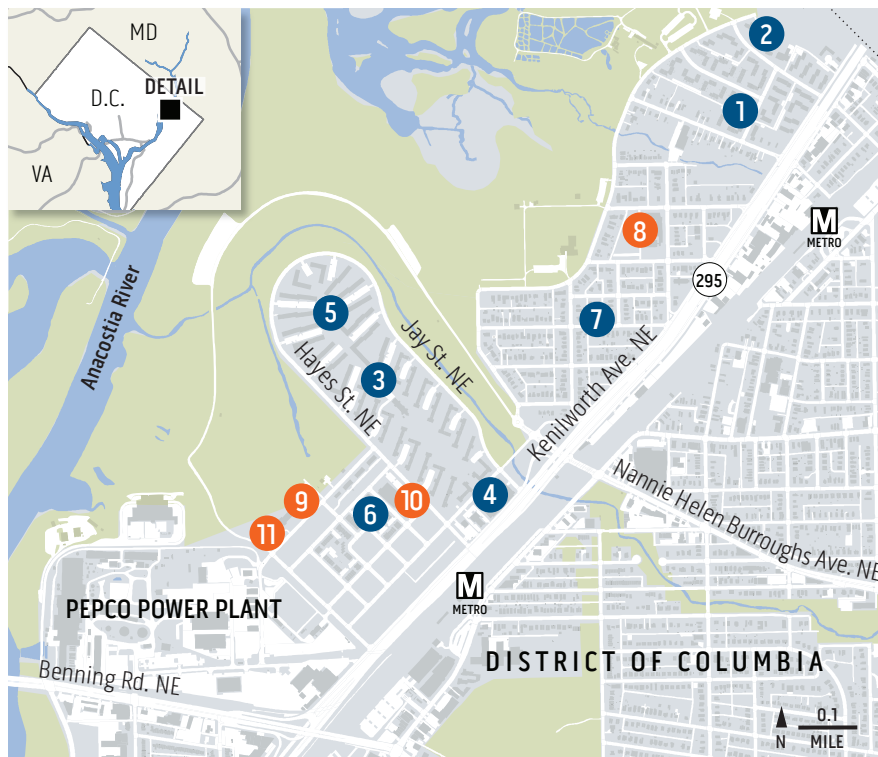
Schools Face Steep Challenges

In addition to the Chávez Middle and Chávez High Schools at Parkside, the DCPNI community is home to two traditional DC Public Schools (DCPS) elementary schools, Kenilworth and Neval Thomas. All three schools face steep challenges, including students that are extremely low income and struggle with basic skills. Table 1 shows the high proportions of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches and testing as not proficient in reading and math.

An even greater challenge for creating a school-centered Promise Neighborhood continuum is that relatively few children from the DCPNI catchment area actually attend these local schools. Both elementary schools have experienced significant declines in enrollment over the past decade (table 1), likely the result of the liberal school choice policies in Washington, D.C.¹ Indeed, approximately half the elementary students from the DCPNI catchment area attend schools outside the community—87 schools altogether in the 2008–09 school year (the most recent data available).

Cesar Chávez Middle and High Schools-Parkside opened in the southern section of the DCPNI community in 2005. The new facility houses both the middle and high schools. Because Chávez is a public charter, there is no neighborhood boundary; students living in the District enroll through a city-wide lottery system to attend. As a result, the proportion of local children who attend these schools is even smaller than the share attending Kenilworth and Neval Thomas: in school year 2008–09, approximately a quarter of all Cesar Chávez Middle School-Parkside students lived in the DCPNI boundary as did just one-fifth of the high school students.

Map 1. DCPNI Neighborhoods



Public Housing

1. Kenilworth Courts

Other Low–Moderate-Income Rental Properties

2. Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation
3. Mayfair Mansions
4. Lotus Square
5. Paradise

Mixed-Income/Homeownership Properties

6. Parkside Townhouses
7. Eastland Gardens

Educational Assets

8. Kenilworth Elementary
9. Neval Thomas Elementary
10. Cesar Chávez Charter Middle and High Schools
11. Educare Early Childhood Center (opening 2012)

Planning a Comprehensive Community Initiative

Creating a comprehensive community initiative that seeks to engage local residents, service providers, and major systems like schools and health care providers in an effort to improve residents' life chances is extremely challenging.² With all these different players involved, multiple and conflicting agendas are inevitable, and planners must negotiate these carefully to avoid problems. The DCPNI case presented two special challenges: as described above, seven distinct communities were involved, each with its own leadership and specific concerns; and, the initiative needed to mesh the priorities of a federal program with DCPNI's grassroots

effort, and therefore had to convince community residents to engage while ensuring that whatever they designed would comply with federal requirements.

To negotiate these challenges, DCPNI staff developed a comprehensive planning process involving five components: leadership and management, breaking down silos, strategy development, community engagement, and fundraising and sustainability.

Leadership and Management

When DCPNI received the federal planning grant award in 2010, its steering committee was spearheaded by Cesar Chávez, America's Promise, and Children's National Medical Center and included community residents

and key nonprofit organizations. (The Urban Institute had joined the effort in 2009 as the local evaluation partner.) The Chávez board of trustees, which initially had fiduciary oversight of DCPNI, delegated planning responsibility to a new DCPNI advisory board. Irasema Salcido chaired the advisory board, which oversaw the initiative's management, fundraising, and continuum of solutions.

With the assistance of Mosaica, an organization that helps community-based nonprofit organizations become more effective and sustainable, DCPNI's advisory board settled on a core mission: to increase the number of children who complete their education—from cradle to college—and enter adulthood as productive participants in the

DCPNI'S CORE VALUES:

- People of the DCPNI community and the focus to build upon its existing capacity
- Children and schools in DCPNI, which will be at the center of DCPNI's efforts
- Accountability, excellence, and data-driven results
- Close collaboration with DCPNI's partners and supporters
- Resident engagement and input in all related decisions

21st century economy and in the civic life of their communities. DCPNI's vision is that each child in Parkside-Kenilworth will receive the Five Promises (inspired by America Promise's 5 Promises) of caring adults, physical and emotional safety wherever they are, a healthy start, an effective education, and opportunities to help others. The board also identified DCPNI's core values (see text box).

DCPNI had only a small staff during the planning year, with consultants serving as directors of planning, resident engagement, and development, all answerable to DCPNI's advisory board until the organization was able to hire an executive director. By summer 2011, DCPNI had hired its first programmatic staff member, a director of community dropout prevention and community outreach.

The advisory board dissolved in October 2011 after a formal board of directors was appointed. The new board builds on the previous experience of prioritizing resident involvement from across the neighborhoods; it also includes content-area experts and representatives from nonprofit organizations, DCPS, and foundations.

Breaking Down Silos

One of DCPNI's first successes is that it brought together the principals of two public charter schools and two traditional DCPS schools for joint strategic planning. This achievement cannot be understated, as the strife between DCPS and public charter schools has run deep. There is little evidence of such close planning and coordination happening elsewhere across the city, and the principals of the four schools reported the benefits that they can all reap from close collaboration and shared resources. These planning efforts deserve more attention and replication across the city.

DCPNI has developed close working relationships with the four community recreation centers located in the area (one each in the multifamily developments of Kenilworth-Parkside Resident Management Corporation, Mayfair, and Paradise, and the other in Kenilworth Courts). These recreation centers were already providing varied youth programming in their developments, and DCPNI recognized the need to coordinate closely with each of them.

In addition, DCPNI established strong ties with other District agencies and organizations outside the targeted neighborhoods in order to provide services and capacity during the implementation year. These District agencies and organizations benefit from DCPNI's coordinated effort and its targeted population. Some key organizations include Children's National Medical Center, the DC Housing Authority, DCPS, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, Educare, East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative, Georgetown University, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and Save the Children.

Strategy Development

The core task of the board and staff was to develop strategies to ensure that children living in the DCPNI communities met the 10 federal Promise Neighborhood goals. From the start, DCPNI chose not to create new

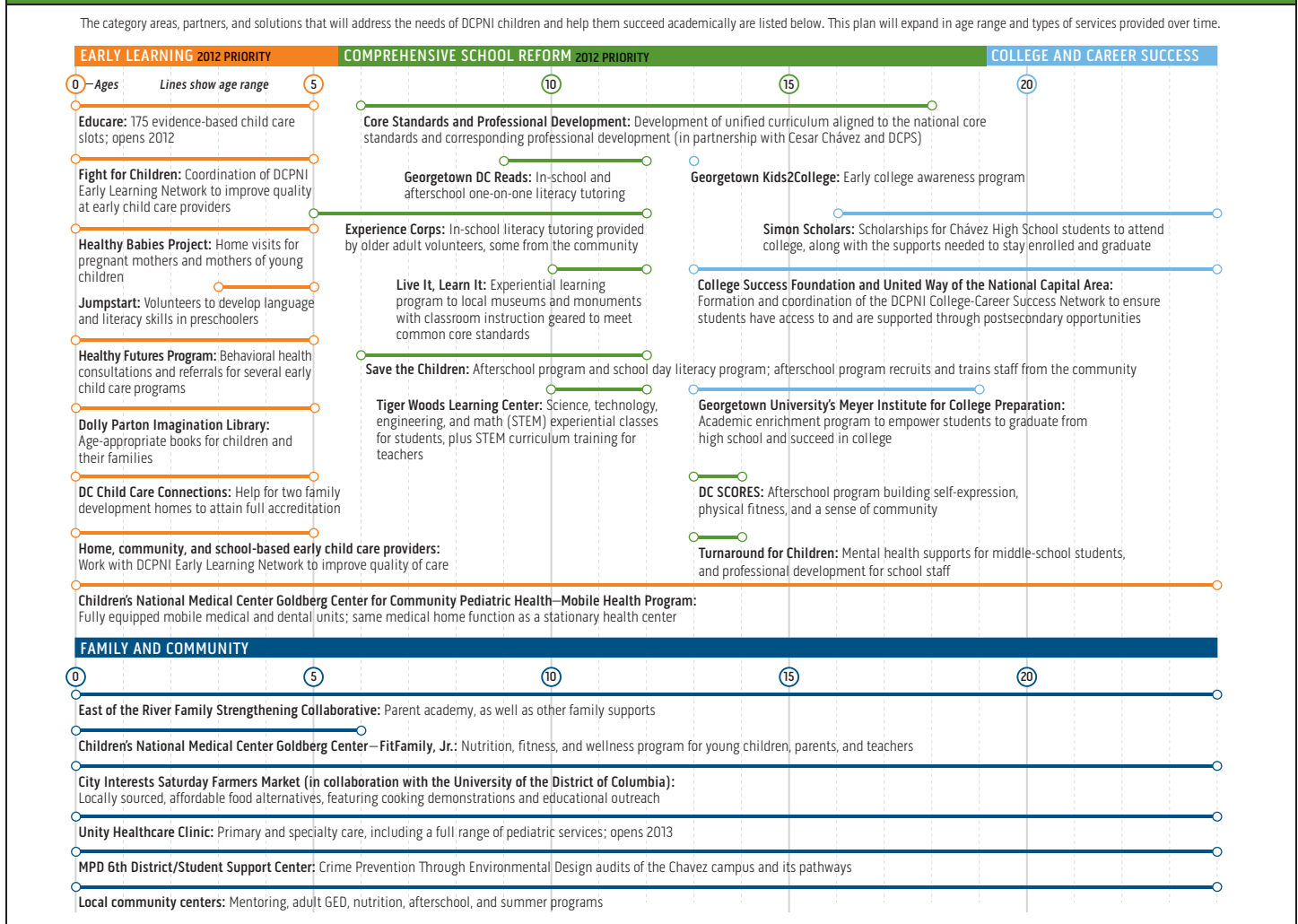
programs, but instead to develop a formal network of already existing neighborhood, city, and national providers. As expected, this umbrella-type of model comes with challenges. One of DCPNI's core values is to support the existing local organizations that serve residents in the footprint and help grow their capacity where needed. DCPNI gives preference to these organizations over other city-wide or national programs. Balancing the selection of providers against measured results was a challenge when there were multiple providers in the footprint as well as other groups located elsewhere in the city.

To develop the continuum of solutions, DCPNI's director of planning managed 10 results-driven work groups, each targeting one of the federal initiative's goals. Work group participants consisted of neighborhood and city service providers, content experts, District agencies, interested residents, and Urban Institute staff. Each group had two co-chairs—one person already involved in implementing or advocating for similar efforts in the District and the other person a resident involved and interested in the efforts—and a facilitator (again, a representative from an organization involved in similar efforts). The planning groups were tasked with developing the specific strategies to improve children's outcomes based on a needs assessment.

As the local evaluation partner, the Urban Institute conducted a needs assessment to both inform planning and comply with Department of Education requirements.³ The Urban Institute team gathered data on the children, families, neighborhoods, and schools in the DCPNI target area, and conducted a segmentation analysis to identify areas of greatest need.⁴

Based on the needs assessment, the planning groups recommended strategies that DCPNI should implement (and service providers DCPNI should use) as part of the continuum of solutions. DCPNI developed criteria that the working groups used to

Figure 1. DCPNI Major Programs and Activities in 2012, by Category Area



identify the key providers, including basic management capacity, a mission that aligns with DCPNI's, capacity to serve the DCPNI target area, an ability to deliver effective, quantifiable evidence-based services, and evidence of strong existing ties to the local community. The planning groups' proposals for strategies and providers were reviewed extensively by the director of planning, the principals of the four schools in the DCPNI target area, and the full advisory board. The product of this comprehensive planning process was a full continuum of solutions grouped into four

category areas with identified partners to address the needs of DCPNI children and help them succeed academically (figure 1).

Community Engagement

From the outset, DCPNI recognized that resident engagement was critical. But the organization faced some challenges in actually developing a strategy. First, being a Promise Neighborhood planning grantee meant that DCPNI was obligated to ensure that its activities fit the Department of Education's guidelines while integrating them with its grassroots

efforts. For instance, the guidelines required that the initiative collect information on healthy foods and obesity, while residents believed that mental health and safety were the priority. Second, while the DCPNI target area is relatively small, it has seven distinct communities, and many residents felt isolated from the other neighborhoods because they had lacked opportunities to interact in the past. Some teenagers from the focus groups talked about purposely not mixing with youth from other neighborhoods and expecting fights to break out if they crossed neighborhood boundaries.

To support its efforts, DCPNI hired a director of resident engagement who lived in Eastland Gardens. He worked closely with the advisory board's resident engagement team, which held monthly community dinners to inform stakeholders about DCPNI, engage them in planning, and solicit feedback. DCPNI alternated the location of dinners among the three school campuses to ensure residents from across the neighborhoods could attend more easily. The resident engagement team also organized two large day-long resident retreats in early 2011 to get residents excited about DCPNI's efforts and improve communication among residents from different neighborhoods. Finally, as noted above, DCPNI had a community resident co-chair for each planning group and made concerted efforts to reach out to families to participate in planning DCPNI programs and services. Like the community dinners, the planning groups altered their locations to accommodate residents' needs. In some instances, a community recreation manager picked up and dropped off residents to help ensure their participation.

Fundraising and Sustainability

A critical test for an ambitious effort like DCPNI is whether the organization can raise enough funds to be sustainable for the long term. In its first two years, DCPNI has been extremely successful in meeting this challenge. First, to qualify for the federal Promise Neighborhood grant, the organization needed to match 50 percent of all proposed federal funds; DCPNI was able to far exceed that goal with a combination of cash and in-kind support. During the planning year, the initiative raised over \$1 million, half from the federal planning grant and the remainder from private sources. DCPNI has also raised more than \$800,000 for the first year of implementation. DCPNI established a funders group to keep funders informed of the initiative's progress. In addition, DCPNI created a sustainability plan-

ning group composed of key leaders from the business, philanthropic, and government communities in the District to help the organization's leadership develop and implement a business plan. Finally, DCPNI engaged the services of The Finance Project, a nationally recognized expert in fiscal mapping and sustainability planning, to help determine how to best coordinate and streamline District and federal resources. DCPNI was able to achieve this success both because of its leadership, particularly Irasema Salcido, who is well-respected and had many connections in both the District and federal government, and because it had the support of key local and national organizations like America's Promise, DC Appleseed, DLA Piper, Washington DC Local Initiatives Support Corporation, local philanthropists Wendy and Fred Goldberg, and Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP.

Next Steps

Going into the first year of implementation, DCPNI will tackle several key tasks that will lay the groundwork for long-term success. These include further developing DCPNI as an organization, which involves rolling out flagship programs and planning for a comprehensive performance management and formative evaluation.

- **Transition from a provisional planning grant structure to a more consolidated organization in 2012.** That means hiring a chief executive officer to move DCPNI's plans forward and thinking about what other staffing strategies will be most effective and sustainable. As an umbrella organization, DCPNI will not be running core programs itself, but it must work out the nuts and bolts of selecting and coordinating a wide array of providers, programs, and services.
- **Build on lessons learned in the planning year about partner selection,** which involves a fine balance between prioritizing local organizations and building local

capacities. In some instances, bringing in new, high-quality service providers may displace existing services.

- **Set up oversight structures** to ensure accountability and quality as well as formalizing communication mechanisms among the providers, DCPNI staff, and the board.
- **Think strategically about how to continue to cultivate resident investment in the initiative** and continue to work closely with community members to define concrete roles for local families in the ongoing implementation.
- **Raise funds to ensure long-term sustainability.** The federal planning grant ended October 2011. While federal dollars may become available in the future, DCPNI needs to ensure it can operate with smaller targeted and strategic federal funding.
- **Be flexible and strategic.** DCPNI operates within a constantly changing policy context. For instance, DCPS recently announced that it will close a neighboring elementary school because of continual low enrollment and will shift students to Neval Thomas. Also, the DC Housing Authority, a key partner of DCPNI, recently won a Choice Neighborhoods planning grant for Kenilworth Courts that requires relocating residents, at least temporarily, during the eventual redevelopment. In addition, new housing development spearheaded by City Interests is expected in the near future.

One of DCPNI's core values is accountability and data-driven results. Therefore, processes and infrastructure need to be put in place to track the providers' performance measurement and children's outcomes. Tracking performance means developing a longitudinal student-level, school-level, and neighborhood-level data system. The challenges in developing such systems are significant, but the payoff is great. Therefore, as DCPNI gears up in the first implementation year, it will also have to develop its data systems and the processes to

track indicators over time. In addition, DCPNI will have to ensure that the individual providers meet the expected targets and outcomes. If the outcomes are not as expected, DCPNI will have to ensure that it can provide resources and assistance to improve the delivery of services and outcomes for children.

Other challenges exist in implementing the formative evaluation. In traditional evaluations, researchers track outcomes for a set group of people experiencing a standard intervention that remains constant over time. However, determining what works for a complex place-based initiative like a promise neighborhood is much trickier. Although the intended target population includes all neighborhood residents, not all the children currently attend DCPNI

partner schools and not all families will be actively engaged in programs and services, making outcomes more difficult to track.⁵ Even for those that do live in the DCPNI footprint and attend neighborhood schools, we know that low-income populations are highly mobile and may move out of the neighborhoods or switch schools in the near future.⁶ Further, the package of services and programs in which each child and family participates will be unique. And, by design, DCPNI will evolve over time in order to continually refine the model to best serve the community. To meet these challenges, the Urban Institute, as DCPNI's data and evaluation partner, has crafted a multifaceted approach consisting of two main components: an outcome evaluation

to determine what works and for whom, and a process evaluation to inform implementation.

Bringing about a better future for the children who live in Parkside-Kenilworth's communities will require a sustained commitment and willingness to learn from mistakes and adapt to changing circumstances. DCPNI has already made great strides during its planning process in engaging residents, developing comprehensive plans, bringing together organizations and resources, and laying the groundwork for a sustainable initiative. Its long-term success will depend on the ability of its leadership to build on these achievements and successfully implement its core solutions. ■

Notes

1. Washington, D.C., has one of the nation's highest shares of public school students attending public charters and very liberal out-of-boundary enrollment policies for traditional public schools. Students may choose to attend their neighborhood traditional school, apply for out-of-boundary traditional school enrollment through a city-wide lottery, submit an application to a selective traditional school, or apply for enrollment to any public charter school through a citywide lottery process. In the 2008–09 school year, only 30 percent of Washington's public school students attended their in-boundary traditional school; 37 percent went to an out-of-boundary traditional public school, and 33 percent attended a public charter school (Comey and Grosz 2010; Filardo et al. 2008). Washington, D.C., is second only to New Orleans in the share of public school students enrolled in public charters.
2. See Kubisch (2010) and Smith (2011).
3. See Popkin et al. (2011) for DCPNI's complete needs assessment and segmentation analysis conducted between October 2010 and July 2011.
4. The Urban Institute collected and analyzed data from a wide variety of secondary data sources including the Census Bureau, local administrative data, and national surveys. The Urban Institute also collected primary data by imple-

menting a school climate survey at Chávez Middle and High Schools and conducting focus groups and teacher interviews.

5. For instance, in the 2008–09 school year, there were 685 public school preschool through 5th grade students (either DPCS or public charter) living in the DCPNI neighborhoods. Of those 685 students, 52 percent attended either Neval Thomas or Kenilworth elementary schools. The remaining 48 percent were dispersed across 87 other DCPS or public charter elementary schools (Popkin et al. 2011).
6. See Comey and Grosz (2011), Coulton, Theodos, and Turner (2009), and Filardo and colleagues (2008) for more information regarding the mobility of low-income children.

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The Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development is dedicated to understanding the relationships between neighborhood-level factors and the well-being and development of children and youth and identifying and evaluating place-based, community-wide strategies to help children grow up to reach their full potential as adults.

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